

**A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC SUPPORT OF FIRST-YEAR  
STUDENTS IN A UNIVERSITY ACCESS PROGRAMME**

**By**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the study submitted for the Philosophiae Doctor degree, in the field of Higher Education Studies in the Faculty of Education titled '***A strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in a University access programme***', is my own work. I have not previously submitted the study at any other university, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

.....

**LERATO M. SEKONYELA**

.....

**DATE**

## DEDICATION

Above all, thank you God for giving me the courage and strength to start, believe, and complete in my work.

I dedicate this study to all the people who contributed towards making the study possible and successful. Without your support, contribution, and keeping me in your prayers, I would not have been able to achieve my goal without you. A special appreciation to my family:

I dedicate this work to my loving husband Lerato Sekonyela for the support, understanding and encouraging me through the process of starting and completing my dissertation. Thank you for the sacrifice and the push when I felt like I cannot keep up. I also dedicate this dissertation to my sons, Thapelo Sekonyela and Tshiamo Mothibe for their patience.

I will also like to dedicate this work to my in-laws (Sekonyela family), who through it all prayed for me to achieve to the best of my ability, for the support, and thank you for accepting and welcoming me into your family.

I will lastly like to dedicate this work to my late father Moeketsi Mputsoe, who fuelled my love for education and taught me to extend a helping hand, and to my late mother 'Mathabiso Mputsoe who could not see me flourish and love (Lerato) what I do.

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I would also like to thank the University of the Free State Faculty of Education, for awarding me the opportunity to pursue this degree, for me to develop and grow my career. Without this opportunity, co-researchers who participated in this study would not have performed so well in their studies in the second semester particularly Sociology.

## **ABSTRACT**

The study focused on the development of a strategy to improve the academic support of first-year University Access Programme (UAP) students. These students seem to experience a number of challenges, and the nature of these challenges was determined through the literature review. These challenges include inequities in academic support, such as scarcity of tutoring support, the need for peer support programmes, and insufficiency in IT support and training. In addition, there seems to be a need for a preparatory support programme to deal with issues of segregation, rareness of academic support centres, and insufficient academic advising. These challenges could be the obstacles that hinder UAP student's academic success, progression, and transition to the student's preferred HE qualification. The identified experienced challenges paved way for the development of a strategy to improve academic support to this cohort of students. Once the strategy was developed, it was significant to identify components of such strategy, and to identify conditions conducive to the implementation of the strategy as what is successful at one institution, will not necessarily return the same results at another institution. In addition, shortcomings of the implemented strategy were identified and disseminated in this study.

Functionalism was discussed as the theoretical framework that informed this study. A description of the functionalism was provided, including its evolution, its historical origin and the background in the context of the objectives of this study. Functionalism allowed for better understanding of the challenges that UAP students experienced and facilitated collaboration among the co-researchers in developing the strategy. Moreover, the argument laid by functionalism was that society consists of social institutions, and for society to function smoothly and survive, all the parts that exist within a social institution need to function interdependently and adapt to the ever-changing education environment (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2013: 31; & Ferrante, 2016: 28).

Participatory action research (PAR) was chosen as the research methodology in this study as one of the purposes of PAR is to improve the quality of people's organisations and lives. Furthermore, researchers who employ PAR, study issues that relate to

social problems, and that constrain and repress the lives of students and educators (Creswell, 2012: 582). Additionally, Marincowitz (2003: 595) indicates that PAR is a research process that focuses on improving quality of service by means of a self-reflective process, exploring and problem solving. Similarly, Ary *et al.* (2010: 515) articulate that PAR is emancipatory and transformational, and aims to challenge unproductive ways of working.

In addition, data was collected through focus group discussions facilitated by the Free-Attitude Interview (FAI) technique (Nkonyane, 2014: 18; & Mahlomaholo, 2009: 228). A number of the reasons why focus group discussions were employed in the study were discussed. One of the reasons was to discover information that one would not otherwise access, that is, it is easier for other people to voice their concerns when they realise that others have similar experiences. Therefore, the participants were more comfortable to speak out and engage in discussions; they also provided evidence to reaching conclusions from post hoc analysis of separate statements from each interview. In addition, Focus group interviews work well with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which was employed in this study. Central to CDA was the understanding that discourse was an integral aspect of power and control, that is, this method was chosen as it allows the researcher and the co-researchers to take control of the discussion, and no one feels forced to say something that they were not comfortable sharing with the group (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 495; Lazar, 2005: 5). FAI and CDA enabled knowledge creation and informed critical aspects pertaining to the study (Lazar, 2005: 5; & Weninger, 2012: 3).

**Keywords:** Academic support, Functionalism, Higher Education Institution, Participatory Action Research, Strategy, University access programme

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AIME	Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience
ALSA	Academic Learning Support Assistant
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
EWS	Early Warning System
FAI	Free-Attitude Interview
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IT	Information Technology
LAC	Learning Assistance Centre
LASC	Learning Assistance Support Centre
PAL	Peer Assisted Learning
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PASS	Programme for Academic Student Success
PTLEP	Peer Teaching/Learning Experience
SI	Supplementary Instruction
SLICC	Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses
SSS	Supplemental Support Services
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training

UAP	University Access Programme
UFS	University of the Free State
UNIFY	University of the North Science Foundation Year
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

# **CHAPTER 1 : ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT OF UNIVERSITY ACCESS PROGRAMME STUDENTS**

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This study focuses on developing a strategy to improve academic support of first-year University Access Programme (UAP) students. This chapter examines the extent and the nature of the problem by presenting thorough background information on the topic. The researcher believes that UAP students face a number of challenges as a result of inadequate academic support. These challenges include the inability to excel academically, and struggling to adapt to and transition to the mainstream program at a higher education institution (HEI). Establishing the nature of the problem will hopefully pave the way for the development of an appropriate strategy to enhance student performance and success.

The problem statement will be discussed, as well as the aim and the objectives of the study in an effort to foster better understanding of the problem. The study employed functionalism as the theoretical framework, and participatory action research (PAR) further facilitated the need for and development of improved academic support. Data analysis and interpretation were facilitated through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and will also briefly be discussed in this chapter.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

It is common knowledge that learners struggle to access institutions of higher education. Therefore, to address this global issue, a number of countries developed different strategies, such as widening participation, access programmes, foundation programmes, and supplemental instruction. The University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa introduced a university access programme (UAP) in 1992 in an effort to assist many deserving students who did not meet university admission requirements due to underperformance at school level. Since the programme began in 1993, a total of 3 630 degrees have been awarded (including 312 honours degrees, 38 master's degrees, and 9 medical degrees) to former UAP students (UFS, 2016/2017).



During the one year as a student in the university access programme at the UFS, the researcher observed a number of limitations and inadequate academic support for students. By academic support, the researcher refers to formal tutorials for different modules the students have enrolled for, a learning assistance support centre (a centre that assists students with academic writing), academic advising, facilitators who are available full day (not only for specific sessions), and adequate computer literacy training. If a university maintains that the UAP was introduced with the intention to help those who did not perform well enough in Grade 12 to follow mainstream programmes, is it not a given that these students are in dire need of academic support services?

Upon the researcher's enrolment in the mainstream program, she realised that mainstream students have more support than UAP students. According to the University of the Free State (2017), the UAP was designed to assist students who underperformed in Grade 12 in accessing HE. The programme is designed to address the issue of access with success to higher education institutions throughout South Africa, and additionally, to address the issue of inclusion within the higher education environment. The researcher believes that, as much as the programme continues to be celebrated due to its successes, namely that 3 630 degrees have been awarded to former UAP students, these students without UAP would not have otherwise accessed HE. Therefore, a significant amount of work still needs to be done to offer the same academic support that mainstream students have to UAP students.

As stated earlier, the UAP continues to celebrate its success rates, which contributes greatly to throughputs. However, if under the current circumstances, the success of the programme is celebrated, one cannot help but wonder what the extent of the celebration would be if UAP students received the same support as mainstream students. These are some of the reasons why academic support at UAPs must be improved. There is also limited research done in terms of the support services at the UAPs throughout South Africa.

Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 490), Essack and Quayle (2007: 78), and Waetjen (2006: 206) agree that access programme students in South Africa experience similar challenges as students in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK). UAPs are insufficiently resourced, for example, students do not have access to tutors/mentors. Students experience stigmatisation, often in the form of demeaning

language by UAP staff members. Students also experience isolation and segregation, as most of the valuable resources are available to mainstream only, causing UAP students to feel inferior and separated from the rest of the institution.

Furthermore, epistemological access (granting admission to higher education without access to knowledge) is another issue that must be addressed. It often happens that students register without having received academic advice, which leads to students not knowing what subjects they can register for, what subjects will help them to reach their goal of accessing mainstream programmes or the subjects they need to pursue a specific career path. Additionally, Hlalele and Alexander (2012), and Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012: 7) argue that the authenticity, in other words, the true nature of UAPs, needs evaluation. Hlalele and Alexander also discuss the issue of support offered to students in access programmes in relation to those in the mainstream (e.g. tutorials) and suggest that this be evaluated (Hlalele, 2010: 107; Arendale, 2010: 14; & Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7).

In the USA and the UK, access students also experience a number of challenges. One of these is stigmatisation, where demeaning language, such as 'at-risk students, high risk students, academically disadvantaged students, underprepared students' are used to define students in access programmes. Equity and equal rights challenges, for example, lack of sufficient academic support such as tutoring programmes, are also evident. Financial issues and under-resourced programmes can negatively affect students, as nobody is willing and prepared to spend taxes on a programme that should have been dealt with or addressed in high school. Segregation and isolation are adding to the problem as most of the higher education institutions that offer access programmes do so at a different campus than the mainstream campus (Arendale, 2010; & Peck, Chilvers & Lincoln, 2010).

The researcher believes that these challenges are potentially sustained by the following defining factors, namely what constitutes an access programme, and who is eligible to access such programme. If institutions recognise these challenges and realise that challenges exist, the development of strategies and setting of best practices are vital. These strategies and best practices can be developed by determining conditions that are favourable in terms of UAPs.

### **1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

As mentioned earlier, UAP students face a number of challenges of which the unequal distribution of academic support has a major impact on their academic performance (Hlalele, 2010: 99). UAP students do not have access to academic support, such as tutorials, writing centres, academic advising, and structured peer learning assistance, that are available to mainstream students. Jones and Lau (2010), Bathmaker (2016), Hlalele and Alexander (2012), and Karp, O’Gara and Hughes (2008) identify a similar problem, and suggest the need to improve academic support. Wilson-Strydom (2015: 151) posits that people are different in various ways. Students have different ways of learning and acquiring knowledge, and even with access to academic support, their performance will differ from one student to another.

The above-mentioned differences may affect ways in which individuals convert available opportunities into achievements. Therefore, Gale and Parker (2014: 740) contest that having “access to HE without appropriate support is not an opportunity”, and without access to support that might enhance success since students enrolled in this programme are believed to be underprepared and underperformed. Additionally, Wilson-Strydom suggests that individual difference in HE does not mean inequality, rather it becomes a cause for concern when these differences become inequalities affecting capabilities. Additionally, inadequate access to academic support potentially affects capabilities.

#### **1.3.1 The research question**

What strategy needs to be developed to improve academic support of first-year UAP students?

#### **1.3.2 The aim of the study**

The aim of the study was to develop a strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in a UAP.

### **1.3.3 The objectives of the study**

The following objectives were explored in an effort to gain better understanding of the kind of academic support UAP students need:

- Identify the challenges experienced by UAP students;
- Identify best practices to improve the academic support of UAP students;
- Evaluate the components of the academic support in a UAP;
- Explore conditions conducive to the implementation of a strategy to improve academic support of UAP students; and
- Determine possible shortcomings of best practices to improve academic support in a UAP.

## **1.4 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review was conducted by searching for published sources relevant to the topic of this research study. The aim was to discover what has already been done in the development of a strategy that will enable the researcher to gather and analyse data. The literature consulted paved the way for the development and implementation of the best strategy, which was performed taking into consideration the mistakes and risks experienced globally. One of the considerations that must be kept in mind in order to avoid similar mistakes and risks, is cultural relativism (Ferrante, 2016). This simply means that during the development and implementation of the strategy it must be considered that UAP students are students in their own right. In other words, strategies that proved to be successful in one country will not necessarily be successful in another. A discussion on best practices regarding academic support of access programme students will also be provided.

### **1.4.1 Brief overview of the theoretical framework**

Functionalism posits that for society to thrive and function smoothly, all parts need one another. Based on this premise, the researcher selected functionalism as the theoretical framework for this research study. Functionalism best shows that when all parts that exist within an institution function interdependently, the institution functions smoothly and equilibrium is maintained. Hence, functionalist proponents point to the

performed functions and dysfunctions within social institutions. According to these proponents, functions and dysfunctions help maintain equilibrium, order and stability (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; Henslin, 2008: 26).

Robert K. Merton (in Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; & Henslin, 2008: 26) categorises functions into manifest functions and latent functions. Functions are defined as acts performed with the intention of reaching desired outcomes, however, functions can also be unintended (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; Henslin, 2008: 26). Society has expectations in terms of certain functions that institutions of higher education need to perform, however, dysfunctions in an institution are often also present. Merton (in Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; & Henslin, 2008: 26) views dysfunctions as institutional actions that can disrupt the smooth functioning and well-being of the whole system. Lack of academic support may also lead to student attrition, albeit an unintended consequence (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; Henslin, 2008: 26). A detailed discussion of functions and dysfunctions of education in relation to literature and the current study will be provided in Chapter 2.

#### **1.4.2 Operational concepts**

Operational concepts are defined and explained in the context of the study and from a functionalism stand. The following concepts are defined, namely strategy, academic support, and university access programme. This study concerns people's experiences in terms of the effectiveness, or not, of the programme. People use language as a mode of communication, in other words, they communicate their experiences to others by using language. People in the same context can assign different meanings to these concepts. It is therefore necessary to clearly define and explain these concepts to avoid confusion and misinterpretation (Mahlomaholo & Netshandama, 2012: 42). In order to foster communication between the parties involved it is vital that the concepts be clearly understood. Only then can the parties concerned communicate freely and engage in meaningful conversation in an effort to address the problem. It was also vital that all parties involved in this study clearly understood the topic and share information that they regard relevant to the topic. This could be achieved through spoken and unspoken language.

### 1.4.3 A brief related literature review

Internationally, widening participation in higher education gained much attention. However, some countries, such as Australia, seem to have advanced in initiatives aimed at social inclusivity and student academic support, while others seem to lack in terms of student support initiatives, such as South Africa.

It seems as if tutor assistance in the USA and the UK was inadequate as these countries substituted tutorial programmes with access programmes (Arendale, 2010: 45; Peck, Chilvers & Lincoln, 2010: 1). One reason for this shift is that access programmes offered students personalised assistance, such as one-on-one teaching, and a face-to-face approach. This was further maintained by reducing the student-tutor ratio, which facilitated academic growth. Peck *et al.* (2012: 2) highlight debate pertaining to the kind of support that would be most valuable to students, and whether services should target those students deemed most in need.

Furthermore, Peck *et al.* (2010) point out that widening participation students are sometimes less confident regarding their academic abilities. Although HEIs regard these students as academically underprepared, they still expect them to thrive as independent learners, and to do so with inadequate academic support. Moreover, most UAP students are not prepared well enough to adjust to the demands of HEIs. This emphasises the need for academic support that will enhance a smooth transition to the mainstream programme and better academic performance. HEIs, particularly those with UAPs, must keep in mind that students have different capabilities and that some, although they did not do well in school, may actually have strong academic capabilities. However, there are also those students who need constant support to better their academic performance. In short, there are groups with different needs within a group.

Additionally, Speirs, Riley and McCabe (2017: 51) acknowledge that positive outcomes, such as increased motivation and engagement, are the result of students' involvement in the co-creation of the curricula. By co-creating the curricula, students can be involved in the creation of assessments. This will enable students to identify and realise their capabilities, which will ultimately foster learning, place them in a position to identify shortcomings, and enable them to seek assistance in time. Karp, O'Gara and Hughes (2008: 13) also mention the visibility and availability of program

advising at USA universities, however, they view the program as lacking structural organisation as first time students could meet any academic advisor upon registration. Furthermore, if at a later stage students have follow-up questions, they might meet a different advisor, which could result in students receiving inaccurate or inadequate information.

It seems as if widening participation is prevalent and well-documented in Australia. O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts and Harwood (2016: 322) articulate that it is the responsibility of HEIs to address social inclusivity for all. That is, all HEIs must provide equal opportunities to all its students, despite students' level of study. In a study by Reed, King and Whiteford (2015: 384), widening participation initiatives and the impact thereof in Australia are highlighted. Initiatives such as a mentoring programme for media students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) have successfully addressed and enabled students' transition to mainstream programmes (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016: 322; & Reed, King & Whiteford, 2015: 384).

CALD and HEPPP in Australia have successfully increased capacity, confidence, and a sense of belonging, motivation and social capital (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016: 322; Reed *et al.*, 2015: 384). Additionally, Gale and Parker (2014: 735) identify the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) as an example of good institutional practices in facilitating student transition to HE. Similarly, Harwood, McMahon, O'Shea, Bodkin-Andrews and Priestly (2015: 220) highlight the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) program that is designed to support indigenous Australian high school students through high school and into university, further education or employment. The AIME program has a well-established curriculum in the form of workbooks, interactive multimedia and session plans for use by the mentees/mentors and the AIME presenter. Therefore, Harwood *et al.* (2015) attest AIME's exponential growth and significant success for its mentees.

In South Africa, access programmes exist at the universities of the Free State, KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo and Cape Town. However, although South African universities offer access programmes, it seems as if support initiated programmes are inadequate. For example, the UFS developed the Programme for Academic Student Success (PASS) but this initiative seems to marginalise particularly UAP students.

PASS is available for extended programme students with an admission point (AP) score of 25-30 (depending on faculty requirements), and first year mainstream students with an AP score of 30 and higher (Strydom, Du Plessis & Henn, 2016: 235). This excludes UA students as their AP scores between 18-24. The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the UFS initiated PASS with the aim to help students cope with the transition from their first year of study to the second. CTL, similar to Academic Learning Support Assistance (ALSA) and Learning Assistance Centre (LAC), provides learning support such as essay writing skills on a one-on-one basis (Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6), however, this kind of support seems inadequate and is not available at the access campus.

## **1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Participatory action research (PAR) was employed as the research methodology in this study. The PAR process is relevant to this study as it allows open engagement from all parties involved. This study was designed in this manner to award space for collaborative sharing of experiences and development of strategies to address the problem. The parties involved shared their realities as they are the ones who experienced it. The researcher, who is also a staff member in the UAP, the leader and the manager of the study, conducted the research with the co-researchers (participants). Participants in this study are referred to as co-researchers as they play a vital role by sharing their experiences, which paved the way for the development of appropriate strategies to address the concerns raised.

The following rules and regulations made it easy to coordinate, maintain order, and foster respect for all the co-researchers during the research project. Punctuality was rated high and shared experiences were treated with respect as it was the reality that every participant experienced. It was also of utmost importance that co-researchers attended all set sessions as attendance was set out as one of the defining factors of the success of the study. Another important factor was that co-researchers had to take responsibility and communicate during the research process, particularly during the *sharing of information* sessions. It was every person's prerogative to choose what he was comfortable sharing with the rest of the group. Furthermore, once problem areas were identified, the co-researchers would be responsible for voicing concerns and



identifying possible strategies to address the problems. Lastly, confidentiality was of key importance and the co-researchers were made aware that shared experiences and other information may not be discussed with outsiders. Functionalism was adopted as the theoretical framework for this research study as it posits that for society to thrive and continue to exist, all members of society should function interdependently (Henslin, 2008: 26; Ferrante, 2016: 28). Similarly, PAR is emancipatory and transformational in nature, and challenges unproductive ways of functioning (Ary *et al.*, 2010: 515).

A planning session was held focusing on identifying and justifying the need for improving academic support for UAP students. This was vital as co-researchers indicated immediate needs, which facilitated the development of an appropriate strategy, taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of such strategy. Identifying the immediate needs helped as it afforded space to develop and prioritise strategies and actions to address that component. Therefore, based on what needed immediate attention, the researcher and co-researchers collaboratively formulated an action plan and its implementation for improving academic support.

Sessions were scheduled according to the availability of the researcher and co-researchers. Co-researchers were responsible for identifying the sections of modules they struggled with. Sessions were preferably to be held once a week, towards the end of each week. This was to provide the co-researchers with the opportunity to obtain content-based clarity from their facilitators, enough time to read the work covered in class, and to compile notes. Co-researchers were at liberty to contact the researcher if necessary before a scheduled session. The researcher and co-researchers collaborated in planning the schedule, and this enabled the researcher to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the strategy. The implementation of the strategy took place within the UAP vicinity. This was done in an effort to avoid any form of inconvenience (e.g. travel time and unfamiliar spaces) to the co-researchers.

Ten (10) registered first-year UAP students with Sociology as major participated, and in this research study are referred to co-researchers. The researcher conducted focus group discussions with the co-researchers. During these discussions, the Free-Attitude Interview (FAI) (Nkonyane, 2014: 18) technique was used to initiate discussions as it allowed co-researchers freedom to communicate in their preferred

language and to interact with one another. According to Mahlomaholo (2009: 228), FAI is useful in determining the true feelings and views of the co-researchers. Discussions were voice-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

### **1.5.1 Data collection**

Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen and Razavieh (2010: 525) posit the importance of triangulation in PAR. They believe that using multiple sources of data and not relying on a single source, enhances corroboration, hence the adoption of the triangulation strategy. Similarly, functionalism highlights that if an institution is to thrive and continue to exist, parts within that institution need to work together (interdependently) (Henslin, 2008: 26; & Ferrante, 2006: 481). In this study, the researcher and co-researchers worked collaboratively in identifying the problem and developing a strategy (or strategies) to improve academic support of UAP students. A focus group comprising of currently registered UAP students was formed as the meeting discussions of this focus group formed part of the data generation process. The next discussion will focus on the data generation process.

#### **1.5.1.1 Cycle 1**

*Phase 1:* The researcher and co-researchers were present in the meeting to ensure that all understand the research problem, the purpose and the aim of the study.

*Phase 2:* A second meeting was held to reflect on the previous meeting, to draw up a schedule for the follow-up meetings and determine guidelines for the operations of the focus group. The researcher also used this meeting to ask permission from the participants to record the discussions of the follow-up scheduled meetings to ensure accurate data capturing. This generated data will be used for analysis purposes. Participants were assured that no person outside of the focus group would have access to the recordings, which would be stored safely with the researcher and be discarded at a later stage.

### **1.5.1.2 Cycle 2**

*Phase 1:* In the focus group discussions, the aim was to answer the research question: what strategy can be developed to improve academic support of students in the UAP? In addition, the researchers and co-researchers collaboratively developed strategies to deal with the identified issues.

*Phase 2:* In this phase, the strategies agreed on in Cycle 2, phase 1, were put into practice. The focus group then assessed each strategy by answering a number of key questions.

### **1.5.1.3 Cycle 3**

The researcher and co-researchers met to reflect on the effects of the intervention strategy that was implemented. It was anticipated that in this last cycle, the researcher and co-researchers collaboratively would be in a position to identify best practise or suitable strategy to improve academic support of UAP students. PAR and functionalism allowed the researcher and co-researchers collaborative space (Berg, 2007: 231), in other words, participants all played vital roles in terms of the success of the research project.

## **1.5.2 Selection of research participants**

In this study, the co-researchers are current UAP students. The researcher purposefully chose the co-researchers based on the following characteristics (Pascoe, 2014: 142; Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2004: 334; Wildemuth, 2009: 245): co-researchers are current UAP students registered in the Faculty of Humanities, with Sociology as a major. The guiding primary consideration was that those students would provide insightful information related to the topic (Wildemuth, 2009: 245).

From a functionalism point of view, social reality is largely what people perceive it to be; it exists as people experience it and assign meaning to it. Social reality is fluid and fragile, and people construct it as they interact with others in ongoing processes of communication and negotiation (Clarke, 2010: n.p). From a functionalist point of view, social life arises in people's subjective experiences as they interact with others and

construct meaning. Therefore, as registered UAP students the co-researchers would be in a position to provide insightful information regarding their experiences and challenges, which will consequently give light to strategy development.

## **1.6 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

The collected data was analysed and interpreted using critical discourse analysis (CDA). The data of the current research study was gathered from focus groups, in the form of spoken and written language, which indicated that CDA would be best suited for data analysis (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 495). The data analysis was done based on the research objectives of the study and addressed the research question and aim of the study. CDA provides space for all concerned parties to have control of discussions (Bloor & Bloor, 2007: 109-110). Similarly, CDA aims to criticise and question discourses, thus leading to the understanding of students' experiences through students' everyday interactions.

Additionally, Wodak and Meyer (2001: 1) point out that CDA takes interest in the relation between language and power, and is used to refer specifically to the critical linguistic approach: "CDA may be defined as fundamentally concerned with analysis opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language".

## **1.7 CHALLENGES AND STRATEGY TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE UNIVERSITY ACCESS PROGRAMME**

A detailed discussion of the challenges that UAP students experienced will be presented in Chapter 3. The challenges identified for this study include inequities in academic support (i.e. scarcity of tutoring assistance, need of peer support programmes, insufficient IT support and training) and lack of a preparatory support programme (i.e. segregation, invisibility of learning assistance support centres, limited academic advising). The researcher consulted literature to identify current best practices implemented by other institutions. Components of academic support in the UAP, conditions conducive to the successful implementation of the strategy, and

possible shortcomings of best practices to improve academic support in the UAP will also be discussed.

## **1.8 FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to complete this research study, findings in relation to each of the objectives will be made and summarised. Data was analysed through the three-cycle procedure that allowed for drawing conclusions, and making recommendations. A detailed discussion will be provided in Chapter 6.

## **1.9 VALUE OF THE STUDY**

This study proposed the development of a strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in the UAP. The value of the strategy would be to add onto the existing approaches and scholarly writings concerned with the nature of the existence of the UAPs. The strategy that was developed was to be utilised to improve not only academic support, but also student performance, which would aid their transition to the mainstream. The findings of the study were used to make recommendations that would add value to UAP and support programmes, the students and the facilitators in these programmes and to the university in general.

## **1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

When conducting research that involves people, a researcher has to adhere to a number of ethical conditions. Therefore, the terms and conditions to obtain ethical clearance to perform this research study, as prescribed by the University of the Free State's Ethics Committee were part of the research process. A full explanation of these terms and conditions is provided in Chapter 4. The following are some of the ethical considerations that were put in place, namely voluntary participation, voice recording, informed consent and no harm to any participant. Voluntary participation entails that participants took part in the research study out of their own free will and were not forced or coerced into participating. Voice recording and informed consent mean that the participants gave permission that the sessions be recorded. With regard to not

causing harm to any participant, the researcher had to keep in mind that some of the discussions during the course of the study might cause participants to be uncomfortable. However, all participants were at liberty to voice concern or choose not to participate in any discussion that made them uncomfortable.

Additionally, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality implied that participants kept the information that transpired during sessions to themselves, and that no discussion of the sessions should continue outside the research group. Once the study has been concluded, the findings will be released and published, as there is an expectation to bring about change and improve the issues raised during the course of the study. Lastly, gatekeeping approval from the institution was necessary in that the institution has to be aware that a research study is taking place in the vicinity, and to ensure that the study or researcher will not in any way exploit participants.

## **1.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter introduced the study by providing background information and the extent of the need to improve academic support in the UAP. The need to improve academic support was justified through the personal experiences that students shared. The challenges identified were discussed to foster better understanding and in the end, develop suitable strategies to better the situation. Furthermore, these discussions and the resulting development of the strategy were based on literature and the theoretical framework. Students' experienced challenges and possible strategies to address such were discussed, based on the literature sources consulted, as well as the theoretical framework that formed the basis of this research study.

This chapter provided a brief description of the PAR procedure that was followed in this research study. The significance of PAR in data gathering and of CDA in data analysis were described. Therefore, the discussions and summaries of information gathered and derived from data analysis were points of consideration in justifying the need for the development of strategies to improve academic support of UAP students. The next chapter will discuss functionalism as the theoretical framework that informed this study.



## **CHAPTER 2 : FUNCTIONALISM AS THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN RELATION TO ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN A UNIVERSITY ACCESS PROGRAMME**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This study aimed to develop a strategy to improve the academic support of students in the University Access Programme (UAP). This chapter focuses firstly on the theoretical framework that informs this study, namely functionalism. The evolution of the theoretical framework to its present state will be discussed by focusing on its historical origin and background in the context of the objectives of this study. The argument in this regard is that society consists of social institutions and for society to function and thrive, all the parts (e.g. in higher education: students, facilitators/lecturers, tutors, write centers) that exist within an institution need to function interdependently, and adapt to the ever-changing (education) environment. This study was informed by the insufficient academic support of students in a university access programme (e.g. the UAP at the University of the Free State). This account of insufficient academic support was based on the researcher's personal experience and observation as a former access programme student, and currently, as a staff member in the programme. However, there seems to be limited information available on the topic, therefore personal experience and observation were taken as points of reference.

Secondly, the functions and dysfunctions of education will be discussed. According to Merton (in Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2013: 31; & Ferrante, 2016: 28) functions can be manifest or latent, in other words, functions can either be intended with expected consequences, or unintended. This study focused on manifest and latent functions performed by education (specifically higher education institutions). As higher education institutions perform expected functions, these institutions could also find themselves in the midst of dysfunctions. Merton (in Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2013: 31; & Ferrante, 2016: 28) explains dysfunctions as human actions that cause harm to the system, and actions that expose unintended consequences (e.g. limited access to academic support that hinders academic success) (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2013: 31, 2016: 28).



Thirdly, functionalism and the role of the researcher and co-researchers will be discussed from a functionalist perspective and in line with PAR. Participatory action research highlights that the researcher and co-researchers come together and collaboratively identify not only potential problems and issues, but also possible interventions (Ary *et al.*, 2010: 515; & Creswell, 2012: 582). Similarly, functionalism points out that for an institution to survive, all its parts need to work together (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; & Ferrante, 2013: 31, 2016: 28). Therefore, the study aimed to develop a strategy that can potentially improve the academic support of access programme students. The strategy was developed collaboratively as the researcher and co-researchers together developed it.

Lastly, the operational concepts will be defined, explained and discussed, as they inform matters relating to the study. These concepts, together with the findings from similar research studies, gave direction to the arguments, and fostered better understanding of the challenges that UAP students experienced. In the end, this also helped to develop an informed strategy to improve academic support. The development of the strategy was also based on best practices available. However, the strategy was developed taking into consideration the specific needs of this cohort of students, namely access programme students.

## **2.2 HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF FUNCTIONALISM**

According to Turner (2014: 83), functionalism began in the early nineteenth century as there was a need for a new discipline that would commit to the subjective study of the social world. The major contribution of functionalism in the field of sociology can be traced to the following theorists: August Comte, Herbert Spence, Emile Durkheim, and Robert Merton, in the field of sociology.

August Comte (1798 – 1857) is known as the father of sociology (Sadovnik & Coughlan, 2016: 1) and one of the major contributors to functionalism. Comte saw the need to theorise about nature and the dynamic of societies, hence his development of the study of sociology (Ferrante, 2016: 8). His view of functionalism posits that in society, individuals cannot exist in isolation. By this, he meant that an individual need others if he wants to continue to exist and survive (Ferrante, 2016: 28; Turner, 2014: 8). According to Turner, Comte analogised society as a complex organism built not

from individual human organisms, but rather from other social organisms. That is, in a social universe, all parts have functions and requisites, and those social requisites must be met for it to persist in its environment. Comte's functionalism perspective arose from biology and he believed that the "development of scientific sociology would be able to guide the future development of biology" (Turner, 2014: 8).

Herbert Spencer (in Turner, 2014: 10), much like Comte, views sociology through a natural science lens. For Spencer, biology is the study of individual organisms, while sociology is the study of what he terms 'super-organisms'. Spencer's functional view maintains that just like organisms, super-organisms also have structures and diverse parts that work interdependently for the survival of the whole. Comte and Spencer seem to agree on the nature of society and the functions each part within society need to fulfil. They further also agree that no single part in a society can exist and function in isolation (Ferrante, 2016: 28; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

Comte and Spencer articulate the existence of diverse parts in society, and that these parts need one another to continue to exist (Ferrante, 2016: 28; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277). Similarly, education is one part that exist in society, and education as an institution, consists of different or diverse parts. Therefore, for education to continue to exist smoothly, all parts need to work collaboratively. As the UAP is one of the parts of education, it is necessary that all relevant stakeholders be involved to ensure its smooth functioning. The researcher believes that a UAP is functioning smoothly when students have equal opportunities across all campuses, in other words, UAP students must have equal access to opportunities and academic support as mainstream students do.

Similarly, Emile Durkheim's functional analysis borrow much from Spencer, as he emphasises the basic relationship between population growth and structural differences, meaning that there is a likelihood of an increase in structural forces because of the growing of a population. Therefore, with population growth the structure evident in society will need to be re-evaluated with each growth. Durkheim (in Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277) believes that, for society to survive, integration among different actors is vital and significant (Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277). Similar to Comte, Durkheim also maintains the "importance of cultural systems as unifying force". In other words, the institutions that exist within the social world need each other, for

instance, society “needs the institution of law to coordinate and control relations within and between social units” (Turner, 2014:13).

According to Durkheim, society is much like a human body that consists of different parts or institutions, namely family, education, the economy and the state. He asserts that society’s institutions are interdependent and function to maintain the larger system (Ferrante, 2016: 28). In light of Durkheim’s view, there seems to be a need in a UAP for integration among different actors. In this case, the different actors are the students, lecturers, tutors/mentors, resources (e.g. computer labs and a library), and institution management. The researcher believes that integration among different actors imply collaborative functioning that will enhance student learning and transition, thereby providing students a sense of collegiality. However, there seems to be limited and inadequate access to such support in the UAP.

Comte and Spencer view “society as a kind of living organism”, that is, “just as a person or animal has organs that function together, so does society” (Henslin, 2008: 505; & Ferrante, 2016: 28, 2013: 30). Durkheim shares the same sentiment, as he views “society as being composed of many parts, each with its own function”. He believes that “when all the parts of the society fulfil its function society is in a ‘normal’ state”, however, each part should not perform its functions in isolation, but for the survival of the whole. Merton refers to this as society being in a functional state (Henslin, 2008: 505; & Ferrante, 2016: 28, 2013: 30). On the other hand, “when parts of society do not fulfil its function, society is in an ‘abnormal’ state”, which is dysfunctional, according to Merton (Henslin, 2008: 505; & Ferrante, 2016: 28, 2013: 30).

With Comte’s assertion in mind, it seems as if UAP students experience a number of challenges that the researcher believes have an effect on the learning process. The demeaning language that is often used to identify students in a UAP and inadequate access to academic support such as tutors and write centres, are but two of the challenges UAP students face. Therefore, O’Shea et al (2016: 322) posit that within an education institution, equal opportunities must be provided as access to such opportunities motivate students to “feel valued and to participate optimally as members of the education institution”. Wilson-Strydom (2015: 152) posits that inequities that exist particularly in HEIs hinder student success.

However, in Ferrante (2016: 28, 2013: 31, 2006: 481) and Henslin (2008: 26), Robert Merton dismisses the organic analogy of what constitutes society, but maintains the essence of functionalism as posited by Durkheim. In other words, “the notion that society is a whole composed of parts that work together”. Therefore, Merton introduces the following concepts: functions (manifest and latent) and dysfunctions (manifest and latent). Functions refer to “the beneficial consequences of people’s actions” and help keep a group in equilibrium. On the other hand, Merton refers to dysfunctions as “consequences that harm a society, they undermine a system’s equilibrium” (Henslin, 2008: 26; Ferrante, 2016: 28, 2013: 31, 2006: 481; Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

UAPs, particularly in South Africa, were established to prepare and empower students who are said to be underprepared and who did not meet the university admission criteria (Hlalele, 2010: 98; UFS Prospectus, 2018). The researcher therefore believes that the establishment of UAPs constitutes a function as it allows those students an opportunity to access higher education institutions (HEIs). However, observable dysfunctions exist in UAPs, such as inadequate academic support (e.g. tutors/mentors, write centres, peer learning assistance/support) (Hlalele, 2010: 107; Arendale, 2010: 14; Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7). These dysfunctions do not only affect the student cohort, but also the HEI as a whole. Dysfunctions affect students in that their capabilities will not be recognised and they probably will not reach their potential. Similarly, HEIs may deem the UAP ineffective because students’ progression to mainstream programmes are compromised.

As stated earlier, Merton holds the notion that “functions can be either manifest or latent”. By manifest, he means that “an action is intended” and recognised to “help some part of a system”. He also points out that latent functions are those actions that have unintended and unrecognised consequences that can help a system adjust (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; & Henslin, 2008: 26). Merton further highlights that human actions can also hurt a system, and these actions are called latent dysfunctions. However, in this particular case, the consequences are usually unintended. In the case of UAPs, inadequate academic support can potentially ‘hurt’ the institution in that students may feel inadequate in terms of the academic requirements of HEIs, and find it challenging to overcome their disadvantages (Bathmaker, 2016: 27; Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; Karp *et al.*, 2008: 2; & Malthus, 2015:

441). Consequently, students' progression and smooth transition to mainstream are affected.

As education is one of the institutions in society, it also has its own functions. There seems to be consensus on the functions performed by education. Benokraitis (2016: 245), Henslin (2008: 506), Ferrante (2016: 160, 2013: 334), and Stewart and Zaaïman (2015: 276-277) identify the following functions of education: teaching knowledge and skills such as reading and writing, and instil cultural values, such as encouraging students to compete and achieve success. Education serves as the machinery towards social integration or integrating a diverse population through schools. Therefore, when education serves as the machinery for social integration, students can learn from each other, share challenges which will consequently foster teamwork, and more so, seek assistance where needed to overcome challenges. Additionally, students gain a sense of national identity, and experience a sense of inclusion where all enjoy equal learning opportunities (Yaghmaei, Yazdani & Ahmady, 2016: 2; & Salik, Zhiyong & Baocun, 2014: 5).

Additionally, education facilitates personal growth as it broadens one's horizons and teaches one to become an independent thinker and a problem solver. Solving social problems is another function of education, as it seems that nations use education-based programs to address social problems. Society is stabilised as more students are enrolled in education and kept away from the streets where they might be committing crimes (Benokraitis, 2016: 245; Henslin, 2008: 506; Ferrante, 2016: 160, 2013: 334; & Stewart & Zaaïman, 2015: 277). West and Thompson (2015: 46) support the functions of education stated above, however, they assert that due to the technological and information revolution, education needs to re-consider and at minimum re-shape its role and functions.

### **2.3 EVOLUTION OF FUNCTIONALISM**

Callaghan (2016: 68) contends that functionalism "seeks to provide practical solutions to practical problems, and is usually firmly committed to a philosophy of social engineering as a basis for social change". 'Emphasising the maintenance of order, equilibrium and stability in society, or regulation and control of social affairs'

(Benokraitis, 2016: 245; Henslin, 2008: 506; Ferrante, 2016: 160; 2013: 334; Rigney, 2015: 338; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 276-277).

As functionalism is concerned with social institutions, proponents have shown much interest in education. West and Thompson (2015: 46) articulate that “functionalism looks at society as a whole, emphasising the contribution a social activity makes to society”. Based on Merton’s perspective, within an education institution, parts exist and for the whole institution to persist to exist, the parts need to function interdependently. These parts function to maintain order and stability within that institution. That is, education has functions: manifest functions and latent functions, and within this institution, dysfunctions are visible yet invisible in that these dysfunctions go unnoticed. However, criticism laid against functionalist proponents is that they defend existing social arrangements, in other words, they defend the status quo.

Defending the status quo can potentially perpetuate marginalisation, for example, the inception of a UAP was with the intention to include previously excluded students. Furthermore, the status quo is defended in that student enrolment in HEIs, particularly the UAP, is based on school performance. For example, a student who wants to study economics might not be able to do so if the student does not meet that faculty’s requirement, namely to have passed Mathematics at a set standard. However, inclusion without the necessary support potentially may lead to students feeling excluded. Hence, Merton introduces the concepts “manifest and latent functions, and dysfunctions” to address criticisms (Ferrante, 2016: 28; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

## **2.4 FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF EDUCATION**

Merton defines functions as “beneficial consequences of people’s actions”. That is “functions help keep the group together in equilibrium”. On the other hand, dysfunctions are defined as “consequences that harm a society, and they undermine system’s equilibrium” (Henslin, 2008: 26; Ferrante, 2016: 28; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

### 2.4.1 Manifest functions

Education and other social institutions evolve and change over time, and need to adjust and adapt to changes. Durkheim and Merton view functions of education as facilitating personal growth and distributing resources equally (Ferrante, 2016: 160). Other functions include transmitting skills, contributing to basic and applied research, solving social problems, and screening and selecting students (for example, channelling students towards different career paths) (Ferrante, 2016). West and Thompson (2015: 46) provide the following as functions of education: “to teach social rules such as cooperation to prepare children to function as part of the society and to teach specific occupational skills”.

Similarly, Ghazarian and Sung-Ho’s (2015: 151) state that education must preserve and enhance social order. Their study was conducted in the USA and followed a functionalist approach. In their study, they emphasise the need to link education with human resources development, giving rise to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education, STEM-focused school support, improved STEM undergraduate education and research funding.

UAP and STEM address the issues of widening participation, and play a role in job training aimed at preparing students to participate productively within society and the economy (Ghazarian & Sung-Ho, 2015: 151). In contrast with STEM, UAP not only focuses on science and technology, but caters for students in a wide range of study fields, namely the Humanities, Economics and Management Science, Natural and Agricultural Science, and Education.

“Education ensures a bond between the individual and society” (Salik, Zhiyong & Baocun, 2014: 5). Education helps students to socialise and become aware of their capabilities, which translate to identity development (Salik *et al.*, 2014: 5). Additionally, for Salik *et al.* (2014: 5) “education also ensures the development of a feeling of connection with a social group”. Therefore, when students in the UAP do not have access to the necessary growth facilitating resources, they might feel disconnected and segregated from the larger society (the rest of the students at the institution). Durkheim believes that “education reflects the necessary diversity since it only diversifies and specialises by helping the individual to acquire knowledge and develop

certain skills necessary for performing any future professional activities” (Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 26).

Parsons and Durkheim both consider school as part of society, and that it prepares individuals for their roles in life based on the values of the society (Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277; Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27; & Ferrante, 2016: 28). According to Ferrante (2016), school is responsible to instil new values in individuals, namely “the value of achievement and the value of equal opportunity”. These individuals have an important function in society since a “developed industrial society requires a highly motivated work force, which strives for success” (Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27).

#### **2.4.2 Latent functions**

From a functionalist view, “schools help society allocate resources and sort individuals into various social classes, reinforcing the dominant values of the society in the process” (Rigney, 2015: 338). UAP students are classified or categorised according to their previous achievements and are indirectly assigned a particular social class, namely those who did not meet the access requirements. This often leads to them being enrolled in a field of study that they would not otherwise choose. Therefore, dominant society values are reinforced on UAP students based on their school performance.

According to Rigney (2015: 338), “Durkheim’s legacy in functionalist analysis outlined how the content of a specific social group is internalised in the individual, in other words, schools make students”. This refers to the unintended function of education, which can also serve as a dysfunction. In this case, the language used in defining UAP students, such as under-prepared or from a disadvantaged background, tends to be marginalising in nature. As students are subjected to this kind of language almost on a daily basis, they internalise such remarks and consequently might end up believing it and act accordingly.

“The functionalist approach to education was significantly enriched by Parsons who pointed out that school (secondary socialisation), following primary socialisation in the family, is the most important agent of socialisation which prepares the student for his role as an adult” (Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27). Msigwa (2016: 541) attests that one



of the roles of HEIs is to build skills and knowledge in students to prepare them for the world of work, and to develop students to become experts in different development sectors. Therefore, once students leave the HEI, they enter a different stage of socialisation, namely re-socialisation. Students develop an own identity based on their socialisation at an institution of higher education. However, if the student is exposed to unequal distribution of resources at HEI, such student is more likely to see himself as unworthy to access such resources and accept life's injustices as normal and just (Ferrante, 2016: 28; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

“Davis and Moore connect the educational system with the system of social stratification and consider education a means of role distribution” (Ferrante, 2016: 28). Social stratification is referred to as a “mechanism, which ensures that the most talented and most able individuals are distributed to positions that are for society functionally most important” (Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27). UAPs tend to, as other HEIs also do, stratify students on their past performance without considering other aspects that might have led to such performances.

### **2.4.3 Dysfunctions**

The UAP was introduced with the intention to address the issue of widening participation. As the programme became popular within the education system, it has unconsciously marginalised those the programme originally was intended for. Johnson (2016: 1) studied the implementation of educational innovations in Europe and realised that “educational innovations, both technological and pedagogical entail declarations which are often not upheld by the community they were intended for”. The researcher observed this also in the UAPs, namely that the UAP seems to marginalise those it was intended for. It seems as if this exclusion is facilitated or driven by financial matters. For example, as UAPs function on a first come, first serve basis, those in the midst of financial difficulties are marginalised because others might fill spaces while they are still trying to sort out their finances.

The researcher views the unequal distribution of resources between campuses also as marginalising. For instance, at the University of the Free State (UFS), the programme (UAP) has its own campus. The campus is isolated and segregated, and is quite a distance from the mainstream campus where resources are readily available

to the students. Mainstream students have access to lecturers after classes, in the form of consultations, and tutors (student assistants) are available to assist undergraduate students with module specific content. Mainstream students also have access to the 'write site/centre' facilitated by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), where students are assisted with academic writing matters such as "text in context" (Hill & Meo, 2015: 845). The aforementioned resources seem unavailable in the UAP campus.

Since the teaching methodology of UAPs is resource-based, the use of technology in these programmes are evident. Although is it true that most of the current generation of students have good technological skills, institutions seem to take it for granted that all students are technology experts (Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). As an institution (UAP) that aims to address the issue of access with success, students from disadvantaged backgrounds (in terms of schooling and socio-economic circumstances) are marginalised as they are expected to perform online activities (Smith, Trinidad & Larkin, 2015: 22). UAP students are marginalised in that they are expected to perform online activities and complete assignments on a computer without the UAP considering whether all students are computer literate, and have had prior technology and computer training. Moreover, insufficient time is spent on introducing students to technology and on training them how to use it (Nelson & Creagh, 2013: 15). For example, in the UAP, the computer introduction module is presented in the second semester, whereas students are expected to perform online assessments from the beginning of the year, in the first semester.

From a functionalist point of view, the institution of education in, for example, industrial countries, is considered a significant pathway for enhancing social mobility (Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015; 277). "The role of the school in legitimization of inequality is pronounced, as is the need to study the factors of inequality in school" (Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27). The researcher believes that there is a need to address access with success from the institution's point of view. Academics and HEIs need to move away from the notion and blame game of the previous education system. In short, HEIs are largely to blame as the current teachers or educators are products of HEIs. Therefore, HEIs need not to focus on the injustices and mistakes of the school system any longer. The students have gained access and are enrolled in HEIs. The focus now needs to be on how not to perpetuate the spirit of marginalisation, segregation, and inequity.

The researcher believes that this can be achieved by ensuring that every student, despite his background and campus of study, enjoys equal access to resources and academic support.

Additionally, Radulović & Krstić (2017: 27) point out that “The functionalist schools function in accordance with the principles of meritocracy, and status is achieved based on just deserts (values).” Furthermore, norms and values need to be applied to all students, despite the gender, race, family origin or class of the student. Additionally, “functionalists see inequality in education as the consequence of the differences in intelligence, in the general abilities and motivations of the individual” (Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

## **2.5 RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING FUNCTIONALISM AS THE THEORETICAL BASIS**

Functionalism uses “structural explanation to emphasise how interdependent parts fit into and operate to sustain an overall system with specific parts serving complementary and specialised supporting roles for the whole” (Neuman, 2014: 83). Functionalism was chosen as the theoretical basis of this research study as the study was concerned with the challenges that students experienced. By employing functionalism, the researcher was in a position to develop a better understanding of the challenges these students experienced and to discover how students construct meaning in their setting. The researcher aimed to discover what the actions mean to the students who engage in them, and to understand how the students subjectively experienced the challenges.

Callaghan (2016: 68) asserts that functionalism seeks to “provide practical solutions to practical problems and is usually firmly committed to a philosophy of social engineering (society drives change collectively) as a basis for social change, emphasising the maintenance of order, equilibrium and stability in society, or regulation and control of social affairs”. Therefore, the aim of the study was to develop a strategy to improve academic support and to maintain order (equal distribution of resources).

This theory focuses on the “goal of producing future citizens who will participate in the political dimensions of society, support patriotism, be law-abiding, and support the democracy” (Strawn, 2009: 36). Improving access to resources might translate into success, as students will know that they are all equally worthy of resources, no matter the campus they are studying at. Similarly, this might be a significant channel in the transition from UAP to mainstream, as students will be familiar with the resources available.

## **2.6 ONTOLOGY OF FUNCTIONALISM**

Functionalism as a theory suits studies in social sciences. Neuman (2014: 104) believes that “people intentionally create social reality with their purposeful actions of interacting as social beings”. Functionalism adopts a more nominalist ontology, namely denying the existence of any general entities such as the universality of reality. “Social reality is largely what people perceive it to be; it exists as people experience it and assign meaning to it. Social reality is fluid, and people construct it as they interact with others in ongoing processes of communication and negotiation” (Neuman, 2014: 104). From a functionalist point of view, “social life arises in people’s subjective experiences as they interact with others and construct meaning” (Neuman, 2014: 104).

Similarly, Clarke (2010: n.p) points out that functionalists take a “subjective perspective and tend to have a realist ontology”, realist in that within society or an institution, entities exist independently, however, independence in that reality is what they see it to be. Furthermore, “functionalists are concerned with explaining how organisations and society maintain order” (Clarke, 2010: n.p). Therefore, with regard to the UAP, students are in position to create their own reality and should be understood and be known by their efforts. If students are afforded space and resources, they can actively make connections between their own lived conditions and being, and making own reality, and even the possibility of a new reality (Nkoane in Piper, Piper & Mahlomaholo, 2009: 26).

Ontologically, functionalism has its roots in the 19th century, as developed by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Functionalists look at the system as a whole, and try to understand the functions performed by the different parts that exist (Callaghan, 2016: 71; & Rigney, 2015: 338). Moreover, functionalism looks at the contributions made by

each individual within the system, thereby enabling an understanding of the whole, notwithstanding that reality is what individuals perceive it to be in their social world.

Additionally, Callaghan (2016: 71) suggests that the social world is therefore “relative and can only be understood from the point of view of individuals who are directly involved in it”. From this perspective, social science was taken to be ‘subjective’, that is, “social science tends to reject the notion that science can generate objective knowledge of any kind” (Callaghan, 2016: 71). Therefore, it was important to understand how UAP students constructed meaning to their experienced challenges, as it is their reality.

“Durkheim reverses the common sense order of relation between individual and society: societies create individuals and not the other way around” (Rigney, 2015: 338). According to Durkheim, sociology is built on the basis that an individual cannot exist and function on his own. Hence, sociologists study society as a whole, to understand societies’ experiences and challenges as a whole, thereby working together in the development of mechanisms to address those challenges. In this way, no individual can own and claim the existence of the whole society. When translated to students, it means that for a student to adapt to and succeed academically at a HEI, the student will need to work/function collaboratively with others. Potentially, we could live in a classless society, where individual status and/or background based on gender, past socio-economic status, do not define such individuals but rather educational attainment (Bourdage, Erickson & Hua, 2016: 28).

Boucher (2015: 389) argues that what “functionalists over the centuries have had in common is not a set of beliefs about the world but a distinctive attitude or stance. Pre-evolutionary functionalists had very different beliefs about the natural world, and very different theories, from evolutionary functionalists (Boucher, 2015: 389).

According to Bourdage *et al.* (2016: 28), “there are four guiding tenets of sociology” of which the first one is the belief that reality is a social construct. In other words, different persons experience multiple realities. Additionally, each person’s reality is constructed based on individual experience. Secondly, human behaviour has hidden social causes because, even though individuals have the freedom to behave in whichever way they see fit, social norms and expectations seem to influence such individual behaviour. The third tenet is the notion that “much of social life is unintended”. In this regard,

sociologists seek an understanding of causes that lead to particular outcomes, as in some cases outcomes experienced by the individual may be unintended but rather “an unintended consequence of a large number” of other factors. The fourth and final tenet of sociology is that the way ‘individuals perceive themselves is greatly affected by how others perceive them’ (Bourdage *et al.*, 2016: 28; Henslin, 2008: 505; & Ferrante, 2014: 334).

## **2.7 EPISTEMOLOGY OF FUNCTIONALISM**

Merton (in Chojnacki, 2015: 185) asserts that, from a functionalism stand, knowledge creation depends on social position, in other words, the nature of knowledge and the reality of such knowledge that humans hold are primarily based on an individual standing in society (Chojnacki, 2015: 185). For Merton, there is no one reality nor nature of knowledge, rather one’s standing in society gives way to the reality that one holds, and the knowledge based on experiences.

A central position of functionalism is that “when parts of society are working together properly, each contributes to the well-being or stability of that society”. However, when a part does not function as intended, it might disrupt the whole system (Henslin, 2008: 505). Ferrante (2014: 334), Ballantine, Hammack and Stuber (2017: 18) add that the central idea of functionalism is that “society is a whole unit, made up of interrelated parts that work together”. Similarly, Clarke (2010: n.p.) holds the view that functionalism strongly emphasises the “pre-eminence of the social whole over the individual parts”.

Functionalists see change in systems as “helping the system continually adapt to new circumstances; change is generally viewed as a slow evolutionary process that does not disrupt the ongoing system” (Ballantine, Hammack & Stuber, 2017: 18). Therefore, UAPs need to adapt to new ways of supporting students. That can be maintained through the introduction and implementation of new strategies to improve academic support to enhance student performance, success and progression, and foster smooth transition to the next level of study. One of the functions of HEIs is the transmission of knowledge, therefore when knowledge is transmitted, students can create own knowledge through understanding. However, inadequate academic support at UAPs hinder students in acquiring knowledge, which in turn might lead to limited knowledge

in that nation as the same students will be expected to contribute to the economy of the nation.

According to Merton (in Bourdage, Erickson & Hua, 2016: 29), sociologists established an “epistemology focused more on teleology/purpose than causality”. In other words, Parsons and Merton (in Bourdage *et al.*, 2016: 29) are more interested in the “purposes served by social phenomena and less in what may have caused them”. According to Bourdage *et al.* (2016: 29), the root of a functionalist mind-set is that the *what* is more important than the *why* (Bourdage *et al.*, 2016: 29).

## **2.8 FUNCTIONALISM AND THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER AND CO-RESEARCHERS**

The researcher and the co-researchers contributed own knowledge, techniques and experiences (Berg, 2007: 231) during this research study. Functionalists believe that, for society to survive and thrive, all parts should contribute for the survival of whole. In this same instance, the researcher *de-classed* herself. This (de-classing) is the process in which the researcher undergoes some kind of psychological transformation (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 318). By psychological transformation, the researcher needs to be aware of power differentials, therefore without addressing how power is distributed, sharing of information might be hindered. Therefore, de-classing is most likely to bring about understanding, respect and effective communication from the researcher and the co-researchers.

In this research study, de-classing was accomplished by ensuring that all parties engaged in open conversation, in a safe environment and in the spirit of PAR, namely those participants are equals (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 318). Babbie and Mouton (2005: 318) view participatory action researchers as change agents, therefore the need for de-classing as a researcher may hold different values than the participants. Therefore, without power dynamics, PAR participants, the researcher and the co-researchers, can be empowered.

The researcher and the co-researchers played a direct role in the implementation process of PAR in the same sense as both parties functioned as full collaborators to maintain democracy and foster mutual trust (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 317). The

participatory action researcher has to be supportive and facilitative. For example, in this research study, the researcher needed to fulfil not only a supportive role but also a “catalytic” role by being an active participant in, and at times the initiator of, dialogue. PAR and functionalism allow the researcher and co-researchers collaborative space where everyone involved plays a vital role in terms of the survival of the whole system.

The role of the co-researchers was significant in dealing with any issues that may arise, and those that they experience on an ongoing basis (Chojnacki, 2015: 185). The nature of knowledge from the co-researchers’ view is based on their standing within the institution, which allowed them (co-researchers) to become agents in changing the situation and circumstances.

As stated earlier, PAR is a process aimed at empowerment. The empowerment in this study was in the form of participants learning new skills (Berg, 2007: 231) such as learning to critically analyse their own situations and problems. This ultimately will improve participants’ ability to devise solutions themselves. Through these skills, students’ self-esteem and personal development may also be improved. In essence, the active involvement of those who are affected by the problem and who are to be the direct beneficiaries (co-participants/students) of the research is essential for meaningful problem identification and problem solving, and for the research to be meaningful to the co-researchers. Similarly, Berg (2007: 231) reiterates that the researcher and co-researchers have to come together and collaboratively identify potential problems and issues, and possible interventions. Through the active involvement of the co-researchers, they may find themselves in a position where they no longer depend on the researcher to solve their problems, but develop their own problem-solving strategies.

The goal of the PAR researcher is to understand the practice and to solve immediate problems. In this instance, immediate problems constitute those challenges that hinder students’ progression. Collaboratively, the researcher and co-researchers reflected on the practice styles, incorporated new information developed by the research, and implemented interventions that potentially may bring about lasting changes in the group (Berg, 2007: 232). From a functionalist point of view, Ballantine *et al.* (2017: 18) highlight that changes of this kind could help the researcher, and more specifically the co-researchers, to adapt to new circumstances.



## **2.9 DEFINITIONS OF OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS**

### **2.9.1 Strategy**

Hornsby (2005: 1461) defines strategy as “a plan that is intended to achieve a particular purpose”. The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines strategy as a “detailed plan for achieving success in situations such as war, politics, business, industry or sport, or the skill of planning for such situations”. The Collins English Dictionary (1988: 1506) defines strategy as “the art or science of the planning particularly a long-term plan for success, especially in business or politics. In Msigwa (2016: 547), strategy entails “mechanisms that alleviate the low representation of marginalized social groups in HE.”

Budd (2017: 111) points out that “the activity of widening participation (WP) refers to strategies that seek to improve the access to, and participation of, a wider range of students at university, specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds”. Friend (2016: 17) views widening participation as a strategy in its own right, that is, widening participation “is a project of social justice by virtue of its underpinning aim. The emphasis on widening, rather than simply increasing, access to and participation in higher education, places focus on those groups who have been traditionally excluded or under/misrepresented in higher education”.

In the South African perspective, the term UAP is used to refer to a process similar to widening participation. UAP is used as a strategy that addresses issues of access to HEIs brought by the injustices of school system, a situation similar to that described by Friend (2016). Therefore, this study anticipates the development of a strategy within a strategy. The strategy includes access to academic support, with the aim to assist students to successfully transition to mainstream programmes, and to obtain a qualification of their choice.

### **2.9.2 Academic support**

In a number of studies, the concepts *access programme* and *academic support* are used interchangeably. However, the researcher decided to explore them separately.

Academic/learning support has many names and forms, such as “academic preparatory programs, remedial education, compensatory education, access programs, developmental education” (Arendale, 2010: 43). Arendale asserts that the aim of learning support/assistance is “to meet the needs of the students facing academic difficulty in a course and to provide supplemental and enrichment learning opportunities for any student at the institution”. Peterson, O’Connor and Strawhun (2014: 1) define academic support as “programs and strategies that are used by schools to increase the academic achievement of students, particularly for students who may be at risk of diminished academic achievement”.

Academic support is considered any activity or social exchange that supports students in their academic studies. By academic support, Peck, Chilvers and Lincoln (2010: 1) mean the following: support from academic tutors, training in academic and essay writing, note taking, study skills and study methods, language support, and activities that make the pedagogies of academia transparent. In the context of this study, the concept of academic support will be employed as the following: availability, access and use of academic tutors, formal and organised peer assistance and learning, academic advising support, where student learning is shared and social, availability of lecturers/facilitators, and access to a learning assistance support centre.

### **2.9.3 University Access Programme**

An access course or programme is defined as “a course of education that prepares students without the usual qualifications, in order that they can study at university or college” (Hornby, 2005: 8).

In its longitudinal report, the University of the Free State (UFS 2017: 1) defines the UAP as a programme that was designed and deemed necessary for students who did not meet university admission requirements. The UAP provides “prospective students, who have UFS Admission Point (AP) scores of 18 to 24, with the opportunity to perform themselves into higher education. Successful UAP students gain access, with credit recognition, to appropriate further degree studies” (UFS, 2017: 1).

For many scholars, there seems to be a universal explanation as to what constitutes access programmes, despite the name of the programme, e.g. academic development

(AD), widening participation, and foundation programme. It seems as if the HEIs in some countries (Australia, US, UK, Botswana, Ghana, Tanzania, and South Africa) adopted this strategy (Levy & Murray, 2005: 130; Karp *et al.*, 2008: 1; & Dillon, 2011: 1481).

The University Access Programme (UAP) was developed with the purpose to prepare and empower underprepared students who did not meet the criteria to access university (Hlalele 2010; 98). This perception is held by many if not all institutions that have adopted the AD programme (Levy & Murray, 2005: 130; Karp, O’Gara & Hughes, 2008: 1; Mabila, *et al.*, 2006: 296; Essack & Quayle, 2007: 73; Peck, Chilvers & Lincoln, 2010: 1; University of the Free State, 2017; University of the Free State, 2018).

In the South African context, Dillon (2011: 1481), and Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 491) assert that access courses provide students an opportunity to progress and further their HE studies. Access courses are designed to afford students an opportunity to outperform themselves. Access programmes are also aimed at students who have under-achieved academically.

For the purpose of this research study, UAP is defined as a programme for students who did not meet the minimum university requirements.

## **2.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed the theoretical framework that informs this study, namely functionalism, by referring to its evolution, its historical origin and its background in the context of the objectives of this study. Functionalism allowed for understanding the challenges that UAP students experienced, which further facilitated collaborative development of possible solutions and strategies. The challenges that students experienced were categorised as functions (manifest, and latent) and dysfunctions, and a discussion was presented.

Furthermore, this chapter explained the role and relationship between the researcher and the co-researchers. The discussion of the roles and relationships was in line with PAR and from a functionalist point of view. Definitions and explanations of operational

concepts that inform matters relating to the study have also been discussed. The next chapter provides a review of the literature on academic support.

## **CHAPTER 3 : REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE ON ACADEMIC SUPPORT OF UAP STUDENTS**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Even though there seems to be an increase in the number of students who access higher education (HE), a number of challenges remain. This study developed a strategy to assist in improving the academic support of students in university access programmes (UAPs). The strategy was developed as a result of challenges that UAP students experienced. Jones and Lau (2010), Bathmaker (2016), Hlalele and Alexander (2012) and Karp, O'Gara and Hughes (2010) identified similar problems, and suggested the need to improve academic support. One of the challenges that Hlalele (2010: 99) identified was the unequal distribution of academic support.

This study focused on five research objectives. The first research objective was identifying the challenges that UAP students experienced. These challenges included inequities in academic support, such as scarcity of tutoring support, the need for peer support programmes, and insufficient IT support and training. Another challenge that was identified was the preparatory support programme (segregation, rareness of academic support centres, insufficient academic advising). These challenges potentially could hinder student success in the UAP, and further hinder students' smooth transition to preferred HE degree.

Secondly, once the challenges were addressed, the researcher and co-researchers focused on identifying 'best practices' to improve the academic support of students in UAPs. Best practices to address the improvement of academic support, such as tutoring programmes (supplemental support services and the Australian indigenous mentoring experience), peer support programmes (student-led, individual-created courses, peer network programme), and IT support (university-based virtual learning environment, blended learning and information and communication technology) were discussed. Best practices to be focused on, with regard to preparatory support, are collegiality, availability and accessibility of learning assistance support centres, and increasing the number of academic advisors.

Thirdly, the components of academic support in the UAP were evaluated, keeping in mind that what seemed to work for one institution would not guarantee success at another institution. Therefore, the significance of cultural relativism, namely “the perspective that a foreign culture should not be judged by the standards of a home culture and that a behaviour or a way of thinking must be examined in its cultural context” (Ferrante, 2013: 71) was considered.

Fourthly, South African HEIs should shy away from the ethnocentric nature of “using one culture as a standard for judging the worth of foreign ways” (Ferrante, 2013: 70). Therefore, even though other nations have developed and implemented so-called ‘best practices’, South African HE needs to be treated in its own context, where institutions explore conditions conducive to the implementation of a strategy to improve academic support of students in the UAP.

Lastly, the study determined shortcomings with regard to the implementation of the strategy to improve academic support of students in the UAP. As stated earlier, different institutions have different success stories. Therefore, the shortcomings determined in this research study were based on the South African context.

### **3.2 CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY UAP STUDENTS**

UAP students experience a number of challenges, such as demeaning language from facilitators, inequities in academic support, inadequate financial support and insufficient preparatory support programme (Hlalele, 2010: 107; Arendale, 2010: 14; Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7). According to Nel, Kistner and Van der Merwe (2013: 85), “these experienced and preconceived ideas have an important influence on the way that students handle the challenges posed by higher education”. Wilson-Strydom (2015: 151) believes that, in order to assess students’ capabilities, we need to interrogate “whether different students have the same opportunities to achieve the outcomes”. Therefore, this study focused on these two challenges, namely inequities in academic support and insufficient preparatory support programme.

### **3.2.1 Inequities in academic support**

With regard to academic support, Wilson-Strydom (2015: 144) suggests that although a policy to improve and increase participation has been implemented, more still needs to be accomplished. According to Wilson-Strydom, participation has improved, particularly in South African universities. However, the question remains as to how institutions are going to retain their students. Therefore, there is a need to determine the kind of support students are awarded that will translate to the successful completion of qualifications. UAP students seem not to have access to the same academic support as their fellow students in the mainstream. Arendale (2010: 14) raises the following questions: “Do students have the right to sufficient academic support?” “What happens when the services are not offered?” Similarly, Wilson-Strydom (2015: 152) highlights an increase in inequity in HEIs, which is said to hinder student success.

Furthermore, O’Shea, Lysaght, Roberts and Harwood (2016: 322) raise the issue of social inclusivity. O’Shea et al (2016) articulate that “social inclusion is recognised as the provision of opportunities that will allow all individuals to feel valued and to participate fully as members of society”. Therefore, students as members of society should not be marginalised by HEIs in terms of resource distribution, as HEIs also are parts of society that exist and need to perform particular functions for the whole to survive. O’Shea et al (2016: 323) point out that social inclusion is the responsibility of all institutions, including HEIs, as these institutions accept public funding. This is another reason why this study was undertaken.

#### **3.2.1.1 Scarcity of tutoring support**

For the purpose of this research study, the term tutor refers to any individual at an HEI who teaches students by using examples and provides students with information to complete a given task. Tutoring seems rare in UAPs, not only in South Africa but also internationally. In the UK, access programs substituted tutorial programs (Arendale, 2010: 45; Peck, Chilvers & Lincoln, 2010: 1). The programmes were developed to prepare students who did not meet university admission requirements, to enter HE (UAP-UFS Longitudinal Report, 2017: 1) as evident in South Africa. Hlalele and

Alexander (2012: 490) believe that the type of support offered to students (access vs mainstream) needs to be scrutinised.

Bathmaker (2016: 27), and Jones and Lau (2010: 407) share the sentiment that there is a need for tutorials in UAPs. Karp *et al.* (2008: 2) highlight the significance of academic support, such as tutorials, that was found to be inadequate at two of the community colleges (Northern Community College and Eastern Community College - pseudonyms) they studied. Karp *et al.* (2008: 10) further articulate that these community colleges offered students a variety of support services, including tutoring. However, “with the exception of some programs targeting traditionally disadvantaged minorities and first-generation college-goers, these services were open to everyone”. Similarly, Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7) state that incoming students value access to tutors.

McFarlane (2016: 77) believes that “tutoring has an important role to play in enhancing students’ learning experiences, and at its best, it has the potential to enable students to make connections between the different elements of the learning experience”. Similarly, Waller, Mathers, Savidge, Flook and Hamm (2017: 5) acknowledge that tutoring should be conducted by knowledgeable students with valuable resources that would otherwise be less accessible, and with the aim to boost academic performance at UAP level; thereby increasing access to Higher Education. Kaldi and Griffiths (2013: 558) attribute performance and success to a range of institutional influences, one of which is support by tutors. Kaldi and Griffiths (2013: 564) also affirm that learning from tutors provides an additional positive influence on learning and student success.

Furthermore, “the role of the tutor is central to enhancing the student experience and fostering student retention by providing personal contact” (McFarlane, 2016: 78). The tutor can act as a link or go-between (McFarlane, 2016: 78), in other words, “between the student, the curriculum and pastoral support available and to engender a sense of belonging, which is crucial to student engagement, particularly in the first year” (McFarlane, 2016: 78). Tutoring needs to focus on reinforcing and extending subject knowledge, and additionally, on remedial work, revision guidance and examination techniques that will facilitate and improve student success (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). Mountford-Zimdars, Sanders, Moore, Sabri, Jones and Highamby (2017: 105) maintain that institutions can further support students by focusing on curricula and learning, extracurricular engagement, and building supportive social relationships.



Furthermore, tutors are “responsible for academic and pastoral support who provide guidance or referral to appropriate services” (Waller et al, 2017: 9) such as remedial session or counselling. Tutorials will allow students who usually avoid speaking up, asking questions or ‘taking risks’ in the classroom, a more inviting and less threatening environment where they can participate and give input without fear or embarrassment (Waller et al, 2017: 9).

The researcher believes that tutors should be seen as academic staff members or faculty staff members (whether full- or part-time) whose role is to support students and to foster students’ engagement in learning. Tutoring strategies differ from one institution to the other. For example, some institutions employ part-time students as tutors, in other words, a tutor can be a student one level ahead of those he tutors. At other institutions, former students and prospective postgraduate students are part of the academic staff cohort. Tutors can also act as mentors as their responsibilities may include supporting student transition to university and between levels at university. Other responsibilities may include “discussing academic progress, encouraging engagement with extra-curricular opportunities, monitoring attendance. Being the first point of contact for academic and personal difficulties, providing guidance and signposting to appropriate support services and offering one-to-one or group meetings on a regular basis” (McFarlane, 2016: 78; Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 565; & Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2017: 105). Unfortunately, it seems as if most of these support services associated with tutors are seldom to be found in the UAP.

There are three different models of tutoring identified, namely the pastoral, the professional and the integrated model (McFarlane, 2016: 78). In the pastoral model, “a specific member of staff is assigned to each student to provide personal and academic support” (McFarlane, 2016: 78). The researcher could not find evidence of the pastoral model in the UAP. The professional model “focuses more on trained staff who undertake this role on a full-time basis” (McFarlane, 2016: 78). The researcher also could not find evidence of the professional model in the UAP. In the UAP, there appears that to be inadequate advising professional supporting students other than academics or facilitators who are also available on campus for a limited period. Finally, in the “integrated curriculum model, tutoring is timetabled and there is, therefore, a requirement for staff and students to attend” (McFarlane, 2016: 78). The UAP seems to provide limited support to students and in implementing the integrated model,

however, more still needs to be done, as tutor/mentor programmes seem rare. The researcher believes students' needs and experiences should be explored further in an effort to determine and make available the support that students really need.

“At some universities, a hybrid of the three models exists; each student has a nominated personal tutor; there are guidance advisers for each area of the discipline providing professional support, student services dealing with specific issues and, in some cases, tutoring integrated into the curriculum” (McFarlane, 2016: 78).

The above mentioned hybrid of the three models seems rare in the UAP, as in most cases academic staff members, who are available for a limited period on campus, provide academic support to students. The researcher observed that these academic staff members were available on campus for academic sessions only (e.g. for two hours), where after students were left without assistance until the next session. When students had questions with regard to what transpired in the previous session, they had to wait for the next session to pose such questions.

### **3.2.1.2 Need for peer support programmes**

UAP students need organised and structured peer-support, which the researcher currently deems insufficient in UAPs. Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7) believe that support systems enhance socialisation and adaptation. There is also a need for student peer coaches. Supportive systems can take the form of “staff as course co-ordinators working with small groups of first-year students” (Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7). This kind of support system is evident in the UAP, but seems inadequate due to time constraints. Academic staff members do not have enough time to pay attention to every student, even if the groups are small.

There are a number of factors at play for students to be successful in their academic and personal spaces. These factors range from institutional influences to non-institutional influences, such as peer networks (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559). Kaldi and Griffiths (2013) further point out that collaborative factors such as peer learning are particularly beneficial for students. For Gale and Parker (2014: 743), students can find the first year of HE quite challenging. Gale and Parker (2014) further draw “attention

to the situational difficulties, that is, it is not only a change of the type of study situation, with higher demands on students' use of time, but also a new social situation and new friends". Therefore, some students struggle to 'fit in' and cannot relate with the UAP culture. Some students find it challenging just to be in a UAP as they have difficulty associating with persons from different backgrounds. Similarly, inadequate social activities that are supposed to aid students in meeting and interacting with others make life of a UAP student even more challenging. UAPs therefore need to make available activities such as peer network spaces that can enhance student engagement, and are likely to have a positive influence on their academic performance.

Tutors can assist with facilitating peer networks where students share knowledge, collaborate in lesson planning or other assignments and communicate socially with their peers. Through these networks, students can exchange news and knowledge about the course(s) (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 564). Institutions can also initiate peer network schemes, to benefit students in progressing successfully through higher education, by providing role models and peer-support. The researcher believes that peer network schemes can assist UAP students because, these students feel that they do "not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early" (Gale & Parker, 2014: 743). Therefore, when a student can easily access a peer network where he can share experiences, the student may realise that he is not alone and assistance is easy accessible.

Peer networks can place students in a position to share knowledge, which ultimately may facilitate student involvement in the creation or development of the curricula. Speirs, Riley and McCabe (2017: 51) view "students as partners in the co-creation of curricula" and in the co-evaluating or co-grading in subject related matters, This partnership, according to Speirs *et al.* (2017), is termed Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses (SLICCs) and they highlight a number of positive outcomes, such as an increase in the engagement and motivation of students.

The UAP does not have structured peer networking spaces where students can share knowledge. Consequently, this leads to 'voiceless' students as they are informed of what needs to be done in terms of their academic activities, without input from their side. O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts and Harwood (2016: 324) conducted a study at an

Australian university and they came to the same conclusion. According to Speirs *et al.* (2017: 52), “a way to foster student engagement is to promote ecological learning systems, where emphasis is placed on the ways in which individuals interact and develop. Within these interactions, it is important that the student voice is present, in order to lead to a radical collegiality that redefines the traditional student–tutor relationship”. This will in the end promote peer learning.

Insufficient peer networking spaces bring about some challenges. For example, UAP students seem to lack a sense of belonging in that they do not engage with students from other campuses, or even with students on their own campus. They are further not awarded space to engage out of class, as they do not participate in activities other than their academic activities. These activities can potentially provide space for first-year students to engage with senior students, which in turn can lead to senior students sharing their experiences, the challenges they faced, as well as the mechanisms used to overcome said challenges. Speirs *et al.* (2017: 54) point towards radical collegiality, acknowledging the “power of peer learning” as students and lecturers co-learn, and finally, considering education as “a democratic project”.

Furthermore, O’Shea *et al.* (2016: 324) highlight that first-year students, particularly those who did not meet university requirements, experience “difficulties of fitting in with the university culture”. O’Shea *et al.* (2016) further state that “most first-year students experience feelings of isolation and loneliness”, and that students who “differ from the mainstream experience intensified feelings”, such as UAP students. “Certain skills and knowledges are socially embedded and depend on access to appropriate capitals in order to enact appropriately” (O’Shea *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, students need space to engage with their peers, as this will aid in a smooth transition and easier adaptation to the HE culture.

Speirs *et al.* (2017: 54) conclude that an institution needs to believe in the power of student agency, and in particular, the importance of students as partners and co-creators. Arnold and Clarke (2014) comment on how the term agency “lacked explicit operationalisation”. Therefore, Arnold and Clarke prefer to think of agency as a combination of two things, namely ‘projectivity’, the capacity to fulfil one’s goals while acting in accordance with a set of personal values, and opportune circumstances. The researcher believes that opportune circumstances can lead to an individual exercise

agency. It seems as if UAP students experience a need for agency. The researcher deems agency a vital element of a UAP, linked to easy navigation of a university's culture. In other words, since UAP students seem to do as they are told, they are voiceless and that makes it even more difficult to adapt to this foreign environment. This strengthens the need for a structured or formalised peer support network in a UAP.

O'Shea *et al.* (2016: 325) believe that the inequality that exists within HEIs cannot only be ascribed to student deficits, as "it is possible to attribute it to individuals or to institutional practices that unintentionally create circumstances that result in inequalities". According to Gale and Parker (2014: 740), 'social integration and academic performance have been identified as contributing to attrition; and that "both are required for the successful integration of first-year students".

### **3.2.1.3 Insufficient IT support and training**

It seems as if HEIs function under the assumption that all students who gain access to the institution are computer literate, and expect students to perform online assessment right from the start of their academic career. Unfortunately, it seems as if many students, especially UAP students, are poorly equipped to deal with computers and technology, as they have not had sufficient training in this regard. Hansen and Reich (2015: 1245) reveal that there is a "gap in education technology opportunities between students from different backgrounds". This gap is "best understood as two divides: one of access and one of usage" (Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). Hansen and Reich (2015) further state that "affluent students not only have different levels of basic access to technologies, they have used them for different purposes with different levels of support". Technology usage at HEIs seems to further perpetuate the marginalisation of students, particularly UAP students who are categorised as under-prepared for HE as they did not meet the university admission requirements.

HEIs need to take into consideration the different technology backgrounds of its students in an effort to avoid advantaging one group over another. Thus, students from model C schools are "likely to use computers for simulations or modelling, while students from schools serving low-income students likely use computers for practice exercises" (Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). In this regard, it is vital that HEIs equip

students as soon as they enter HE to use technology to their advantage and enhance their academic performance.

Furthermore, Hansen and Reich (2015: 1245) found that “free wikis were more likely to be created in affluent schools, and in these schools, wikis were more likely to be used to support collaborative problem-solving and new media literacy. In schools serving low-income students, wikis were more likely to be used for teacher-centered content delivery”. Therefore, students from non-model C schools might be under the impression that only academic staff have access to technology. UAPs need to preferably in the first semester equip and train students in the use of technology in an effort to enhance their HE experience and better their academic performance.

According to Smith, Trinidad and Larkin (2015: 22), online education and digital learning have become the norm among educational institutions, specifically HEIs. However, the relationship between communities and educational institutions needs to be re-visited. “The digital revolution can provide digital learning opportunities for disadvantaged and advantaged students, provided students have access to such opportunities, and their engagement is supported” (Smith, Trinidad & Larkin, 2015: 22). Therefore, HEIs should move away from the assumption that all students possess a computer or a smartphone, and that all students are able to use such technology if made available.

The researcher observes that UAP students appeared not to have access to similar resources, such as access to computers and a computer literacy module, as the students at main-campus. Often, UAP students have to travel to the main campus in order to gain access to such resources. Therefore, participation in and access to HEIs must be based on inclusion, where all groups are given the same opportunity to utilise resources that they can benefit from, and equity, which should be aimed reducing the barriers that can impact on success (Nelson & Creagh, 2013: 15; & Rawlinson & Willimott, 2016: 41). “It has become evident that students in some quarters of the education system frequently experience negative and inequitable treatment” (Hlalele & Alexander 2012, 487). Hence, scholars who theorise “inclusion”, “calls for students never to be seen in isolation”. In other words, all students should be treated as equals, and the campus they attend should not be a defining factor for access to resources.

According to Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 487), “what is central to the understanding of inclusion is the notion of participation”.

Institutions must “advocate adequate mechanisms to regulate social arrangements in the fairest way for the benefit of all” (Hlalele & Alexander, 2012). Furthermore, Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 489) elucidate that “regulating social arrangements could mean dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction and accessing beneficial resources such as technology”. Therefore, students as agents and stakeholder in HEIs need to “advocate the discourse of disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalisation and exclusionary processes” (Hlalele & Alexander, 2012).

### **3.2.2 Preparatory Support Programme**

In this study, preparatory support refers to access to beneficial resources that assist students to adapt to the HE environment and consequently lead to progression to the next level. Students seem to experience a number of challenges in terms of preparatory support, such as segregation of physical environment and resources, invisibility learning support centre, and limited access to academic advising.

#### **3.2.2.1 *Physical environment and resources***

Often, the university access programme is offered on a different campus than the campus where mainstream students are accommodated, namely an academic preparatory academy (Arendale, 2010: 65). In researchers observation, this practice is evident in some South African universities also, namely the University of the Free State (UFS) and the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN). The researcher believes that the segregation of campuses appear to perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation of UAP students as most, support services, if not all, are located at the mainstream campus.

As already mentioned, most of the higher education institutions that offer access programmes, do so at a different campus than the mainstream campuses. This isolation and segregation do not only affect students who academically failed to obtain

the required admission points, but also the academics associated with these programmes. That is, this segregation and isolation perpetuate further stigmatisation (Arendale, 2010: 48; Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). For example, most beneficial resources are located at the mainstream campus, and are associated with or potentially lead to successful academic performance. Therefore, a UAP campus without such resources may hinder students in realising their full potential, consequently leading to attrition and possibly general stigmatisation of the UAP in general. Furthermore, due to segregation and/or isolation of campuses, some students may feel disconnected from their studies and from the institution. Additionally, this disconnection can also be brought about by students' observations that there are different distribution of resources on campuses.

UAP campuses are segregated and under-resourced (Bathmaker, 2016: 27; & Mabila, *et al.*, 2006: 296). Mabila *et al.* (2006: 296) refer to unequal resource distribution, limited availability and limited accessibility. Unequally distributed resources seem to range from access to tutors, peer network spaces, academic advising, and a learning support centre. UAP students suffer as a result of said under-resourced campuses. Peck *et al.* (2010: 15) highlight the importance of the availability of programmes such as the Academic Learning Support Assistant (ALSA), and its location. In other words, ALSAs are programmes developed with the intention to support students in academic matters and therefore should be located in a single area allowing students' easy access. The researcher believes that, in order to enhance accessibility of resources, both the UAP and the mainstream programme should be offered on the same campus.

Gale and Parker (2014: 743) recognise a number of beliefs about learning and knowing, which currently dominate HE. According to Gale and Parker (2014), these beliefs are socially exclusive and require students to adopt identities that do not always agree with their life trajectories. As a result of their academic performance in school, students in the UAP often find themselves enrolled in a field of study because they qualify for enrolment, and not because that is their programme of choice. Therefore, Gale and Parker (2014) suggest "a more socially inclusive regard for university student identities and practice that would acknowledge that the curriculum itself should reflect and affirm working-class students by ensuring that working-class histories and perspectives are presented with respect rather than marginalised and ignored". This could be achieved through the availability of learning assistance centres and/or other



spaces with the intention to support students, thereby fostering a smooth transition to HE.

The researcher believes that the integration of campuses, in other words, providing the student cohort access to all beneficial resources that the institution has to offer, may increase student engagement and provide a sense of collegiality. Consequently, this can promote inclusion and discard feelings of marginalisation that some UAP students have experienced.

### **3.2.2.2 Learning assistance support centre (LASC)**

According to Northall, Ramjan, Everett and Salamonson (2016: 27), university academic expectations are quite different compared to vocational education and training (VET), additionally, Northall *et al.* (2016: 27) suggest that students often “struggle with academic referencing, essay writing and using information technology (IT) sources. Therefore, this assertion calls for availability of and accessible learning assistance support centres. Vocational pedagogy is traditionally competency-based and focused on the teaching and learning of a trade, whereas university pedagogy is geared towards deep learning with a theoretical orientation that encourages critical thinking, reflection and action”.

Most students are challenged by the expectations from higher education studies, and without learning assistance support centres, these students may feel overwhelmed and become disconnected from the environment. In some cases, this leads to failure to complete the programme.

Additionally, without access to learning assistance support centres, students can feel unprepared to handle the challenges and perform to the expectations of the institution. This, together with limited knowledge of resources or university systems, potentially can be a barrier to the retention and success of these students (Northall *et al.*, 2016: 27). Therefore, there is a need among UAPs to introduce learning assistance support centres to prepare and assist students with academic related matters. A similar issue was identified in a study by Northall *et al.* (2016) that involved a metropolitan university in Western Sydney.

Furthermore, invisible learning assistance support centres deny students the opportunity to uncover their potential, and to identify areas that need growth and development. Peck *et al.* (2010: 6) identify the availability of ALSA at the Roehampton University as beneficial. It seems as if there is a need for such centres such to assist students with academic writing matters. The researcher believes that ALSA provides similar services as Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the UFS. However, it seems as if CTL caters 'only' for mainstream students where it is actually the UAP student who may be in dire need for these services. Another issue is that CTL is located on the mainstream campus, quite a distance from the UAP campus. Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4) document the need for Learning Assistance Centres (LACs), which seem to provide a wide range of services similar to ALSA and CTL.

For Nel *et al.* (2013: 87), language is one of the biggest obstacles that students enrolling in higher education studies face. Nel *et al.* (2013: 87), further contest that students, before and after enrolling, can benefit from psychometric assessment, subject choice or career advice and counselling. Institutions can in advance identify areas that students may need to be introduced to upon enrolment, for example, computer literacy. These forms of assessments have an important influence on students' subject choices, and can contribute towards student' academic success in their proposed higher education studies. However, institutions may have to develop faculty specific assessments based on the needs of the faculty. Similarly, there seems to be a need for faculty specific academic advising for all students, especially first-years, despite their education background.

### **3.2.2.3 Academic Advising**

Karp *et al.* (2008: 10) found that some colleges offered students a variety of support services at different centres, for example, programme advising (Karp *et al.*, 2008: 10-16). One of the risks associated with programme advising is that every time a student needs academic advice, the student may meet a different advisor than the previous time. This may lead to misdirection as students are exposed to general advising and not faculty specific advice. This can further result in a depersonalised relationship between the advisor and the students. Therefore, faculty specific advisors and increasing the number of advisors are vital. This is similar to the situation in the UAP,

as there seems to be limited access to academic advising support. Strayhorn (2014: 62) highlights the following as key responsibilities of advisors: “they help make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace. They help students navigate college by making clear what students need to know and do to be successful. They help students find a sense of belonging on campus”. Therefore, the researcher believes that limited access to academic advising support denies students a sense of belonging and may hinder smooth transition to the mainstream.

Additionally, Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 104) indicate that academic advisors can guide students in carefully choosing general education courses, provide knowledge and awareness that would enhance student core beliefs, and prepare them to face the ethical and societal issues of their future profession. However, without access to such support, UAP students may feel neglected and find themselves functioning in isolation. Some UAP students may continue their studies with one goal in mind, namely the successful completion of a qualification, and fail to find a connection between what they study and their purpose in life. Through academic advising, UAP students can understand what they are studying and why, which may enhance their engagement in the general education environment (Egan, 2015: 80; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 104; & Lowenstein, 2015: 118).

Aguilar, Lonn and Teasley (2014: 113) evaluated the use of the Early Warning System (EWS) by academic advisors in the USA. They found that the “EWS intended to support just-in-time decision-making around students' academic performance for use by academic advisors within two specific Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) learning communities” (Aguilar *et al.*, 2014: 113). The researcher believes that this system seems to be implemented in time to support students who are struggling academically, however, the system seems to be marginalising in nature as it caters only for STEM students. A similar system is present at the University of Limpopo in South Africa, namely the University of the North Science Foundation Year (UNIFY) (Mabila *et al.*, 2006: 295). One aspect of concern regarding these kinds of systems is that it seems as if they are intended to prepare students in courses such as Mathematics and Science only. Other fields of study are neglected. This raises the question whether South African HEIs still hold the traditional notion that only students who excel in Mathematics and Science are intelligent students. The researcher gets the impression that UNIFY also holds the notion that Mathematics and Science are

the only important subjects or modules, and by doing so, they give the message that all other fields of study are useless. Once again, this perpetuates the system of marginalisation and exclusion that needs to be addressed. Therefore, increasing the number of and accessibility to academic advisors in the UAP may be one of the answers as it places advisors in a position to identify difficulties and challenges that students experienced. The stakeholders can thus be made aware of these issues, thereby facilitating appropriate faculty specific mechanisms.

Darling (2015: 96) contends that academic advisors can play a vital role in HEIs as advisors are in a position to inform academic staff or colleagues of the challenges that the students are facing, the experiences students have outside of the classroom, and how these challenges affect the students' learning and success. Another concern is that, although the academic advisor is available, he must also be effective in advising students. The researcher has observed that academic advisors on UAP campuses are only available for a limited period of time, and in most cases, advise all students on campus. There seems not to be any faculty-specific advisors, an issue that needs to be addressed (Egan, 2015: 76; Lowenstein, 2015: 129; Karp, O'Gara & Hughes, 2008: 13). Advisors on UAP campuses should not only be available during the registration period, but for the full academic year. Furthermore, the institution needs to establish a connection or relationship between the advisors and the academics, as academic staff members may feel bombarded by students with personal issues which, in the researcher's view, are the responsibility of the advisor.

### **3.3 BEST PRACTICES TO IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE UAP**

#### **3.3.1 Supplemental Support Service**

As Jones and Lau (2010: 407) mention the need for tutorials in UAPs, Arendale (2010: 71) highlights Supplementary Instruction (SI) as one of the most useful practices. However, in this research study, SI is referred to as Supplemental Support Service (SSS) as referring to this practice as SI seems to be instructional in nature, thereby taking away student agency. The intention with SSS is to increase student academic performance as the programme targets difficult academic courses. Hall and Collins (n.d, n.p) revealed that the UK government recognised that all students deserve excellent teaching, regardless of their background. The USA government introduced

a teaching excellence framework consisting of peer assisted learning (PAL) whereby senior students act as tutors to first-year students. Considering all of the above, it is clear that there is a lack of tutoring support in the UAP. As stated earlier, the SSS identifies difficult courses, however, determining difficult academic courses can be a challenge, as it poses complexities in measuring student success interventions. Since universities have new cohorts of students each year, all year groups cannot be treated the same, for example, current students may be academically stronger in a particular subject or module than students of the previous year, or vice versa.

Hall and Collins (n.d., n.p) point out that PAL is grounded in SI. Hall and Collins concur with Jones and Lau (2010) and Arendale (2010) on the purpose of PAL by highlighting that SI targets at-risk courses rather than providing remedial interventions to at-risk students. In contrast, Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 99) regard SI and the peer teaching/learning experience programme (PTLEP) as similar to PAL but also different as the group sizes differ. Usually, an SI group consists of 100-300 students in one venue, whereas a PAL group consists of 10-20 students. Therefore, PTLEP in this regard will be discussed as a possible strategy later in this chapter. In contrast to this, Hillsdon (2014: 245) places SI in the developmental education as it focuses on issues of achievement-related underprepared students in HE and therefore views SI as an effective and essential learning strategy.

### **3.3.2 Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)**

Harwood, McMahon, O'Shea, Bodkin-Andrews and Priestly (2015: 220) state that the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) program has a well-established curriculum. The AIME presenters deliver the AIME curriculum to groups of students and their university mentors. In this case, the AIME presenters are trained and knowledgeable members of staff responsible for transferring expertise to first-year students and their mentors, and once students and their mentors have established a trusting relationship, the mentors consequently serve as tutors. During program delivery, the mentor (as tutor) and the mentee sit together, and the mentor supports and encourages the mentee through different academic tasks. The mentors also act as role models to the mentees (Harwood *et al.*, 2015: 221).

Waller, Mathers, Savidge, Flook and Hamm (2017: 5) mention a tutoring and mentoring outreach project at a university in the UK where they combine tutoring and mentoring. Tutoring by knowledgeable undergraduates provide other undergraduate students a level behind the tutor with a valuable resource that would otherwise be less accessible. Students new to HE can benefit significantly from being mentored by confident and capable undergraduate students, with first-hand 'hot knowledge' about what university is actually like, otherwise called a form of 'cultural capital. It also offers a role model with whom the students can relate, and who can offer reassurance that the university really can be open to all.

Waller *et al.* (2017: 6) further highlight that "the main focus is on reinforcing and extending subject knowledge". Additional focuses include remedial work, revision guidance and examination techniques. In mentoring, delivery is through informal conversation where mentees are probed for information and insights into students' actual university experiences. To the researcher, it seems as if tutoring programmes are rare at South African universities that offer UAP. However, it also seems as if tutoring programmes are implemented on mainstream campuses, but seldom on UAP campuses.

Waller *et al.* (2017: 6) note that, in terms of student academic understanding, "...students achieved better grades in formative assessments after taking part in the scheme as they were more confident with theories". Additionally, Waller *et al.* (2017: 6) also state that lecturers reported an "increased engagement with the subject, leading to more enjoyment of the lessons and better subject knowledge".

Waller *et al.* (2017: 8 – 10) and Harwood *et al.* (2015: 221) mention the issue of "increased enthusiasm for subject. Lecturers reported that the support offered in one-on-one or small group settings was particularly beneficial." Another benefit is the improved writing skills of students for whom English is an additional language, which is also an issue of growing concern mentioned by one of the respondents of this research study.

### **3.3.3 Student-Led, Individually-Created Course (SLICC)**

Speirs, Riley and McCabe (2017: 51) suggest that students be partners in the co-creation of curricula and co-evaluating or co-grading of subject related matters. Speirs *et al.* term this partnership Student-Led, Individually-Created Course (SLICC), which can be implemented as a strategy to address the need for peer support programmes in an effort to improve academic support in the UAP. Students can be awarded space in co-creating the curricula by involving them in the development of academic activities and assessments. This can increase student motivation and engagement in subject matters. In their study, Speirs *et al.* (2017) highlight the positive outcomes, including increase in engagement and motivation of students. It seems as if SLICC provide benefits similar to those of the tutor and mentor scheme highlighted by Waller *et al.* (2017).

It seems as if UAP students are informed of what needs to be done in their academic endeavours, without them giving any input. O'Shea *et al.* (2016: 324) conducted a study at a university in Australia and shared the same sentiment, namely that in most HEIs the student voice is absent and silent. Speirs *et al.* (2017:52) suggest that one way to foster student engagement is through emphasis on “the ways in which individuals interact and develop”, by including students in curriculum development thereby allowing students’ agency. Student agency can be maintained by involving them in development of content or module specific activities that will potentially facilitate academic growth.

Wanner and Palmer (2015: 357) suggest that “encouraging students to engage with the curriculum expectations can assist them in becoming independent learners”. Additionally, Wanner and Palmer (2015) highlight the significance of students and lecturers as partners in learning and assessment, and that when students are awarded the opportunity to provide input in assessment processes, the effects will lead to student engagement and motivation. In Egan’s (2015: 77) study, it emerged that when students develop, design and co-create curricula, they (the students) are able to develop their “own learning goals and to strategically create their own course of study in line with those goals”. Therefore, as a result of students’ involvement in curricula development, they are more likely to benefit from such development (Egan, 2015: 80).

Darling (2015: 92) states that when students are involved in curriculum development and design, they learn to become members of the higher education community.

### **3.3.4 Peer network programme**

Kaldi and Griffiths (2013: 558-559) state that for students to succeed in their academic careers, there must be institutional influences, such as support by peers, and non-institutional influences, such as support by family and friends, to offer. Additionally, individual factors such as personal motivation and confidence, and collaborative factors, such as peer networks, are vital for student success.

Kaldi and Griffiths report that even a small amount of institutional support was significant in student retention (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559). Peer network, according to Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 104), is a strategy that involves interaction between peers of the same educational level as well as interaction with peers from different educational levels. Through a peer network, peers become a source of information for each other, therefore, learning can be seen as involving reciprocal elements. In other words, students collaboratively are involved in the learning process. Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 105) also suggest that in a peer network, peers share abilities, have discussions, and challenge their partial and incomplete knowledge.

As Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 105) suggested earlier, students developed networks to communicate knowledge and news between themselves and sometimes to collaborate in lesson planning or other assignments. In a study that Kaldi and Griffiths (2013: 564) conducted in Greece, students developed networks through which they exchange news and knowledge about the course. Similarly, in the UK context, students also drew on peer information exchange from other students to help with lesson planning and course assignments (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 564).

### **3.3.5 University-based Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)**

Jones and Lau (2010: 407) identify a virtual learning environment (VLE) as one of the beneficial strategies that HEIs can apply implement in addressing insufficient Information and Technology (IT) training. VLE, according to Jones and Lau (2010), is



a mix of Blackboard and an in-house platform. The courses are designed with a clear agenda, which recognises that the students are put in a position to construct their own knowledge via social interaction and their own cognitive understandings. Jones and Lau (2010: 407) further state that “the course is built around the online discussion board within the VLE to provide students with a sense of a learning community”.

In a VLE, students complete weekly tasks online as part of their course. This learning environment offers students a place to collaborate with others, overcome loneliness and have opportunities to negotiate and share learning with their peers, something that they had not experienced before (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 551) state that the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Hradec-Kralove has implemented a VLE many years ago. Similar to Jones and Lau (2010), Hubackova and Semradova also (2016: 552) state that the courses are in a Blackboard environment and this system seem not “very complicated for students”. The researcher believes that a VLE has elements similar to blended learning and information and communication technology.

### **3.3.6 Blended Learning and ICT**

Im and Kim (2015: 3) agree with Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 557) that “A blended learning model has recently been in use for enhanced interaction and collaboration in diverse educational contexts” (Im & Kim, 2015: 3). They further state that blended learning has shown positive effects on learning processes and outcomes. In other words, blended learning is seen as a contributing factor in improving student participation in learning, consequently leading to an increase in student autonomy (Mitchell, Parlamis & Claiborne, 2014: 353). Through blended learning, students collaborate with student-student and lecturer-student to deal with complex problems. The “success of blended learning depends on both parties involved (lecturer & student), not only on the quality of the course and the virtual environment, but also on the degree to which the students are prepared to work in their virtual study environment” (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 553).

“Information and communication technology (ICT) accelerated the globalization of education, specifically in Korea” (Im & Kim, 2015: 3). In addition, Wanner and Palmer (2015: 354) point out that “ICT is the enabler for personalising learning by giving

students greater diversity in their learning and more flexible, personalised learning spaces". Through the use of ICT and a blended learning model, an instructor incorporates online content and blends it into the entire lesson. Similarly, Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 551) view blended learning as a "combination of the contact session between student-lecturer and of a self-contained (student) preparation using on-line education".

Im and Kim (2015) indicate that, "... this ICT-incorporated learning context has been favoured because it maintains human contacts while capturing the flexibilities of online learning". Wanner and Palmer (2015: 354) support this notion. Blended learning also allows authenticity, that is, it incorporates tasks that are likely to be encountered in life. These tasks may be offered and completed online, which has been found to increase students' motivation to learn. "Since ICT-incorporated curriculum enables learners to control the technology and ultimately their learning, unlike traditional teacher-centered learning, a class can be more learner-centered" (Im & Kim, 2015: 3).

Wanner and Palmer (2015: 356) promote the "flipped classroom" concept, which is quite popular in Australia. According to them, 'flipped classroom is a blended learning approach that incorporates and integrates face-to-face and online delivery methods'. Wanner and Palmer (2015) support Im and Kim (2015) with regard to the opportunities that flipped learning award, for example, "flipped learning is about increasing active learning opportunities in the classroom by shifting direct instructions outside of the larger group learning space" (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356).

In their study, Wanner and Palmer (2015: 356) document that "students in a blended learning environment have the advantages of both face-to-face and online learning, such as personal interaction with the teacher and other students and the flexibility and variety of online content". They further suggest that blended learning is "a fundamental redesign that transforms the structure of, and approach to, teaching and learning". Flipped learning awards students flexible environments where they can choose when, where, what and how to study and learn, thereby allowing student autonomy (Mitchell, Parlamis & Claiborne, 2014: 353).

Wanner and Palmer (2015: 356) indicate that "blended learning is equal to traditional face-to-face teaching and learning and in achieving learning outcomes". They also infer that it can lead to greater student engagement as it is flexible, accommodate

different learning styles and are linked to “improved student outcomes”, Im and Kim (2015: 3) share this sentiment. Additionally blended learning is more student-centred and directed (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357).

### **3.3.7 Collegiality as a strategy**

Some HE institutions that offer UAP seem to do so at a different location, segregated from the main campus. Therefore, to address the issue of segregation, institutions can afford students a sense of collegiality by integrating all programmes on one campus or equally distributing resources across campuses. Associated with this segregation, is a tendency by facilitators and staff to use demeaning language when speaking to or about UAP students. The language that is used to identify and categorise the students in a UAP programme tends to stigmatise the students (Essack & Quayle, 2007: 79) and make them feel inferior. The following are examples of the demeaning language used by facilitators and staff members: at risk students; high-risk students; academically disadvantaged students; under-prepared, free education student etc. (Arendale, 2010: 12; Hlalele, 2010: 107; & Waetjen, 2006: 206).

Essack and Quayle (2007: 74) argue that access programmes, by definition, are problematic as a final solution because they treat individual students, rather than the education system as a whole, as defective. Furthermore, it seems that the education system focuses on the symptoms rather than on finding the core of the problem. In this regard, the system needs to collaborate by having all stakeholders functioning interdependently in an effort to improve the whole. Essack and Quayle (2007: 74) further affirm that ‘there is potential for UAPs, by attempting to redress past educational inequities, to increase students' perceptions of inferiority or stigma’. The researcher believes that the potential of UAPs can be maintained by means of positive association and motivational concepts in identifying those qualified to be in the programme.

Furthermore, Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 492), and Essack and Quayle (2007: 74) agree that UAPs are underpinned by the assumption that black students are inherently deficient. In a South African context, black students often attended traditionally black schools that are insufficiently resourced, even in the new dispensation. Therefore, Hlalele and Alexander (2012) state that labelling black students has the potential not

only to stigmatise black students as being inferior, but also to impede the ability of universities to question the relevance of UAPs (Essack & Quayle, 2007: 74). However, since the UAP gained popularity, it caters for students from all races, not just black students.

Peck *et al.* (2010: 15) maintain that access programmes are located at an off-campus site. That is, South African higher education have seen university access programmes housed at sites other than at the main campuses (Bathmaker, 2016: 27; & Hlalele & Alexander, 2012: 492). These sites include further education and training colleges (such as TVET colleges) and/or satellite campuses. Moreover, such tendencies do not keep UAP students at the centre of universities' practice, but further remove and exclude students from accessing valuable resources.

Similarly, "offering programmes at exclusive sites also poses a challenge in respect of resources. Questions relating to the proper distribution of benefits and burdens among sites pose a challenge for education institutions" (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). Therefore, integrating campuses and availing beneficial resources to all student communities can potentially improve academic support for UAP students.

Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 492) mention that a new tutorial programme was introduced as a mechanism of supporting mainstream students to achieve academic success in module-specific assessments. Senior students fulfil the role of tutors as a means of transferring their academic knowledge to mostly first-year students. However, this tutorial programme is rare in university access programmes. This further leads to the marginalisation of UAP students as they are excluded from or denied access to tutorials believed to foster academic success.

### **3.3.8 Learning Assistant Support Centre**

Peck, Chilvers and Lincoln (2010: 6) mention that students can benefit from an academic learning support assistant (ALSA) as it affords students access to academic support associated with academic success. According to Peck *et al.* (2010) ALSA provides learning support particularly for students in the Media and Culture, and Journalism and News Media programmes. One of the aims of ALSA is to provide assistance with essay writing on a one-on-one basis, an approach similar to the one

mentioned by Arendale (2010: 68), namely a learning assistance centre (LAC). According to Peck *et al.* (2010: 6), ALSA involves subject expertise who have a clear understanding of the nature of essays, particularly in academic disciplines, and who have insight into the critical demands and use and understanding of the theories expected from the students.

Agreeing with Martin, Arendale and Associates (1993), Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4) state that one of the best practices employed is the establishment of learning assistance centres (LACs) that play a critical role in student success. Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4) state that LACs are also known as learning labs, learning centres, and student assistance centres. Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4) believe that an LAC is “a designated physical location on campus that provides an organized, multifaceted approach to offering comprehensive academic enhancement activities outside of the traditional classroom setting to the entire college community”. These centres provide a wide range of services in support of the mission of the institution, such as tutors, study groups, support for special needs students, study skills instruction, writing assistance, Mathematics assistance, and computer assistance. The designed centres are open to students who did not meet the university admission score and the mainstream student population.

### **3.3.9 Accessible and Unlimited Academic Advising**

Aguilar, Lonn and Teasley (2014: 113 – 114) report on the tool designed to track student effort, namely Student Explorer, and the implementation of the Early Warning System (EWS). Aguilar *et al.* (2014) have found that advisors used the

*“EWS during their meetings with students—despite it being designed as a tool to provide information to prepare for meetings and identify students who are struggling academically. EWS intended to support just-in-time decision-making around students' academic performance for use by academic advisors within two specific Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) learning communities Student Explorer was initially designed to track student effort and performance, and to provide support for the advisors in an integrated student development program for at-risk students who were in their first- and second-year in undergraduate STEM programs. The goal was to*

*provide the necessary information about student engagement and performance to advisors to facilitate timely interventions with their students during the semester” (Aguilar et al., 2014: 114).*

According to Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 99), the roles and responsibilities of academic advisors include regularly meeting with students to discuss their values and goals, and advise them on the entire curriculum. Advisors are in a significant position to help students make personal connections between their search for meaning and purpose, and general education. Finding a connection between the curriculum and what they aspire to be later in life (career) is one of the issues that the majority of first-year students struggle with. Additionally, Darling (2015: 91) sees academic advisors as being in a position to create connections between general education curriculum and students’ experiences at university and beyond. Therefore, having access to academic advisors may benefit students in many ways.

Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 100) further highlight that students are bombarded with a lot of information during orientation week, which in most cases takes place in the first week of the university’s academic calendar. Academic advisors can play a significant role here as they further articulate what the curriculum consists of, and clarify and suggest fields of study that students can enrol for to meet or find connection between their (students) values, beliefs, and general education. Advisors can also assist students in realising how the content of individual courses align with program goals, enabling students to find a connection between the curriculum and personal goals and values (Egan, 2015: 76).

Furthermore, Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 104) suggest that

*“academic advisors can ask students the big questions in the context of their general education courses—what have they learned, are there cross-course connections, what contributed to their knowledge of themselves and their goals, and what future courses might be taken to deepen self-understanding. Academic advisors could guide students in carefully choosing general education courses that provide knowledge and awareness that would enhance their core beliefs and prepare them to face ethical and societal issues of their future profession”.*

Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 104), and Egan (2015: 76) agree that when students are shown the connection between their career path, meaning and purpose,

and that it begins with their general education courses, students' engagement in those courses will likely rise, therefore, there is potential for students' success.

Similarly, Lowenstein (2015: 118) mentions that advising is more than a mere method of informing students about general education requirements and how to meet these requirements, but rather an integral and inseparable part of the curriculum. Lowenstein (2015: 120) suggests that advisors should not only be viewed as people tasked with explaining the curriculum to students and helping them choose classes with the aim to meet requirements. Advisors should be seen as people who pay attention to the order in which students take these classes and query the rationale for their choice of specific classes. Lowenstein (2015: 120) points out that "another richer role that advisors can play is not only to serve as course-selection assistants but as full-fledged educators directly involved in facilitating student learning".

For Lowenstein (2015: 121), in higher education institutions there are "specific learning goals for the various classes that students take which include knowledge of facts, theories, and ways of knowing; skills of communication, analysis, and evaluation; and intellectual dispositions". In this regard, the advisor can take the role of an 'interdisciplinary agent' as, students experience those discrete classes not as isolated and unrelated experiences but as integral parts of a coherent whole (Egan, 2015: 76-79; & Lowenstein, 2015: 121). In this way, students who are able to identify ways in which these parts (subjects) complement, contrast with, and support each other and how they all contribute to a meaningful understanding of the world. These students will also be aware of the transferrable skills their institutions want them to develop. Darling (2015: 92) and Egan (2015: 80) declare that through academic advising, students not only adapt to the new environment, but also learn to become members of their university community, and to think critically about their roles and responsibilities. This will enhance their development as educated citizens to later contribute economically to a global community.

## **3.4 COMPONENTS OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE UAP**

### **3.4.1 Sustenance of academic support**

#### **3.4.1.1 *Regular meetings***

SI can be operational where students work in small groups, meet on a regular basis (e.g. once or twice per week), and the sessions last between 45 minutes and an hour. Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 106) state that “the basic idea of SI is to provide regular review sessions where students work collaboratively and with peer support of students (‘SI leaders’) that have been academically successful or did well in that course. Traditionally, SI has been used for courses that are challenging or where pass rates are lower than 60%. SI review session may include discussions, comparing notes, and group work to prepare for tests”.

Additionally, Waller *et al.* (2017: 6-7) point out that senior students deliver the tutoring and mentoring to first-year students. These sessions are usually weekly or bi-weekly, for a period of between six and twelve weeks, and lasting from 30 minutes to two hours per session. Sessions can be one-on-one or with small groups, and inside or outside of the classroom.

Hilsdon (2014: 245) states that “the discourse of SI concentrates on issues of achievement related to the lack of ‘preparedness’ of students for learning in HE and seeks to counter this by promoting effective and essential learning strategies”. Therefore, regular meetings with tutors will enable students to identify difficult sections in modules and improve their confidence in asking for assistance with difficult concepts, which in the end will facilitate academic growth. The implementation of this strategy will potentially contribute towards tutors being able to identify programmes with high dropout rates.

Rather than targeting ‘at risk’ students, Hilsdon (2014: 245) articulates that “SI concentrates on programmes with high drop-out rates”. That is, SI “... avoids the remedial stigma often attached to traditional academic assistance programmes since it does not identify high-risk students, but identifies high-risk classes. Therefore, SI is open to all students in the targeted course” Hilsdon (2014: 245).



### **3.4.1.2 Student-tutor ratio**

Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 44) suggest that each mentor as a tutor be responsible for a group of fifteen first-year students. They also emphasise that these mentors, as tutors, remain in contact with their groups for the duration of their first year of study (Rawlinson & Willimott, 2016: 44). Furthermore, Rawlinson and Willimott also suggest the following key operational components, namely that “mentors be recommended by program leader as having appropriate personal qualities for mentoring, such as effective communication skills, leadership, empathy, and commitment to their studies”. Peck *et al.* (2010: 5) suggest a reciprocal relationship between students and tutors.

In addition, when the student-tutor ratio is low, Reed, King and Whiteford (2015: 386) indicate that mentoring and tutoring programmes should successfully impact on students, namely by increasing capacity, confidence and a sense of belonging, as well as motivation and social capital. Complementary areas should include raised self-awareness, informed decision-making and enhanced study experience.

## **3.4.2 Training and facilitation**

### **3.4.2.1 Mentors as role models**

The main focus of tutoring and mentoring is on reinforcing and extending subject knowledge. However, additional focuses may include remedial work, and guidance in terms of revision and examination techniques (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). Peck *et al.* (2010: 5) express the role of a tutor as directing students’ progress, supporting students and ensuring that specialist support is made available when necessary.

Additionally, Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 44) highlight that “mentors offer support by engaging with their group of students using learning centred strategy”. The mentoring element can be delivered through informal conversations in which first-year students probe for information and insights into the ‘real undergraduate student experience’ (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). Therefore, when senior students share information such as the challenges they have experienced, first-year students might realise that others have had similar challenges, and were able to overcome them.

### **3.4.2.2 Confident and capable mentors**

Gale and Parker (2014: 742) suggest that tutoring and mentoring programs take the form of induction and transition programs conducted by confident and capable mentors. In an induction program, mentors and tutors 'encourage students to carefully consider their suitability and desirability of the career pathways associated with their field of study, mentors and tutors by provide first-year students with information, introduce them to campus and staff'. As a transition program, first-year students shadow student mentors. Consequently, mentors can be viewed as role models.

Furthermore, Waller *et al.* (2017: 7) demonstrate that tutors and mentors are supported by university academics through regular emails, face-to-face meetings, and sometimes through establishing their own informal peer support systems. McFarlane (2016: 79) concurs with Waller *et al.* in that tutors and mentors are providing much needed support, as senior tutors co-ordinate and provide guidance to personal tutors, and support students who urgently need assistance. Through such support, junior tutors and mentors will be in a position to set boundaries, and ask for assistance or referral in cases that require intervention.

### **3.4.3 Student agency**

#### **3.4.3.1 Students as change agents**

Speirs, Riley and McCabe (2017: 51) suggest that students should be partners in the co-creation of curricula and the co-evaluating or co-grading of subject related matters in an effort to increase student motivation and engagement. Similarly, O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts and Harwood (2016: 324) suggest that students should not just be informed, but rather be partners who engage in what needs to be done in their academic career. Wanner and Palmer (2015) share this sentiment.

When students are involved or engaged in co-creation of curricula, they may be able to identify challenges. In that case students can collaborate in sharing information and engaging in discussions, which will improve their understanding of text-in-context subject related matters, enabling them to engage and be involved in co-creating the curricula.

### **3.4.3.2 Co-constructors of curricula**

Wanner and Palmer (2015: 357) emphasise that students should be encouraged to engage in curriculum expectations and developments as this is essential in the development of independent learners. Egan (2015: 77) suggests a strategy where students develop and design their own curriculum aligned with personal goals, which seems likely to facilitate independent learning. Students' involvement in designing their own curriculum not only facilitates independent learning, but also allows students to engage with the material by spending time on challenging subject matter. This potentially will translate into students approaching the subject from different perspectives and engaging with others, which could facilitate higher order thinking. Darling (2015: 92) concurs that when students are engaged in curriculum development and design, they adapt smoothly to the higher education community.

### **3.4.4 Interconnecting programme**

#### **3.4.4.1 Source of information**

For Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 99), SI programmes such as Peer Teaching/Learning Experience Programme (PTLEP) sessions are offered close to examinations and tests, with two sessions per test and three sessions per examination. In the PTLEP, facilitators guide the process and make comments, but only after the students themselves have made suggestions on how to answer questions correctly. Therefore, students might have the necessary information in preparation for a test or examination.

According to Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 104), PTLEP at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is "multi-layered peer interactions that mitigate the effects of the high student-lecturer ratios. PTLEP offered benefits as competition decreased among students, thereby increasing cooperation, motivation, self-confidence and self-esteem". "The student development mentioned above can be attributed to the attention awarded to each student, which encouraged the student to probe for more information without fear of embarrassment (UFS, 2018).

#### **3.4.4.2 Collaborative learning**

Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 100) suggest that in PTLEP students be organised into study groups of 5-7, which was found to be highly effective for Asian American students. Each group was assisted by a graduate student as facilitator to stimulate discussion and answer questions. The programme improved the academic performance and retention of students.

Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 107) indicate that “The academic workshops of the PTLEP held close to the tests and examination times because this time is the best for students to focus on their learning, and also because students had started to read the study material to prepare for tests or examinations”. Therefore, students are more familiar with their course contents and can participate actively in discussions. These sessions also allowed students to “identify difficult course sections and awarded them the opportunity to pay particular attention to the concepts that they did not understand. Together with fellow students who understood those concepts, they actively explored the concepts during three hour-long workshop sessions by discussing questions”.

#### **3.4.5 Mobile and online learning**

##### **3.4.5.1 Sharing learning**

A virtual learning environment (VLE), according to Jones and Lau (2010: 407), is a combination of Blackboard and an in-house platform where students complete weekly tasks online as part of their course. It offers students a place to collaborate with others, overcome loneliness and provide opportunities to negotiate and share learning with their peers, which they had not experienced before (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). VLEs also have characteristics similar to learning or writing centres, including elements of information and communication technology (ICT) and blended learning.

##### **3.4.5.2 Interactive**

VLEs seem to provide collaborative space where students work together on academic related matters such as assignments (Im & Kim, 2015: 3). It is collaborative in that

students continue interaction offline, thereby improving engagement and learning outcome gained from peers (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 360).

### **3.4.6 Interacted learning**

#### **3.4.6.1 *Student-centred***

Im and Kim (2015: 1) state that a “major feature of blended learning as a strategy to facilitate diverse online materials”. ICT and blended learning provide the following: student-centeredness, an instructor who provides students with material before the lectures, activity-laden instructions, students having to study the assigned reading materials available online, and participation in small group discussion-type activities with multiple instructors (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356-360).

#### **3.4.6.2 *Participation and autonomy***

Im and Kim (2015: 3) point out that ICT maintains human contact and the flexibility of online learning. ICT also allows student authenticity that is tasks encountered in life such as case study may be offered and completed online. That is students can use lived experiences to better understand content, than creating students who cram without understanding. Im and Kim (2015) further suggest that blended learning is convenient and encourages students to become active participants in knowledge construction. ICT also is associated with diverse offline interaction among peers and their instructors, thereby improving student engagement and learning outcomes.

### **3.4.7 Collective sharing**

#### **3.4.7.1 *Integration of campuses***

Integration of campuses will offer all students access to resources beneficial to a successful academic career. However, segregation of campuses poses some challenges in terms of availability and distribution of resources (Essack & Quayle, 2007: 74; Hlalele & Alexander, 2012: 496; Malthus, 2015: 441). Therefore, integrated campuses not only provide access to resources, but also give students a sense of

belonging and inclusion (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007: 392). This may lead to students easier adapting to HE and having a higher chance of succeeding academically.

#### **3.4.7.2 Equal distribution of resources**

Resources have to be equally distributed across campuses as students benefit greatly from these resources. If campuses are to be left segregated, institutions need to ensure that all students on all campuses of a specific institution enjoy similar benefits, and that sites where UAPs are located are properly developed to suit the needs of the students on that specific campus (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 114; & Mabila *et al.*, 2005: 296).

#### **3.4.8 Academic support**

##### **3.4.8.1 Physical environment**

Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4) state that LAC is “a designated physical location on campus. LAC provides organised and comprehensive academic enhancement activities outside of the traditional classroom setting to the entire college community”. According to Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4), these centres provide the following services: tutors, study groups, support for special needs students, study skills instruction, writing assistance, and assistance with Mathematics and Computer Literacy. These centres are not marginalising in nature as they cater for both mainstream and UAP students.

Writing centres offer students individual or group consultations with peer writing consultants, assistants or tutors. According to Malthus (2015: 442), the peer writing consultants in most cases are postgraduate students working with undergraduate students. Mills (n.d: n.p) also articulates the significance of the Aboriginal and Islander Support Unit (AISU) at the University of South Australia. The role of the AISU is firstly to ensure that students gain access to university, and secondly, that students receive appropriate academic support via learning assistance and access to resources.

### **3.4.8.2 Writing support**

In their study, Karp *et al.* (2008: 10) found that the Roehampton University offered students a variety of support services at different centres. The centres provide students with additional information and support, and offer student success courses, programme advising and special support programmes (Karp *et al.*, 2008: 10-16). Malthus (2015: 442) positions “writing centres as primarily involved in the teaching of different genres of academic writing, and should either be centrally located within the institution or in faculties or disciplines”. Furthermore, Malthus states that the centres commit to offering students individual or group consultations with peer writing consultants, assistants or tutors. The peer writing consultants are post-graduate students working with undergraduates or with fellow postgraduates (Malthus, 2015: 442).

Peck *et al.* (2010: 6) reveal that “ALSA provides learning support for students”. Furthermore, ALSA aims to provide one-on-one assistance with essay and dissertation writing, which includes providing feedback and guidance on the structure of the document, the development of the academic argument; writing according to academic conventions as well as attending to grammar; punctuation and referencing (Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6). ALSA therefore consists of subject experts who have a clear understanding of the nature of good academic writing.

## **3.4.9 Academic advising support**

### **3.4.9.1 Faculty specific support**

Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 104) identify a number of roles and responsibilities of academic advisors. Academic advisors ask questions in the context of their general education courses, such as what have they learned, are there cross-course connections, what contributed to their knowledge of themselves and their goals, and suggest courses that may be taken in future to enhance self-understanding.

According to Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 104), academic advisors guide students in carefully choosing courses that provide knowledge and awareness to enhance their core beliefs and prepare them for ethical and societal issues of their future profession.

Academic advisors must be able to establish trusting relationships with students and have a broad knowledge of general education (Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 104). They must be in a position to help students connect their search for meaning and purpose to being engaged in general education (Darling, 2015: 91). Darling (2015: 91) further suggests that “academic advisors are in a position to create connections between the general education curriculum and the students’ experience at our university and beyond”.

Darling (2015: 93) states that university campuses are multi-cultural and that it is the academic advisor’s role to help students successfully navigate and understand different cultures so that appropriate connections can be made for and with the students. The academic advisor as a cultural navigator is helpful to consider when exploring how advisors must connect to the academic cultures of their institutions.

#### **3.4.9.2 *Interdisciplinary agents***

Egan (2015: 76) asserts that academic advisors must help students gain a deeper appreciation of the goals of general education principles. According to Egan (2015: 76), academic “advisors can encourage students to hone their abilities to synthesise and apply the knowledge and skills they are gaining from courses taken through general education”. Academic advisors must be able to help facilitate what Egan (2015) referred to as the three I’s of general education, that is, interdisciplinary, integration, and intentionality. For Egan, these aspects of learning are often associated with improving the quality and impact of general education programmes for undergraduate students.

Lowenstein (2015: 120) believes that academic advisors (whether faculty or academic staff) are precisely the people tasked with explaining the curriculum to students and helping them choose classes that will meet the requirements, that is advisors help students to choose credit bearing modules. Advisors must also pay attention to the order in which students take courses and query the rationale for their choice of specific courses. Another role of academic advisors, as stipulated by Lowenstein (2015: 120), is that they serve not as course-selection assistants but as full-fledged educators directly involved in facilitating student learning.



Simply put, “a student’s academic advisor is just the person who can remain with the student over a period of more than a semester and work with the student on the intentional development of an integrated overview of the student’s entire education” (Lowenstein, 2015: 122). One reason is that the advisor has regularly scheduled ‘teachable moments’ with the student during course selection or registration times. Meetings arranged for this purpose are also excellent opportunities to look at relationships among current classes, previous classes, and potential future classes (Lowenstein, 2015: 123).

### **3.5 CONDITIONS CONDUCIVE TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY**

#### **3.5.1 Accessibility**

Students benefit greatly from supplemental support services, however, when these services are made available on campus, the institution needs to ensure that all its students are able to access these services (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). Accessibility can be ensured by making such services are relevant and supportive in that students benefit by accessing such services.

Karp *et al.* (2008: 2) point out that the availability of academic support, such as tutorials, is conducive to accessibility. The need for tutorials is echoed in Briggs *et al.*'s study (2012: 7) by their statement that the incoming student values access to tutors. This condition needs consideration at all UAP campuses.

#### **3.5.2 Supportive space**

As stated earlier, a comfortable space for learning and peer engagement increases students’ confidence and improves the learning process (Harwood *et al.*, 2015: 221). Therefore, students need to have a welcoming space where they feel safe to have discussions with their peers and voice subject-related concerns without fear (Speirs *et al.*, 2017: 51). A supportive space also affords one the ability to confidently identify difficult subject matter and seek assistance (Waller *et al.*, 2017). This will allow students to become agents for learning. The co-creation of subject-related matters such as activities and assessments will potentially enhance subject understanding and

foster student independence in terms of the learning process (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357).

### **3.5.3 Formalised and structured programme**

Peer support services and programmes can be formalised and structured by incorporating them in the formal lecture timetable. In this way, students may realise its positive nature. Formal structuring of support services will also keep students from being embarrassed when they access these services or when they engage in interaction with their peers if they experience challenges with a specific subject (Darling, 2015: 92; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357). Students may also feel more comfortable knowing that there is a space formally afforded to them where they can exchange knowledge and share experiences with their peers, which consequently could facilitate filling knowledge gaps experienced during lectures (Egan, 2015: 77; Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 104; & Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559).

### **3.5.4 Exposure to technology**

It appears that not all UAP students have been exposed to or trained in using computers and other technology prior to entering an institution of higher education. HEIs need to ensure that the first-year student cohort is exposed to computer technology from the beginning of the year (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Im & Kim, 2015: 3). In HEIs, the use of technology has increased rapidly and students are now expected to complete online assessments and engage in online discussions (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552). Therefore, without timeous training, some students may be unable to complete online assessments, which may be a barrier to academic progress and have a negative impact on student confidence (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356).

### **3.5.5 Adequate training**

Students must be introduced to and trained in the use of technology early in the year, however, this training needs to continue for the duration of their academic career. As

students pass each academic year and with technology continuously developing and changing, it is imperative that students have relevant knowledge and stay on a par with these changes. Similarly, when students are continuously trained and exposed to using computers and other technology, their growing self-confidence as well as confidence in completing the assessment may lead to increased engagement and successful completion of learning outcomes (Im & Kim, 2015: 3; Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 354).

### **3.5.6 Availability of resources**

When campuses are segregated, there is a probability that resources are unequally distributed. Therefore, stakeholders and institutions need to be familiar with and aware of all programmes on offer, and identify the necessary resources to allow each campus to function smoothly. To identify needed resources, students should be afforded a sense of agency, where they can engage as students, and engage with institution management on issues relating to resource distribution (Essack & Quayle, 2007: 79; Waetjen, 2006: 206, & Arendale, 2010: 12).

### **3.5.7 Physical resources**

Once the resources are available, the institution needs to ensure that all students have access to these resources. This can be accomplished by placing them all in the same building, and on the campus where students attend formal lectures (Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6; & Franklin & Blankenberger, 2016: 4). Accessible resources can also foster a positive association of such resources by students and staff, and this can be ensured by mostly focusing on the benefits of such resources, rather than stigmatising those who access and are in need of such resources.

### **3.5.8 Designated building**

The location of learning assistance support centres is important. Peck *et al.* (2010: 15) highlight that these centres should be located in a single area to ease access. However, if all available programmes, namely UAP and mainstream, are concentrated

on one campus, students would benefit greatly as first-year students would also have access to senior students, who could support them in their academic activities (Franklin & Blankenberger, 2016: 4). However, if the UAP is offered on a different campus than the mainstream campus, UAP students must have equal access to the support services as the students on the mainstream campus. This will enhance inclusion and justice for all students despite their background and level of study, which in turn award students a sense of collegiality (Malthus, 2015: 441).

Additionally, Malthus (2015: 441) posits the need for learning assistance support centres. Allowing open access to centres and availing them to all students, can provide students a sense of belonging and collegiality. Akoojee and Nkomo (2007: 392) explain that all students should be integrated into mainstream spaces, and that HEIs need to respond to all students rather than only those who would not normally be admitted. Also, the environment need to be conducive, entertaining and a comfortable atmosphere for social interaction for all parties which is believe to facilitate academic and social adjustment (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 114).

### **3.6 SHORTCOMINGS OF BEST PRACTICES TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE UAP**

There are a number of shortcomings in improving academic support to UAP students, of which the following will now be discussed: dependence, boundaries, time consuming and costly, expensive and discriminative, self-responsibility, capacity, reluctance, and increasing the number of advisors.

#### **3.6.1 Dependence**

There is a danger that UAP students can view the tutors as experts in the specific subject matter and can lead to students depending too much on tutors for assistance and lose motivation and confidence in their own ability (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Morley, 2012: 3). Another risk is that when students rely on their peers for assistance, they put a lot of pressure on them (their peers) and they may in the end struggle to concentrate on their own studies (Hall & Collins, n.d; n.p).

### **3.6.2 Boundaries**

McFarlane (2016: 77) looks at the situation from the perspective of tutors as they may lack clarity on the purpose and boundaries of their role. Since tutors and students work closely together, students may at some stage reveal to their tutors personal matters that hinder their engagement and success. These revelations can cause distress on the tutors' side, as they are not equipped to deal with situations like these. This can eventually have a negative influence on their effectiveness (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Hall & Collins, n.d: n.p.). In addition, due to time constraints some tutors might hesitate before seeking guidance in cases of students' acute personal circumstances.

### **3.6.3 Time consuming and costly**

Students at UAPs need a supportive system, such as peer-support, to enable socialisation and adaptation (Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7). There is also insufficient student peer coaches. A supportive system can be in the form of staff members acting as course co-ordinators and working with small groups of first-year students (Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7). This system seems costly, as institutions may have to employ more staff. Another drawback is that this potentially can create student dependency on peers and hindering own learning.

### **3.6.4 Expensive and discriminative**

The use of technology in HE has the potential to discriminate against students. Hansen and Reich (2015: 1245) point out that the implementation of blended learning has the potential to marginalise students because of their differentiated backgrounds. Some students might not have adequate computer training while others have been exposed to computers before. Therefore, institutions might have to spend an extensive amount of time training students. The risk of a VLE is that not all students prefer to spend time in online discussions - others would rather print the material and study offline (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407).

VLEs can also be costly and expensive for both students and the institution, and perpetuate exclusion. Students may have to purchase equipment, which can be quite expensive. Additionally, blended learning can also be costly for institutions, as institutions will have to ensure that all students have access to 'free Wi-Fi' services, and with free Wi-Fi, institutions will need staff to monitor its use (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552), and ensure smooth operation.

### **3.6.5 Self-responsibility**

Blended learning can also pose some challenges. Wanner and Palmer's (2015: 359) study indicate that some students suggested that due to limited face-to-face sessions with lecturers, their workload was more and that was time consuming. Some students may struggle or lack self-responsibility for their learning, which may hinder success and progression.

Moreover, Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 552) mention some of the disadvantages of blended learning, namely inappropriate use of some kind by students, inappropriate use in some areas of education, depending on other technological equipment, and demanding arrangement of content from the educators.

Morley's (2012: 2) study, conducted in Ghana and Tanzania indicates that a significant number of students complain about lack of learning resources and facilities, including information technology. Therefore, with blended learning taking momentum in HEIs, these students find themselves waiting in queues in labs to access such technology, and this can lead to lack of self-responsibility, as these students might not be able to complete assessments on time and put the blame on the institutions' limited resources.

### **3.6.6 Capacity**

If all the programmes on offer at a HEI were to be integrated on a single campus, the available resources can be put under tremendous pressure as the institution may experience a lack of capacity. Since the UAP houses approximately one thousand two hundred students (1200), the question remains whether the institution's available

resources have the capacity to accommodate these extra students (Jones & Lau, 2010; Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013; & Im & Kim, 2015).

It seems that institutions were developed with a specific number of students in mind. Therefore, the resource capacity will be in line with the projected number of students that the institution can accommodate. If all the programmes offered by the institution are integrated on one campus, it may be possible that some students, who cannot afford to buy a computer for example, may find themselves waiting in long queues in order to make use of the available resources (Smith *et al.*, 2015: 22). As a result, students may miss some lectures as they are waiting in line to complete an online assessment or assignment (Im & Kim, 2015; & Hubackova & Semradova, 2016).

### **3.6.7 Reluctance**

When students do not understand the purpose of learning assistance support centres, and because of fear of stigmatisation if they make use of support centres, they may be reluctant to allow and access support centres (Peck *et al.*, 2010; & Aguilar *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, more studies focusing on positive association with learning assistance support centres must be conducted.

Karp *et al.* (2008: 10) found that some institutions offered students a variety of support services at different centres. One of the services that these centres provide, is programme advising, however, students have no guarantee that they will meet the same programme adviser every time they need advice (Karp *et al.*, 2008: 10-16). This may result in students receiving incorrect or misdirected information and an impersonal relationship between advisors and students (Darling, 2015: 91; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 100; Lowenstein, 2015: 118; & Egan, 2015: 76). Therefore, institutions need to employ more advisors and have faculty-specific advisors available.

### **3.6.8 Increasing the number of advisors**

There are risks associated with academic advising, as Lowenstein (2015: 117) points out: "Students' level of engagement with general education and their grasp of its goals

are a problem at many institutions”. Therefore, Lowenstein (2015: 117) suggests a “partial solution in which institutions treat advising as coursework in its own right, an integral part of general education rather than external to it”. However, this could create challenges for advisors, and extra cost for institutions that, according to Lowenstein (2015: 117), are worthwhile if institutions highly value integrative learning.

Lowenstein (2015: 127) further articulates that part of the integrative learning model is that institutions award credit (in whatever form fits their curricula) for academic advising. This will definitely have a cost implication.

Egan (2015: 86) identifies a number of obstacles to developing and implementing programme advising, such as resources, caseloads, and time. Egan (2015) further points out that limited resources on campuses mean that “academic advisors are often saddled with caseloads of advisees numbering in the hundreds, consequently, this means that advisors will not have the time to devote to engaging in the kind of dialogue that would help students gain a more nuanced and meaningful appreciation of general education”. Furthermore, this also means that “advisors do not have the time to develop a working knowledge of an institution’s array of disciplines and programs, which would potentially hamper any attempts at helping students to think about the relevance of and relationships among sometimes seemingly disparate fields of knowledge” (Egan, 2015).

Lowenstein (2015: 127) also highlights that institutions will have to pay more attention to the skills of their advisors, and if necessary, to train the advisors. Institutions will have to carefully look for suitable candidates and in some cases, lure them away from other types of employment. This could be costly and time consuming on the part of the institutions. For Lowenstein (2015: 129) “Developing the skills for this kind of advising in both faculty advisors and full-time advisors will require effort on their part and a commitment of resources by institutions”, which also has financial implications.

Darling (2015: 96) discovered that many institutions use technology to track ‘at-risk students’. The data gathered through this kind of technology can be used for timeous communication and intervention in an effort to assist ‘at-risk. This could be time consuming especially if the institution does not have advisors particularly dedicated to do this kind of work. In addition, Strayhorn (2014: 62) views academic advising as



involving hard work and requiring a great deal of time, energy, and attention, which may pose challenges to an under-resourced and under-staffed institution.

### **3.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed and explored literature related to the study objectives, namely to identify the challenges experienced by students in the UAP, to explore best practices in improving academic support, to evaluate the components of academic support in the UAP, to identify conditions conducive to the implementation of the strategy; and to identify the shortcomings of best practices to improve academic support in the UAP.

Literature relevant to the need to improve academic support in the UAP was discussed. The literature provided the basis and justification for the need to improve academic support as UAP students experience challenges with regard to unequal academic support services, limited availability of tutoring, a need for structured and organised peer learning programmes, and insufficient IT training and support. Furthermore, preparatory support programmes are also limited due to the segregation of campuses, invisibility writing centres, and limited academic advising. The next chapter focuses on the research design and methodology.

## **CHAPTER 4 : RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The main aim of this study was to develop a strategy to improve academic support of UAP students. This chapter describes the research design and methodology, and participatory action research linked to functionalism as the framework. Furthermore, a description of the researcher and the co-researchers will be provided and a discussion on a systematic data gathering procedure. Critical discourse analysis as the method of data analysis, as well as the ethical considerations adhered to in this study will be discussed. A brief view of the research site will also be provided.

### **4.2 PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Participatory action research (PAR) is employed in this research study. According to Creswell (2012: 582), the purpose of PAR is to improve the quality of people's organisations and lives, hence participatory action researchers study issues that address social problems (Creswell, 2012: 582). In this research study, the focus was on issues that constrain the lives of students and educators. Additionally, Marincowitz (2003: 595) indicates that PAR is a research process focusing on improving the quality of service by means of self-reflective processes, exploring and problem solving. Similarly, Ary *et al.* (2010: 515) articulate the purpose of PAR as emancipatory and transformational, and to challenge unproductive ways of working.

Additionally, Jacobs (in Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014: 198) states that PAR is used to study social issues that constrain the lives of individuals, and that one of the defining factors of PAR is its collaborative nature. In the PAR environment, collaboration is vital as the researcher and the participants are viewed as equals, with minimal power dynamics. In other words, "equality in sharing control and power is a basic value in PAR" (Marincowitz, 2003: 595). Babbie (2010: 314) articulates that PAR often involves poor people who have little influence on policies and actions that affect their own lives.

Glassman and Erdem (2014: 214) reveal that “central to PAR is the idea that the researcher starts examination of human action not with an abstract research question but with recognition and observation of human action as it exists”. Participatory action researchers collaborate with community members to understand what occurs in the network of human relationships that acts as either a pull or a push factor in relation to desired goals. Consequently, community members use their gathered information to develop new and better action plans. In terms of the UAP, the researcher and co-researchers collaborated in developing an action plan to enhance academic support of students, which would consequently lead to success. Furthermore, Glassman and Erdem (2014: 214) suggest that PAR’s “goal of research is not hypothesis testing with objective measures but to participate in the realities and experiences of the community and collaborate, learn, and move toward social change in order to improve the human condition”.

For the proposed study, it seems as if academic support (i.e. tutorials, write centre and peer learning) at the disposal of mainstream students is not available to UAP students. Therefore, by employing PAR, the researcher, in collaboration (Creswell, 2012: 583; Marincowitz, 2003: 595) with the co-researchers, would be able to identify the underlying academic challenges that students in the UAP experienced. Once the challenges have been identified, the strategy to improve academic support would collaboratively be developed. Therefore, by employing PAR, the researcher could address the challenges that the students experienced. As Glassman and Erdem (2014: 215) articulate, in PAR “the research is a collective problem-solving process in the shared real world, where all actors (those affected) are involved in research”. Therefore, UAP students share their realities and experiences as that is their real world.

Málovics, Juhász, Berki, Mihók, Szentistványi and Pataki (2018: 2) highlight one of the challenges that participatory action researchers encounter, namely the ‘creation of good theory which will enable and empower community members to make pragmatic and sustainable changes in their lives’. A similar challenge is anticipated with UAP as students follow the programme for one year only. Their experiences and realities will differ from those experienced by UAP students in previous years, or in years to come. Therefore, the suggested strategies must be sustainable as it may need readjustment based on the needs of the student cohort of the particular year.

### **4.3 STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH (Pseudonym)**

In this research study, the participants or co-researchers are current UAP students. The researcher purposefully chose the co-researchers based on the following characteristics (Pascoe, 2014: 142; Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2004: 334; Wildemuth, 2009: 245): co-researchers are currently UAP students, registered in the Faculty of Humanities, with Sociology as a major. The guiding primary consideration was that these students would provide insightful information related to the topic as they are currently experiencing the challenges of a UAP (Wildemuth, 2009: 245).

From a functionalist point of view, social reality is largely what people perceive it to be; it exists as people experience it and assign meaning to it. Social reality is fluid and fragile, and people construct it as they interact with others in ongoing processes of communication and negotiation. Furthermore, functionalists also believe that social life arises in people's subjective experiences as they interact with others and construct meaning. Therefore, the participants, as registered UAP students, were in the best position to provide insightful information of their experiences and challenges, which would consequently give light to the development of strategies.

In this study, participants are referred to as co-researchers as they collaborate in exploring and identifying problem(s). This entail all actors' involvement through the process, this also minimise power dynamics, which could hinder participation. The co-researchers were sourced from UAP-UFS in South Africa. During sessions or discussions (focus group discussions), the researcher took steps to ensure minimal interruptions. The telephone was disengaged and a 'Do not disturb' sign was placed on the door to keep uninvited guests from entering. There were ten (10) co-researchers (6 females and 4 males) present in the discussions.

### **4.4 THE RESEARCHER'S BACKGROUND**

The researcher is a former UAP (previously known as the career preparation programme) student. The researcher entered HE with the intention of becoming a psychologist, however, through this journey discovered an interest in working with students. The researcher studied in the Faculty of Humanities (Honours in Sociology, & Psychology). The researcher also enrolled for a master's degree in Africa Studies

(Gender Studies) as her interest has always been on students' access to and success in HEIs. Her master's study focused on female access to and success in HEIs (narratives of female graduates). The researcher has been employed at the UAP as academic facilitator in Sociology, and Psychology since 2005.

As a former UAP student, and currently a staff member in the same programme, the researcher saw the need for research on academic support for UAP students. This need was informed by the researcher's own experience as a former UAP student, and by observing that more students found it challenging to adjust to a HEI and its demands. The researcher believes that these challenges surface during interactions between facilitators/lecturers and students, and the environment. One of the reasons might be that a UAP allow students who did not meet the minimum university requirements to enter HE, students who otherwise would not have the same opportunity. The researcher also realises that education is evolving, and that the UAP every year encounters a new student group with different needs than the group of the previous year. Therefore, one group of students cannot be treated the same as another group, and new approaches and/or strategies should be in place. In the end, it is important that a university provide equal opportunities for all its students, and quality education and learning through equal distribution of resources.

#### **4.5 DATA GATHERING INSTRUMENTS**

Data was collected using a voice-recording device as it is simple to use and the device allows for play back. This was found to be quite suitable for the study, particularly during focus group discussions, as the researcher could not write down everything that was said during a group discussion. The researcher did, however, take notes when necessary. For example, questions were asked when an explanation was required for something one of the participants said and the researcher then took notes. One advantage of voice recordings is that information can be transferred to a computer and a memory stick, and such information could not be lost. During the briefing session at the beginning of the research project, the co-researchers gave consent to voice recording on condition that the recordings were confidential and should not be shared with their facilitators/lecturers as they feared victimisation.

## **4.6 DATA GATHERING PROCEDURE**

### **4.6.1 Data collection**

Ary *et al.* (2009: 525) believe in the importance of triangulation in PAR. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data that enhances collaboration and avoid relying on a single source for data hence the adoption of the strategy. Similarly, functionalism highlights that parts within an institution need to work together (interdependently) for the institution to thrive and to continue to exist (Henslin, 2008: 26; & Ferrante, 2016: 28). Hence, in this study, the researcher and co-researchers collaboratively developed a strategy to improve the academic support of UAP students.

The researcher and co-researchers collaborated in planning the schedule of the sessions so that the timeframe suited everybody. The researcher made sure that the set times were convenient for co-researchers, and that no one was forced or inconvenienced in any way. The sessions took place on the premises of the University to avoid any form of inconvenience, such as travel time or unfamiliar places.

A focus group comprising currently registered UAP students was formed as the discussions of this focus group formed part of the data collection process, which will be discussed next.

#### **4.6.1.1 Cycle 1: Briefing co-researchers**

*Phase 1:* The researcher and co-researchers attended a briefing or information session where the researcher explained to the co-researchers the nature, aim and purpose of the research study.

During this session, the researcher firstly introduced herself, and stated her intention with the study and explained how the institution might be involved. The researcher also introduced the topic. Secondly, the co-researchers were handed letters explaining the study, and consent forms to sign if they were interested in participating in the research project. The researcher allowed them to take the letters home so that each one could make an informed decision whether or not to participate, without feeling forced in any way. Next, the researcher explained the main aim and objectives of the study. It was also made clear that the co-researchers' identity and responses would

only be known to the researcher and the co-researchers, and if necessary, to the researcher's supervisors. This is in line with ethical considerations in conforming to confidentiality and anonymity of the co-researchers' participation to non-participants. The researcher also indicated to co-researchers that as partners in the study, they were all in control of the process. Should they see a need to adjust the set schedule or to reschedule, they could notify the researcher with a new proposed date for a meeting.

*Phase 2:* This was a planning session with the purpose of reflecting on the previous meeting, namely the briefing session. This was to allow co-researchers the opportunity to ask questions and to gain clarity if they had any concerns. After the question and answer session, the co-researchers submitted signed consent forms. Thereafter, a schedule was drawn for follow-up meetings. At the beginning of this session, the rules and regulations that were to guide these sessions were drawn collaboratively. The researcher used this meeting to ask permission from the co-researchers to voice record the discussions of the follow-up scheduled meetings as a way to capture the data accurately. This generated data would be used for analysis purposes only. The co-researchers were assured that no person outside of the focus group would gain access to the recordings and that the recordings would be stored safely, and discarded in a proper manner when the study was completed.

### **Rules and regulations – focus group meetings**

The following are rules and regulations that guided the focus group discussions and the strategy implementation process:

1. **Punctuality** – always make sure that you are on time for sessions.
2. **Attendance** – it is important that you attend all lectures. Remember, the purpose of our sessions is to clarify and do activities on what was discussed in class. Our sessions should not substitute class times.
3. **Take responsibility and communicate** – it is your responsibility to identify challenging parts of the work, compile notes before our meetings, and indicate during meetings where you need clarity. If you want us to change our schedule, please communicate such, and provide a suggestion. We need to reach consensus as a group.

4. **Participation** – remember, participation is voluntary. If at any point you do not want to continue in these sessions, you are free to do so.
5. **Respect for individual member** – it is of the utmost importance that we support each other. Await your turn. Deal with one aspect at a time. Assist each member where necessary. Remember, members share their experience the way they see it as it is their reality.
6. **Confidentiality** – members under any circumstances should not disclose what transpired during sessions to anybody outside the discussion group.

Table 4.1; Focus group schedule

Day	Activity/task	Time (in minutes)	Progress
1	Briefing session	60 min	completed
2	Focus group discussion	180 min	completed
3	Mentoring and tutorial session	180 min	completed
4	Student feedback (test), <b>Writing session</b>	220 min	completed
5	Follow-up: focus group discussion	120 min	completed
6	Writing – group discussion	240 min	completed
7	Student feedback (assignment)	90 min	completed
8	Presentation preparation per group	180 min	completed
9	Tips (presentations)	180 min	completed
10	Tips (presentations)	180 min	completed
11	Student feedback (presentations)	60 min	completed
12	Feedback (presentations), follow-up focus group discussion, and reflection (study)	120 min	completed



Detailed action plan provided in Appendice 6.

#### **4.6.1.2 Cycle 2: Discussion schedule and implementation**

*Phase 1:* Before commencing with the discussion, the researcher reminded the co-researchers of the rules and regulations set in Cycle 1, phase 2. A focus group discussion was held around answering the following research questions: How do you experience the UAP? What challenges have you experienced in the UAP in general? What challenges have you experienced in Sociology? What kind of academic support would you say is available at the UAP campus? In your view, is academic support at UAP adequate? What should the UAP do to improve academic support of students and strategies? What conditions conducive to academic support would you suggest UAP put in place? What possible risks can be associated with the strategy? It was at this session that the co-researchers suggested a strategy to improve academic support. At the end of this session, the researcher confirmed the schedule with the co-researchers.

The Free-Attitude Interview technique (FAI) was used to initiate and conduct the focus group discussions (Nkonyane, 2014: 18). This technique is suitable for this research study for a number of reasons. When participants are given the freedom to speak, the information they provide tends to be more relevant than when the researcher would use a structured questionnaire (Nkonyane, 2014: 18). Furthermore, FAI is non-directive in nature, therefore providing space for the co-researchers to intervene and for the researcher to respond flexibly and sensitively. The instrument is useful in determining the true feelings and views of participants (Mahlomaholo, 2009: 228).

*Phase 2:* In this phase, the strategy suggested in Cycle 2, phase 1, was put into practice, and the researcher facilitated the implementation of the strategy. The strategy included tutorial sessions and the co-researchers were responsible for identifying course content they found challenging. The researcher and co-researchers collaborated in formulating possible questions, techniques on answering such questions, taking notes and sharing study techniques. The researcher facilitated peer learning, which was part of the tutoring session. The purpose of this session was to assist the co-researchers with preparations for a test. A reflection session was scheduled to take place after the test for co-researchers to provide feedback on their

performance and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. Writing sessions were also scheduled because the co-researchers needed assistance in compiling an assignment. The researcher and co-researchers worked collectively on a number of topics to give the co-researchers the opportunity to share ideas on various topics. Individual groups at a later stage consulted with the researcher on the compiled assignment. The consultation took the form of supervisor-students relationship.

#### 4.6.1.3 Cycle 3: Reflection

Table 4.2: Co-researchers - strategy assessment

Strategy	Useful/need improvement/not useful	Suggestions
Mentoring and Tutoring sessions		
Writing sessions		
Presentation sessions		

All co-researchers completed the above strategy assessment after attaining feedback from their lecturer/facilitator. Each co-researcher kept his own assessment and submitted it at the final meeting only in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. However, after individual assessment, the researcher and co-researchers met for further assessment in order to determine what needed to be done differently. Furthermore, this allowed the co-researchers to see their feedback first, then assess whether the strategy was successful or could be successful in future.

The researcher and co-researchers met to reflect on the effects of the implemented strategy. It was anticipated that in this last cycle, the researcher and co-researchers collaboratively would be in a position to identify the best practise or strategy that would improve academic support to UAP students. PAR, similar to functionalism, allows the researcher and co-researchers collaborative space (Berg, 2007: 231), in the sense that everyone involved played a vital role in terms of the survival of the entire system.

#### **4.7 DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND REPORTING**

Data was analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). “Data is analysed in this way as this is better suited to those interested in theorizing about life, than those who want to get their hands dirty” (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 495). Central to CDA is the understanding that discourse is an integral aspect of power and control. The chosen method allowed the researcher and the co-researchers to take control of the discussion and share information voluntarily, without feeling pressurised to do so (Bloor & Bloor, 2007: 109-110).

Wodak and Meyer (2009:109-110), and Babbie and Mouton (2005: 495-496) state that CDA aims to question and criticise discourses, that is, CDA reveals the contradictions within and between discourses. CDA further aims to describe the ways in which power and dominance are produced in social practice through the discourse structures of everyday interactions (Lazar, 2005: 5; & Weninger, 2012: 3).

Wodak and Meyer (2009: 109) point out a number of the characteristics of CDA. Firstly, all approaches are problem-oriented, and thus necessarily interdisciplinary and eclectic. Secondly, CDA is characterised by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and retroductive investigation of semiotic data. CDA researchers also attempt to make their own positions and interests explicit while retaining their respective scientific methodologies and remaining self-reflective of their own research process (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 495).

Lazar (2005: 5) states that CDA is part of an emancipatory critical social science that is openly committed to the achievement of a just social order through a critique of discourse. From this perspective, Lazar points out that the central concern of critical discourse analysts is to critique discourses that sustain a patriarchal and unjust social order. In other words, relations of power that systematically privilege one group as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower another group as a social group. One of the aims is to show that social practices overall are far from being neutral and are in fact exclusive and marginalising in nature.

Additionally, Wodak and Meyer (2009: 109-110) state that CDA aims to question and criticise discourses. CDA reveals the contradictions within and between discourses, the limits of what can be said and done, and the means by which discourse makes

particular statements seem rational and beyond all doubts, even though they are only valid at a certain time and place (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 495-496).

Another reason for choosing CDA for data analysis is because CDA increases awareness of the reciprocal influences of language and social structure. More specifically, CDA aims to describe the ways in which power and dominance are produced and reproduced in social practice through the discourse structures of everyday interactions (Lazar, 2005: 5).

- 1) Wodak and Meyer (2009: 110) state the following steps inherent in conducting CDA: 1) Activation and consultation of preceding theoretical knowledge. In this case, what Wodak and Meyer (2009) imply is that a researcher needs to consult related and relevant literature on the topic of interest before applying CDA. In this research study, the researcher did consult related literature on the topic.
- 2) The researcher must use systematic collection of data and context information. In this regard, Wodak and Meyer (2009) suggest that the researcher state clearly how data will be collected, and how such data is relevant in a given context.
- 3) Selection and preparation of data for specific analyses. In this research study, the researcher selected and downsized data according to relevant criteria, and transcription of tape-recorded data was employed.
- 4) Specification of the research question and formulation of assumptions. In this case, Wodak and Meyer (2009) imply that the researcher must have a research question that guides the study, in place. However, this study is qualitative in nature, therefore, assumptions were formulated based on observed and shared experiences as student reality.
- 5) A qualitative pilot analysis that allows testing categories and first assumptions as well as further specification of assumptions must also be undertaken. In this way, other scholars or readers will be afforded space for further research, in order to test findings and to fill the knowledge gap.
- 6) The researcher should also provide detailed case studies, in other words, focus group discussions conducted should be clearly stated and analysed as discussed according to PAR and CDA, and from functionalist view.
- 7) Formulation of critique, meaning the interpretation of results should be dealt with taking into account the relevant context knowledge.

- 8) The researcher should provide an application of the detailed analytical results (Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 110). This is to provide better understanding of the results and the context in which the study was conducted.

#### **4.8 VALUE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH**

This study aimed to develop a strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in the UAP at one university in the Free State. There is limited research done on the topic in South Africa, therefore this study will contribute towards scholarly work. The value of the strategy will be to add onto the existing approaches and scholarly writings, which are concerned with the nature of the existence of the UAPs. Once the strategy is developed, it is anticipated to be utilised in improving not only academic support for UAP students, but also enhancing student performance, which will aid their transition to the mainstream. The findings of the study will be used to make recommendations that will be of value to the UFS access and support programmes, the students, the coordinators, the facilitators and the University in general.

#### **4.9 RESEARCH SITE: UAP-UFS SOUTH CAMPUS**

The research site was the UAP on the South campus of the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein. South campus was formerly known as VISTA University before it was incorporated into the UFS. UAPs were previously offered at the now TVET colleges. Since the incorporation of universities, some UAPs, particularly those in Bloemfontein, moved from the TVET colleges in town to South campus. However, the UFS continue provision of UAPs at TVET colleges. South campus is at the outskirts of Bloemfontein, and it caters for distance learning programmes and the university access programme. For the purpose of this research study, ethnic grouping did not play a role in determining co-researchers, as South campus as a research site consists of different ethnic groups (Sotho, Xhosa, Venda, Zulu, and Afrikaans). Therefore, all students with Sociology as a major had equal opportunity of participating in the study, despite their ethnic group.

## **4.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In academic research, ethical considerations are significant. In this study, the researcher ensured that all ethical processes and considerations stipulated by the school of higher education of the UFS were adhered to. The researcher applied for ethical clearance and gatekeeping, both of which were approved. It was important to apply for gatekeeping because the co-researchers are current students at the UFS. Gatekeeping, as stipulated in the UFS research guideline, ensures that students or staff members participating in any form of research are not exploited in any way. Therefore, the researcher was granted permission to conduct the study with students as co-researchers. The researcher also adhered to other ethical considerations, which will be discussed next.

### **4.10.1 Voluntary participation**

The researcher explicitly made the co-researchers aware that their participation in the study was voluntary. Those interested in participating in this research study were free to do so. Those not interested were free not to participate. The researcher did not force or coerce co-researchers in taking part in the research study (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 521).

### **4.10.2 Voice recording and Informed consent**

Before resuming the discussion, the researcher took the time to get permission from the co-researchers to voice record the discussions and assured them that the study and its results will not place them at risk (Berg, 2007: 65). Therefore, the information was recorded in such a manner that the co-researchers could not be identified. In addition, it was important to assure the co-researchers that the study and its results would not place them at risk of criminal or civil liability, nor will it be damaging to their financial standing, employability or reputation. Their participation would also not have a negative impact on their studies or academic career (Berg, 2007: 65) as the main purpose of the study was to develop a strategy to improve academic support of UAP students. The co-researchers were once again ensured that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time should they wish to do so.

Participants in any research study decide to participate for various reasons. One of the reasons is the fear for victimisation should they not participate. Another reason is the prospect of financial gain as often participants receive an incentive for taking part in a research study. Children and prisoners often feel compelled to participate (Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2004: 523). In this research study, the researcher remained continually aware of the possibility of these hidden agendas and respected the freedom of potential participants to decide for themselves the reason for participation. In this research study, the researcher was also the lecturer/facilitator for the co-researchers and might therefore feel compelled to participate for fear of failing the subject or module should they not do so. The researcher ensured them that whether they participated in the research study or not would not in any way affect them negatively.

#### **4.10.3 No harm to the participants**

A researcher should inform the participants that if they feel uncomfortable and wish to withdraw from the study, they could do so at any time without fear of any negative consequences (Strydom *et al.*, 2004: 522). The researcher would protect participants from any form of physical discomfort, within reasonable limits, that might emerge from the research project. Strydom *et al.* (2004: 522) state that emotional harm to participants is often more difficult to predict and to determine than physical discomfort. The researcher informed the participants that if in any way they felt uncomfortable with the issues at hand and wished to withdraw from the study, they could do so at any time without fear of any negative consequences. Additionally, should the co-researchers experience emotional discomfort, the necessary support would be arranged.

#### **4.10.4 Anonymity and confidentiality**

Strydom *et al.* (2004: 523) state that anonymity means that afterwards no one should be able to identify any participant (Babbie, 2001: 472). Anonymity must be ensured when reporting and transcribing what transpired during discussions. In other words, the real names of the co-researchers would not be revealed, but pseudonyms would

rather be used. Babbie (2001: 472) states that a research project guarantees anonymity when the researcher, not just the people who read about the research, cannot identify a given response with a given participant. The use of focus group discussions does guarantee that participants remain anonymous as it makes it difficult to keep track of who has or has not turned up for the discussion, and it is difficult to identify the recorded voices.

#### **4.10.5 Release or publication of the findings**

The researcher kept an open mind in terms of the technical shortcomings and failures this study might pose. Babbie and Mouton (2005: 526) state that a researcher has an obligation to make known to the readers any technical shortcomings and failures of the research project. The researcher will therefore report any negative findings related to the study as she strives to maintain objectivity and integrity in conducting scientific research (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 526).

#### **4.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed the implementation of participatory action research to conduct research. The chapter outlined the design of the strategy in accordance to the study, namely dividing the participants into categories was discussed based on the roles that each participant fulfilled in the study. PAR as the research methodology was discussed with reference to the cycles and phases of the research process, as this is what distinguishes PAR from other related research approaches.

The researcher and co-researchers as participants in the study were profiled. This made the participants aware of their role in the research and that their contributions can add to the success of the study. Discussion of data collection procedures were also made, this entailed the process followed in the commencement of the research and how continuity was ensured during the research process. That is, FAI and CDA were used for data generation and data analysis, which contributed towards knowledge creation. The detailed data analysis will be provided in Chapter 5.



# **CHAPTER 5 : DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS FOR THE STRATEGY TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT**

## **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The study aimed to develop a strategy to improve academic support of first-year UAP students. In this chapter, the focus will be on the findings, interpretations, conclusions and recommendations based on data captured during the focus group discussions. The Free-Attitude Interview technique (FAI) was employed during discussions to initiate interaction (Nkonyane, 2014: 18). The researcher and co-researchers collectively identified the challenges experienced and thereby in collaboration suggested the strategy to improve academic support. Collectively, the researcher and co-researchers were equally involved, as the implementation of the strategy that followed PAR procedure was in place. From literature, basic elements critical for objectives constitute evaluation criteria, and were used as guiding principles in making sense of the data gathered. PAR process is discussed in this chapter.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyse the data. CDA allowed the researcher and the co-researchers to take control of the discussion and no one was forced to share information that they were uncomfortable sharing (Bloor & Bloor, 2007: 109-110). The researcher made her position explicit to the co-researchers while maintaining the respective scientific methodologies and being self-reflective in the process (Babbie & Mouton, 2005: 495).

## **5.2 CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY UAP STUDENTS**

HE students encounter a number of challenges before and after enrolment. Therefore, this section will discuss the challenges experienced by UAP students, best practices to improve academic support, and the implementation of the proposed strategies. Wilson-Strydom (2015: 144) suggests that although participation in South African universities has improved, students have to be retained. The kind of support students are awarded plays an important role in their completing a HE qualification. This

confirms that institutions need to be aware of and understand the experiences and challenges their students are facing, for instance, the nature of the academic support available, if any.

According to the PAR procedure, the researcher and co-researchers have to come together and collaboratively identify the potential problem and issues, as well as possible interventions (Ary *et al.*, 2010: 515; & Creswell, 2012: 582). Furthermore, participatory action researchers engage in collective problem-solving processes in the shared real world where all actors, particularly those affected, are involved (Glassman & Erdem, 2014: 215). Therefore, focus group discussions were held in an effort to gain understanding of the challenges experienced by UAP students.

### **5.2.1 Limited tutoring support**

The researcher believes that tutoring is limited in UAPs. This seems to be the case also in the UK, where access programs substituted tutorial programs (Arendale, 2010: 45; Peck *et al.*, 2010: 1). Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7) state that incoming students value access to tutors. Similarly, Bathmaker (2016: 27), Jones and Lau (2010: 407), and Karp, O’Gara and Hughes (2008: 2) highlight the significance of tutorials as essential for students to overcome disadvantages. Furthermore, McFarlane (2016: 77) maintains that tutoring enhance students’ learning experience and at best, enable students to connect the different elements of the learning experience. In this regard, the researcher asked the co-researchers to describe the nature of academic support at the UAP, and this is how they responded:

**Zizi:**... *We need help, any kind of help because we want to understand the work. We do not know what UAP can offer, all we need is any kind of help...*

**Thabang:** *At some point, because we need help, we hustle for help, we were even planning to look for tutor but it did not workout.*

From the above statements, it is clear that they valued tutoring as a strategy to enhance their learning and understanding. Karp *et al.* (2008: 2) highlight that students benefit greatly from tutoring as it awards them the opportunity to overcome disadvantages. The co-researchers further articulated that:

**Zizi:** ...we are from high school and some of us from rural areas where we were told many times that we are not good enough. In high school, we were spoon fed, but varsity is another level. We have to be independent. No one will chase after you asking why you did not do the work. Some of us come from rural areas. This environment is new to us. We don't know what is expected of us... Facilitators act like we know, we as students are like small children/baby. You can't force a small child to eat pap and spinach....we are like small children, it's first time at university, so facilitators should first give us information, help us understand, let us ask questions.....we do not have tutors here.

The researcher believes that students should be informed of all available support from the onset of their academic career at a university. Drawing from the co-researchers' perspective, the researcher came to the conclusion that students were not informed of such support; it could be that there is no support offered so there is nothing to tell the students. Therefore, the co-researchers were stranded, alone in a new environment. The co-researchers indicated that facilitators were unapproachable, and that made adapting to university life even more challenging. From a functionalist point of view, when systems that exist within an institution do not function interdependently, the institution, referring to both students and stakeholders, are damaged.

### **5.2.2 Need for peer support programmes**

There are quite a number of factors at play and that need to be taken into consideration for students to be successful in their studies. These factors can be institutional, where beneficial resources are available for all, and non-institutional, such as peer networks (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559). Kaldi and Griffiths further suggest that students benefit from collaborative factors such as peer learning. The availability of tutor and mentor assistance has the potential to help students develop peer networks where they can share knowledge, and assist each other with difficult parts of the modules (e.g. assignments and test revision) (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 564). Similarly, Speirs *et al.* (2017: 51) suggest that if students play a role in the co-creation of curricula in subject related matters, they experience an increase in engagement and motivation.

The co-researchers were asked how they study, and whether as students they help each other. They responded as follows:

**Zizi:** *Yes...I do study ....I do study and sometimes when I study too much at times I forget and mix-up information.....*

**Thabang:** *I read the information repeatedly. I sometimes record the information on my phone, especially if I don't understand. I record so that when I walk to campus I can listen to information.*

**Zizi:** *Me...since you started this group, as a group if we work together we can make it, and pass with flying colours.....when we leave this campus, like in this group, we are working together in different modules, it helps.*

**Kate:** *We do work together as a group in different modules. When we work together, the other students explain in our language (referring to mother tongue) ... in that way things are easier to understand.*

**Zizi:** *...since we started working with you, we now know who (referring to group members) is good at what subject or part of the module, therefore this helps because we talk amongst each other and help each other.*

From the above statements, it is clear that the co-researchers greatly benefited from working together. The co-researchers substantiated Kaldi and Griffiths (2013) assertion that when students are provided a peer network opportunity, they communicate knowledge and collaborate in sharing and suggesting different ways of approaching individual subject matters. Students further benefit as they support each other, confirming the need for peer networking. Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7) agree with this and state that peer networks help students to socialise and adapt to this foreign environment. Furthermore, Speirs *et al.* (2017: 51) articulate that peer networks allow students to co-create curriculum or co-grade subject related matters. The researcher asked the co-researchers whether they formulated their own questions in preparation for tests or exams, and they responded as follows:

**Lydia:** *Yes...I do formulate own questions, it helps. I read everything, then record self, especially with long questions and it works.*

**Boitumelo:** *I first learn the definitions, then identify keywords in the definition. Then I try to understand the definition, in that way it becomes easier to understand everything when I understand the definition... it helps when you*

*have someone who challenges you to see whether you understand. That is why we come up with different questions, and try to answer them, just in case they are in the test.*

**Mamello:** *We also ask you, ma'am, to check if we have approached the questions right. But we are scared to ask our facilitators to see whether we understand and are on the right track.*

From the above responses, it is clear that co-researchers developed their own questions and worked on how to answer such, thereby engaging in co-creating or co-grading of subject related matter. In a way, the co-researchers developed their own question papers and memoranda, and the researcher views this as facilitating the learning process. Therefore, as stated earlier, when students are afforded space to collaborate and work as a collective, they learn better, and experience increased motivation and engagement during and after lectures. This agrees with functionalism in that when all parts co-exist and no individual exists in isolation within the institution, they will maintain smooth transition and the whole has a better chance of survival.

### **5.2.3 Insufficient IT support and training**

Hansen and Reich (2015: 1245) infer that there is a gap in education technology opportunities for students from different backgrounds. They believe that the gap is two sided: “one of access and one of usage” (Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). Hansen and Reich (2015) further state that students from advantaged backgrounds are exposed to technology earlier than those from disadvantaged backgrounds, making them familiar with technology from an early age. Furthermore, they also have access to different types of technologies. However, there are students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have never sat in front of a computer, let alone know how to switch it on or use the keyboard or mouse. According to Hansen and Reich (2015), the use of technology at HEIs marginalise students from disadvantaged backgrounds as most of them are not computer literate (Hansen & Reich, 2015).

Furthermore, Smith *et al.* (2015: 22) attest the need for re-visiting the use of technology at HEIs. Institutions need to take into account that not all its students are computer literate as they come from different communities and have different educational backgrounds. Without prior training in technology usage, one group might benefit over

the other, hence the need for training at the beginning of the academic year. The co-researchers responded as follows to the use of technology on campus:

**Zizi:** *...computer is going to damage my certificate...*

**Luyanda:** *Yes...in computer, when we do practicals we have 3 hours, but the test is like 30 minutes.*

**Boitumelo:** *For me...it's my first time sitting in front of computer, I don't even know how this thing work...but in practicals we have assistance.*

**Thato:** *Computer is a serious problem.....I know nothing with computer.*

**Mamello:** *Ma'am, I don't know how to study for computer test, like theory in the textbook....textbook tells us how.....I don't know where they get the theory from.*

Smith *et al.* (2015: 22) observe that education has evolved, and online education and technology based learning have become the norm at educational institutions, specifically HEIs. This makes it even more important that HEIs realise that not all students are computer or technology literate. Therefore, HEIs need to move away from the assumption that every student has access to computers or other forms of technology. HEIs need to prepare students well in advance in the use of technology, and cannot assume that all students are technology savvy. Hansen and Reich (2015: 1245) point out that blended learning has the potential to marginalise students because of their diverse backgrounds. Some students have inadequate computer training, while others have been exposed to computers from an early age. Therefore, from a functionalist point of view, when one part within the institution are benefited over another, the institution seems dysfunctional and the equilibrium might be affected.

The co-researchers attested that some of them and a number of the other UAP students have never used a computer before. The co-researchers also indicated that the computer training module was offered in the second semester only, which posed a huge problem as they were expected to type assignments, complete online activities and search information on the Internet right from the beginning of their academic career. Therefore, their insufficient computer skills brought about unfavourable results, and at times, they had to pay someone to type their assignments.

#### 5.2.4 Physical environment and resources

A number of universities in South Africa and across the world appear to have adopted access programmes with the intention to address the issue of widening participation and to prepare students for mainstream education (Mabila *et al.*, 2006: 296). Therefore, it appears as if institutions (e.g. in South Africa) that offer access programmes, do so at a different campus than the mainstream campus (Peck *et al.*, 2010: 15). This isolation and segregation have a negative impact on UAP students as they are viewed as academically 'under-prepared'. Bathmaker (2016), Jones and Lau (2010), Karp *et al.* (2010) and Hlalele (2010) agree that the language used to define UAP students poses a significant problem as it causes further stigmatisation. These students are referred to as under-prepared, at risk, coming from disadvantaged background, etc., adding to stigmatisation as these students are segregated and isolated (Arendale, 2010: 48; Hlalele & Alexander, 2012: 490). UAP students are further stigmatised by the demeaning language used by lecturers/facilitators. The co-researchers responded as follows:

**Edward:** *I personally think it would be better if we are all at the same campus, like main campus, we are disadvantaged at UAP campus in terms of transport. We're mostly referred to the main campus for almost all services and it's a lot.*

**Sizwe:** *When it comes to UAP, we don't have enough service delivery, we need to improve the learning styles and more academic advice and tutors. So for me, if we all attend in one campus I think that will help in service delivery.*

**Thabang:** *I personally don't have a problem with campuses being segregated, but transport is an issue.*

**Sizwe:** *For transport, there is res. This thing of being call UAP is not good because we are one university.*

From the above responses, it is clear that the co-researchers were not satisfied with the segregation of campuses as it denied them certain services, such as academic advising and tutors that were at the disposal of mainstream students. Consequently, it seems as if order and stability is not maintained within the institution, as resources are unequally distributed. Additionally, Merton states that one of the functions of education is the equal distribution of resources, therefore, when an institution does not uphold and perform this part of its function the institution could be harmed as a whole

(Ferrante, 2016: 160; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 276). The co-researchers explained the experience of being in a UAP as follows:

**Thabang:** *Being in the programme is fun, we experience new things such as diversity (new language, friends, independent from parents).*

**Luyanda:** *I have learnt two new languages even though I am not fluent.*

**Zizi:** *For me, being in the programme is sometimes kinda challenging, the workload....coming from high school, at school we were spoon-fed - given everything. Here, we have to be independent, everything is up to you. Whether you are attending or not, whether you submit your work or not, it's all up to you.*

**Thato:** *Workload, for me, ma'am, I tend to procrastinate and when I procrastinate, workload piles up.....and it's very challenging.*

**Edward:** *My challenge is that we do not have enough and adequate expose to study methods.*

**Lydia:** *Same WhatsApp group.*

From these responses, it is evident that the co-researchers were excited by the new experiences that HE brought with and they learned to make decisions that would enhance their progress and transition to mainstream. However, they also indicated that they did encounter some challenges at the hands of their lecturer/facilitators:

**Thabang:** *In our sociology classes, some facilitators tell us that we are rejects, we have been rejected by main campus, that we come to class to warm up chairs, that we are metals just sitting there with no response or understanding.*

**Zizi:** *We now know that everyone at South campus is a reject, we even joke and laugh about it so that it does not get to us.*

**Edward:** *It is very painful when we are told that we are rejects... it's very painful and it hurts.*

**Luyanda:** *It is not fun to be told that you are a reject, as some students ba e nka ka pelo (translation: take it to heart).*

**Thabang:** *So...because of that, some students don't attend classes any more.*

**Mamello:** *I even hear computer facilitators saying that this semester's students act like dumb....it got me so angry that I approached them one by*



*one....I told them I did not like what you guys were saying about us. It makes us not to come to class or even ask for help when we don't understand.*

From the co-researchers' point of view, being constantly 'reminded' that they were not good enough to be there, affected their well-being, and also their studies and personal lives. Therefore, co-researchers were reluctant to approach their facilitators when there were subject related matters that they did not understand. From a functionalist point of view, it is important that different parts that exist within an institution function interdependently, otherwise the entire system can be harmed, become dysfunctional, and expose part of the system to unintended consequences (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; & Henslin, 2008: 26). This in turn can negatively impact students' dignity, progression, retention and participation in HE.

Nelson and Creagh (2013: 15) seem to support Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 488) and conceptualise social justice in HEIs as follows:

*“Self-determination focuses on providing opportunities so that individuals can have control over their lives. The principle of rights is based on treating people with dignity and acknowledging the impact of social and cultural influences. Participation and access are based on inclusion with all groups being given the opportunity to utilise beneficial resources, while equity aims to reduce the barriers that can impact on success” (Nelson & Creagh 2013: 15).*

Therefore, facilitators' use of demeaning language potentially would have negative effects on the students and the institution as a whole. The researcher believes that the use of such language might lead to lower retention rates, lack of motivation among students, and consequently tarnish the image of the institution.

The co-researchers further stated that facilitators seemed to lack good working relationships:

**Zizi:** *Our facilitators.....we love them and respect them... it's like someone (facilitator) wants to prove a point to other.....as students we are here to learn and need information and pass. You know, ma'am, soldiers work together and cover each other, but our facilitators don't cover each other....like they want to prove a point that someone did not prepare for their work. In future, facilitators must act like soldiers...like Mr here suggests.*

**Thabang:** *Facilitators should not argue with each other in front of students....*

**Sizwe:** *They need to prepare themselves and cover each other like Mr here said...*

**Edward:** *I don't like what they are doing.*

**Lydia:** *...no need to expose how much information I have in front of students who come here to study that module and learn information to pass...I will pass with flying colours.*

**Kate:** *I observed one facilitator.....**student illustrating** (rolling eyes) when the other was explaining information...*

**Luyanda:** *...adding to co-researcher 6.....I said to myself, there it goes again.*

**Boitumelo:** *They criticise each other.....always adding what the other is saying...*

**Zizi:** *I think they are not trained for combined classes.....azikwazi ukubusa izinkunzi ezimbili esibayeni esisodwa.*

**Sizwe:** (translating **Zizi** response)....*we can't have two bulls in the same kraal.*

**Mamello:** *It is confusing...during combined sessions.....one explains in an easier way, but we must remember who will be marking your work...you are afraid to write easier explanation because someone else will be marking you.*

**Edward:** (adding to **Mamello**)...*one facilitator say: straight from the textbook, the other says: the way you understand...it's so confusing.*

From the above views and expressions, it is clear that the co-researchers valued good structure and expected their facilitators to be well-prepared. The co-researchers also stated that they would appreciate facilitators working as a team, not exposing and criticising each other in front of students. They indicated that the main reason for being at university was to learn, not to observe facilitators criticising each other and wanting to prove that they have been facilitators for a long time. The co-researchers further observed a lack of communication between facilitators, which they claimed to negatively impact their studies as they received mixed messages on how to address and answer test and exam questions.

**Zizi:** *...I think my fellow group member will speak about this. When they have combined classes, which normally happens in preparation for tests, there is usually some level of confusion amongst us (students). One facilitator will*

*suggest that we answer the questions in a certain way, and the other suggests something else, therefore we are left confused. Another confusion will be when one facilitator explains part of work easier, while the other explanation is hard. So we have to remember who will be marking their work. I am sorry..., it seems like today I talk too much.*

On the other hand, students had questions about the content of the subjects, but were afraid to ask questions for the following reasons:

**Zizi:** *We are scared of asking questions when we do not understand, facilitators show angry faces when we ask questions.*

**Thabang:** *We have been told that we are rejects, therefore we are scared to ask questions, which makes us not to understand the work. **The rest of the co-researchers nodded (head).***

From the above responses, it is evident that when parts do not co-exist and function interdependently, harm can be caused (Ferrante, 2016: 28). Therefore, due to the inability of facilitators to work as a team, students were confused. Moreover, students struggled with learning. It seems that students in some quarters of the education system frequently experienced 'negative and inequitable treatment' (Hlalele & Alexander, 2012: 487). Therefore, inclusion calls for students never to be seen in isolation from the broader societal changes and constitutional imperatives. According to Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 487), what is central to the understanding of inclusion is the notion of participation.

Hlalele and Alexander (2012, 489) elucidate that "overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction". Durkheim (in Ferrante, 2016) believes that there seems to be a need for integration among different actors. In this case, the actors are students, lecturers/facilitators, tutors/mentors, resources in UAPs. The researcher believes that integration among different actors implies collaborative functioning, enhances student learning and transition, thereby providing students a sense of collegiality. However, there seems to be limited access to such support in the UAP.

### 5.2.5 Learning assistance support centre

Northall *et al.* (2016: 27) note that students at university struggle with academic related matters, such as academic referencing, essay writing and using IT. This calls for learning assistance support centres within the HEIs. The invisible availability of learning assistance support centres seem to deny students the plausibility of realising their potential, and the ability to identify areas that need development (Peck *et al.* 2010: 6). HEIs bring their own set of challenges, for example, academic writing. Therefore, without learning assistance support centres, students might be overwhelmed and disconnected from the institution. The co-researchers responded as follows in terms of their awareness of the availability of a support centre at the UAP campus:

**Sizwe:** *...do we even have such a building? As far I know, ma'am, the only support we have is our facilitators, that's if I can call it support.*

**Zizi:** *...we don't have such a centre because like now, when we need someone to assist us with maybe writing an essay, we talk amongst each other.*

**Sizwe:** *You know what, I think the only place where we can get information is during class sessions. However, we struggle to ask questions in class because we are scared of our facilitator. We are scared to ask questions due to language (co-researchers are rejects / metals / warm-up chairs / eat NSFAS money) used by facilitators.*

From the above, it is clear that students needed assistance with academic writing. Peck *et al.* (2010: 6) indicate that the availability of ALSA, as is evident at Roehampton University, is beneficial for students. The same services are available at CTL at the University of the Free State, however, the CTL premises are situated on the main campus of UFS, which is quite far from the UAP campus. Therefore, the co-researchers were unable to access such support services. The co-researchers also indicated that they needed assistance in assignment writing, which is one of the services rendered by CTL. From a functionalist view, one of the functions of education institutions is to transmit skills to enable students to, later in life, contribute and function as part of society. However, the absence of a learning assistance support centre at the UAP campus seems to threaten students from reaching their full potential. Moreover, functionalism maintains that no individual can function in

isolation, in other words, as society; we need each other for the whole society to thrive. Unfortunately, from the co-researchers' responses it seems as if they were forced to function in isolation.

Additionally, when an institution does not afford students access to learning assistance support centres, those students can potentially feel ill-prepared for the challenges posed by HEIs. This can eventually become a barrier to the retention and success of these students (Northall *et al.*, 2016: 27; & Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6).

### **5.2.6 Limited access to academic advising**

A number of scholars seem to concur on the benefits of academic advisors. One of the benefits is that academic advisors are in a position to inform academic staff of challenges that students face, and that could hinder student performance. Scholars, such as Darling (2015), Egan (2015), Lowenstein (2015), Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015), and Aguilar, Lonn and Teasley (2014), have highlighted the above as one of the benefits. However, this kind of support service is limited at the UAP campus, and this is how the co-researchers perceived academic advising on campus:

**Sizwe:** *Yes...we are aware of the availability of academic advisor at UAP campus, however, the challenge is with accessing the advisor. At UAP campus, we only have one academic advisor is available, for me I think the university should hire more academic advisor for upcoming students.*

**Zizi:** *We struggle to access academic advising services, as most of the time the advisor is either fully booked for a month, or the advisor has meetings or working at other campuses...*

**Edward:** *It's the same story, we have to wait long, at times, we find a long queue, as it has been difficult to access him.*

**Thabang:** *It is highly difficult to access academic advisor, if we look at the number of students on this campus, you will see that everyone wants to access him, so it's difficult to use services. As at times, we still have to attend classes, and there is a long line. I also think this is too much work for academic advisor as he is the only one advising students, this is too much work for one person if we look at the number of students at this academy.*

From the co-researchers' point of view, there is a need for the UAP to involve or employ more academic advisors. Increasing the number of academic advisors has the potential that all students would have access to advice when in need of such services. Therefore, accessibility of academic advisors would assist students to navigate HEIs, and provide students with the necessary information to be successful, thereby growing a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2014: 62). However, limited access to such services might lead to students' feeling neglected and working in isolation. Furthermore, when students have access to academic advisors, they could receive guidance in choosing general education courses that would provide knowledge to understand what they are studying and why, which would in the end enhance their engagement in the general education environment (Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 104; Egan, 2015: 80; Lowenstein, 2015: 118). Co-researchers were asked about the information provided by the academic advisor and they responded as follows:

**Zizi:** *No...the information before the time when we register here at school, they said that when you want to do education you can do Humanities. Recently now the information changed. They told us there are small chances that you can do education even here, the guy came from main campus, he told us to continue with Humanities, when we don't want to do Humanities. It's painful ma'am, even our academic advisor tries to fight for us, but we are waiting with painful heart, we still have that little hope that we are going to do education. I don't know whether it's a lecturer, or facilitator, or advisor. At the beginning of the year, during registration, they say that space is full for education. Then next year when I go to Bloem campus, I am going to do the education with no problem, but suddenly things have changed, they told us that we can continue with Humanities then we can later do PGCE, I don't wanna do PGCE.*

**Thabang:** *...this university is deceiving us, in that at the beginning of the year, we were promised that after completing UAP, we will be able to register for education at the main campus. Recently, in this semester (second semester), people from main campus came with DV2/3 forms for students to complete, and in that meeting, we were informed that students registered in Humanities will not be accepted for education in 2019. Ma'am, we are angry because we were promised that we will study what we want next year. If they told us this information at the beginning of the year, we would have made other decisions, or at least we will have known that there is no space for us in education. Now we are told that we will be competing with first year students from matric, why*

*will this UFS reject its own students? So, ma'am, this takes us back to facilitators saying we are rejects, it's like it's becoming true that we are rejects. And ma'am, I think between Bloem campus and South campus someone is busy deceiving us, because I know someone who was at South campus and is now doing education, so I think someone is deceiving us for the sake of new students coming from matric.*

**Edward:** *I am not going to do education next year, I wanna do nursing, but then apparently, I feel as if the university has deceived us, failed us, made empty promises regarding our education, that is when we come here this programme, this programme will allow us to go to a higher level or another campus. Not everyone wants to do sociology, or education or nursing. But, we were promised that when we are in this programme it will access us to higher learning.*

**Lydia:** *And also with social work, we cannot be taken from here straight, because we are not fit enough to do social work. Even if I happen to do well maybe because I am going to continue with Sociology and but I chose Psychology also, even if I do well for social work there will be selection, there is no guarantee that one day I will do social work.*

**Kate:** *Even in the small book, the yearbook, they said that for you to do social work, you must obtain seventy percent (70%) in your modules, but they now they say they don't take students from here (UAP).*

Strayhorn (2014: 62) suggests the following as some of the responsibilities of advisors, namely “they help make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace”. However, based on the responses from the co-researchers, one can infer that at the UAP, the academic advisor did not make the ‘hidden known’ to the co-researchers as seemingly, the co-researchers were promised that the UAP was the path way for students to transition to the mainstream, where they could an enrol for the courses of their choice. From the co-researchers’ perspective, there seemed to be lack of communication between the UAP academic advisor and the faculties. This lack of communication, in the researcher’s view, could be associated with one person having to do the work of twenty others, which can be quite overwhelming.

From a functionalist perspective, this lack of communication causes harm to those involved. In this case, the UAP students seem to be in the firing line. Therefore, the

co-researchers suggested that UAP increase the number of academic advisors so that everybody can get advice when needed. Unfortunately, the co-researchers felt that their own university does not provide them with a sense of belonging. Through academic advising, UAP students could be in a better position to understand what they are studying and why, and which subjects to enroll for in order to enhance their engagement in the general education environment (Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 104; Egan, 2015: 80; Lowenstein, 2015: 118). However, the co-researchers seemed to understand why they were enrolled in UAP, namely that they did not meet the minimum requirements. Conversely, the co-researchers were in the dark as to why they are in UAP enrolled for Sociology and Psychology, because what was promised to them, seemed not to possible at all. The co-researchers were promised that upon successful completion of UAP, they could enroll in any field of their choice in the mainstream, however, based on the recent information, this seemed not to be the case at all.

### **5.3 BEST PRACTICES TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE UAP**

#### **5.3.1 Supplemental support services**

The intention with SSS is to increase student academic performance. The programme is said to target difficult academic courses and modules. Students deserve excellent teaching despite their background (Hall & Collins, n.d: n.p), therefore the UK government introduced a teaching excellence framework called peer assisted learning (PAL). PAL is facilitated by senior students acting as tutors for first-year students. This research study identified lack of tutoring support in the UAP, Sociology was treated as one of the difficult modules. The researcher and co-researchers worked in groups of 10, as small groups allow for better engagement and enhance understanding.

**Lydia:** *Since we started working in this group, I now enjoy Sociology. I am able to ask questions without fear that other students will laugh at my English, and I do not fear irritating my facilitator.*

**Sizwe:** *You have no idea how comfortable I feel in this group, and another thing I like is like we have come to work together in this group, we now help each other.*

**Zizi:** *I am so grateful that I decided to be part of this group because we get to be challenged and in that way we can see where we are lacking. Also, having*



*someone to rely on when I don't understand, having someone to show me how to take notes and how to study, it helps.*

From the responses of the co-researchers it seems that they have benefited greatly from SSS, namely having access to a tutor. However, in this research study, SSS was facilitated in a collaborative manner, everyone as a co-researcher played a vital role. In the UK, SSS is facilitated by senior students and not by academic staff members (Hall & Collins, n.d: n.p). From the above experiences that the co-researchers were willing to share, it seems evident that when students are awarded an opportunity and comfortable space to engage with the academic related material, their understanding, engagement and motivation with that particular module improves quite a lot (Hilsdon, 2014: 245; & Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 99).

### **5.3.2 Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience**

Mentoring is highlighted as one of the programmes particularly beneficial to first-year students. The mentoring experience seems to offer benefits similar to those of SSS (Harwood *et al.*, 2015: 221). During program delivery, the researcher and the participants collaboratively sit together, with the intention to support and encourage each other through different academic tasks. However, roles might shift at some point, for example, the researcher can act as a mentor to offer support and encouragement, particular with difficult subject matters. Moreover, co-researchers collaboratively work together in achieving the desired goal (Harwood *et al.*, 2015: 221). For the co-researchers, this programme offered support, as is evident from the responses below:

**Mamello:** *You know, we are new at varsity, so having this group and you helps. At times, because we are told that we are rejects, we wanted to give up on our studies. Let me speak for myself, I am scared of asking questions in class, so because of that I was afraid that I am not going to pass. Like when we started this group, and someone suggested that we formulate a goal that we want to achieve, that no one in this group should feel little. That gave me hope that at least when I want to cry or I need help, I have someone to talk to.*

**Lydia:** *What I like about this group is that we work together, and that we have an expert in the module working with us, and that makes it easier for me to understand the module.*

**Zizi:** *You see now, since we started this group, we know who is good at what module, so even after our discussions in this group we still help each other.*

**Kate:** *We do work together as a group in different modules, when we work together, the other students explain in our language (referring to mother tongue) in that way things are easier to understand.*

In a study conducted in England, an outreach project combining elements of tutoring and mentoring was discovered (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 5). Therefore, this research study adopted similar elements, namely a combination of mentoring and tutoring. The researcher and co-researchers played both roles in that learning was collaborative. A similar outreach project was appreciated by the co-researchers when sharing experiences. They indicated that working in isolation at university is not an option, especially if a student is working towards a specific goal. They further stated that tutoring and mentoring by knowledgeable individuals are beneficial, and that it reinforce and extend subject knowledge. Therefore, through informal conversation the co-researchers were able to engage in subject matters other than that intended for this study (Harwood *et al.*, 2015: 221). This enabled them to identify whom to engage with in terms of their other modules. Furthermore, the co-researchers appreciated the benefits of this group with the following remarks:

**Zizi:** *...like what you did to us was useful, it was useful, it was useful a lot. Because, if we like look our results right now, it shows that there is change somewhere somehow. Like, already now, I think we going to promote the module, unlike first semester it was challenging, and I think someone did not pass the module. So... since you came into our lives in our study like helping us with Sociology, you helped us a lot.*

**Edward:** *...unlike first semester, because this semester we had someone working with us, I passed. First semester was hard, I didn't understand, and I was scared to tell my facilitator that I was lost in class.*

**Zizi:** *...thank you for helping us prepare for the test, I also passed, I'm glad that we came to you for help.*

**Boitumelo:** *...I did pass...*

### 5.3.3 Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses

One of the strategies that can be used to address the need for peer support programmes in an effort to improve academic support in the UAP, is student-led individually-created courses (SLICC). For Speirs *et al.* (2017: 51), the implementation of SLICC involves students as partners in the co-creation of curricula and the co-evaluation of subject related matters. To increase student motivation and engagement, students can be awarded space in co-creating the curricula by involving them in the development of academic activities and assessments (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016: 324). In this case, the co-researchers shared their experiences in terms of learning:

**Lydia:** *...I do formulate own questions, it helps...*

**Boitumelo:** *I first learn the definitions... identify keywords in the definition...in that way it becomes easier to understand everything when I understand the definition... it helps when you have someone who challenges you to see whether you understand... we come up with different questions, and try to answer them...*

**Mamello:** *We also ask ... to check if we have approached the questions right...*

From the above shared experiences, it is evident that the co-researchers created their own curricula by formulating questions, and collectively worked on answering such questions. In a study by Egan (2015: 77), it has emerged that when students are engaged in the development of curricula, they benefit in that they are in a position to develop learning goals and are able to create a course of study aligned with those goals (Egan, 2015: 80). The co-researchers also indicated that formulating their own questions helped with the understanding of course content, and when they understood the course content, it became easier to engage with the subject and with fellow students. Additionally, from co-researchers shared experiences, it seems that they benefited from creating their own questions in preparation for tests or exams as they aligned their goals with those of the module.

In some HEIs, students seem to lack agency because they are silenced. Students are not involved in academic related matters, but only informed. Lack of student agency was also evident at a university in Australia (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016: 324). Therefore, SLICC can be implemented to address the issue of lack of student agency (O'Shea *et*

*al.*, 2016: 324; & Speirs *et al.*, 2017: 52). Student agency seems to be lacking in UAPs as well, as is evident from the following response:

**Mamello:** *...we are scared to ask our facilitators to see whether we understand and... are on the right track.*

Even though the co-researchers seemed to experience challenges in engaging with their facilitators during lectures, it seems as if they, as a collective engaged in the subject matters after class, and that improved motivation. According to Wanner and Palmer (2015: 357) and Darling (2015: 92), the implementation of SLICC assists students in becoming independent, and increases student engagement and motivation. Consequently, students learn to become members of the HE community by being involved in curriculum expectations. That is, the co-researchers as a collective in this research study, collaborated in working on the module outcomes, facilitated by the researcher.

#### **5.3.4 Peer network programme**

For Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 105), the availability of a peer network programme affords students a space to communicate knowledge and news among themselves, and to collaborate in planning assignments. Additionally, in a study by Kaldi and Griffiths (2013: 564) it is revealed that through the availability of peer network spaces, students in Greece exchanged news and knowledge about the course. Similarly, in England, students exchanged information with each other and helped each other with lesson planning and assignments (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 564). This seems to have a positive impact on student learning, progression and retention. Similarly, in this study, the co-researchers had a space to collaborate as peers, and below are the responses relating to peer network:

**Zizi:** *... since you started this group, as a group if we work together we can make it, and pass with flying colours.....when we leave this campus, like in this group, we are working together in different modules, it helps.*

**Kate:** *We do work together as a group in different modules, when we work together, the other students explain in our language (referring to mother tongue), in that way things are easier to understand.*

**Zizi:** (added)... *since we started working with you, we now know who (referring to group members) is good at what subject or part of the module, therefore, this helps because we talk amongst each other and help each other.*

From the above, it seems as if the co-researchers worked together to achieve the desired goals. They also indicated that they learned and understood better when they shared and discussed information among each other.

Peer network in this research study was facilitated by the researcher, unlike the study by Kaldi and Griffiths (2013: 564) where the peer network was facilitated by second and third year students. However, the researcher as part of the team engaged with the co-researchers in lesson planning and assignments. Gale and Parker (2014: 743) posit that institutions that initiate peer network schemes, by providing role models and other peer support systems, do so with the intention of benefiting students to successfully progress through HE. This seems to agree with the functionalist view that there are greater benefits when functioning as a collective, including providing students a sense of collegiality (Ferrante, 2016: 28; Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

### **5.3.5 University-based Virtual Learning Environment**

Jones and Lau (2010: 407) identify a virtual learning environment (VLE) as a beneficial strategy that institutions can use to address insufficiency in IT training and support. A VLE is a combination of Blackboard and another online platform. The courses in VLE are designed with a clear agenda, in other words, students are put in a position to construct own knowledge via social interaction and their own cognitive understandings. One of the benefits that Jones and Lau (2010: 407) mention is that an online discussion board provides students a sense of belonging and creates a learning community. The co-researchers responded as follows:

**Zizi:** *...since we started working in this group, I have communicated with some of the group members who are doing well in computer, and one lady has been helping me with that module.*

**Luyanda:** *...in computer, when we do practicals we have 3 hours...and as students we are working together to help each other and it helps.*

**Boitumelo:** ...*in practicals we have assistance....*

It seems evident that through collaborative functioning and accessibility of support, the co-researchers were able to navigate the use of a computer. Even though some of the co-researchers indicated no prior experience in using a computer, they found the support by fellow students helpful. Additionally, students were expected to perform online assessments and other related activities, therefore, elements of functionalism were visible as the co-researchers highlighted that the availability of other students to assist them had an impact on their performance and progress.

According to Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 551), the Social and Behavioural Sciences Faculty at the University of Hradec Kralove, have been using VLEs for quite a number of years. In addition, Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 552) concur with Jones and Lau (2010: 407) in that students do not find VLEs complicated to use. A VLE allows a collaborative learning platform for students where they work together on subject related matters, and this is believed to have aided in overcoming feelings of loneliness and afforded opportunities to share and negotiate their learning experiences with their peers.

### **5.3.6 Blended learning and ICT**

Blended learning and ICT are similar to a VLE as all three systems afford space for student collaboration. Im and Kim (2015: 3), and Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 557) contend that blended learning and ICT are used to enhance interaction and collaboration in diverse educational contexts. The use of these systems has shown positive effects on learning processes and outcomes as they act as the contributing factors in improving student participation in learning, and increasing student autonomy (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353). Blended learning seems to enhance student collaboration in dealing with complex problems. For blended learning to be successfully beneficial both parties need to be involved (lecturer and student). 'This involvement does not only pertain to the quality of the course and the virtual environment, but also on the degree of student preparedness and support to work in their virtual study environment' (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 553). The co-researchers indicated that they have benefitted from blended learning in the following responses:

**Mamello:** ...we are here to learning, and not only to learn from facilitators but from each other. It was so exciting when I learnt about Blackboard and what to use it for. So, one of the things I have learnt so far is that for some of us, because I'm shy and at times becomes anxious, when I ask questions using email or on Blackboard it becomes easier. Because I don't see the other person's face, and when I get responses, I get to see where I'm lacking and that helps me to want to improve, I therefore feel good about myself.

**Boitumelo:** Adding on that, I use information that I got from Blackboard to remind me of what to do, so that helps.

**Kate:** For me, using Blackboard and things like WhatsApp as form of communication and sharing information, and asking for help does help. Like I get different views, and that makes me engage in deeper thinking. Also having things like articles posted on Blackboard is useful because I can do those in my own time and place. So I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class...

In Section 5.2.3, the co-researchers mentioned that they were dissatisfied because of insufficient training in computer literacy. In this case, however, the co-researchers seemed contend with the use of Blackboard, although they did not have prior exposure to the use of computers. They remarked that they used the online platform to communicate with each other and as an interaction space to share information, which they seemed to find quite effective and satisfying. Furthermore, some co-researchers shared the sentiment that using online platforms such as Blackboard improved their confidence in that they were able to share knowledge and help fellow students.

Wanner and Palmer (2015: 354) point out that the use of ICT afford students a space for personalised learning as it is more flexible. In ICT and the blended learning model, students are able to access instructor-incorporated online content and blend it into the entire lecture. Similarly, Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 551) agree that blended learning combines contact sessions between student-lecturer and a self-contained (student) preparation. The co-researchers seemed to agree with this as one of them responded as follows:

**Kate:** For me, using Blackboard... Like I get different views, and that makes me engage in deeper thinking. Also having things like articles posted on

*Blackboard is useful because I can do those in my own time and place. So I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class...*

Blended learning allows students a space for authenticity in that the instructor incorporates tasks that are likely to be encountered in life. Because these tasks may be offered and completed online, students' motivation to learn has improved. An ICT-incorporated curriculum enables students to control the use of technology and ultimately their learning, and since the lectures are more student-centered (Im & Kim, 2015: 3) student outcomes have been improving (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357).

### **5.3.7 Collegiality as a strategy**

Integration of campuses and programmes seem evident as was observed at one institution in South Africa, namely the University of Cape Town, where all programmes are offered on one site. This practice was implemented to address the issue of segregation visible at some institutions. The integration of campuses allow for equal distribution of beneficial resources among students. Furthermore, there seems to be a tendency by facilitators to use demeaning language when talking to UAP students, which can also point to segregation. The co-researchers responded as follows regarding segregation and integration:

**Edward:** *I personally think it would be better if we are all at the same campus, like main campus....*

**Sizwe:** *...learning styles and more academic advice and tutors. So for me, if we all attend in one campus I think that will help in service delivery.*

**Thabang:** *I personally don't have a problem with campuses being segregated... I think UAP being campus on its own has some benefits, like we are able to know each other, and in a way we can get individual attention in classes. We also get to easily adapt to being at varsity.*

**Sizwe:** *...This thing of being call UAP is not good because we are one university.*

The co-researchers seemed not to have an issue with the segregation of campuses as some viewed the practice as beneficial. One of the benefits they mentioned was that attending a UAP campus gave them a sense of belonging in that they were able



to adapt to university culture. Another co-researcher indicated that they were afforded a sense of belonging in that they got individualised attention, and they easily got to know each other (Salik *et al.*, 2014: 5). As discussed in Section 5.3.4, when students are awarded space to co-exist and peer support is available, they are in a position to identify individuals who perform well in individual modules. In that way, students collaborate in dealing with different subject matters, and that gives them a sense of collegiality (Nelson & Creagh, 2013: 15; Rawlinson & Willimott, 2016: 488; & Waetjen, 2006: 206). From a functionalist point of view, when individuals participate in education, the institution needs to afford its members the necessary diversity that will allow members to gain knowledge and develop skills for future participation in professional activities (Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 26; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277). However, other co-researchers seemed dissatisfied with segregation of campuses because of the unequal distribution of resources.

### **5.3.8 Learning assistant support centre**

Peck *et al.* (2010: 6) contend that ALSA benefits students as it affords them access to academic support associated with academic success. ALSA also provides students one-on-one assistance with essay writing, one aspect that they seem to really struggle with. Similarly, Arendale (2010: 68) highlights the significance of LAC that seems to provide services similar to ALSA. According to Peck *et al.* (2010: 6), subject experts are involved in ALSA as they have a clear understanding of the nature of essays per specific academic disciplines. They also have insight into the kinds of critical demands and understanding of the theories expected from students. Learning assistant support centres, as referred to in this study, seemed to have benefited the co-researchers, as is evident in the following responses:

**Thabang:** *...we are good, even our lecturer is highly impressed, we got exactly what we were aiming for...we were aiming for ninety-nine percent (99%), and that's exactly what we got.*

**Edward:** *We are slaying with our marks, our facilitator even said we were annoying but in a good way.*

**Luyanda:** *We did well...*

**Zizi:** ...we are over the moon, we are so happy with our marks, we did good, we are lucky that we found you this semester without paying you, even when we see our marks in this semester, we are very happy.

**Lydia:** ...in first semester we didn't get too much support, so asking for help did help, and... I think this support should extend to next years' students, this really helps.

**Sizwe:** ...anything is possible if you ask for help, we had to hustle for help, and we saw that it helps asking for help.

It seems that when students are afforded academic support, they are able to realise their capabilities. Establishing a learning assistant support centre is said to be one of the best practices that an institution can implement (Martin, Arendale & Associates, 1993; & Franklin & Blankenberger, 2016: 4). LACs serve a critical role in student success at many colleges and universities. For Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4), LAC provides all students a wide range of services, such as tutoring, study groups, study skill instruction, writing assistance and computer assistance, . The designed centres are non-discriminative as they cater for both students who did not meet the university required admission score and mainstream students. By doing this, an institution is viewed as being functional (Ferrante, 2016: 28; Ghazarian & Sung-Ho, 2015: 151; Salik *et al.*, 2014: 5; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

### **5.3.9 Accessible and Unlimited academic advising**

There seems to be significant benefits associated with accessibility and unlimited academic advising. Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 99) articulate that academic advisors have regular meetings with students discussing their values and goals, and advising students on the entire curriculum. Advisors help students to make personal connections between their search for meaning and purpose and the general education environment. Additionally, Darling (2015: 91) agrees that advisors are in a position to create connections between the general education curriculum and students' experiences at university and beyond.

Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 100) state that academic advisors play a significant role in that they explain what the curriculum consists of, and clarify and suggest fields of study that students can enrol for in order to find a connection between

their (students) values, beliefs, and general education. Advisors furthermore assist students to realise how their individual courses align with program goals (Egan, 2015: 76). The co-researchers responded as follows with regard to the role of the academic advisor:

**Luyanda:** *We do have academic advisors on campus. What he does is to help us with planning our studies, and how we should study. He shows us what we can study next year once we completed UAP.*

**Thato:** *One thing I have learnt from the advisor is that we should plan our assignments, like when we plan we will not procrastinate and feel the workload.*

**Mamello:** *For me, I think he has taught me skills to link different modules. For example, I used to see these modules as different, I didn't understand why I have to take skills class/module. But since meeting him even for those few minutes, I learnt that the skills that we learn in skills class can be applied in other modules. He also give us information of what we can study for next year.*

From the above, it is evident that access to an academic advisor plays a significant role in the academic life of a student. Darling (2015: 92) and Egan (2015: 80) indicate that access to academic advisors helps students to adapt to the new environment. Students learn how to become members of the university community, and better understand their roles and responsibilities, and that enhanced student development as educated citizens, who later contribute economically in global community (Ferrante, 2016: 28; & Ghazarian & Sung-Ho, 2015: 151). Therefore, when students experience a sense of collegiality, it is likely that there will be an improvement in student engagement and motivation in subject matters.

An academic advisor can take the role of an interdisciplinary agent as, in HEIs for example, there are specific learning goals and objectives for individual modules that students are enrolled for. Therefore, if students have access to faculty specific advisors, they will benefit more as they not only gain factual knowledge and theories, but also acquire communication skills, analysis skills and evaluation skills. The academic advisor as interdisciplinary agent helps students experience their modules not as isolated and unrelated but as integral parts of a coherent whole (Egan, 2015: 76-79; & Lowenstein, 2015: 121).

## 5.4 COMPONENTS OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE UAP

### 5.4.1 Sustenance of academic support

#### 5.4.1.1 *Regular meetings*

To sustain academic support in the UAP, students and tutors need to have regular meetings once or more per week, depending on students' needs (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). In addition, tutors work with small groups in sessions that last from 30 minutes to two hours (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 106). These sessions are mostly conducted in preparation for tests and exams and other forms of assessment such as assignment writing. Working in small groups seems beneficial in that every student has an opportunity to ask questions, as questioning is an important aspect in education in order for a student to attain better understanding and clarity in subject matters (UFS, 2018: 77). In these sessions, students are awarded space to work collaboratively and with peer support (SI leaders) who are academically successful and performed well in that specific course (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 106; Reed, King & Whiteford, 2015: 386; & Waller *et al.*, 2017: 7).

In this research study, the components of SSS sessions included weekly meetings between the researcher and the co-researchers. It was collaboratively agreed to have the meetings at the end of the week. This was to allow the co-researchers (students) enough time to work on their notes, obtain clarity from facilitators, and then identify challenging sections of the module. The researcher as a mentor and a tutor was then in a position to reinforce and extend subject knowledge (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). Reed *et al.* (2015: 386) suggest that mentoring and tutoring programmes should successfully impact on students in that students' confidence should improve, motivation levels increase and an increase in capacity be evident. From the responses below it is clear that the co-researchers appreciated the kind of support they received in preparation for tests, assignment and presentations:

**Sizwe:** ...like now, I can tell the upcoming students to ask for help, if they find Sociology difficult, even with any other module, like ... throughout the year, you taught us that at university you can never work and make it alone. You must start talking to people so that you can help each other and find help. It

*really helped us. Showing us how to answer question, like short questions (definitions), long questions (essays).....*

**Zizi:** *...I can tell you to get ready for another students next year. Like those students who know what they want, I can say just get ready for that student .... And ... I think you should also call us to come and help other students.*

**Mamello:** *I was confused at the beginning, but since we started working with you, you guided us, and we're grateful.*

As suggested by Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 106), one of the components of SI or SSS is to have regular meetings or sessions where students work collaboratively and with peer support of SI leaders who have been academically successful or performed well in that course. This assertion also seems evident in co-researchers perspective as they seemed to appreciate the collaborative space where they worked together to discuss, compare notes, and work in groups to prepare for test and other forms of assessment.

The purpose of regular meetings between the co-researchers was to ensure that they were prepared for tests and other assessments. This entailed the co-researchers identifying difficult course sections, where after open discussions on the specific matters were held. This was conducted in a collaborative manner and to offer support to every co-researcher (Hilsdon, 2014: 245). One of the defining results was that co-researchers' confidence improved because the supportive space allowed them to freely ask for more clarity if they did not understand a specific aspect.

The researcher took the role of mentor and tutor, where the researcher available to support students with their academics particularly for Sociology, and where deemed necessary specialised support was provided. Tutoring was evident in that co-researchers shared strategies that would enhance academic success. While mentoring ensured in specialised support in the form of one-on-one sessions (researcher - co-researcher) (Gale & Parker, 2014: 742; McFarlane, 2016: 79; Rawlinson & Willimott, 2016: 44; & Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). It was important to have one-one-one sessions also as the researcher observed that during group sessions, some co-researchers were too shy to say that they were still experiencing challenges with the module.

#### **5.4.1.2 Student-tutor ratio**

Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 44) suggest that each mentor as a tutor should have a manageable group of not more than fifteen first-year students. Furthermore, Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 44) also suggest that mentors as tutors need to remain in contact with their groups for the duration of their first year of study. This is done to enable first-year students to smoothly navigate HE. A mentor must have the following qualities for the process to be successful: “effective communication skills, leadership, empathy, and commitment to own studies”. Additionally, Peck *et al.* (2010: 5) suggest a reciprocal relationship between students and tutors. The co-researchers responded as follows with regard to group work:

**Mamello:** *...during these sessions we learned that working with my group members does help. I was comfortable in that small ideas means something when someone would not understand, you made us realise that what we thought as small idea, was actually a good and big idea, which made us have good assignments and presentations.*

**Zizi** *...like in this group, we are now working together in different modules and it helps....*

**Lydia:** *...in here, I am comfortable in that in here even when I am wrong, I am corrected in a nice way and that made me accept my mistakes and, and I was comfortable to say when I don't understand. I was also comfortable in that even if I was wrong, at least my idea was heard, and even the group has always been willing to help, which is not the case in class with facilitators.*

In addition, for mentoring and tutoring programmes to be successful, the programmes must have low student-tutor ratio, increase capacity, increase confidence and sense of belonging, as well as increase motivation. Complementary areas should include raised self-awareness, informed decision-making and enhanced study experience (Reed *et al.*, 2015: 386). From the co-researchers point of view, working in small groups or having a low student-tutor ratio really made a positive impact on them as they have learned that working in a group is helpful. Seemingly, they implied that they have benefited in the following ways, namely an increased understanding of the module, enhanced engagement with the module and an increase in motivation.

Additionally, a reciprocal relationship between co-researchers, as Peck *et al.* (2010: 5) suggest, was evident as the co-researchers articulated that they have learned to work with each other and that they help each other in different modules. Reciprocity was maintained also since the co-researchers came to sessions prepared, which not only facilitated smooth discussions and engagement in subject matters, but also made it easier for the co-researchers to share information and knowledge (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 557; Im & Kim, 2015: 5; Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353; & Reed *et al.*, 2015: 387).

## **5.4.2 Training and facilitation**

### **5.4.2.1 Mentors as role models**

The main focus of tutoring and mentoring is on reinforcing and extending subject knowledge, however, when necessary, additional focus may include remedial work, revision guidance and examination technique (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). Peck *et al.* (2010: 5) view the roles of tutors as directing students' progress, supporting students and ensuring that specialist support is made available when necessary. The co-researchers expressed their appreciation for being able to access tutoring and mentoring sessions as follows:

**Sizwe:** *We thank you for working with us, because even during holidays, you were available for us even when you had to spend time with your family...*

**Mamello:** *Thank you for being available for us, and not being tired of us. Sometimes you had to leave, but you did not leave, you sat with us to guide us, that was helpful... you helped us through.*

**Edward:** *Taking your advice really worked for me, especially this semester.*

**Lydia:** *...when you asked us questions on our assignments, it helped... in that at times we don't believe in our work, so you reading every paragraph and asking us to explain really helped.*

From the above, it is clear that the co-researchers benefited from having access to tutoring and mentoring sessions. During these sessions, the researcher and the co-researchers provided support where necessary in that when other co-researchers did not understand course material, those who understood the material intervened and

assisted the others. This supports the functionalist notion that individuals cannot function in isolation if they want to survive and thrive in society and maintain stability. Functionalism further maintains that the functions of education include the following: to instill values, to emphasise the value of achievement and to provide equal opportunities (Ferrante, 2016: 28; Radulović & Krstić, 2017: 27; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277). Working as a group awarded the co-researchers space where they viewed each other as equals and provided support to each other when necessary.

#### **5.4.2.2 Confidence of mentors**

Waller *et al.* (2017: 5) contend that mentoring should be provided by confident and capable undergraduate students, with first-hand experience about what academic life at a university is actually like. As suggested in Section 5.4.2.1, mentors and tutors should be role models with whom the students can relate. However, although the researcher in this study was not an undergraduate student but a former UAP student, she still fulfilled the role of a mentor.

Waller *et al.* (2017: 6) discovered that students achieved better grades in formative assessments after taking part in the mentoring and tutoring programmes, and seemingly, students experienced increased confidence with theories. Additionally, lecturers also reported an “increased engagement with the subject” leading to more “enjoyment of the lessons and better subject knowledge” (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). The co-researchers seemed to agree that their academic performance has improved since their participation in mentoring and tutoring programmes:

**Thabang:** *...our feedback, we are good, even our lecturer is highly impressed, we got exactly what we were aiming for...*

**Edward:** *We are slaying with our marks, our facilitator even said we were annoying but in a good way.*

**Zizi:** *...we are over the moon, we are so happy with our marks, we did good... we are very happy.*

The above experiences of the co-researchers agree with the findings of Waller *et al.* (2017: 8 – 10), and Harwood *et al.* (2015: 221), namely that students experience “increased enthusiasm” for a subject when afforded the necessary support.



Additionally, lecturers were confident that students benefited from the support offered in one-on-one or small group settings. Therefore, when students are afforded support and equal distribution of resources they are in a better position to create own knowledge (Clarke, 2010). Similarly, Nkoane (in Piper *et al.*, 2009: 26) suggests that when such spaces such as students to co-exist are available for students, students are in a position to make connections between their lived experiences and conditions, thereby make own reality and possibly create new reality. Therefore, success is eminent when trained and knowledgeable staff act as mentors, with the responsibility to transfer their expertise to first-year students (Harwood *et al.*, 2015: 221).

**Lydia:** ...when you asked us questions on our assignments, it helped in that you made us aware that we need to write exactly what's in "your" (referring to co-researchers) mind, not to try to impress the person who is going to read our work. And that also helped us think of lots of different ideas...

Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 44) highlight that mentorship should employ a student learning centred approach. This entails that mentoring could be delivered through informal conversations in which students probe for information and insight into the 'real undergraduate student experience' (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 6). Therefore, when mentors (students) share information such as the challenges they experienced, first-year students might realise that others have had similar challenges, and were able to overcome them.

### **5.4.3 Student Agency**

#### **5.4.3.1 Students as change agents**

According to Speirs *et al.* (2017: 51), students should be partners in the co-creation of the curricula and the co-evaluation of subject related matters. It that way, there is potential that students would experience increased motivation and engagement. O'Shea, *et al.* (2016: 324) suggest that students should be afforded space to act as change agents and should not just be informed. Preferably, students should form partnerships with academic staff where students engage in what needs to be done in subject matters (Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

Students with a sense of agency seem to be involved or engaged in subject matters, and collectively and collaboratively they might be able to identify challenges and strategies to overcome such challenges. Moreover, students might collaborate in sharing information and engaging in discussions, which would improve text-in-context understanding of subject related matters. However, when students are not involved and engaged they might find themselves in a position of creating new realities (Nkoane in Piper *et al.*, 2009: 26), as is evident in the co-researchers' responses below:

**Sizwe:** *Most of the time, when I don't understand, I apply Cram Pass Forget (CPF) strategy and it helps.*

**Edward:** *'same WhatsApp group' (meaning we are on the same boat), we apply this strategy because we are scared of asking our facilitators questions when we don't understand.*

To avoid new realities that potentially might not benefit students, students need to be engaged and not merely informed about subject related matters. As suggested below, the co-researchers seemed to benefit when engaged in subject related matters:

**Mamello:** *We need someone to challenge us to engage in more thinking...*

#### **5.4.3.2 Constructors of curricula**

At HEIs there are curriculum expectations and developments, therefore Wanner and Palmer (2015: 357) suggest that institutions should encourage student engagement as this facilitates development of independent learners. Egan (2015: 77) suggests that students develop their own goals and curricula, and these goals should be aligned with the expectations of the curricula, which will enhance independent learning. Seemingly, when students are involved in designing the curriculum, they have the opportunity to engage more with the material by spending time on challenging subject matters.

This potentially will translate into students approaching the subject from different perspectives and engaging with others, which could facilitate higher order thinking. Darling (2015: 92) concurs that when students are engaged in curriculum development and design, they adapt smoothly to the higher education community. The co-researchers commented as follows:

**Lydia:** ...I do formulate own questions, it helps...

**Boitumelo:** I first learn the definitions, then identify keywords in the definition. Then I try to understand the definition, in that way it becomes easier to understand everything when I understand the definition... it helps when you have someone who challenges you to see whether you understand, that is why we come up with different questions, and try to answer them, just in case they are in the test.

**Mamello:** We also ask... to check if we have approached the questions right...

**Lydia:** ...when you asked us questions on our assignments, it helped in that you made us aware that we need to write exactly what's in "your" (referring to co-researchers) mind...And that also helped us think of lots of different ideas...

From the above, it is clear that the co-researchers developed their own questions and worked on how to answer these questions, thereby they were co-grading and co-creating subject related matters. In a way, the co-researchers developed a question paper and a memorandum, and in the researcher's view, this facilitated the learning process. Therefore, when students are afforded space to collaborate and work as a collective, they learn better, and it increases their motivation and engagement during and after classes (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 100).

#### **5.4.4 Interconnecting Programme**

##### **5.4.4.1 Source of information**

SI programmes, referred to in this study as SSS, were offered close to times of assessments such as tests and exams, and even when students had to submit assignments (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 99). It was conducted as such so that students can have access to information relevant to such assessments. Therefore, during this information sharing sessions, facilitators and students collectively shared suggestions on how to approach the questions and answers of assessments. These sessions seemed to be of value to students, as the co-researchers commented:

**Edward** ...I am comfortable in that in here even when I am wrong, I am corrected in a nice way and that made me accept my mistakes and, and I was

*comfortable to say when I don't understand. I was also comfortable in that even if I was wrong... and even the group has always been willing to help...*

**Mamello:** *I was comfortable in that small ideas means something when someone would not understand... made us realise that what we thought as small idea, was actually a good and big idea, which made us have good assignments and presentations.*

**Thabang:** *...sometimes when I don't understand, someone explain in my language, in that way I understand.*

The co-researchers attested that there is value in the availability of and access to SSS. They further asserted that due to fear of embarrassment, they often were reluctant to ask questions during formal sessions (UFS, 2018: 77), however SSS has provided a comfortable space to ask questions and seek clarity. One co-researcher suggested that other students in the SSS space were always willing to assist those who needed help, and that valuable information was shared among those present in that specific SSS. The co-researchers gave the impression that working in collaboration and as a collective have value, such as students sometimes provided explanations in their mother tongue, which enhanced the understanding of the subject matter.

Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 104) add that during the SSS programmes, students appear comfortable, therefore, such space leads to increased cooperation, motivation, self-confidence and self-esteem. These increases were ascribed to individualised attention to students, which provided students a space where they were encouraged to probe for more information without fear of embarrassment (UFS, 2018: 77).

#### **5.4.4.2 Collaborative learning**

Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 100) believe that there is value in student collaborative learning. For example, in PTLEP, as in SSS, students are organised into small study groups of 5-7, which proved to be highly successful. Academic programmes such as SSS were held close to the tests and examination, as it was the time when students are more focused on their learning, and have started to prepare for tests or examinations. Each group was facilitated by students who successfully completed the module, and this seems to have contributed to improved student

academic performance and retention. However, in this study the researcher facilitated collaborative learning among students (co-researchers).

**Edward:** *...I am comfortable...the group has always been willing to help...*

**Mamello:** *I was comfortable in that small ideas means something...was actually a good and big idea, which made us have good assignments and presentations.*

**Thabang:** *...someone explain in my language, in that way I understand.*

The co-researchers attributed their improved academic performance to access to SSS. In other words, working together with others motivated and facilitated active learning. Students were able to identify difficult course content, which was then discussed during SSS sessions, and that gave them the opportunity to pay attention to sections they did not understand prior to the session. In collaboration with the researcher and the co-researchers (co-researchers & researcher) who understood course content that others found challenging, these sections were explored by discussing the questions (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 107).

## **5.4.5 Mobile and online learning**

### **5.4.5.1 Sharing learning**

The use of mobile and online learning seems to have increased across the education sector and particularly in HEIs (Smith *et al.*, 2015: 22). One of the popular online learning platforms is a VLE, which is a combination of Blackboard and a mobile platform (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). In a VLE, students collaborate with others and complete weekly tasks as part of their. The use of this platform seems to be advantageous in more than VLEs comprise similar characteristics as learning centres or write centres, with elements of information and communication technology (ICT) and blended learning. The co-researchers seemed to appreciate the benefits of mobile learning as follows:

**Mamello:** *...It was so exciting when I learnt about Blackboard and what to use it for... because I'm shy ...when I ask questions using email or on Blackboard it becomes easier. Because I don't see the other person's face, and when I*

*get responses, I get to see where I'm lacking and that helps me to want to improve, I therefore feel good about myself.*

**Boitumelo:** *Adding on that, I use information that I got from Blackboard to remind me of what to do, so that helps.*

**Kate:** *...using Blackboard and things like WhatsApp as form of communication and sharing information, and asking for help does help. Like I get different views, and that makes me engage in deeper thinking. Also having things like articles posted on Blackboard is useful because I can do those in my own time and place. So I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class...*

The co-researchers seemed excited about the use of platforms such as Blackboard, as online learning methods helped them to overcome some of their disadvantages, such as loneliness (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). The co-researchers furthermore regarded online platforms as useful in the sense that it offers students opportunities to negotiate and share learning (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 360). The use of an online medium of communication was evident during the course of this study. The co-researchers were at liberty to utilise email and WhatsApp to communicate with each other. This was useful in that some co-researchers were shy, therefore, utilising these forms of communication in search of clarification of subject matter was useful. Similarly, some co-researchers indicated that while studying on their own, be it at home or elsewhere, it was useful to have access to such platforms in that it was readily available and added an element of fun to learning with their peers.

#### **5.4.5.2 Interactive learning**

A VLE provides a collaborative space where students work together on academic related matters, such as assignments, and discuss difficult course material (Im & Kim, 2015: 3). It seems as if the co-researchers continued academic related interactions offline, and in that way student engagement and learning outcome improved (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 360). The following responses are the co-researchers views on access to and availability of online platforms:

**Mamello:** *...when I ask questions using email or on Blackboard it becomes easier... when I get responses, I get to see where I'm lacking and that helps me to want to improve...*

**Boitumelo:** ...I use information that I got from Blackboard to remind me of what to do, so that helps.

**Kate:** ...using Blackboard and things like WhatsApp as form of communication and sharing information, and asking for help does help... Also having things like articles posted on Blackboard is useful... So I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class...

The co-researchers reiterated the usefulness of online platforms by stating access to and availability of such platforms afforded them space to continue interactions beyond the classroom. They further indicated that online platforms, to some extent, seemed to be supportive in nature, as students collaborated in dealing with difficult subject matters and supported each other while working on assignments. Additionally, access to online study guides assisted students on what to prepare for the next sessions. Therefore, working in collaboration with others seemed to provide the co-researchers a sense of being part of the campus community.

#### **5.4.6 Interacted/ Fused learning**

##### **5.4.6.1 Student-centred**

For Im and Kim (2015: 1), ICT and blended learning seem to facilitate diverse online material. It appears that ICT and blended learning are student-centred, as facilitators make material available for students before the class commences. Facilitators also provide activity instructions before the class, and this provides students time to read the content before class and to ask questions during class sessions. Furthermore, students are expected to study the assigned reading materials available online, and their participation in small group discussion-type activities is vital and beneficial (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356-360). The co-researchers responded as follows:

**Mamello:** ... using email or Blackboard ...I get to see where I'm lacking and that helps me to want to improve...

**Boitumelo:** ...I use information that I got from Blackboard to remind me of what to do...

**Kate:** ...using Blackboard and things like WhatsApp as form of communication and sharing information...I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class...

The co-researchers seemed to support the views of Im and Kim (2015), and Wanner and Palmer (2015), with regard to access and availability of ICT and blended learning. For some co-researchers, the advantages of ICT and blended learning were that they could ask questions on challenging subject matters, and address any knowledge gaps. This would foster improvement in their academic performance. Other advantages of ICT and blended learning include that when students are online or logged on, they remember what is expected of them for the next session, as the information is in most cases posted on such platforms. Additionally, having access to ICT and blended learning provides space for students to share information on subject related matters which facilitates growth, and leads to improved confidence and improved subject knowledge.

#### **5.4.6.2 Participation and autonomy**

Participation is vital as it has the potential to improve students' understanding of subject matters. Im and Kim (2015: 3) assert that the availability and use of ICT help in maintaining human contact while maintaining flexibility at the same time. Additionally, ICT enhances student authenticity as students, by sharing information online, notice information and knowledge gaps, and share and help others to fill the gaps (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353). In that way, students become authentic as they relate the academic knowledge that they gained to tasks encountered in life (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 557). Blended learning appears to be convenient and encourages students to become active participants in knowledge construction. Moreover, Nkoane (in Piper *et al.*, 2009: 26) asserts that when students are afforded such spaces, they are in a better position to create a new reality. Due to interaction diversity offered by ICT, such is associated with diverse offline interactions among peers and their instructors, which lead to improved student engagement and learning outcomes (Im & Kim, 2015).

**Mamello:** ... *I get to see where I'm lacking and that helps me to want to improve...*

**Boitumelo:** ...*I use information that I got from Blackboard ...so that helps.*

**Kate:** ...*using Blackboard ... I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class...*



**Boitumelo:** ...it helps when you have someone who challenges you to see whether you understand, that is why we come up with different questions, and try to answer them...

**Mamello:** We also ask...to check if we have approached the questions right...

The co-researchers seemed to use ICT as a means of communication between themselves and the facilitators. This mode of communication benefited the co-researchers as they shared knowledge and other subject related matters. It afforded them the opportunity to formulate questions, and how to approach and answer such questions. ICT also affords students collaborative space and diversity in learning as they use ICT to gain clarity from peers, and often the facilitators too, if there are subject related matters that they do not understand.

The use of ICT seems to afford students some flexibility as they can engage with each other and access material at a time and place convenient to them (Im & Kim, 2015: 3). Students find blended learning convenient and they actively engage with other students in subject matters.

#### **5.4.7 Collective sharing**

##### **5.4.7.1 Integration of campuses**

For students to share resources campuses need to be integrated. This integration of campuses might bring with equal distribution of and access to resources beneficial to students (Essack & Quayle, 2007: 74; Hlalele & Alexander, 2012: 496; & Malthus, 2015: 441). Additionally, the integration of campuses could provide students with a sense of belonging and inclusion (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007: 392) that consequently might lead to students easier adapting to life at university and a better chance of succeeding in their academic endeavours. These are the responses of the co-researchers on the integration of campuses:

**Edward:** I personally think it would be better if we are all at the same campus...

**Sizwe:** When it comes to UAP, we don't have enough service delivery...

From the above, it is clear that the co-researchers were not satisfied with segregation of campuses as it denied them certain services, such as academic

advising and tutors that seemed to be at the disposal of mainstream students. Additionally, when co-researchers needed to access said services, they were mostly referred to the mainstream campus as such services were unavailable at the UAP campus. One of the components of social justice in HE is equity, which in this instance aims to reduce the barriers that can impact on students' academic success (Nelson & Creagh, 2013: 15; & Rawlinson & Willimott, 2016: 41). Therefore, UAP students saw the segregation of campuses as threatening equity and as a result, posing barriers that could hinder success. The co-researchers also mentioned the following challenges:

**Thabang:** *In our Sociology classes, some facilitators tell us that we are rejects, we have been rejected by main campus, that we come to class to warm up chairs, that we are metals just sitting there with no response or understanding.*

**Zizi:** *We now know that everyone at South campus is a reject, we even joke and laugh about it so that it does not get to us.*

**Edward:** *It is very painful when we are told that we are rejects... it's very painful and it hurts.*

**Luyanda:** *It is not fun to be told that you are a reject, as some students ba e nka ka pelo (translation: take it to heart)...*

**Thabang:** *so...because of that, some students don't attend classes any more.*

**Mamello:** *I even hear computer facilitators saying that this semester's students act like dumb....it got me so angry that I approached them one by one....I told them I did not like what you guys were saying about us. It makes us not to come to class or even ask for help when we don't understand.*

From the co-researchers' point of view, being constantly reminded by the people they respect and look up to, that they are not good enough, affected their well-being, their studies and their personal lives. Therefore, the co-researchers were scared to approach the facilitators when they had difficulty understanding academic content. From a functionalist point of view, when different parts that exist within an institution do not function interdependently, they might cause harm to the entire system, be viewed as dysfunctional, and expose parts of the system to unintended consequences (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; Ferrante, 2016: 29; & Henslin, 2008: 26). This can in turn

negatively impact students' dignity, progression, retention and participation in higher education.

Another reason that students called for the integration of campuses, is that they believed that such integration would help them understand their rights while they were on campus. According to Nelson and Creagh (2013: 15), and Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 488), the principle of rights as one of the components of social justice in HE is based on treating students with dignity. Therefore, the use of demeaning language by facilitators would negatively affect students and the institution as a whole. The researcher believes that the use of such language might lead to lower retention rates, lack of motivation among students, and consequently tarnish the image of an institution.

The co-researchers further stated that the facilitators seemed to lack a good working relationship:

**Zizi:** *Our facilitators..... it's like someone (facilitator) wants to prove a point to other..... You know, ma'am, soldiers work together and cover each other but our facilitators don't cover each other....like they want to prove a point that someone did not prepare for their work. In future facilitators must act like soldiers...like Mr here suggests.*

**Thabang:** *Facilitators should not argue with each other in front of students....*

**Sizwe:** *They need to prepare themselves and cover each other like Mr here said...*

**Edward:** *I don't like what they are doing.*

**Lydia:** *...no need to expose how much information I have in front of students....*

**Kate:** *I observed one facilitator.....student illustrating (rolling eyes) when the other was explaining information...*

**Boitumelo:** *They criticise each other.....*

**Zizi:** *I think they are not trained for combined classes.....azikwazi ukubusa izinkunzi ezimbili esibayeni esisodwa.*

**Mamello:** *It is confusing...during combined sessions.....one explains in an easier way, but .....you are afraid to write easier explanation because someone else will be marking you.*

**Edward:** (adding to co-researcher 10).....*one facilitator say straight from the textbook, the other says the way you understand...it's so confusing.*

From the above views and expressions, it is clear that co-researchers valued good structure and preparedness from their facilitators. The co-researchers also stated that they would appreciate the facilitators working as a team, not exposing and criticising each other in front of students. They further remarked that the main reason for being at university was to learn, not to observe facilitators criticising each other. The co-researchers also observed lack of communication between facilitators, which had a negative impact on their studies as there seemed to be unclear expectations from facilitators as to how students should address and answer questions in the test and exams.

#### **5.4.7.2 Equal distribution of resources**

There is a need for equal distribution of resources across campuses, as these resources are beneficial to students. It seems as if the segregation of campuses brings about unfavourable consequences as not all students at the same institution of higher education have access to the same benefits. Furthermore, segregation of campuses seem to perpetuate the spirit of stigmatisation, as sites where UAPs are offered are under-resourced, thereby hindering students from realising their full potential and achieving academic success in the end (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 114; & Mabila *et al.*, 2005: 296).

Nelson and Creagh (2013: 15) and Rawlinson and Willimott (2016: 41) conceptualise social justice in HE as entailing participation and access, implying the inclusion of all groups and equal opportunity to utilise beneficial resources. Consequently, when all students are included in participation and have access to resources, equity is maintained and barriers to learning reduced. The co-researchers responded as follows:

**Edward:** *I personally think it would be better if we are all at the same campus ....We're mostly referred to the main campus for almost all services and it's a lot.*

**Sizwe:** *When it comes to UAP, we don't have enough service delivery, we need to improve the learning styles and more academic advice and tutors. So for me, if we all attend in one campus I think that will help in service delivery.*

Hlalele and Alexander (2012, 489) elucidate that “overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction”. In light of Durkheim’s (in Ferrante, 2016) view, there seems to be a need in the UAP for integration among different actors. In the current research study, the students, the lecturers/facilitators, the tutors/mentors and campus resources are the actors. The researcher believes that integration among different actors imply collaborative functioning that enhances student learning and transition, thereby providing students a sense of collegiality.

The co-researchers’ remarks above correspond with the functionalist view that when parts do not co-exist and function interdependently, harm would be caused (Ferrante, 2016: 28). The inability of facilitators to work as a team confuses and negatively affects students, as can be derived from the co-researchers’ remarks above. This only adds to the students’ struggle to learn. It seems as if students in some quarters of the education system frequently experience ‘negative and inequitable treatment’ (Hlalele & Alexander, 2012: 487). Therefore, inclusion calls for students never to be seen in isolation from the broader societal changes and constitutional imperatives. According to Hlalele and Alexander (2012: 487), the notion of participation is central to inclusion.

#### **5.4.8 Academic support**

##### **5.4.8.1 Physical environment**

According to Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4), there is a need to improve academic support for UAP students. One mechanism that can direct the improvement of academic support is the availability of learning assistance support centres. Franklin and Blankenberger (2016) classify a learning assistance support centre as “a designated physical location on campus that provides an organised, multifaceted

approach to offering comprehensive academic enhancement activities outside of the traditional classroom setting to the entire college community”, and the availability of such centre is viewed as one of the best practice and critical resources that an institution can make available.

These centres provide a wide range of services in support of the mission of the institution, namely tutoring, study groups, support for special needs students, study skills instruction, writing assistance, math assistance, and computer assistance. The designed centres are available to students who did not meet the university’s required admission score and the mainstream student population. The co-researchers commented as follows:

**Sizwe:** *...like now, I can tell the upcoming students to ask for help, if they find Sociology difficult...that at university you can never work and make it alone. You must start talking to people so that you can help each other and find help. It really helped us. Showing us how to answer question like short questions (definitions), long questions (essays).....*

**Mamello:** *I was confused at the beginning, but since we started working with you, you guided us, and we’re grateful.*

Contrasting to Franklin and Blankenberger’s (2016: 4) view as to what constitutes a learning support centre, for the co-researchers a learning support centre meant the availability and accessibility of support. From the above remarks by the co-researchers, it seems as if they did not attach support centres to a physical building. They indicated that availability and accessibility of academic support within their reach were all that mattered. The co-researchers further suggested that it was not about the building, but about benefiting from the resources that mattered. From the co-researchers’ perspective, during the course of this study, they had benefited in that they were able to obtain support that enabled them to better their academic performance.

Furthermore, Malthus (2015: 442) suggests that one of the benefits of support centres is that students individually and in a group can access writing consultants, tutors and academic advisors.

#### **5.4.8.2 Writing support**

According to Peck *et al.* (2010: 6), students benefit from ALSA as it affords them access to academic support associated with academic success. One of the aims of ALSA is to provide assistance with essay writing on a one-on-one basis and in a group setting. This is similar to LAC, mentioned in Arendale (2010: 68). For Peck *et al.* (2010: 6), ALSA involves different actors of which subject expertise is eminent. Involving subject experts is vital as they have clear understanding of the nature of essays for specific academic disciplines. They additionally have insight into the critical demands, use and understanding of the theories expected of the students. The co-researchers comments below highlight the benefit of writing support:

**Thabang:** *...our lecturer is highly impressed...we were aiming for ninety-nine percent (99%), and that's exactly what we got.*

**Edward:** *We are slaying with our marks, our facilitator even said we were annoying but in a good way.*

**Luyanda:** *We did well...*

**Zizi:** *...we did good, we are lucky that we found you this semester without paying you, even when we see our marks in this semester, we are very happy.*

**Lydia:** *...in first semester we didn't get too much support, so asking for help did help, and... I think this support should extent to next years' students, this really helps.*

**Sizwe:** *...anything is possible if you ask for help, we had to hustle for help, and we saw that it helps asking for help.*

In this study, it was evident that the co-researchers received writing support in terms of their assignment writing skills. This support was conducted in groups and on an individual basis. The co-researchers firstly worked as a group, thinking critically about their chosen topic. This shows that an element of peer learning was involved. The co-researchers submitted written assignments to the researcher for feedback. However, since the facilitators were the ones grading the assignments in the end, the researcher suggested a number of changes before the co-researchers submitted their assignments. The co-researchers were under no obligation to accept the researcher's suggested changes. From the co-researchers' written work and assignments, the

researcher identified the following aspects that needed more attention, namely guidance on sentence structuring, grammar, punctuation and referencing. The co-researchers expressed their gratitude for deciding to accept the suggested changes as follows:

**Zizi:** ...we are lucky that we found you this semester without paying you, even when we see our marks in this semester, we are very happy.

**Lydia:** ...first semester we didn't get too much support, so asking for help did help...

**Sizwe:** ...if you can look at our first semester assignments, you will see that we all didn't know how to reference, and that's where we lost marks. Since joining this group, we are good at assignment writing, I just hope we could get the same assistance in other modules.

#### **5.4.9 Advising support**

##### **5.4.9.1 Faculty specific support**

Academic advising during group session entailed collaboration of co-researchers navigating university culture such as discussing other matters that seem challenging for students (Darling, 2015: 93). In this instance, navigation of university culture means the understanding of general education and the courses that the co-researchers were enrolled for, focusing on interdisciplinary, integration and intentionality. It was important that the co-researchers understood the connection between different modules (Egan, 2015: 76). For example, in the English module, the co-researchers were taught paragraph construction, and instead of realising that this would help in writing assignments, test and exams of nearly all other modules, the co-researchers treated the modules as unrelated or in isolation. It seems as if most students struggled to apply knowledge or information gained in one module to another module as they regarded modules as separate units and not connected at all. Therefore, it was important that the co-researchers understood how modules are linked. They responded as follows:

**Luyanda:** We do have academic advisors on campus. What he does is to help us with planning our studies, and how we should study. He shows us what we can study next year once we completed UAP.



**Thato:** *One thing I have learnt from the advisor...He also give us information of what we can study for next year.*

In the *skills and competencies for lifelong learning* module, the co-researchers were taught various skills that could facilitate success in their academic and personal life (UFS, 2018). However, they seemed not to apply such skills in their studies, as they regarded knowledge as the only necessary aspect to pass a module. Therefore, it was of the utmost importance that the co-researchers learn synthesis and to apply the knowledge gained in the skills module to the general education environment (Egan, 2015: 76; & Lowenstein, 2015: 123). However, the researcher scheduled a meeting with the appointed academic advisor at the UAP to address the co-researchers' questions and concerns in terms of future enrolments or curriculum advice.

For Karp *et al.* (2008: 10), the appointment of more advisors, particularly faculty specific advisors are vital. The availability of faculty specific advisors can provide students better understanding of fields of study, unlike students receiving advice from general advisors. As highlighted in Strayhorn (2014: 62), the key responsibilities of advisors include making the implicit explicit, and the unknown known.

#### **5.4.9.2 Interdisciplinary agents**

As mentioned in Section 5.4.9.1, Darling (2015: 93) views navigation of university culture as an understanding of general education and the courses that the co-researchers were enrolled for. In other words, one of the responsibilities of an academic advisor is to be an interdisciplinary agent, which in this context means helping co-researchers to understand the connection between different modules (Egan, 2015: 76). The co-researchers responded as follows:

**Edward:** *I thought English was English, like I didn't think that English had anything to do with Sociology. For example, after discussing in this group how we should write thing like assignment, it was only then I saw that these modules are related.*

**Kate:** *Me too, I thought what we were doing in Communication module was just for that module, same goes for skills module. But since we started working in this group, I see like after working on referencing and paragraph*

*construction, that I use the same structure and style, and that made me to pass my assignment even in that module.*

Through academic advising, UAP students are in a position to understand what they are studying and why, which would in the end enhance their engagement in general education (Egan, 2015: 80; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 104; & Lowenstein, 2015: 118). Academic advisors as interdisciplinary agents can be of advantage to the co-researchers as they seem to understand the connection between what they are studying, and how one module can lead to the successful completion of another. As indicated above, the co-researchers are in a position to apply skills learned in a specific module to another module, such as the skills and competencies module to Sociology. The co-researchers commented as follows:

**Luyanda:** *We do have academic advisors on campus. What he does is to help us with planning our studies, and how we should study. He shows us what we can study next year once we completed UAP.*

**Thato:** *One thing I have learnt from the advisor is that we should plan our assignments, like when we plan we will not procrastinate and feel the workload.*

**Mamello:** *For me, I think he has taught me skills to link different modules. For example, I used to see these modules as different, I didn't understand why I have to take skills class/module. But since meeting him, even for those few minutes, I learnt that the skills that we learn in skills class can be applied in other modules. He also give us information of what we can study for next year.*

The co-researchers indicated that they benefited from academic advice, even with the minimal amount of advice they received. However, the co-researchers therefore suggested unlimited and accessible faculty specific advising as it would potentially lead to greater benefits. Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015: 104) indicate that academic advisors guide students in carefully choosing general education courses, therefore, with access to faculty specific advisors these students may obtain an even better understanding of the faculty curriculum and requirements. Advisors provide knowledge and awareness that enhance students' core beliefs and prepare them to face the ethical and societal issues of their future profession (Egan, 2015: 80; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 104; & Lowenstein, 2015: 118).

## 5.5 CONDITIONS CONDUCTIVE TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

For a strategy to be successful in addressing challenges identified, conditions conducive to its implementation need to be taken into consideration.

### 5.5.1 Accessibility

As mentioned in Section 3.5, Karp *et al.* (2008: 2) and Malthus (2015: 7) suggest that one of the conditions conducive to the implementation of a strategy such as tutorial and mentoring, is the availability of mentors and tutors for students who need support. This sentiment is shared by Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7) who found that students value access to tutorials. During the course of this study, the co-researchers needed to avail themselves for different sessions in order to participate in discussions. In their view, conditions conducive to the implementation of the strategy entailed the following:

**Edward:** *...I am comfortable in that in here, even when I am wrong, I am corrected in a nice way and that made me accept my mistakes and, and I was comfortable to say when I don't understand. I was also comfortable in that even if I was wrong, at least my idea was heard, and even the group has always been willing to help...*

**Mamello:** *I was comfortable in that small ideas means something when someone would not understand, you made us realise that what we thought as small idea, was actually a good and big idea, which made us have good assignments and presentations.*

**Zizi:** *...that's why we need help, Sociology is hard...where we get help does not matter, it can be under the tree or anywhere, as long as we get help so that we pass our modules.*

Akoojee and Nkomo (2007; 392) refer to the integration of all students in mainstream spaces and not segregating students in terms of their level of study or the programme they have enrolled for, as a condition conducive to providing access to support services. However, it seems as if the co-researchers found it critical that support services be available and accessible. They also indicated that what mattered most was to get assistance, the where and the how came second, One of the co-

researchers, Zizi, responded as follows: “...where we get help does not matter, it can be under the tree or anywhere, as long as we get help so that we pass our modules”. Although the office that the researcher and co-researchers worked in was uncomfortable, the co-researchers were allowed space to ask questions and seek clarity. It was also a space where they shared ideas with fellow group members to enhance their understanding of subject related material, for instance. As mentioned before, functionalism views one of the functions of education as to facilitate personal growth and the fair distribution of resources to all students (Ferrante, 2016: 160). Therefore, by affording students resources can indicate that the institution is functional as its members are able to function and access such resources. For Jones and Lau (2010: 407), it is important to ensure accessibility to resources by making such services relevant and supportive.

### **5.5.2 Supportive**

Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 114), and Jones and Lau (2010: 407) suggest another condition conducive to academic support, namely an atmosphere that is entertaining, comfortable and supportive for all involved, that enables social interaction and facilitates academic and social adjustment. Additionally, Harwood *et al.* (2015: 221) indicate that when students are afforded a comfortable space for learning, such peer engagement may lead to an increase in confidence and thereby improve the learning process. Furthermore, to Speirs *et al.* (2017: 51) it is important that students have a welcoming space where they can voice concerns related to subject matter without fear. Similarly, Waller *et al.* (2017) indicate that a supportive space affords students confidence to identify difficult subject matters and to seek assistance. This enables students to become change agents in learning, and enhance subject understanding, which facilitates independent learning (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357). However, the co-researchers seemed unsatisfied in terms of what they experienced during individual formal sessions:

**Zizi:** *Our facilitators act like we know what Sociology is about.*

**Edward:** *We are scared to ask questions in class as some facilitators have an angry look when asked questions...*

**Thabang:** *...I think this thing is simple. The only thing we need in this programme is for the facilitator to be friendly with all the students. In that way the student can easily approach the facilitator when they don't understand.*

From the above statements, it is clear that during formal classes or sessions, the co-researchers were uncomfortable with their facilitators, a situation that could hinder the learning process. However, the co-researchers seemed appreciative of the process during the implementation phase of the strategy:

**Edward:** *...I am comfortable...even when I am wrong, I am corrected in a nice way and that made me accept my mistakes...*

**Mamello:** *I was comfortable...made us realise that what we thought as small idea, was actually a good and big idea, which made us have good assignments and presentations.*

**Lydia:** *...And that also helped us think of lots of different ideas. It also helped in that at times we don't believe in our work, so you reading every paragraph and asking us to explain really helped.*

**Zizi:** *It was good in winter, it was good working from your office because it was warm. However, where we did our sessions did not matter for me, because all we wanted was to work so that we can promote the module.*

The co-researchers confirmed and supported the conditions suggested by Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013: 114), Jones and Lau (2010: 407), Harwood *et al.* (2015: 221), Speirs *et al.* (2017: 51), Waller *et al.* (2017) and Wanner and Palmer (2015: 357). From the co-researchers' remarks it is clear that during the course of this study, the atmosphere was entertaining, comfortable and supportive for all. They further articulated that they were able to engage with each other, which led to an increase in confidence that consequently enhanced the learning process. They also suggested that being part of this study was welcoming as they did not fear voicing concerns related to subject matters. Similarly, because of the supportive space they acted in, they were confident to voice concerns about difficult subject matters and not afraid to seek assistance. Due to the availability of a supportive space, they were enabled to engage in subject matters and formulate questions that helped them obtain good grades in that particular subject. Therefore, from the co-researchers' perspective, and in line with functionalism and PAR, it seems that working collaboratively in dealing with

difficult matters was beneficial as the co-researchers were able to solve what they considered to be a problem.

### 5.5.3 Formalised and structured support services

Although support services may be available to students, if such services are not explicitly made known to students and not incorporated in their formal timetables, students might hesitate to make use of those services. Students' past experiences do play a role in the learning process, for example, if a student has a background of being exposed to negative criticism, this might hinder learning. If support services are formal and structured, students might access these services and communicate with their peers without being embarrassed (Darling, 2015: 92; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357). When support services are incorporated in the formal timetable of the university, students might feel compelled to access such services. Additionally, when these services are structured students might feel comfortable in exchanging knowledge and experiences with peers, which consequently might facilitate addressing the knowledge gaps experienced during lecturing sessions (Egan, 2015: 77; Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 104; & Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559). Access to structured and formalised services also facilitates independent learning as students are motivated to prepare for the exchange of knowledge during these sessions (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357). However, according to one of the co-researchers, such structured services seemed unavailable in the UAP:

**Mamello:** *Sitting in class, we thought we understood, but when we had to do the work on our own it was difficult... Even in the first semester, I was expecting someone to come in to help us, maybe like a tutor, because even with our lecturers, they are not available to help us and when we ask them for help, they couldn't because it seemed like they are giving us answers.*

From this statement, it seems that **Mamello** was not aware of the availability of any form of academic support, hence her remark that it was a challenge to get through the first semester. However, through their participation and involvement in this study, the co-researchers seemed contend that having scheduled times for meetings and sessions encouraged them to prepare for and collaborate in such sessions:

**Zizi:** ...I don't think in these group there is anyone who is going to write the exam. Even if there is someone, I think that someone if they continue attending your discussion sessions and do revision for Sociology, that person will pass.

**Mamello:** Especially because this module is difficult, we really needed someone to help us through. This semester was better than first semester, because we now had someone to consult when we didn't understand, unlike first semester it was hard... You really came through for us, we really appreciate it.

**Kate:** ...that really helped a lot, because when you asked us 'what do you mean here?', it really made us to think of lots of ideas, and it made us see that we have to write exactly what we were thinking. It also helped because asking us to explain made us think of different ideas and to be creative and not to be scared of writing our thoughts. It was good. That is why we did good in our assignments.

The above remarks refer to the sessions between the researcher and the co-researchers, and it is clear that the co-researchers appreciated structured and semi-formal setting in their endeavor to make a success of the UAP. They came to the sessions prepared in order to have meaningful discussions from which everybody can benefit. The co-researchers saw questioning as an important aspect that allowed for higher order thinking. One of the co-researchers, **Kate**, made the following statement: "... that really helped a lot, because when you asked us 'what do you mean here? It really made us to think of lots of ideas..." This statement seems supportive of Wanner and Palmer's (2015: 357) assertion that when students are afforded space to collaborate and share knowledge, independent learning is facilitated.

Furthermore, when services are available, accessible, semi-formal and structured, students might not feel embarrassed to access services or to communicate experienced challenges with their peers (Darling, 2015: 92; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 357).

**Mamello:** Especially because this module is difficult, we really needed someone to help us through... we now had someone to consult when we didn't understand, unlike first semester it was hard, ma'am. You really came through for us, we really appreciate...

In the above statement, **Mamello** seemed to appreciate and realise the advantage of being able to access academic support services. The word 'consult' shows that co-researcher had a space for further clarity when they encountered challenges. In this study, sessions were structured in the sense that all parties involved were present, and engaged and exchanged knowledge during these sessions. The sessions were semi-formal in that co-researchers could discuss subject related matters or any other matter that they wished to discuss. The reason why the co-researchers were allowed to discuss personal matters was because they felt that personal matters could hinder participation. Therefore, such matters were dealt with so that everyone was comfortable and undistracted, and willing to engage in a meaningful and beneficial manner. Ghazarian and Sung-Ho (2015: 151) articulate that from a functionalist point of view, education preserves and enhances social order. This was also observed and maintained in this research study in the sense that the co-researchers as a collective adhered to the rules and regulations stipulated. All attendees were prepared for the sessions, and this led to positive outcomes.

#### **5.5.4 Exposure to technology**

One of the skills that HEIs seem to expect that all new students have is knowing how to use a computer (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Im & Kim, 2015: 3). The students are expected to complete online assignments and engage in online discussions right from the start of their academic career (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552). However, without prior training and knowledge, students tend to disengage from the institutional culture (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356). From the co-researchers' responses below it appears as if not all students have been exposed to the use of technology prior to entering university. The co-researchers, with sad facial expressions, responded as follows regarding their level of computer skills and the expectations from the UAP:

**Zizi:** *...computer is going to damage my certificate...*

**Boitumelo:** *For me... it's my first time seating in front of computer, I don't even know how this thing work...*

**Thato:** *Computer is a serious problem.....I know nothing with computer.*



**Mamello:** ...I don't know how to study for computer test, like theory in the textbook....textbook tells us how.....I don't know where they get the theory from.

Due to an increase in the use of technology in HEIs as suggested by Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 552) and Smith *et al.*, (2015: 22), students entering without technological skills would find it even more challenging to adapt to the culture of the institution as they might be unable to complete online assignments and participate in online discussions, which ultimately would keep them from progressing academically. It might also have a negative impact on student confidence (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356)). In an effort to address these issues and to advance the co-researchers' technological skills, the researcher took it upon herself to assist the co-researchers (students) with the basics aspects of using a computer. Collaboratively, the co-researchers worked on programmes that were essential for their academic progression, namely creating Word and PowerPoint documents, searching for information on the Internet, and navigating through the institution's website to become familiar with Blackboard, the platform where they had to submit assignments, participate in online discussions and often complete assessments. The co-researchers benefited from this training, as is evident from their remarks below:

**Thabang (with a little smile):** ... At least I now know how to type an assignment and look for information on the Internet...

**Lydia:** ...when you said that you will teach us how to use computer, I was like to myself "where does she get the time to do all of this things, how does she know all these?" But again, I was like, she has been here for so long and I need help, so let me see what she will teach me!

**Zizi:** Adding on co-researcher 5: She is like jack of all trades! So...when we started discussing the use of computer and you suggested that we take notes of step-by-step of computer that was helpful because I had written notes to use when I was alone.

**Mamello:** When you said we have computers in our hands (referring to smartphones), I was so confused! But then when you asked us to show you the sign that say "on/off" on our phones we all showed you the same thing! You also suggested that we look for the same sign on a computer, and that was clever!

**Thato (big smile):** *...to show that we learnt a lot from you, we did so well on our presentations, we were able to put pictures on slides even videos, and our presentation was so professional, and our assignments were nice.*

The co-researchers needed basic computer literacy training in order to complete assessments and perform better academically. Stewart and Zaaiman (2015: 277), Radulović and Krstić (2017: 27) and Ferrante (2016: 28) suggest that, from a functionalist view, education needs to instil new values in students, namely the value of achievement and of equal opportunity. Therefore, discussing computer basics was one way in which the co-researchers could strive to succeed, as in their view it motivated them to learn more due to the support. This is evident in **Zizi** and **Thato's** remark: **Zizi:** *"...we take notes of step-by-step of computer that was helpful because I had written notes to use when I was alone..."* Due to an increase in the use of technology in HEIs (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552; & Smith *et al.*, 2015: 22), it is vital that once students are enrolled at the institution, they should be able to complete such assessments. Seemingly, the co-researchers appreciated the exposure to computer technology: **Thato (big smile):** *"...to show that we learnt a lot from you, we did so well on our presentations, we were able to put pictures on slides even videos, and our presentation was so professional, and our assignments were nice"*. Therefore, adequate training is essential for students to succeed in their academic career and to adapt to university culture as the use of technology seems to be the norm at HEIs (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353; Smith *et al.*, 2015: 22; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356).

### **5.5.5 Adequate training**

Institutions have to ensure that their students are exposed to the use of computer/technology from the beginning of the year (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Im & Kim, 2015: 3) and training in using a computer should continue throughout the academic year. Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 557) indicate that in HEIs technology has been used to enhance interaction and collaboration among the campus community. Additionally, for Mitchell *et al.* (2014: 353), the use of technology seems to be a contributing factor in improving student participation in learning, thereby leading to student autonomy (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014: 353). The facilitators expected the co-researchers to complete most of the assessments online and for the rest, they were

expected to search online for information and submit typed assignments. Therefore, as stated in Section 5.5.4, in this study the co-researchers dealt with the basics of using a computer. From the following remarks it is clear that the co-researchers grew confident in the use of a computer:

**Mamello:** *If we were taught computer at the beginning of the year, I think for most of us like now, we could've done well in the first semester. I'm saying this because last semester, I didn't even know what blackboard is and how it works, then we were supposed to do tests online. That wasn't good. But since we started here in this group, we use steps that you showed us, if I have forgotten something about computer I talk to some of this group members.*

**Thabang (with a little smile):** *... At least I now know how to look for information on the Internet...*

**Zizi:** *...when ... you suggested that we take notes of step-by-step of computer that was helpful because I had written notes to use when I was alone.*

**Thato (with a big smile):** *...to show that we learnt a lot from you, we did so well on our presentations, we were able to put pictures on slides even videos, and our presentation was so professional, and our assignments were nice.*

From the above statements, it is clear that the co-researchers benefited from the computer training provided by the researcher. The co-researchers also suggested that if they were exposed to computer training earlier in the year, their academic performance would be better as most of their assignments had to be completed online. However, Jones and Lau (2010: 407), Im and Kim (2015: 3), Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 557) and Mitchell *et al.* (2014: 353) suggest that the use of technology seems to contribute to student participation in learning, thereby leading to student autonomy. This is also evident in the following statement by one of the co-researchers, namely **Zizi**: “... we take notes of step-by-step of computer that was helpful because I had written notes to use when I was alone”. When students are exposed to the use of technology and are adequately trained, autonomy increases as students are motivated to practice on their own. Furthermore, adequate training also seems to contribute to outcome achievement (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356). The co-researchers articulated that they, as a result of the technology training they obtained during this study, were able to outperform their previous scores and successfully complete assessments. **Thato**, one of the co-researchers, responded as follows (with

a big smile on his face): “...we did so well on our presentations, we were able to put pictures on slides even videos, and our presentation was so professional, and our assignments were nice”. Additionally, Im and Kim (2015: 3) concur with Wanner and Palmer (2015: 356) that the use of technology increases student participation, engagement and collaboration. It seems as if the co-researchers agree:

**Mamello:** *...if I have forgotten something about computer I talk to some of this group members.*

In order to benefit students the most, the use of technology must be student-centered, assist students in achieving learning goals, enhance engagement and be accommodative of all learning styles. In other words, institutions need to be aware of student preferences and how they learn best (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 356). The use of technology in HEIs must be flexible in nature, allowing students to perform activities in their own time and space (Im & Kim, 2015: 3). Students also must be comfortable and confident in using technology. This can be achieved if HEIs adequately train its members, and avail resources to the benefit of all.

### **5.5.6 Availability of resources**

The segregation of campuses poses a challenge for students as there seems to be an unequal distribution of resources on different campuses. Therefore, institutions have to be familiar with and aware of all programmes offered, and identify necessary resources for each campus to ensure smooth functioning of all its campuses (Ferrante, 2016: 28; Msigwa, 2016: 541; & Rigney, 2015: 338). Students need to be afforded sense of agency because they, as the users of said resources, are in a position to assist institutions in identifying what resources they need as that is their reality (Nkoane in Piper *et al.*, 2009: 26; & Waetjen, 2006: 206). Students need a space where they can engage with fellow students, and with institution management on issues relating to resource distribution (Arendale, 2010: 12; Essack & Quayle, 2007: 79; & Waetjen, 2006: 206). Resources can include teaching methods, student-facilitator engagement, facilitator-facilitator engagement, and technology. The co-researchers commented as follows regarding resources and the prevention of challenges:

**Sizwe:** *Most of the time, when I don't understand, I apply Cram Pass Forget (CPF) strategy and it helps.*

**Edward:** *'same WhatsApp group' (meaning we are on the same boat), we apply this strategy because we are scared of asking our facilitators questions when we don't understand.*

From the above statements, the co-researchers seemed confident that they are not exposed to good teaching and learning practices. Because the co-researchers entered HE to obtain a qualification, they had to find other means to ensure better performance as they claimed not to be exposed to good teaching and learning practices. One of the co-researchers, **Sizwe**, remarked as follows: "...when I don't understand I apply Cram Pass Forget strategy and it helps". Unfortunately, the Cram Pass Forget (CPF) strategy is not recommended as a good method of learning as soon after writing a test, for example, the student forgets the information and has to study all over again in preparation for the next assessment. Since the co-researchers seemed to resort to CPF, it might be that they are not well equipped in terms of learning and study strategies. The co-researchers remarked as follows:

**Zizi:** *Our facilitators.....we love them and respect them... it's like someone (facilitator) wants to prove a point to other..... You know, soldiers work together and cover each other but our facilitators don't cover each other....*

**Thabang:** *Facilitators should not argue with each other ....*

**Sizwe:** *They need to prepare themselves ...*

**Edward:** *I don't like what they are doing.*

**Lydia:** *...no need to expose how much information I have in front of students....*

As indicated earlier, resources could also imply facilitator-facilitator engagement. From the co-researchers' point of view, it seems as if the facilitators lacked a good working relationship and that could hinder student performance. It seems as if due to what co-researchers observed during formal sessions, their attention moved from learning to trying to understand what they were exposed to, consequently hindering learning.

Therefore, institutions need to ensure that all its members are well-equipped and all campuses well-resourced in order to avoid the challenges mentioned above (Ferrante, 2016: 28; Msigwa, 2016: 541; & Rigney, 2015: 338). Students also need to be aware of all academic support services that are available on campus, if any. However, since

the researcher and the co-researchers started working as a collective and in collaboration, the co-researchers expressed their gratitude on the availability of resources as follows:

**Edward:** *...unlike first semester, because this semester we had someone working with us, I passed....*

**Zizi:** *...thank you for helping us prepare for the test, I also passed, I'm glad that we came to you for help.*

**Boitumelo:** *...I did pass, even though I did not get the marks I wanted. When writing the test, I had to remember who was going to mark my test, therefore I got confused whether I should answer the questions the way you taught us, and I lost some marks because I did not answer some of the questions the way you showed and explained to us.*

The availability of resources should be on a par with individual modules, as that could eliminate quite a lot of confusion, as is evident from **Boitumelo's** statement: "*... I did pass, even though I did not get the marks I wanted. When writing the test, I had to remember who was going to mark my test, therefore I got confused whether I should answer the questions the way you taught us, and I lost some marks because I did not answer some of the questions the way you showed and explained to us*". In this regard, members of an institution need to co-exist and function interdependently (Ferrante, 2016: 28) to maintain order, stability and to ensure smooth functioning of the institution on all levels.

From the co-researchers' point of view, the availability of resources and the ability to access such resources were beneficial as most of them, if not all, performed better in the second semester compared to the first semester, when they received no academic support (Msigwa, 2016: 541; & Rigney, 2015: 338).

### **5.5.7 Accessibility of resources**

Once the resources are made available, the institution needs to ensure accessibility for all. Accessibility to resources can be maintained by having all the academic support services in one physical building, and preferably on the campus where students attend formal sessions (Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6; & Franklin & Blankenberger, 2016: 4). Students

must also be encouraged to access and utilise these beneficial resources, rather than to fear stigmatisation should they access these resources. In other words, students will only realise the advantages of academic support services if there is a positive association with it (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 114; & Mabila *et al.*, 2005: 296). The opposite seems also to be true as students become reluctant to use these resources if they cannot make a positive association (Peck *et al.*, 2010; & Aguilar *et al.*, 2014). However, in this study, the co-researchers' sense of responsibility and achievement played a role in ensuring that they utilised the resources that enabled them to successfully complete assessments. The co-researchers articulated the advantages of accessing such resources as follows:

**Edward:** ... because this semester we had someone working with us, I passed. First semester was hard, I didn't understand...

**Zizi:** ...thank you for helping us prepare for the test, I also passed....

**Boitumelo:** ...I did pass, even though I did not get the marks I wanted...

From the above statements, it is clear that the co-researchers realised the advantages of accessing resources. One of the co-researchers, **Zizi**, indicated that such resources contributed towards the successful completion of assessments: "...thank you for helping us prepare for the test, I also passed, I'm glad that we came to you for help". This statement clearly stipulates that because the resources were accessible and the co-researchers were aware of the benefits of said resources, they were eager to utilise these resources and expressed their gratitude for the opportunity. This agrees with the earlier statement that students are more likely to utilise resources if there is a positive association attached to said resources (Aguilar *et al.*, 2014; Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 114; Mabila *et al.*, 2005: 296; & Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6). Therefore, expressing gratitude as suggested in functionalism serves as a provision of practical solution to practical problem (Callaghan, 2016: 68; & Strawn, 2009: 36). As suggested earlier in this section, resources must be available and accessible for all members, and this can be accomplished by having them in one building (Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6; & Franklin & Blankenberger, 2016: 4).

### 5.5.8 Designated building

As suggested in Sections 5.5.6 and 5.5.7, one of the conditions conducive to the availability and accessibility of resources is to house all relevant resources in one building and refer to it as a centre (Malthus, 2015: 441; & Peck *et al.*, 2010: 15). However, Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4) suggest that all available programmes, namely the university access programme, the extended programme and the mainstream programme, must be presented at one location in order for students to benefit from these resources. First-year students would then also be in contact with senior students who could support them academically. Furthermore, the seniors might also encourage the first-years to make use of resource centres. In addition, Akoojee and Nkomo (2007: 392) support the notion of integrated campuses as this could ensure inclusion and justice for all students in that they would have access to beneficial resources. This would also award them a feeling of collegiality (Malthus, 2015: 441). In addition, functionalism supports the notion of integration as it views education as a machinery for social integration, thereby providing students a sense of national identity (Ferrante, 2016: 160, 2013: 334; Henslin, 2008: 506; Salik *et al.*, 2014: 5; & Yaghmaei *et al.*, 2016: 2). The co-researchers seemed aware that the resources available to their counterparts could rarely be found at a UAP campus. However, they were content with the situation as long as the little resources that were available, were explicitly made known to them. In other words, the benefits from accessing resources outweigh the lack of resources. The co-researchers commented as follows:

**Zizi:** *...talking on behalf of our groups, like what you did...was useful, it was useful, it was useful a lot. Because if we like look our results right now, it shows that there is change somewhere somehow. Like already now I think we going to promote the module... So...since you came into our lives in our study like helping us with sociology, you helped us a lot.*

**Thabang:** *...we are good, even our lecturer is highly impressed ...*

**Edward:** *We are slaying with our marks...*

**Luyanda:** *We did well, but we lost two (2) marks, but we will work on it.*

**Zizi:** *...we are over the moon, we are so happy with our marks, we did good, we are lucky that we found you this semester without paying you, even when we see our marks in this semester, we are very happy.*



**Lydia:** *...in first semester we didn't get too much support, so asking for help did help, and ma'am, I think this support should extent to next years' students, this really helps.*

**Sizwe:** *...anything is possible if you ask for help, we had to hustle for help, and we saw that it helps asking for help... Since joining this group, we are good at assignment writing, I just hope we could get the same assistance in other modules.*

The co-researchers' expression of gratitude in the statements above, are in line with Franklin and Blankenberger (2016: 4) who suggested that when learning assistance support centres were organised properly, such centres provided comprehensive academic enhancement activities beyond the classroom setting. These centres also provide beneficial academic support by offering tutoring, study groups, peer assistance learning, support for special needs students, study skills, writing assistance, and computer assistance. These centres are inclusive in nature as they cater for students from both the UAP and the mainstream programme (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007: 392; Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013: 114; & Malthus, 2015: 441). Availability and accessibility of learning assistance support centres (in one location) for all members can serve as a mechanism to address criticism against functionalism, namely that functionalism defends the existing social order and the status quo (Ferrante, 2016: 28; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 277).

The co-researchers seemed to have reaped some rewards from the implementation of the strategy. However, the shortcomings also should be mentioned. Therefore, the next section will discuss the shortcomings of best practices to improve academic support in the UAP.

## **5.6 SHORTCOMINGS OF BEST PRACTICES TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE UAP**

### **5.6.1 Dependence**

The co-researchers regarded the researcher as an expert in subject matter e.g. Sociology. The researcher was concerned that the students became dependent on her as she played the role of mentor and tutor, and this could hinder their confidence

and motivation (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Morley, 2012: 3). Another scenario is where co-researchers depended on their peers for academic assistance. However, this put a huge amount of pressure on those students and they struggled to engage in their own studies because they had to provide assistance to others (Hall & Collins, n.d: n.p). From the remarks below, it is clear that the co-researchers depended on the researcher:

**Sizwe:** *...because even during holidays, you were available for us even when you had to spend time with your family...*

**Mamello:** *Thank you for being available for us, and not being tired of us. Sometimes you had to leave, but you did not leave...*

**Lydia:** *...when you asked us questions on our assignments, it helped in that you made us aware that we need to write exactly what's in "your" (referring to co-researchers) mind...It also helped in that at times we don't believe in our work, so you reading every paragraph and asking us to explain really helped.*

Lack of self-confidence seemed to play a role in students becoming dependent on whoever was willing to assist them (McFarlane, 2016: 77; & Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7). The researcher believes that the lack of confidence in this particular group of students may be a result of past experiences where they (co-researchers) were told that they were 'rejects'. Therefore, the co-researchers at times seemed not to believe in themselves and their work, as suggested below:

**Lydia:** *...at times we don't believe in our work, so you reading every paragraph and asking us to explain really helped.*

The co-researchers seemed reluctant to submit their written assignments to their facilitators if the researcher did not first read through the assignment. This shows the level of dependency on the researcher. Even though at times co-researchers had minor mistakes that did need to be resubmitted, such behaviour was observable and evident. Therefore, set boundaries were crossed as the co-researchers wanted to meet during the holidays as well.

### 5.6.2 Boundaries

One of the shortcomings in improving academic support to UAP students was lack of adhering to boundaries in the relationship between the researcher and the co-researchers. McFarlane (2016: 77) conducted a study with tutors and also found a lack of boundaries. McFarlane revealed that the tutors seemed to lack clarity on what it means to be a tutor. Other tutors did not clearly communicate boundaries to the students. Since tutors work closely with students, some students revealed to them personal matters that potentially were hindering their engagement and success. Some tutors did not know how to handle this situation and became distressed to the extent that they could not function effectively (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Hall & Collins, n.d: n.p.). In addition, due to time constraints some tutors hesitated before seeking guidance from senior tutors and their mentors in cases of students' acute personal circumstances. However, there were cases where clear boundaries were set, but as a result of students relying too heavily on tutors, these boundaries were ignored. A similar situation occurred in the current research study, as described by co-researchers in the following remarks:

**Sizwe:** *...even during holidays, you were available for us even when you had to spend time with your family. And at times, we just came and disturb your other work...*

**Mamello:** *...Sometimes you had to leave, but you did not leave...*

McFarlane (2016: 77) suggested that setting boundaries is paramount to the success of tutoring. In the current research study, the researcher was willing to provide academic support to the co-researchers. However, she did not deem it necessary to set such strict boundaries as she held the belief that those students were adults, and knew and understood the concept of boundaries. From Sizwe's statement it is clear that they crossed boundaries: "*...even during holidays, you were available for us even when you had to spend time with your family. And at times, we just came and disturb your other work*". The phrase "*at times, we just came and disturb your other work*", is a clear example that the researcher was mistaken in assuming that the co-researchers understood and would keep to the boundaries she set. It often happened that the co-researchers did not make prior arrangements for consultations with the researcher, as indicated in **Mamello's** statement: "*...Sometimes you had to leave, but you did not*

*leave...*” The researcher also had other commitments, such as lecturing, and it did happen that the co-researchers did not find her in the office. The co-researchers would then contact her by phone or WhatsApp to ask for assistance. Since they often were behind schedule, the co-researchers left things to the last minute and then pressured the researcher for assistance. They did not see the need to delay gratification.

### **5.6.3 Time consuming and costly**

Other shortcomings that hinder the implementation of the strategy to improve academic support are time and money. There seems to be a need among UAP students for supportive systems, such as peer support, tutoring and academic advising. Similarly, Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7) believe that peer support, tutoring and academic advising support systems enable socialisation and eased adaptation to HEIs. Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7) further articulate that unavailability and inaccessibility of said services might hinder student progression and retention. However, in this research study, such support services were available and this enhanced the co-researchers’ performance. Since support systems can take the form of staff as course co-ordinators working with small groups of first-year students (Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7) institutions might have to employ more staff, which makes this a costly exercise. As discussed in Section 5.6.1, there is also the danger that this system may lead to student dependency on peers, which not only hinder learning but also independent learning (Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 359).

In this study, tutoring and mentoring sessions posed time constraints. The sessions were aligned with the Sociology lecture time-table, hence the reason that the content had to be covered before the co-researchers had to complete each assessment. Additionally, the co-researchers seemed dependent on the researcher, as they often did not attend lectures due to being told by the facilitators that they were ‘rejects’ (Wanner & Palmer, 2015: 359). They furthermore had the expectations that the work will be covered during our group discussion, in other words, with peer support. The co-researchers also revealed personal matters that at times emotionally overwhelmed and distressed the researcher (McFarlane, 2016: 77; Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7). The remarks below agree with the statement by Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7), and Wanner and

Palmer (2015: 359) in regard to the reason why students did not attend lectures and depended on the researcher:

**Mamello:** *...even our facilitators are not available to assist us, we have noticed that they only come to campus for classes, and when done, they leave. Even after class, when we try to ask questions, we don't get answers.*

**Thabang:** *We have been told that we are rejects, therefore we are scared to ask questions, which makes us not to understand the work. **The rest of the co-researchers nodded (head) in agreement.***

From the challenges shared above, it is clear that a limited academic support system creates student dependency on peers and eventually, hinders learning and independent learning. This was discussed in Section 5.6.1 and agrees with the view of Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7), McFarlane (2016: 77), and Wanner and Palmer (2015: 359). These circumstances, namely depending on the researcher and sharing personal matters, often resulted in the researcher and co-researchers working until late. Some of the co-researchers were not productive because they were exhausted. In addition, limited face-to-face contact with facilitators added more strain on the co-researchers. **Thabang**, one of the co-researchers, remarked as follows; *"...we are scared to ask questions, which makes us not to understand the work"*. Another issue was that co-researchers could not obtain academic support beyond formal sessions. One of the co-researchers, **Mamello**, stated the following in this regard: *"...even our facilitators are not available to assist us, we have noticed that they only come to campus for classes, and when done they leave. Even after class when we try to ask questions we don't get answers"*. In an effort to assist the co-researchers to achieve the desired goals, namely to pass this particular module, the researcher and co-researchers spent long hours dealing with what they considered as difficult subject matter.

#### **5.6.4 Expensive and discriminative**

HEIs expect students to use technology for assignments, online discussions and assessments. This expectation and its implementation can potentially be discriminating and marginalising in nature (Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). One can predict that the implementation of technology, such as computer usage, can be seen as discriminative and marginalising as HEIs are supposed to cater for students from

differentiated backgrounds. As outlined in Hansen and Reich (2015: 1245), some students have inadequate computer training while others have been exposed to and are well equipped in using a computer. Therefore, institutions might have to spend an extensive amount of time training students. Additionally, students have different preferences regarding learning and spending study time. Some students prefer to spend time in online discussions, while others would rather print the material and study offline at a later stage (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). From the above, it is clear that some students may find the use of technology, such as computers, quite challenging. This can lead to a situation where students are disconnected from the institution and their studies. The co-researchers responded as follows:

**Zizi:** *...computer is going to damage my certificate...*

**Boitumelo:** *For me...it's my first time sitting in front of computer, I don't even know how this thing work...*

**Thato:** *Computer is a serious problem.....I know nothing with computer.*

**Mamello:** *...I don't know how to study for computer test...*

**Luyanda:** *I don't have a laptop, so at times when I want someone in this group to help, we struggle because computer labs are always full.*

From the above statements, it is clear that the institution's technological expectations from students can be marginalising and discriminating (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407; & Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). As Smith *et al.* (2015: 22) posit, the use of online platforms in higher education has become the norm, however, some institutions assume that students are technology savvy. The use of technology in higher education can provide learning opportunities for students, however, if students are not comfortable with using such technologies, it can impact negatively on their academic performance. This is confirmed in the following remarks by the co-researchers:

**Zizi:** *"...computer is going to damage my certificate..."*

**Boitumelo:** *"...it's my first time sitting in front of computer, I don't even know how this thing work..."*

**Thato:** *"Computer is a serious problem.....I know nothing with computer."*

**Luyanda:** *"...so at times ... we struggle because computer labs are always full".*

The co-researchers seemed frustrated with the situation and confirmed that not all students are technology savvy, therefore the need for adequate technology training (Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). The words "...*damage...*" and "...*serious problem...*" in their remarks above suggest that they are frustrated and not comfortable using technology, which pose a serious threat to their progression to mainstream programmes. UAP students have to pass all their modules before they can progress to the mainstream programme. However, without adequate training and support, this may seem unreachable and will not become reality.

As established earlier, there are costs involved in the use of technology for learning for both the student and the institution. In terms of cost to the institution, more staff may have to be employed to support students (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552). On the students' side, cost will be incurred to purchase equipment, which can be quite expensive and therefore, also exclusive as not all students have the means to acquire such equipment (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552). One of the co-researchers, **Luyanda**, confirmed this in the following statement: "*I don't have a laptop, so at times when I want someone in this group to help, we struggle because computer labs are always full.*" This statement also confirms that students become frustrated with limited resources such as computer labs that are too small for the number of students having to work on computers. Improving the computer labs to accommodate the number of students may be costly, however, it is necessary for students to excel in their academic career (Morley, 2012: 2). Additionally, since institutions expect students to use technology to complete assignments and assessments, they have to provide students access to 'free Wi-Fi' services, which leads to having to employ extra staff members to monitor its use and ensure smooth operation (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552).

### **5.6.5 Self-responsibility**

Some students lack self-responsibility for their learning, which can be a result of blended learning. Wanner and Palmer (2015: 359) established that the implementation of blended learning tends to limit face-to-face formal sessions, implying that students need to take responsibility for their learning. This puts pressure on students as some of them postpone their assignments to the last minute. The workload then piles up and

in the end, the student struggles to complete everything on time. Consequently, lack of self-responsibility might hinder academic success and progression (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552).

In addition, Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 552) speculate that blended learning or technology could be misused as students might use such resources for unrelated purposes. Furthermore, students can become dependent on technology, and can put pressure on educators concerning the arrangement of content (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016: 552). This is evident in the following remarks by the co-researchers:

**Zizi's** response: *"Our facilitators don't post material on blackboard on time."*

**Thabang**: *"At times because we have other modules, I find myself postponing to complete assignments, and when I try to do that assignment, blackboard gives me problems. Or maybe I run out of data."*

These statements support the view by Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 552) and Wanner and Palmer (2015: 359), namely that students lack self-responsibility for their learning. This is illustrated clearly in **Thabang's** response: *...because we have other modules, I find myself postponing to complete assignments...*

Morley's (2012: 2) study corroborated with studies by Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 552) and Wanner and Palmer (2015: 359) with regard to students lacking self-responsibility. They agree that with blended learning taking momentum in HEIs, students find themselves waiting in queues at computer labs to access such technology. This might affirm lack of self-responsibility, as students might blame the institution's limited resources as the reason why they could not complete and submit their assignments on time.

### **5.6.6 Capacity**

The researcher believes that the integration of campuses might pose challenges to the institution because the increase in student numbers will most likely put pressure on the resource capacity. Additionally, students find themselves waiting in long queues in labs to access computers, the result of limited resources. As suggested in Section 5.6.5, this might lead to lack of self-responsibility as students might not complete assessments on time and put the blame on the institutions' limited resources (Jones



& Lau, 2010; Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013). Luyanda confirms this with the following remark: *“We struggle because computer labs are always full.”*

If all institutional programmes were to be integrated on a single campus, the institution’s resources would be put under tremendous pressure in terms of the available capacity and the required capacity. Since the UAP houses approximately one thousand two hundred students (1200) (UFS-UAP Longitudinal Report, 2017), the question arises whether the institution’s available resources have the capacity to afford all students access to these resources (Jones & Lau, 2010; Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013; & Im & Kim, 2015).

The number of students an institution can accommodate seems to correspond with the resources that an institution can afford its students. As discussed in Section 3.6.4, institutions that implement blended learning and ICT seem to reinforce the use of technology (Jones & Lau, 2015) among its members and this pose some challenges. Challenges associated with the expectation to use technology could be that some students cannot afford to purchase a computer, or if the student has a computer, his data might be limited. Therefore, students might find themselves waiting in long queues for an extended period of time in order to make use of the institution’s available resources (Smith *et al.*, 2015: 22; Im & Kim, 2015; & Hubackova & Semradova, 2016). Consequently, students might find themselves not being able to attend some lectures as they wait to complete online assessments, hence Hubackova and Semradova (2016: 552) suggested that an institution make available free WiFi for students. However, availing free WiFi can also bring about some challenges, as discussed in Section 5.6.4.

### **5.6.7 Reluctance**

Some students seem reluctant to make use of the available academic support on campus, such as learning assistance support centres. One explanation provided by Peck *et al.* (2010) and Aguilar *et al.* (2014) is that students seemed not to understand the purpose of learning assistance support centres. Furthermore, students may also choose not to access such services for fear of stigmatisation (Aguilar *et al.*, 2014; & Peck *et al.*, 2010). Stigmatisation of those who access academic support is evident in **Zizi’s** remark: *“You know ma’am, when we ask for help when we don’t understand*

*parts of a module, some people say we are dumb, even our friends say the module is easy”.*

From the co-researcher’s perspective above, it seems as if some students were reluctant to look and ask for assistance even if they found a particular module challenging. This is in line with findings by Peck *et al.* (2010) and Aguilar *et al.* (2014). In addition, in Karp *et al.* (2008: 10) institutions that offer UAP and related support turn to do so at a specified centre. This was also observed during the course of this research study as some co-researchers were hesitant to voice concerns. One of the co-researchers remarked as follows:

**Mamello:** *“You know, before we got to really understand how helpful this group was going to be, and because of the experiences we had with our facilitator, them telling us that we are rejects, I didn’t feel comfortable to say that I didn’t understand dependency theory because I thought people will see me as dumb.”*

Karp *et al.* (2008: 10) attest to the availability and accessibility of support centres for all students, despite their level of education, and that these centres offer a variety of support services, such as academic advising, tutoring, and peer group sessions. However, there has been a number of challenges reported with regard to academic advising. One of the challenges is the limited number of faculty specific advisors available. This leads to students receiving general academic advice and not specific to their program of study. This arrangement tends to misdirect students and does not enhance a personalised relationship between the advisor and the student (Darling, 2015: 91; Egan, 2015: 76; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 100; & Lowenstein, 2015: 118).

### **5.6.8 Increasing the number of advisors**

Despite the availability of academic advising, students have shown below average levels of engagement with general education and understanding of the goals (Lowenstein, 2015: 117). Therefore, Lowenstein (2015: 117) suggested a partial solution, where institutions incorporate advising as coursework in its own right. Additionally, this could create challenges for advisors and costs for institutions, which

according to Lowenstein (2015: 117) are worth meeting if the institutions value integrative learning. The co-researchers responded as follows:

**Thabang:** *“It is highly difficult to be able meet up with the academic advisor, because if we look at even the number of students actually here on campus, that would really like need his assistance on how to implement and push their careers forward.”*

**Luyanda:** *“We do have academic advisors on campus. What he does is to help us with planning our studies, and how we should study. He shows us what we can study next year once we completed UAP.”*

The statements above seem to affirm the need for an academic advisor to assist students with general education matters and with understanding of the goals (Lowenstein, 2015: 117). The co-researchers saw the need to incorporate advising in their course work, as suggested in **Thabang’s** statement: *...need his assistance on how to implement and push their careers forward*”. By “implement”, one can infer that **Thabang** was referring to incorporating advising in coursework or even having advising as a module in its own right and awarded credits (Lowenstein, 2015: 117). However, Lowenstein (2015: 127) also warns that cost may be involved in implementing this.

In addition, Egan (2015: 86) identifies a number of obstacles in the development and implementation of academic advising, namely resources, caseloads and time. According to Egan (2015), limited resources on campuses meant that academic advisors were often overloaded with students needing academic advice. This limits the time available to devote to individual students and may result in students not receiving the best possible advice. One of the co-researchers commented as follows:

**Zizi’s:** *“In regarding to academic advisor, in this campus, there is a lot number of students, on this campus there is only one academic advisors, and is not enough.”*

In addition, Strayhorn (2014: 62) and Egan (2015) agree that academic advising requires a great deal of time, energy, and individual attention to students, which seem to present a huge problem, as many institutions are under-resourced and understaffed. Furthermore, due to time constraints the advisors do not have the time to develop a working knowledge of an institution’s array of disciplines and programmes. This could potentially hamper attempts to help students think about the relevance of

and relationships among the sometimes disparate, fields of knowledge. One of the co-researchers responded as follows:

**Zizi:** *“In regarding to academic advisor...I could not manage to have an appointment with the academic advisor in the first semester. For me, I think what can be improved is to have more or hire more academic advisors especially for the upcoming students, I think that could be beneficial for those students. Because they need the advice on how they can proceed with their careers and the modules they are taking.”*

**Zizi** seems to suggest the need to increase the number of advisors on campus, and particularly faculty specific advisors as this would enable students to have access to faculty specific advisors.

As discussed previously, Lowenstein (2015: 127), Egan (2015) and Strayhorn (2014: 62) mentioned another challenge, namely that institutions will have to pay more attention to the skills of the academic advisors and, if need be, will have to provide adequate training to academic advisors. If an institution decides to increase the number of advisors, there will be costs involved in terms of salaries and training. Furthermore, institutions will have to handpick advisors, and may have to lure them away from their current type of work, if the institution was to employ faculty specific advisors. In addition, for Lowenstein (2015: 129) skills development for this kind of advising in both faculty advisors requires effort on advisors and a commitment of resources by institutions. The commitment of institutions to provide resources, as suggested by Darling (2015: 96), are time consuming and also involve cost as it entails that institutions use technology to track students in need of academic support services. This is furthermore associated with continuous communication and timeous intervention with regard to at risk students, particularly if the institution does not have designated advisors to fulfil this task.

## **5.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter presented, analysed and interpreted data in terms of the study objectives. The chapter presented data that attempted to verify and highlight the need to improve academic support to students in UAPs. In this research study, the challenges that the students' experienced were addressed. The following challenges were addressed,

namely scarce tutoring assistance; lack of peer support programmes; inadequate IT support; segregation/stigmatisation; inadequate academic advising support; and an invisible learning assistance support centre. These areas were categorised as inadequate and hindering the learning process, and therefore were considered significant and critical components of the strategy.

Furthermore, the data was analysed and interpreted in relation to the conditions conducive for the implementation of the suggested strategy to improve academic support. In this regard, attention focused on the learning assistance support centre as a strategy and as a space that offers the following support, namely mentoring; tutoring; peer learning; writing support; and academic advising. The shortcomings of the best practices were discussed included dependence, boundaries, time consuming and costly, expensive and discriminative, self-responsibility, capacity, reluctance, and increasing the number of advisors. Finally, conclusions were made based on the data analysis and interpretation of data, which led to the recommendations. The next chapter will provide the synopsis, conclusion and recommendations for improving academic support of students in university access programmes.

## **CHAPTER 6 : SYNOPSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING ACADEMIC SUPPORT OF UAP STUDENTS**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

This study on the development and implementation of a strategy to improve academic support of first-year UAP students was an attempt to contribute towards equal access to and distribution of resources among campuses. It also aimed to encourage HEIs that offer access programmes and the co-researchers to see the value of collaborative learning and of enhanced support. Therefore, this chapter presents the research findings and the recommendations, which were also aimed at enhancing academic support and guiding similar studies.

Additionally, the purpose was also to improve the academic support that will potentially contribute towards students easier adapting to life at university, progressing to the next academic level and ensuring a smooth transition to the mainstream. As one of the ethical considerations, the study acknowledged the continuing challenges experienced by students in the programme to date. Therefore, the study investigated the challenges that UAP students experienced and explored possible strategies that would enhance and avail resources that currently are insufficient, rare and limited.

### **6.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

Although the number of students accessing higher education increases, the challenges remain. This study aimed to develop a strategy to assist in improving the academic support of students in UAPs. The strategy was developed by responding to and addressing the challenges that UAP students experienced. It seems as if not much research has been done on this topic in the South African context. However, Jones and Lau (2010), Bathmaker (2016), Hlalele and Alexander (2012), and Karp *et al.* (2010) seem to have identified similar problems, and suggested the need to improve academic support. Hlalele (2010: 99), identified that students experience unequal distribution of academic support, among other challenges.

Access programmes have gained much attention and support globally, but under different names. Some refer to access programmes as widening participation, while others call it academic development (AD) or foundation programme. This also indicates that not only South Africa aims to address access programmes in the context of HE, but also the USA, the UK, and Australia. Unfortunately, although these countries all realised the importance of student academic support, they have not all advanced at the same speed. Australia has advanced initiatives aimed at social inclusivity and student academic support, whereas South Africa is still far behind in terms of such initiatives (Levy & Murray, 2005: 130; Karp *et al.*, 2008: 1; & Dillon, 2011: 1481).

Literature reveal that policies are in place to improve and increase access to HE (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). However, in the researcher's view policies that guide access programmes seem unclear. Additionally, the following also needs to be addressed, namely how higher education institutions will retain students, and what students need to succeed academically. For students to progress in their studies, there should not be any form of inequity in academic support, such as mentoring and tutoring, peer support programmes, and IT support. Additionally, preparatory support programmes dealing with segregation of the programme and its students, erecting learning assistance support centres, and improving academic advising services such as faculty specific academic advising, have to be in place.

Discussions with the co-researchers indicated that there is a need to improve academic support in the programme. The co-researchers highlighted the significance of improving academic support as it will enhance learning, which in the end may lead to a smooth transition to the mainstream, and successfully completing mainstream programmes.

The kind of academic support that students are awarded also needs consideration as it influences their academic career towards completing a HE qualification. There seems to be unequal distribution of resources across campuses as UAP students do not have access to the same academic support that mainstream students have. Without access to support services, students might not perform academically as required, which could lead to attrition.

### **6.2.1 Problem statement**

UAP students face a number of challenges, one of which is the unequal distribution of academic support (Hlalele, 2010: 99). Academic support that are available to mainstream students, namely tutorials, learning assistance support centres, academic advising, and structured peer learning assistance, seem rarely to be found at a UAP campus, or if it exists, it is insufficient. Studies such as that of Jones and Lau (2010), Bathmaker (2016), Hlalele and Alexander (2012), and Karp *et al.* (2008) identified a similar problem, and suggested the need to develop a strategy to improve academic support. Wilson-Strydom (2015: 151) posits that people are different in more ways than one, for example, in education institutions, students acquire knowledge differently. Even if all students have access to academic support, they will still perform differently.

The abovementioned differences can affect the ways in which individuals convert available opportunities into achievements. Therefore, Gale and Parker (2014: 740) contested that having access to HE without appropriate support is not an opportunity, and without access to support, students success may be hindered since the students enrolled in this programme are believed to be 'underprepared and under-performing'. Additionally, Wilson-Strydom (2015) suggests that individual differences in HE does not mean inequality, rather it becomes a cause for concern when these differences become inequalities affecting capabilities. Additionally, limited and insufficient access to academic support can potentially affect capabilities.

### **6.2.2 Research question**

What strategy needs to be developed to improve academic support of first-year UAP students?

### **6.2.3 The aim of the study**

The aim of the study was to develop a strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in the UAP.



#### **6.2.4 The objectives of the study**

The following objectives were explored to gain a better understanding of the kind of academic support UAP students need:

- Identify the challenges experienced by students in the UAP.
- Identify best practices to improve the academic support of students in the UAP.
- Evaluate the components of the academic support in the UAP.
- Explore conditions conducive to the implementation of a strategy to improve academic support of students in the UAP.
- Determine possible shortcomings in the strategy to improve academic support in the UAP.

### **6.3 FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This following section provides a synopsis of relevant information on the need to improve academic support of UAP students, and recommendations to improve such services.

#### **6.3.1 Scarcity of tutoring support**

Tutoring and mentoring as best practice can potentially enhance students' learning, enable students to connect the different elements of the learning experience, and foster better understanding of course content. Tutors can also positively influence learning as students can freely express their concerns with the module content, and grow a sense of collegiality. Students can further benefit as tutors provide guidance on an individual basis and group support. Tutoring assistance also enhances student motivation and engagement in that particular module. Therefore, scarcity of tutors and mentors at UAP denies students an opportunity to realise their potential and to succeed in HE (Arendale, 2010: 45; & Peck *et al.*, 2010: 1).

The co-researchers shared their experiences and remarked that tutors and mentors are rare on campus, as discussed in Section 3.2.1.1. The co-researchers indicated that sometimes they lack understanding of text-in-context of a particular module, which was Sociology in this research study. They found it challenging to express their

concerns to the facilitators as they found the facilitators unapproachable. Therefore, having access to tutors and mentors can potentially assist students with the learning experience, and to adapt to the 'foreign' environment (Bathmaker, 2016: 27; & Jones & Lau, 2010: 407).

### **6.3.1.1 Recommendation for tutoring support**

Supplemental support services and the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience discussed in Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 seem to be best practices for addressing scarcity of tutoring and mentoring support. Institutions that offer UAP need to introduce tutoring and mentoring programmes. Drawing from the data gathered in this study, it is evident that students benefit when provided space to ask questions in terms of the module content. It is important that students do not feel threatened in this space, and that they can relate with the tutor and mentor in this space (Karp *et al.*, 2008: 10). The first step will be to assign a mentor to a student so they can discuss general information about the HEI. Additionally, mentors can provide students a sense of collegiality as they (the mentors) can share the challenges that they experienced and how they overcame those challenges. Mentors can play a vital role in helping students realise that they can share the challenges they experience with their entrusted mentors (Briggs *et al.*, 2012: 7; & McFarlane, 2016: 77). In this way, a mentor becomes a tutor (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 5).

Tutors and mentors must preferably be students who are academically one level ahead of those they engage with (Waller *et al.*, 2017: 5). This will help to maintain the student-tutor relationship as they in a sense speak the same language. The same language refers to the tutor and the student not being far apart in terms of academic study, which enables them to understand each other, and share strategies to deal with challenges.

### **6.3.1.2 Shortcomings of tutoring support**

Although literature identified many benefits of student access to mentors and tutors, there are also challenges that must be considered (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 558). In some cases, mentors and tutors may lack clarity of their roles, and experience

challenges in setting boundaries with their mentees. The issue with a lack of clear boundaries is that when students are comfortable with the mentor, they often begin to cross boundaries by revealing personal matters to the mentors, which could potentially distress the mentor and tutor, thereby hinder the effective functioning of such services.

Similarly, during the course of this research study the co-researchers grew comfortable around the researcher and revealed to the researcher information that caused her to distress. Time constraints posed another threat. The research schedule was aligned with the Sociology schedule, which at times caused the researcher and co-researchers to work late. Employing mentors and tutors can also place a financial burden on the institution as these individuals will probably have to be lured from other departments in the institution or from other institutions. Furthermore, since the mentors and tutors will have to travel between campuses their own studies might be affected.

### ***6.3.1.3 Conditions conducive to tutoring support***

Conditions that are conducive to academic success include the availability of mentoring and tutorial programmes on campus. The incoming student can see the value of having access to mentors and tutors. As suggested previously, mentoring and tutoring should preferably be facilitated by senior students who are academically one level ahead of first-year students. These sessions can take place on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, for a period of between six and twelve weeks, and last for anywhere between 30 minutes and two hours. Sessions can be one-on-one with students inside and/or outside of the classroom, or small group discussions. Each mentor/tutor will be responsible for a group of ten to fifteen first-year students. Mentors remain in contact with their groups for the duration of the group's first year of study (Arendale, 2010; Jone & Lau, 2010; & Hall & Collins, n.d).

Furthermore, there are a number of key operational components that must be considered. For example, the program leader recommends mentors/tutors that have appropriate personal qualities such as, effective communication skills, leadership, empathy, and commitment to their studies. The mentor/tutor and students should also be able to maintain a reciprocal relationship.

Data collected during focus group discussions indicate that UAP students see the need for mentors and tutors. The co-researchers indicated that the majority, if not all, students are new to the HE environment, they struggle to understand module language and find it challenging to address questions during assessment. Therefore, having access to tutors on an individual basis will assist students in dealing with challenging subject-related matters.

### **6.3.2 Need for peer support programmes**

One of the challenges that first-year students experience is adapting to the HE environment. These challenges include students struggling to fit in and to relate to the HE culture, having difficulty with time management, struggling with new ways of learning and not easily making new friends. Students can benefit greatly from peer support, as suggested by Briggs *et al.* (2012: 7). A peer network, together with the assistance of tutors and mentors, can award students a space where they can share knowledge. Peer networks provide students an opportunity to socialise and adapt to life at a HEI. Additionally, peer networks can also help students overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness, and enhance a sense of collegiality and agency (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559).

From the data gathered and the implementation of peer learning support in this study, it is clear that the co-researchers benefited greatly from their peers. One co-researcher indicated that sometimes it was difficult to understand the language used in Sociology, but having a peer explain the contents in the co-researcher's own language made it easier to overcome the challenge. Similarly, co-researchers also suggested that because they were provided a space to work together on Sociology, they now find themselves working together in other modules also as they have realised that collaborative learning was beneficial (Gale & Parker 2014: 743; & Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559).

#### **6.3.2.1 Recommendation for peer support programmes**

A peer network programme, as discussed in Section 3.3.4, appears to be best practice to address the need for peer support programmes. UAPs have to provide students a

space where they can meet to socialise and to develop peer networks (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016: 324). Students can be afforded this space by introducing or availing extramural activities on campus. Through these extramural activities, students will be in a position to engage in interaction with other students, share experiences, share knowledge and collaborate in sharing various ways of approaching difficult subject matter (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 564). Furthermore, institutions can avail formal, organised and structured peer support programmes that are incorporated into timetables and facilitated by mentors or tutors (Gale & Parker 2014: 743; & Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: 559).

### **6.3.2.2 Shortcomings of peer support programmes**

The lack of formal, organised and structured peer support programmes denies students many benefits such as opportunities to network where they can communicate, share knowledge and collaborate in sharing different approaches to individual subject matters. Without peer networking spaces, students experience loneliness and struggle to adapt to the foreign environment of the HEI. Without a peer network that allows students to co-create the curriculum and co-grade subject-related matters, students will be unable to support each other as they may not know the other students in the same programme. Therefore, some students find themselves lost in the system due to lack of knowledge, for example, if a student realises that he is struggling with a module, he does not know where to seek help.

Students can benefit greatly from peer networking as they share information and knowledge. During the course of this study, the co-researchers allowed collaborative learning even beyond classes, and indicated that having space to work with their peers proved beneficial in that peers were able to share knowledge that facilitated content understanding. The co-researchers further suggested that working with their peers enabled them to identify challenges in the other modules they are enrolled in, seek assistance and achieve most of their goals.

### **6.3.2.3 Conditions conducive to implement peer support programmes**

Students must be treated as partners in subject-related matters. In other words, students should not just be informed on what needs to be done, but be actively engaged in the co-creation of curricula and co-evaluating or co-grading of individual modules (Speirs *et al.*, 2017). Engaging students in co-creating modules is essential as it can develop students into independent learners. When students are engaged, there is a high probability that they will adapt smoothly to the HE community (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016).

Organising students into study groups (peer support) of five to seven (5-7) students per group seem beneficial for students in understanding course content. Each group must be facilitated by a senior student to stimulate discussion and answer questions. The programme appears to have improved academic performance and retention of students. The programme in most cases was held close to the tests and examination times as this time is seen as best for students to focus on learning. Additionally, because students had started to read the study material in preparation for tests or examinations, students can easily engage during this session and fill in knowledge gaps (Darling, 2015; & Egan, 2015).

Furthermore, during this time, students usually are more familiar with course contents and can engage in discussions. Moreover, the sessions provided co-researchers a space to identify difficult course sections and afforded them the opportunity to pay particular attention to the content that they do not understand. This space enabled collaboration between co-researchers and their peers, who understood the course content, by actively exploring the content which facilitate understanding.

### **6.3.3 Insufficient IT support and training**

There seems to be insufficient IT support and training in HEIs. Students from different backgrounds enter HE, however, it seems as if one group is advantaged above another as all students are expected to use technology from their first day of university, despite some of them never having been introduced to such technology (Hansen & Reich, 2015: 1245). In other words, the students receive the necessary training in using technology (Nelson & Creagh, 2013: 15; & Rawlinson & Willimott, 2016: 41).

The co-researchers stated that some of them have never used a computer until the day they entered university. When the institution expect students to use a computer for assessments purposes it becomes a huge challenge and some students even pay another student to type their assignments and assist with the use of a computer. This situation hinders learning and exacerbate fear of failing due to the co-researchers' inability to optimally utilise a computer (Smith *et al.*, 2015: 22).

#### **6.3.3.1 Recommendation for IT support and training**

The university-based virtual learning environment and blended learning discussed in Sections 3.3.5 and 3.3.6 seem well suited in dealing with insufficient IT support and training. As the use of technology have increased at institutions of learning, particularly HEIs, institutions need to introduce the use of such technology well in advance of students' enrolment. HEIs can also collaborate with schools to train potential students in the use of technology. Similarly, when the use of technology is introduced, institutions should consider that students come from diverse backgrounds, where one student might not have had access nor used technology before, and another student having advanced technological skills. If institutions keep this in mind, there is high probability that they will award all students equal opportunities to access and successfully use technology, which may lead to an improvement in the quality of student learning, adaptation, transition and a successful academic career (Hlalele & Alexander, 2012: 487).

#### **6.3.3.2 Shortcomings in terms of IT support and training**

One of the possible shortcomings in terms of the use of IT in HEIs is that students prefer different ways to study. Some students, especially those with IT experience, feel comfortable in using technology to study, while those without prior exposure to or training in IT might be very uncomfortable at the thought of using IT to study. This also adds to these students being disadvantaged. Moreover, students without prior experience in using IT, might also procrastinate in performing online activities, and might lack self-responsibility for learning, therefore procrastination leads to work piling up and potentially leading to attrition. Some students might feel embarrassed to

mention they are unfamiliar with the use of technology as they fear failure and stigmatisation (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016; & Jones & Lau, 2010).

Institutions, and students, can find access to technology to be a costly endeavour. On the part of the institution, it can be expensive to provide free Wi-Fi to all students as part of their inclusivity strategy. Offering free Wi-Fi implies that the institution will have to employ more staff members to monitor Wi-Fi use, increasing the institution's remuneration expense. Additionally, the institution might have to spend time and money in ensuring that every student is properly equipped to use technology.

### **6.3.3.3 *Conditions conducive to IT support and training***

Universities introduced Blackboard to allow students to create own knowledge, own cognitive understanding of the course content, have a space where they can interact online with peers in order to facilitate growth, and experience the sense of the learning community. The use of Blackboard differs from one institution to the other, e.g. at some institutions, students complete weekly tasks online. At other institutions, students write online tests, for example. Blackboard also offers students a collaborative learning environment with their peers, is a strategy that enable students to overcome loneliness, and an opportunity to negotiate and share learning (Jones & Lau, 2010; & Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

Other positive outcomes in using technology include an improvement in student participation in learning linked to increased student autonomy. Furthermore, students also collaborate in dealing with complex problems relating to the courses they have enrolled for, and this collaboration can either be between student-student or between student-lecturer. The use of technology further allows lecturers to incorporate online material that students need to study before attending the next lecture. Technology thus enables students to personalise learning and maintain autonomy as they can decide when and where they will be able to prepare the material (Im & Kim, 2015).

The co-researchers also highlighted that as students, they were expected to make use of technology to complete some of the assessments. However, the co-researchers emphasised that the use of technology should be introduced at the beginning of the



academic year as some of them have never been exposed to computers before they entered university.

#### **6.3.4 Physical environment and resources**

Most HEIs offer access programmes at a different campus than the mainstream programme. Unfortunately, it seems as if most of these campuses are under-resourced as UAP students do not have access to similar support services as the mainstream students (Arendale, 2010: 65). The following include some of the resources that are limited at the UAP campus, namely tutorials, consultations with facilitators after lectures, adequate training in the use of technology and adequate access to academic advising (Jones & Lau, 2010: 407). Therefore, students view the programme as isolating them from the rest of the student cohort and they experience feelings of loneliness. The isolation and segregation also impact on self-determination that focuses on providing individuals with opportunities that allow them to have control over their lives. Students can experience the rights principle as being unacknowledged, that is the right to beneficial resources.

Additionally, although students have accessed HE, there seems to be some level of exclusion in that UAP students are not given the opportunity to utilise resources that they could benefit from. This furthermore impacts on equity that is supposedly aimed to reduce barriers that translates on negatively impacting on success (Bathmaker, 2016: 27; & Mabila, *et al.*, 2006: 296). The co-researchers also indicated that students were stigmatised in classes, which were supposed to be a safe place, by the facilitators using demeaning language. Lack of good working relationship among the facilitators seemed to be another factor impacting negatively on student learning. This could be linked to segregation because, if campuses were integrated, students could access support services, as soon as they were exposed to demeaning language, to seek assistance that would facilitate and improve their levels of motivation.

##### **6.3.4.1 Recommendation for physical environment and resources**

Collegiality and learning assistance support centres can address the need for a physical environment and resources to improve academic support at the UAP campus,

as presented in Sections 3.3.7 and 3.3.8. HEIs that offer access programmes need to ensure that UAP students have access to the same academic support afforded to mainstream students. Higher education institutions also need to ensure that there is integration among all actors and that every actor plays the role as intended. Successful integration has the potential to overcome injustices and obstacles that prevent some members from participating with others as full members. Extramural activities at a UAP campus, where students can engage, exchange and develop knowledge on subject matter, can also afford students a sense of collegiality.

#### **6.3.4.2 Shortcomings of physical environment and resources**

If all the programmes offered by an institution were to be integrated on one campus, the resources and capacity of the institution might be put under pressure because of the increased number of students. The UAP houses approximately one thousand two hundred students (1200). If campuses were integrated, the current resources available at the mainstream campus might not have the capacity to accommodate all of these students (Jones & Lau, 2010; Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013; & Im & Kim, 2015).

The capacity problem that may arise as a result of the integration of campuses can lead to a situation where students have to wait to access computer labs, for instance, as not all students are in the financial position to buy a laptop or a computer. Therefore, they spent an extensive amount of time waiting in long queues in order to access the available resources (Smith *et al.*, 2015: 22). Unfortunately, this can result in students missing lectures. If students miss lectures, their understanding of module content might be compromised, which can ultimately pose a threat to their successful completion of the specific module (Im & Kim, 2015; & Hubackova & Semradova, 2016).

The co-researchers seemed unhappy with the segregation of campuses as it denied them access to beneficial support services, such as tutors and academic advising, which were available to mainstream students. Additionally, Merton (in Ferrante, 2016 & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015) states that one of the functions of education is equal distribution of resources, therefore, when an institution does not uphold and perform this function it could harm the whole institution (Ferrante, 2016: 160; & Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015: 276).

### **6.3.4.3 Conditions conducive to physical environment and resources**

The language that is used to identify and categorise the students in the access programme tends to stigmatise them. Labelling students based on their level of study and previous performance, leave these students feeling inferior and have a negative impact on their academic performance. These students have been labelled 'at risk students, high-risk students, academically disadvantaged students, and under-prepared students'. It further seems as if access programmes treat individual students rather than addressing the challenges faced by the education system as a whole. Moreover, labelling students as being deficient and inferior stigmatise students and perpetuate the inability of HEIs to increase access with success. The co-researchers also mentioned that their facilitators stigmatised them as they were using demeaning language towards the co-researchers. As a result of this, a number of co-researchers refused to attend lectures and would most likely not be able to progress to the mainstream programme.

For some scholars such as Franklin and Blankenberger (2016) and Hakizimana and Jürgens (2013), the off-campus location of access programmes poses a number of problems, such as the programmes being under-resourced, and students having to travel long distances to campus (Franklin & Blankenberger, 2016). These campuses seem excluded and marginalised in relation to mainstream campuses as the resources available to mainstream students are either not available on the UAP campus or not properly distributed (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013). For example, mainstream campuses offer tutorials to support students in their academic endeavours, however, the same cannot be said of UAPs. The UAP-UFS teaching methodology claims to be resource-based, however, this needs to be investigated because the resources available to mainstream students are rarely available to UAP students on their campus.

Some of the co-researchers indicated that they were aware of the support offered to mainstream students, and were under the impression that the same support would be made available on their campus. However, this seemed not to be the case as very little support was offered at the UAP campus. They further suggested that the institution could address the inequities mentioned by ensuring that all students have access to the same support services.

### **6.3.5 Learning assistance support centre**

Students seem to benefit from services such as essay writing assistance offered by learning assistance support centres (Northall *et al.*, 2016: 27). In this regard, the institution employs experts on the subjects to engage in one-on-one sessions with students. The experts, for example, assist students in understanding the nature of discipline-specific essays as well as theories dealt with in a particular subject (Peck *et al.*, 2010: 6).

Learning assistance support centres provide comprehensive academic enhancement activities outside of the traditional classroom setting (Malthus, 2015). These services include tutoring, study groups, support for special needs students, study skills instruction, writing assistance, math assistance, and computer assistance (Karp *et al.*, 2008; Mills, n.d; & Peck *et al.*, 2010). The designed centres offer services to UAP students and mainstream students. The co-researchers indicated that if they had a learning assistance support centre on campus, they would make use of the services offered because they need assistance in academic matters.

#### **6.3.5.1 Recommendation for a learning assistance support centre**

From the above, it is clear that there is a need for a learning assistance support centre at a designated physical location at the UAP campus. Students can benefit greatly if they have access to support services where they receive the necessary support from discipline-specific experts. Not being able to access support services threaten students' academic performance and progress. Additionally, a learning assistance centre can be viewed as a *one stop shop* as students are able to consult on any of the following services: writing assistance; computer assistance, study skills, tutoring and mentoring, group or peer learning support, etc.

#### **6.3.5.2 Shortcoming of a learning assistance support centre**

As mentioned before, the wide range of support services offered by learning assistance support centres help students realise their potential and overcome disadvantages (Mabila *et al.*, 2005). However, students cannot benefit from these

services if they are unaware that a learning support centre is available. Furthermore, literature suggests that many students lack understanding and association of such support services (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013). The opposite is also true, namely that although students know that a support centre is available, they are reluctant to make use of the services offered for fear of stigmatisation.

During a discussion with the co-researchers, one co-researcher mentioned that others suggested that students who seek help are inferior. The rest of the discussion group indicated that they would not be bothered by what other students say especially if they could obtain the assistance they needed to progress academically and obtain their qualifications. Moreover, building or having a designated building for such services might be costly, as the institution apart from erecting the building, might need trained staff to ensure continuity and sustainability.

#### **6.3.5.3 Conditions conducive to learning assistance support centre**

A learning assistance support centre has to offer a diverse range of support services to students on an individual basis or in group consultations (Karp *et al.*, 2008). Learning assistance support centres can be viewed as a *one stop shop* that house and provide services such as mentoring, tutoring, academic writing (including referencing techniques), peer support, and academic advising programmes (Briggs *et al.*, 2012).

These centres provide additional information and support for students, such as special support programmes where necessary (Im & Kim, 2015; & Peck *et al.*, 2010). The learning assistance support centre can either be centrally located within the institution, in faculties or at departments. It seems as if it is quite easy to find peer writing consultants at such centres as they are post-graduate students working with undergraduates or with their peers. However, despite the usefulness of a learning assistance support centre in student development, if the services are offered only at the mainstream campus, the students at the UAP campus would not benefit at all. The co-researchers remarked that if a learning assistance support centre was available on the UAP campus, many of the students would benefit as the centre provided a wide array of services associated with learning and academic success.

### **6.3.6 Limited access to academic advising**

Having access to an academic advisor has many benefits for students as the advisor can provide the necessary information about what students need to know and to do to become successful in their academic endeavours. This may also foster a sense of belonging. Students can receive guidance in choosing educational courses, and understand what they are studying and why (Karp *et al.*, 2008: 10-16). First-year students entering HEI experience many challenges as this is a completely new environment. One of these challenges is the scientific or academic language that students will have to get used to, and the academic advisor can be of great assistance in this regard (Strayhorn, 2014: 62).

However, the co-researchers complained that they found it challenging to access the academic advisor at the UAP campus. The already bad situation was worsened as there was only one advisor available for approximately one thousand two hundred UAP students. This may be part of the reason some students not even try to access the advisor. Some students rely on fellow students for information, which at times maybe misleading or incorrect (Egan, 2015: 80; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015: 104; & Lowenstein, 2015: 118).

#### **6.3.6.1 Recommendations to improve access to academic advising**

When taking the above in consideration, it seems that there is a need to urgently increase the number of academic advisors at the UAP campus. In Section 3.3.9, it was suggested that best practice would be accessible and unlimited academic advising to the student cohort, despite the campus where they are located. Increasing the number of advisors would provide all students access to all the services offered. To prevent misleading information because different advisors help a student, advisors can each be assigned a specific group of students for that year (Darling, 2015: 96). This would provide continuity in advice and prevent students from being exposed to different advisors should they have follow-up questions on matters that were discussed with another advisor.

Additionally, institutions should employ faculty specific academic advisors to ensure that students acquire relevant and correct faculty specific information (Egan, 2015: 76;

Lowenstein, 2015: 129; & Karp *et al.*, 2008: 13). These advisors would need to have regular consultation with the relevant faculty, for them to attain the latest information to share with students. Advisors should not only consult with individual students, but should also have regular meetings throughout the year with the group of students. Advisors should stay in regular contact with student groups to inform them of any changes and decisions that might affect them.

#### **6.3.6.2 Shortcomings of academic advising**

To ensure that all students consult an academic advisor during the course of their studies, literature suggested that institutions award credits for academic advising, in other words, the institution would have to find ways to fit academic advising into the curricula (Lowenstein, 2015). However, this might prove to be too expensive for some institutions to implement. Students could also find this challenging as it is possible that they would meet a different advisor every time they needed academic advice. This could lead to students receiving misdirected information and a depersonalised relationship with the advisors. Students would also have to repeat everything that was discussed with the previous advisor to the new advisor. This might lead to a situation where students do not achieve the desired results (Karp *et al.*, 2008).

Training academic advisors could also be expensive. Should the institution decide to increase the number of advisors, the institution would also have to ensure that the newly employed advisors have the necessary skills and are adequately trained to perform optimally (Karp *et al.*, 2008). As a result of the increasing number of students at university, time could become a threat as advisors might find themselves with a huge number of cases that should be attended to. Similarly, advisors might not have enough time to spend per case, which consequently could impact on students' meaningful appreciation of general education (Egan, 2015). As UAPs seem to be under-resourced, the available resources might be under threat as academic advising involves hard work, time, energy and attention.

### **6.3.6.3 *Conditions conducive to academic advising***

Upon enrolment at HEIs, students are bombarded with a lot of information, especially during orientation week. Academic advisors could play a significant role here as they (advisors) could explain to first-years what the curriculum consists of, and clarify and suggest fields of study that students can enrol for to connect their (students) values, beliefs, and general education. Academic advisors could also assist students to see the alignment of individual courses with program goals and help students to align these courses with their personal goals. This would enable students to see the connection between the curriculum and personal goals and values (Darling, 2015; Egan, 2015; & Lowenstein, 2015).

Academic advisors should also provide the necessary information about student engagement and performance and, where deemed necessary, facilitate timely interventions with their students during the semester. In other words, the advisor should stay in contact with students throughout the year. Additionally, at first year level, the academic advisor should guide students in carefully choosing general education courses. In the case of UAP students, due to limited space available in the programme, the academic advisor guide students in choosing modules to enrol for during their access year.

As a result of the limited space in UAPs, students have been advised to enrol in another faculty even though it is not their desire. For example, if a student applied to study in the Education faculty, but could not enrol due to limited space in that programme, the student seems to be advised to enrol with another faculty, such as Humanities, with the assurance that he can enrol for his preferred programme at the beginning of the following year. However, the co-researchers complained that they were 'misdirected' or 'mislead' into enrolling in a specific faculty under false pretence that they will enrol for their preferred programme in another faculty the following year. Therefore, students should be assigned a faculty specific advisor with whom they can engage for the duration of the year at the UAP campus.



#### **6.4 EVIDENCE THAT THE STRATEGY WAS EFFECTIVE**

In Cycle 2, phase 1, a schedule that suited everybody was agreed to and the implementation of the suggested strategy to improve academic support in the UAP was also discussed.

During Phase 2 of the study, the strategy that was suggested in Cycle 2, phase 1 (discussed in Section 4.6.1.2) was implemented. In this phase, the researcher was responsible for facilitating the implementation of the strategy. Before the implementation of the strategy, the researcher and co-researchers set goals that they wanted to achieve, for example, the co-researchers indicated that they wanted to understand the module in question and be able to promote the module by the end of the semester in 2019. Promoting a module means that a student performed well enough in all the assignments and assessments that he does not need to write the examination. Students have to obtain a semester mark of 70% or higher to promote a module.

The strategy to improve academic advising included tutorial sessions, peer learning sessions, exercises to improve writing skills and skills in using technology, such as Internet searches to gather information sessions. During these sessions, the co-researchers were responsible to identify module content they found challenging. The researcher together with the co-researchers collaborated in formulating possible questions and answers, practising how to take notes during lectures, and sharing study techniques. The researcher facilitated peer learning, which formed part of the tutorial sessions aimed at assisting the co-researchers in preparing for tests. A reflection session was scheduled to take place once the test was written so that the co-researchers could give feedback on their performance and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. The co-researchers initiated the writing sessions because they had to compile and submit an assignment. The researcher and co-researchers collectively worked on various topics to enable the co-researchers to share ideas on a variety of topics. Other academic matters that were dealt with in these writing sessions included referencing, paragraph construction, application of theoretical perspective, using a computer to type assignments, and preparing Powerpoint presentations. Individual groups at a later stage consulted with the researcher on the assignment that was submitted. The consultation session was in the

form of supervisor-students relationship, in other words, the co-researchers had to compile the assignment and suggestions were made based on their written work.

During the last meeting between the researcher and the co-researchers, they indicated that the strategy was successful, as they have all succeeded in promoting the module with scores between 78% and 90%. Furthermore, other than being overwhelmed with promoting the module, the co-researchers also seemed satisfied and confident that their writing skills had improved and they were able to compile assignments. The co-researchers indicated that they passed all assessments (tests, assignments and presentations), but seemed to be more impressed with their performance in assignments and presentations. They further attested that they have performed better in the second semester than the first semester. Their academic writing skill has improved and that has translated into their other modules. They inferred that they used the skills that were shared during this study and as part of academic advising, to perform better in other modules. The co-researchers further posited that other than an improved academic performance, they also experienced improvement in confidence, understanding of module content, and engagement in formal classes. They suggested that the same support be extended to the incoming UAP students, and co-researchers volunteered to assist the researcher in this regard should it be necessary.

## **6.5 METHODOLOGY THAT CONTRIBUTED TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGY**

The implementation of the identified appropriate strategy was put into action. The process was collaborative in nature as all actors played a significant role in identifying the problem. The process was collaborative also because all actors contributed in the planning, implementation and reflection phases of the strategy.

### **6.5.1 Planning**

The researcher and co-researchers collaborated in the planning process of the research. In this study, all the actors had significant roles to play.

### **6.5.1.1 Findings**

The researcher and co-researchers collaborated in deciding how the study was to be conducted. Additionally, as partners they collaboratively decided on what would be the most appropriate type of study and the key stages in this process. The planning process focused on action techniques to be put in practice and the time frame of each phase of the research. The co-researchers' role was significant in that revealing their experiences helped constitute reality, thus, without their contributions, the study would not be completed.

The co-researchers collaborated with the researcher in developing the rules and regulations guiding the sessions and the meetings. This was essential because the co-researchers had to determine when they would be available. The co-researchers suggested that time and module content need attention. They suggested dates and a strategy that could contribute towards successful completion of the module.

For the purpose of this study, the co-researchers were viewed as equals as they provided insightful information into their world, thereby allowing the researcher not just to see them as the researched but as partners, and to see the world through their eyes. As a researcher, during the planning process, it was significant that the researcher brought own assumptions to the surface, without masking and later deploying such underneath the methodological artifice of science. The researcher, as a former UAP student, shared the challenges that she experienced. Thereby allowing co-researchers realise that similar challenge continue to exist. Total involvement of co-researchers was vital as the researcher's approach was to empower and provide space where the 'muted' speakers join in the discussion on social issues that affected them.

### **6.5.1.2 Recommendations**

Institutions that offer access programmes should make available a learning assistance support centre, where students could access academic support services associated with success. These services should be available at the campus where the students attend lectures. Additionally, when services are accessible, students will become comfortable making use of these services. In this study, the writing centre was the

space where the co-researchers came to consult the researcher on matters relating to Sociology.

The co-researchers were responsible for identifying challenging subject matter and found it beneficial that the researcher could assist with these matters. The researcher played the roles of mentor and tutor, which benefited the co-researchers as they could gain clarity and understanding. From the above, it is clear that students benefit from support services and institutions need to afford students such services.

## **6.5.2 Implementation**

The strategy suggested in collaboration with the co-researchers was put into practice.

### **6.5.2.1 Findings**

The co-researchers were the primary driving force behind the implementation of the strategy. They collaboratively decided which issues needed immediate attention. They had to prioritise the activities and suggested what the researcher could do to assist in dealing with such matters. Co-researchers as students are in the position to actively learn to make connections between their own lived conditions, and making reality that has occurred. Therefore, through this learning process, the co-researchers realised the possibility that their contribution in this study might lead to a new reality for UAP students, thereby enabling regenerative history.

The working strategy took the form of a learning assistance support centre with mentoring and tutoring sessions, peer support, and writing sessions. During these sessions, the co-researchers had to attend lectures by the facilitators in order to attain information and get clarity on the subject matter. However, in some cases the co-researchers indicated that certain matters were still unclear and they lacked understanding. Due to the facilitators being unapproachable, the co-researchers were unable to gain clarity on these matters, hence the reason for the mentoring and tutoring sessions.

Peer support was an essential part of the mentoring and tutoring sessions as the researcher saw a need for the co-researchers to work together in discussing

challenging module matters. The researcher also realised that there were certain sections of modules that some understood better than others, and they could then explain these sections to their peers. The researcher engaged in these discussions to ensure that all were going according to plan and intervened when necessary. To aid learning and planning, the co-researchers were responsible for formulating activities, predicting test or examination questions, and ways to answer such questions.

The co-researchers indicated that they needed assistance in assignment writing. They suggested dates and times for consultations with the researcher. During these sessions, matters such as writing an introduction, constructing a paragraph, searching for information on the Internet, and referencing techniques were addressed.

#### **6.5.2.2 Recommendation**

Students need a space where they can access academic support on subject related matters. Therefore, if the UFS, for example, does not find it feasible to erect a building to house all these services, CTL can make its services available at the UAP campus of the UFS. The benefits of availability and accessibility of support services were discussed in detail in Section 3.4.2.2.

#### **6.5.3 Facilitating**

It was significant that the researcher was available for all the meetings and discussions with the co-researchers. This was to ensure that the suggested strategy was implemented and to monitor the results.

##### **6.5.3.1 Findings**

During this phase, the co-researchers worked collaboratively to achieve the desired goals. The presence of the researcher was to ensure that the co-researchers were really working, and to intervene should the co-researchers not reach consensus. The researcher approached this process with the view that the co-researchers' acts of knowing needed stimulation in their own being, experiences, needs and destinies.

Hence, at the beginning of the implementation phase of the strategy, the researcher suggested that the co-researchers formulate a plan of action according to their goals.

#### **6.5.3.2 Recommendation**

During the implementation phase of the strategy, the facilitator needs to uphold, and be aware of personal biases and assumptions that might interfere with the process of learning, particularly for the co-researchers.

The researcher acted as facilitator, not of the modules, but of the implementation of the strategy. In order to avoid confusion, the researcher built on the knowledge that the co-researchers gained during their official lectures.

#### **6.5.4 Reflecting**

Within PAR processes, reflection on the implemented strategy is significant. The reflection phase in the current research study entailed discussions on the results of the implemented strategy, reviewing co-researchers' experiences, and reflecting on the nature of the research with co-researchers on an ongoing basis.

##### **6.5.4.1 Findings**

Reflection was essential as it provided the researcher and co-researchers an opportunity to collaborate in enhancing the strategy for future implementation purposes. This was to determine whether the desired goal was achieved, particularly the co-researchers' goal. This phase also provided the co-researchers an opportunity to suggest future changes, and articulate what was effective and what not. This will possibly lead to students being change agents.

The co-researcher had the opportunity to reflect on the strategy, which consisted of mentoring and tutoring, peer learning or support, writing sessions, and whether they have achieved their goal. In their examination of the strategy, they displayed and demonstrated appreciation as they have all achieved their goal, namely to promote Sociology at the end of the second semester. The co-researchers declared that all of

them obtained a final mark ranging between 75-91 % for the specific module. They further highlighted that when students have support, they are more likely to excel and enjoy university life.

#### **6.5.4.2 Recommendation**

Institutions of higher education must provide a supportive environment to their students, and ensure availability and accessibility of such services on various campuses. Through these kinds of services, students can realise their potential, gain a sense of belonging, and experience sustained progression. Therefore, the UAP needs to put in place mechanisms and strategies to enhance and de-stigmatise their own, and afford them a sense of agency and belonging.

## **6.6 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

This study has found that the aim and objectives of the development of a strategy to improve academic support in the UAP as a focal point were crucial throughout its development and implementation processes. The co-researchers, as the voice of the entire programme, identified and demonstrated the need to improve academic support for UAP students.

It can thus be concluded that the leaders and stakeholders of the institution or the UAP need to take student needs into consideration and investigate mechanisms to foster a comfortable, just, accommodating, and supportive environment that will facilitate individual and academic development. Furthermore, the institution not only need to award space, but also engage with and encourage students, to be change catalysts.

Based on the above findings and recommendations, it is clear that UAPs need to advocate, adapt, collaborate, and make available this proposed strategy to enhance student involvement, participation, planning, engagement and motivation associated with personal well-being and academic success.

## 6.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A number of limitations and challenges were experienced during the course of this study. Some students suggested that while the researcher was inviting participants for the study, UAP facilitators indirectly advised students against participation. Students were indirectly informed that during research processes, students are exploited, therefore some students decided not take part in the research study.

Other challenges included mistrust between co-researchers and fear of victimisation. It was a challenge in the sense that some co-researchers wanted to share some information during discussions, but decided to withhold such information. Other co-researchers indicated that they had to lie to friends about their whereabouts because they were uncomfortable with the thought that their facilitators may discover that they are getting help elsewhere.

Venue allocation also posed a challenge as the researcher was informed that she could not be allocated a venue within the university vicinity as the study was personal and not related to the students or her work.

There was a time limit regarding the implementation of the strategy to improve academic support. The research schedule had to be aligned with the schedule of the specific module, and as the students were also committed to their other modules, the sessions were extended and often held after hours.

The researcher intended to have a working space or venue where students could sit comfortably while working, have activities printed and stationary to use during sessions. Unfortunately, the researcher could not find a sponsor. Therefore, lack of funding can also be a limitation.

The co-researchers also had other expectations from the researcher. One particular incident that stood out happened after the students had been informed that one faculty has decided not to admit students from any other faculty. The co-researchers suggested that the researcher negotiate on their behalf. However, the researcher told them that this situation was out of the researcher's scope of work, and that it was the academic advisor's responsibility. A meeting was scheduled between him and some of the co-researchers to discuss the matter.



## **6.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The above-mentioned limitations of the study emphasise the need for further research into UAPs and to increase the number of co-researchers. Seemingly, there is limited research conducted on the topic, therefore more scholars need to engage in order to provide a clearer picture and better understanding of UAPs and its academic support services. Furthermore, the researcher recommends using more diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks in future studies on the topic. Further research on the issues of identity and agency, that is to understand how UAP students position (identity and agency) themselves within the institution of higher learning, must also be conducted. Furthermore, there seems to be limited information on critical aspects in terms of how students understand access to UAP and HEIs.

It is also important that more research be conducted on UAP students' academic career beyond UAP, the kind of support that is available and accessible, if students utilise the support that they did not have at the UAP campus, and students' general perception of support services. In addition, during the course of this study, themes were identified that also need to be addressed, namely facilitators lacking team work and communication skills, and more research on their use of demeaning language towards students on campus. These themes could potentially link to retention, success, and attrition in HEIs.

## **6.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The findings were discussed in line with the study's aim and objectives, and provided insightful information on the study as a whole. Findings mostly confirmed what literature deposited, and suggest that challenges can be overcome and new mechanisms be put in place. The defining principle in the findings is that when individuals co-exist and function interdependently, it can lead to smooth functioning of the whole system, and the whole system being in a state of equilibrium.

Furthermore, the processes that were followed in this study, particularly functionalism and PAR, made it possible for all parties involved to see their value as co-researchers and that their contribution could drive change within the institution. Their participation in the research study could also enhance their academic performance. The principles

of PAR led to all parties being equals. Taking the above into consideration, it was plausible to affirm that the strategy was implementable, adaptable and sustainable in similar situations.

## **6.10 CONCLUSION**

Chapter 1 introduced the study by providing background knowledge and the extent of the need to improve academic support in UAPs. The need to improve academic support is justified by the challenges that students experienced. A discussion of the strategy to improve academic support was based on the literature consulted. Additionally, functionalism as the theoretical framework formed the basis of the strategy to address the identified challenges. Furthermore, the PAR processes followed in this study were discussed and CDA was described.

Chapter 2 presented functionalism as the theoretical framework that informed the study. This discussion included the evolution, historical origin and background of functionalism in an effort to enhance understanding of the theory and its relevance to address and respond to the objectives of this study. Functionalism allowed better understanding of the challenges that UAP students experienced and facilitated collaborative development of the strategy.

Chapter 3 discussed literature related to the objectives of the study, namely to identify the challenges experienced by students in the UAP, to identify best practices in improving academic support. Furthermore, to evaluate the components of academic support in the UAP, to identify conditions to enhance the implementation of the strategy, and to identify the shortcomings of best practices to improve academic support in the UAP. Literature provided information that justified the need to improve academic support. Additionally, the following challenges experienced by UAP students were determined, namely scarcity of tutoring assistance, a need for structured and organised peer learning programmes, insufficient IT training and support, segregation of campuses, invisible learning assistance support centres, and limited academic advising. These aspects paved the way to develop best practices and a strategy to improve academic support of UAP students.

Chapter 4 discussed the implementation of PAR in research studies. This chapter outlined the design of the strategy, and discussed PAR methodology with reference to the cycles and phases employed in the research study. It was done in this manner as the cycles and phases distinguish PAR from other related research approaches.

The researcher and co-researchers, as participants of the study were profiled and the data collection procedures discussed. FAI and CDA were discussed in terms of data generation and data analysis, and contributed towards knowledge creation.

Chapter 5 presented, analysed and interpreted data in terms of the objectives of the study. Data was used to verify and highlight the need to improve academic support in the UAP. Consequently, the challenges identified also verified the need to improve academic support. These challenges were considered significant and critical components of the strategy. Furthermore, data analysis and interpretation facilitated the determination of conditions conducive to the implementation of the strategy. Additionally, based on the analysed and interpreted data, conclusions were made that consequently led to the recommendations.

Chapter 6 discussed the findings in line with the aims and objectives of this research study. The findings brought to light insightful information on the study as a whole as the findings seem to confirm what literature deposited. These findings indicate that challenges can be overcome through the use of best practices. Furthermore, the findings have shown that for an institution to be viewed as in a state of equilibrium, individuals need to co-exist and function interdependently.

# CHAPTER 7 : PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE STRATEGY TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT OF UAP STUDENTS

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

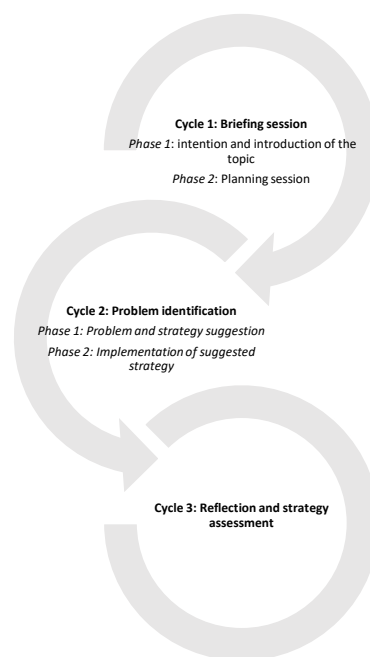
A strategy in widening participation is defined as the activity that seeks to improve access to university, and participation of a wider range of students at university (Budd, 2017: 111)., This activity is utilised as a mechanism to alleviate low representation of marginalised social groups (Msigwa, 2016: 547). Therefore, in this study, strategy refers to a learning assistance support centre that includes access to academic support with the aim for success and enabling transition, to facilitate qualification attainment. This strategy contributes a vital basis to a space that recognises students and stakeholders as equal and valued partners in its development with the aim to improve academic support deemed necessary for adaptation to, success, and transition in HE thereof. Therefore, students and other stakeholders as equal and valued partners need to be involved in the development and adaptation of the strategy, which will facilitate ownership and involvement.

As stated earlier, the aim of the strategy is to improve academic support of students in the UAP to ensure that students are well adapted to university life, succeed in their studies, and a smooth transition to mainstream is maintained. This aim seems to be in line with the principles of functionalism, namely that the whole society plays a vital role in the continued existence of such society and to maintain equilibrium. Therefore, functionalism established that no individual can exist on his own, as we all need each other for us to thrive. From a functionalist view, each individual within a society plays a role, and each role contributes to the whole (Benokraitis, 2016: 14; & Ferrante, 2013: 31; 2016: 28). If an institution fails and does not perform its function, that will likely lead to disruption of the whole, which translates to a dysfunctional and unstable society. PAR principles seem in line with the theoretical framework and the aim of this study as PAR aims to improve the quality of people's lives by addressing social problems that constrain and repress the lives of students and educators (Creswell, 2012: 582). Additionally, the purpose of PAR is emancipatory and challenges unproductive ways of working, it is also transformational (Ary *et al.*, 2010: 515) and focuses on improving

the quality of services by means of problem solving (Marincowitz, 2003: 595), which seem evident in the UAP.

The developed strategy entails sustenance of academic support, training and facilitation, student agency, interconnecting programme, mobile and online learning, interacted learning, collective sharing, academic support and advising support as critical elements that will enable implementation and success. Therefore, with the components mentioned, it is essential to illustrate the PAR process followed in this study. Thereafter, an illustration of steps that guided the development of the strategy, discussed in Chapter 5, will be presented.

## 7.2 THE PAR PROCESS FOLLOWED IN THIS STUDY



### 7.2.1 Cycle 1: Briefing session

In this cycle, it was vital that the participants had a clear understanding of the topic and the intention of the study. The cycle consisted of two phases, the first phase comprised the introduction of the topic and the intention of the study. The planning took place during the second phase.

### **7.2.1.1 Phase 1: Introduction of the topic and intention of the study**

In this phase, the researcher and co-researchers had a meeting with the purpose to introduce the topic and brief the co-researchers on the topic of the research study. The researcher also provided clarity and answered all the questions in an effort to enhance the co-researchers' understanding of the research problem. The researcher also briefed the co-researchers of the purpose and the aim of the study.

During this phase, the discussion was based on the following:

- 1) The researcher introduced herself to the co-researchers and stated her intention with the research study and how the institution might be involved. The topic was also introduced.
- 2) Co-researchers interested in participating in this research study were provided with letters explaining the study, and consent forms which they had to sign and return to the researcher should they decide to participate. The researcher suggested that the co-researchers take the letter home, so that they can make an informed decision whether or not to participate without feeling forced to do so.
- 3) The researcher explained the aim and objectives of the research study.
- 4) The issues of ethical considerations were articulated, namely that the identity and responses of the co-researchers would only be known to the research team (the researcher, the co-researchers, and if need be, the researcher's supervisors). This is in line with ethical considerations in conforming to confidentiality and anonymity of their participation to non-participants. Due to the nature of this study, following PAR, and discussions being held in a focus group manner, the responses were transcribed verbatim using pseudonyms.
- 5) During the discussion, it was also indicated that the co-researchers were partners in the study and that the researcher and the co-researchers were all in control of the process. At the end of this phase, a date for the planning session was determined. However, should the co-researchers see a need to adjust the set schedule or reschedule a meeting, there needs to be communication to the researcher, with a new proposed date for the meeting.

### **7.2.1.2 Phase 2: Planning session**

During this meeting, the second of the research process, the co-researchers had to submit their signed consent forms. The researcher decided that they should submit the forms toward the end of the meeting to ensure that all their questions were answered before they agree to participate. During this meeting, the researcher and co-researchers reflected on the previous meeting, which was the briefing session. This was done to allow the co-researchers a further opportunity to ask questions if they still had some concerns regarding participation in the research project. After the question and answer session, the co-researchers submitted the signed consent form. Those who decided not to participate but were still present in this session were excused from the meeting so that the planning can go ahead.

A schedule for the next meeting was decided upon. At the beginning of this session, the researcher and co-researchers collaborated in establishing rules and regulations to guide the sessions. This will be discussed later in this chapter. It was in this meeting where the co-researchers also consented to voice record the discussions of the follow-up scheduled meetings as a way to capture the data accurately. Furthermore, it was articulated and the co-researchers assured that the generated data would be used for analysis purposes only. Additionally, the co-researchers were assured that no person outside of the focus group would have access to the recordings, which would be stored in a safe place for the duration of the research project, and be discarded at a later stage.

## **7.2.2 Cycle 2: Problem identification**

### **7.2.2.1 Phase 1: Problem identification and strategy suggestions**

In this phase, the co-researchers in a group setting identified the problems they experienced in the UAP. It is significant to mention that before the discussion commenced, the rules and regulations set in Cycle 1, phase 2, were reiterated. A focus group discussion was held in an effort to answer the research question and to address the objectives of the study. The following questions were addressed:

- 1) What challenges have you experienced in UAP?
- 2) What challenges have you experienced in Sociology?

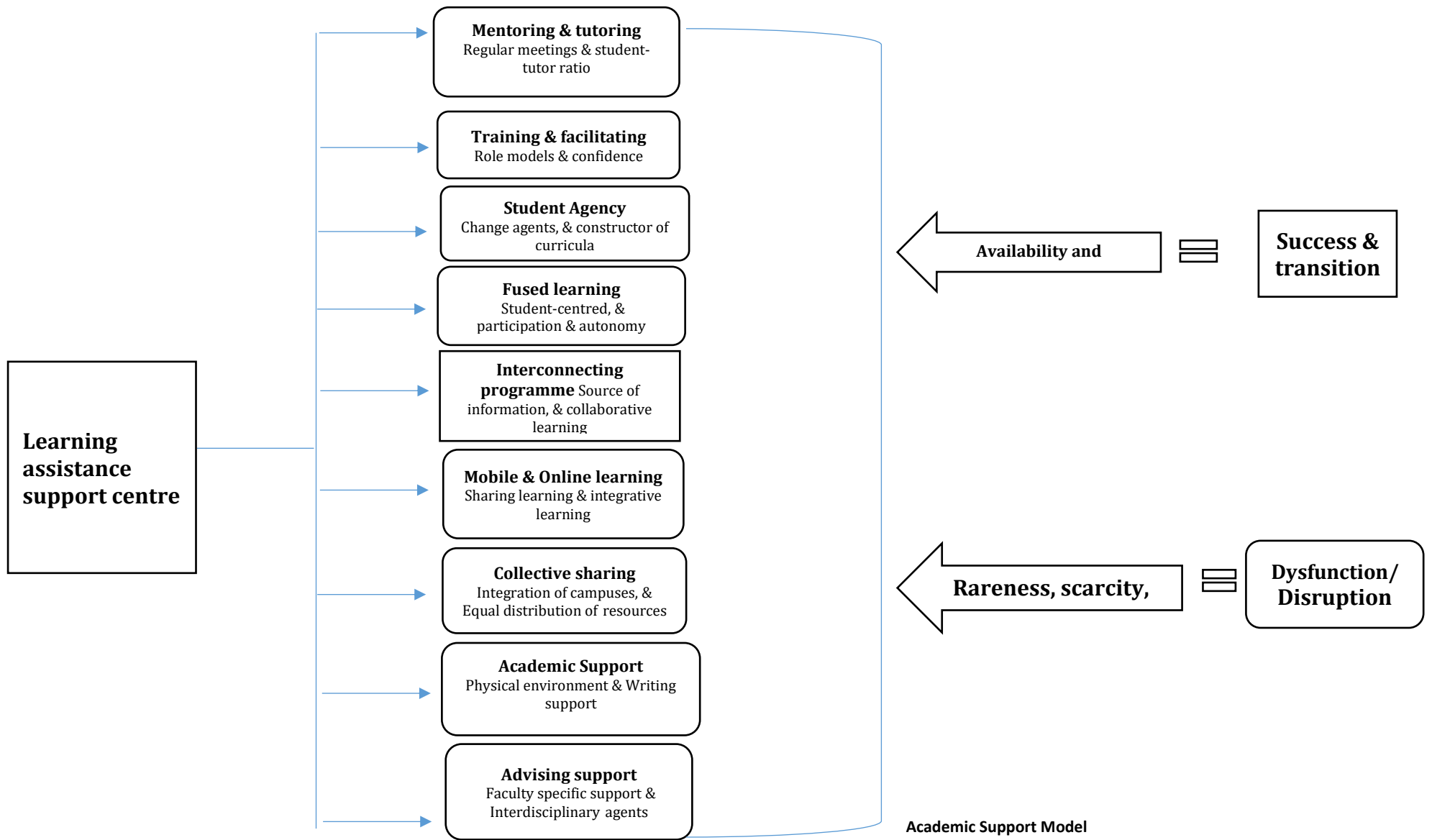
- 3) What kind of academic support would you say is available at UAP campus?
- 4) In your view, is academic support at UAP adequate?
- 5) What should UAP do to improve academic support of students and strategy?
- 6) What conducive conditions conducive to academic support would you suggest UAP put in place?
- 7) What are the possible shortcomings associated with the suggested strategy this session also that the co-researchers suggested a strategy to improve academic support in the UAP? They also had to suggest possible shortcomings associated with the strategy.

The FAI technique was used to initiate and conduct discussions as it provided co-researchers freedom to speak (Nkonyane, 2014: 18). Therefore, using this technique allows the co-researchers to disclose more relevant information than when a structured questionnaire is used (Nkonyane, 2014: 18). Furthermore, because FAI is non-directive, it provided the co-researchers space to intervene and for the researcher to respond flexibly and sensitively. The technique was useful in determining the true feelings and views of the co-researchers (Mahlomaholo, 2009: 228). At the end of this session, the co-researchers confirmed and approved the set schedule suggested in Cycle 1, phase 2.

### **7.2.2.2 Phase 2: Implementation of the suggested strategy**

In this phase, the strategy suggested in Cycle 2, phase 1, was put into practice, and the researcher took the role of facilitator in the implementation of the strategy. The strategy was in the form of learning assistance support centre, where the services provided included mentoring and tutorial sessions, peer learning, writing sessions, ICT training, and presentation preparation sessions (see the detailed discussion in Section 4.6.1.2). These sessions were intended to assist the co-researchers in their preparation for assessments. Furthermore, it was significant to have a reflection session once the co-researchers received feedback on their assessment. This was to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy and to suggest and implement adjustments where necessary.





Strategy above was discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

### 7.2.3 Cycle 3: Reflection

Table 7.1: Strategy assessment

Strategy	Useful/need improvement/not useful	Suggestions
Mentoring and Tutoring sessions		
Writing sessions		
Presentation sessions		

Co-researchers assessed the implementation of the strategy by completing the above table in order to determine the effectiveness of the strategy (see Section 4.6.1.3).

## 7.3 THE NEED TO DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN UAP

There seemed to be numerous best practices proven as effective in providing academic support to university students. However, availability and implementation of such practices appear to be rare at UAP campuses. Therefore, it was vital to develop a strategy to improve academic support in the UAP. The development of the strategy was based on the challenges that the students experienced, and to respond to the first objective of this study. The following challenges were identified:

- Inequities in academic support
  - scarcity of tutoring assistance,
  - need for structured and organised peer learning programmes, and
  - insufficient IT training and support.
- Preparatory support programmes
  - segregation of campuses,
  - microscopic learning assistance support centre, and
  - limited academic advising.

Therefore, the identification of the challenges paved the way to identify best practices, thereby facilitating the development of the strategy.

#### **7.4 RULES AND REGULATIONS GUIDING DISCUSSIONS**

It was vital that rules and regulations to guide the meetings were outlined from the onset. This was to ensure that there was order, and would translate to stability during discussions (detailed rules and regulation provided in Section 4.6.1.1).

- **Punctuality** – being on time for sessions.
- **Attendance** – attendance of all formal classes, sessions to clarify and do activities. The sessions do not substitute lectures.
- **Take responsibility and communicate** –responsibility to identify challenging parts of the work, compile notes, and need for clarity. Communicate suggestions to change schedule.
- **Participation** – voluntary.
- **Respect for individual member** – support each other.
- **Confidentiality** – no discussion with anyone who is not part of the project.

#### **7.5 SUMMARY**

The strategy developed seem effective in ensuring and improving academic support of UAP students. The development of this strategy or model did not take place without the co-researchers contributions. The strategy was successfully implemented as it provided the desired outcomes. During the problem identification and strategy suggestion cycles and phases, the co-researchers set goals they aspired to achieve at the end of the semester. They achieved their goals and therefor the strategy seems effective in the context of a UAP at the University of the Free State in South Africa. For the strategy to be successfully implemented at other settings, adjustments may have to be made to align the strategy with specific goals. Additionally, a number of shortcomings were identified during the implementation of the strategy, and these were discussed in Section 5.6. Furthermore, the strategy is illustrated in detail in Section 7.2.2.2 and discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

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# APPENDICE 1: UFS ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER OF APPROVAL



Faculty of Education

10-Jun-2018

Dear Mrs Lerato Sekonyela

**Ethics Clearance: A strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in the University Access Programme.**

Principal Investigator: Mrs Lerato Sekonyela

Department: School of Higher Education Studies (Bloemfontein Campus)

### APPLICATION APPROVED

With reference to your application for ethical clearance with the Faculty of Education, I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Ethics Board of the faculty that you have been granted ethical clearance for your research.

Your ethical clearance number, to be used in all correspondence is: **UFS-HSD2017/1483**

This ethical clearance number is valid for research conducted for one year from issuance. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension.

We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure we are kept up to date with your progress and any ethical implications that may arise.

Thank you for submitting this proposal for ethical clearance and we wish you every success with your research.

Yours faithfully



Prof. MM Mokhele Makgalwa  
Chairperson: Ethics Committee

Education Ethics Committee  
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## APPENDICE 2: GATEKEEPING APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF THE  
FREE STATE  
UNIBESITHI VAN DIE  
AFRIKASTRAAT  
MUNICIPIALITY  
FRIDATATA



Office of the Vice-Rector: Research and Internationalisation  
Kantoor van die Visektor: Navorsing en Internasionalisering

29-Aug-2018

Dear Applicant

### UFS AUTHORITIES APPROVAL

Research Project Title:

**A strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in the University Access Programme.**

This letter serves as confirmation that your request to collect data from students and/or staff members at the University of the Free State for your research project has been approved.

Kind Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RC Withuhn', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

**PROF RC WITTHUHN  
VICE-RECTOR: RESEARCH & INTERNATIONALISATION  
CHAIR: SENATE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

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# APPENDICE 3: UFS ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

1



22 August 2018

Dear Mrs Lerato Sekonyela

## Student Affairs Research Committee: Study approval and registration

With reference to your application for approval by registration with the Student Affairs (SA) Research Desk, I am pleased to report that approval has been granted for your study to engage the student population for the purposes of the research.

Your study is registered with the Student Affairs Research Desk for its full duration. The research desk is appointed to offer you support in further detailing access to and data collection among students.

Kindly note that it is required that you submit the findings of the above research to the Research Desk upon completion of the study. This can be in the form of a short report or another suitable format.

Please do not hesitate to contact Miss Godi Rogers, with further queries or requests for support.

Yours sincerely,

**P Ngolombane**  
**Dean: Student Affairs**

CC: Miss C Rogers

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## **APPENDICE 4: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY**

Dear Research Participants

### **REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH IN YOUR CAPACITY AS A UAP STUDENT IN A SPECIFIC SUBJECT AREA**

I kindly request your participation in the study described below. I am a PhD candidate at the University of the Free State at the Department of Education. As part of the requirements for this degree, I have to submit a dissertation. The study aims to develop a strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in a university access programme.

I therefore request you to participate in the study based on the information that you are currently registered UAP-UFS students, registered in Faculty of Humanities, with Sociology as a major module.

It is important that you as the participant for the study understand the following:

- a) Your identity will remain anonymous when reporting on the results
- b) You are not obliged to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable with
- c) If at any time during the period of the research wish to withdraw, you can do so without any questions.

**THANK YOU INADVANCE**

For further information, you are welcomed to contact me.

Lerato Sekonyela



## APPENDICE 5: INFORMED CONSENT

### Researcher:

Ms LM SEKONYELA  
Department of Psychology  
University of the Free State  
Bloemfontein  
9300

### Study Leader:

Dr JS KABI  
Higher Education Studies  
University of the Free State  
Bloemfontein  
9300

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **INFORMED CONSENT**

Dear participant

I would like to invite you to take part in this research project:

***A strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in a University Access Programme.***

This study is about the views of access students concerning the academic support students need to be successful in university life. We would like you to participate with us in this research because you are currently in a UAP-UFS.

The reason why we are doing this study is to give students a chance to share their experiences about the academic support they perceive as necessary and as most important for successful university life. You will also have a chance to share your ideas on how the university can improve the academic support of first-year students in the UAP.

The possible risks to you in taking part in this study are that the discussion will be in-group format and therefore all participants have to agree to keep all the information confidential.

I am sure you will benefit from this study, as you will have a chance to share your views on the necessary academic support students need to be successful. The findings will be used to make recommendations to the UFS access and support programmes.

While I greatly appreciate your participation in this important study and the valuable contribution, you can make, your participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part in this study. If you do choose to take part and an issue arises which makes you uncomfortable, you may stop at any time with no further repercussions.

If you experience any discomfort or unhappiness with the way the research is being conducted, please feel free to contact me directly to discuss it, and note that you are free to contact my study leader (indicated above). Should any difficult personal issues arise during the course of this research, I shall endeavour to see that a qualified expert is contacted and able to assist you.

Yours sincerely,

---

LM Sekonyela

**Please complete and return this page.**

**Study:**

*A strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in a University Access Programme.*

**Researcher:**

Ms LM SEKONYELA

**Participant:**

Your name and surname: .....

Your age:.....

Your contact number:.....

I am currently a University Access Programme (UAP) student at the University of the Free State.	YES	NO
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- I hereby give free and informed consent to participate in the abovementioned research study.
- I give the researcher consent to voice record discussion.
- I understand what the study is about, why I am participating and what the risks and benefits are.
- I give the researcher permission to make use of the data gathered from my participation, subject to the stipulations he/she has indicated in the above letter.
- I undertake to keep all information pertaining to the group discussion session and the content of the discussions strictly confidential.

Signature: .....

Date: .....

## APPENDICE 6: ACTION PLAN

PRIORITY AREA	ACTIVITIES	START DATE	TIME-FRAME (minutes)	RESPONSIBILITY	REQUIRED RESOURCES	COMPLETION DATE	REFLECTION/ MONITOR PROGRESS
Briefing and planning session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus groups discussion</li> <li>- Question and answer session</li> <li>- Rules and regulation</li> <li>- Drawing of schedule</li> </ul>	29/08/2018	60min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Voice recorder</li> </ul>	29/08/2018	completed
Identifying experienced challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus group discussion</li> <li>- Voice recording</li> <li>- Hand writing of discussions</li> <li>- Probing for clarity</li> </ul>	31/08/2018	115 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Voice recorder</li> <li>- Pen and notebook</li> </ul>	31/08/2018	completed
Identifying possible strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus group discussion</li> <li>- Voice recording</li> <li>- Discussing resources available for mainstream</li> </ul>	31/08/2018	120min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Voice recorder</li> <li>- Pen and notebook</li> </ul>	31/08/2018	completed

Implementation: Mentoring and tutoring (test preparation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify difficult module areas</li> <li>- Text-in-context approach</li> <li>- Note-taking</li> <li>- Importance of class attendance</li> <li>- Sharing study strategies</li> </ul>	03/09/2018	180 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Text book</li> <li>- Study guide</li> <li>- Pen/pencil highlighter and notebook</li> </ul>	03/09/2018	completed
Mentoring and tutoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding verbs used in test and exam</li> <li>- Discussion of difficult module content</li> <li>- Formulating and completing activity</li> <li>- Predicting test questions</li> </ul>	04/09/2018	120 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Text book</li> <li>- Study guide</li> <li>- Pen/pencil , highlighter and notebook</li> </ul>	04/09/2018	completed
Mentoring and tutoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Answering predicated test questions</li> <li>- Budgeting time during test</li> </ul>	04/09/2018	120 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Text book</li> <li>- Study guide</li> <li>- Pen/pencil highlighter</li> </ul>	04/09/2018	completed

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sharing study strategies</li> <li>- Planning how to answer essay questions, definitions, discussion and other short questions</li> </ul>				and notebook		
Test feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussing performance</li> <li>- Difficulty areas</li> </ul>	06/09/2018	60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- researchers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Test question paper</li> <li>- Pen/pencil, highlighter and notebook</li> </ul>	06/09/2018	completed
Focus group discussion follow-up session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussion of issues from previous meeting</li> <li>- Probing for clarity on focus group discussion</li> </ul>	07/09/2018	120 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Voice recorder</li> <li>- Notebook and pen</li> </ul>	07/09/2018	completed
Writing session – preparation for assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Choosing a topic</li> <li>- Discussing why the chosen topic</li> </ul>	07/09/2018	180 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-researchers</li> <li>- Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Venue</li> <li>- Notebook and pen/pencil</li> <li>- computer</li> </ul>	07/09/2018	completed

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Planning an assignment</li> <li>- Using internet for information on the topic</li> </ul>						
Writing session – assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sharing written work</li> <li>- discussion and suggesting changes</li> <li>- writing introduction</li> <li>- paragraph construction</li> <li>- referencing</li> </ul>	12/09/2018	120 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- assignment hardcopy</li> <li>- pen/pencil</li> </ul>	12/09/2018	completed
Group 1: Writing session - assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sharing written work</li> <li>- discussion and suggesting changes</li> <li>- writing introduction</li> <li>- paragraph construction</li> <li>- referencing</li> </ul>	14/09/2018	120 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- assignment hardcopy</li> <li>- pen/pencil</li> </ul>	14/09/2018	completed
Group 2: Writing session - assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sharing written work</li> <li>- discussion and</li> </ul>	18/09/2018	120 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- assignment hardcopy</li> <li>- pen/pencil</li> </ul>	18/09/2018	completed

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- suggesting changes</li> <li>- writing introduction</li> <li>- paragraph construction</li> <li>- referencing</li> </ul>						
Group 3: Writing session - assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sharing written work</li> <li>- discussion and suggesting changes</li> <li>- writing introduction</li> <li>- paragraph construction</li> <li>- referencing</li> </ul>	21/09/2018	120 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- assignment hardcopy</li> <li>- pen/pencil</li> </ul>	21/09/2018	completed
Assignment feedback – 1st draft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sharing and discussing feedback</li> <li>- what to improve</li> <li>- referencing</li> <li>- application of theory</li> </ul>	25/09/2018	60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- graded assignment hardcopy</li> <li>- pen/pencil</li> </ul>	25/09/2018	completed
Assignment feedback – final	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sharing and discussing feedback</li> </ul>	05/10/2018	180 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- graded assignment hardcopy</li> </ul>	05/10/2018	completed
Writing, mentoring,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sharing tips</li> </ul>	08/10/2018	180 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> </ul>	08/10/2018	completed



tutoring – presentation preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what to include e.g. video, picture, referencing</li> <li>- rules for presentation</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- graded assignment hardcopy</li> <li>- computer</li> <li>- notebook and pen</li> </ul>		
Presentation preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- each group present</li> <li>- suggestions</li> </ul>	10/10/2018	180 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- co-researchers</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- memory stick – slides</li> <li>- computer</li> <li>- notebook, pen</li> </ul>	10/10/2018	completed
Group 1: presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- presentation suggestions for changes</li> </ul>	15/10/2018	60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- group 1 members</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- memory stick – slides</li> <li>- computer</li> <li>- notebook, pen</li> </ul>	15/10/2018	completed
Group 2: presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- presentation suggestions for changes</li> </ul>	17/10/2018	60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- group 2 members</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- memory stick – slides</li> <li>- computer</li> <li>- notebook, pen</li> </ul>	17/10/2018	completed
Group 3: presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- presentation suggestions for changes</li> </ul>	17/10/2018	60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- group 3 members</li> <li>- researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- venue</li> <li>- memory stick – slides</li> <li>- computer</li> </ul>	17/10/2018	completed

					- notebook, pen		
Feedback – presentation	- discussing presentation feedback	19/10/2018	60 min	- co- researchers - researcher	- venue - notebook and pen	19/10/2018	completed
Academic advising, Reflection on implemented strategy. Feedback on overall Sociology performance	- focus group discussion - sharing experiences and challenges	25/10/2018	180 min	- co- researchers - researcher	- venue - voice recorder - notebook and pen	25/10/2018	completed

## **APPENDICE T1: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

### **Pseudonyms used in transcription.**

**Researcher:** Thank you ladies and gentlemen for choosing to participate in this study. As a reminder the discussion will be on your experiences, mostly the focus will be on your experienced challenges as UAP students. So, what has been your experience been like so far in this programme? By experiences I mean what is it that you like about the programme, and what has been challenging for you being in the programme.

**Zizi:** For me being at the programme has been fun, sometimes kinda challenging. As I am from higher school, where we were spoon-fed, here is challenging because of the workload, we are not used to this kind of workload of work. Here you have to be independent, you have to work hard for yourself, no one will come after you to see if you have done the work, no one cares whether you have attended or not attended. Like everything is up to you, no one will ask whether you have submitted or not submitted. So I have to remember why I'm here. Also being here is a good thing as we experience new things. Most of the time, we used to procrastinate, maybe because the day was too long. If let's say assignment is due tomorrow, I will do it the night before. Time management is a challenge for me. To being here at South campus is good, as we are experiencing new things.

**Thabang:** It's been fun being here at South campus, but it's been a little bit challenging as Mr here was saying about the workload and other things, because sometimes as a student like me, I usually expect some things from lecturer, like preparation for tests and exams. Sometimes I expect lecturer to get us exposed to different methods like study methods, we do get study methods but we don't get enough preparation and exposed to methods to prepare for things like tests and examinations. I think we don't have adequate resources on how to prepare for tests and exams. Most of the time, when am looking at this things, when it comes to tests preparations actually, for example when we write the test we don't get enough preparation. We do get preparation but they don't tell us exactly how we are supposed to be doing it, which is a bad impact on us on tests and examination, I find it very challenging. But also being in the programme is fun, we experience new things such as diversity – new languages, friends, independence from parents, and meeting new people as well as facilitators.

**Edward:** Adding to what Mr here said. I think I agree with them ma'am, like with workload we don't have enough time to study because there is always an assignment to do. My challenge is that we do not have enough to prepare ourselves and adequate exposure to study methods, sometimes I don't even know what is expected of us, I get lost in class and am scared to ask questions because i'm shy. I feel like we don't have enough time to prepare for all the modules, like we almost always have something to do. But it's fun being here yet hard. Besides challenges, it's been nice, meeting different everything.

**Lydia:** same WhatsApp group.

**Zizi:** if you are not prepared for class, it seems like you are just a metal occupying space in class, because at times they will tell you to prepare this and this, and at times you find that you did not prepare because you have a test on that day for the other module. At other times there is an assignment for the other module, so we as students are not there yet when it comes to time management. Also eish friends, when it comes to friend, it's difficult because you want to study and they want to go out. Also with time management, we take a bus to campus, so you have to wake up early like at 5 O'clock in the morning, jah it's a challenge.

**Kate:** Actually the structure of the test. At times they tell us to paraphrase and at times because we don't understand, we start cramming those definitions and confusing them because you don't understand. At least if it's possible, we they can try to write us class test ma'am to show us how to answer questions not to give us the test questions, but to at least give us the strategy of answering test questions.

**Lydia:** Class test it's what the Mr. here is saying, it will be very beneficial for us also, if we can have more of class test during class sessions. It also helping because you will know that I'm lacking here and here

**Thabang:** Our facilitator for Sociology, once mentioned that every Friday we will have class test, but that never happened. We never reminded the person of the class test. Nna am afraid of the person.

**Edward:** It's been nice meeting the beautiful people.

**Luyanda:** It's been fun for me too but challenging sometimes. It's been fun because I have learnt two new languages even though I am not fluent.

**Thato:** workload and a lot of freedom, for me ma'am I tend to procrastinate and when I procrastinate, workload piles up and it becomes too much for us, and it's very challenging. Like today is Friday, everyone is excited, and now we have test of Monday. So peer pressure is a problem, some of my friend will say "don't tell me about sociology, sociology is easy". So now you feel like you have to go out with them.

**Thabang:** Like yah ma'am to be here, it's a good thing although that there are some challenges. like my group says, sometimes our facilitators tell us to prepare for the up coming class, and it's not like we don't prepare for the next coming class, it's just that sometimes we don't understand the work. Some facilitators, and I'm not saying all of them, some of them act like we know you understand. I was asking some of friend what's the use of coming to class if we know. When we come to class they ask us questions and they expect us to answer as if we know. Sometimes you find that you had to prepare unit 1 and unit 2. And you find that you understand unit 1 and don't understand unit 2. So now, when we get to class, they ask question and want you to answer as if you know. So like in Sociology, the first test we had to write an essay, and because I didn't know how I failed to write an essay. That's where I started asking for help from other facilitators, and when we had to write second test, I passed that test because I was getting help from another facilitator. I think our facilitator and I mean other facilitators can put in some effort to help us, because some of us we leave high school maybe 2010 or 2011 we no longer understanding those things of writing an essay, we don't understand this thing of writing an essay. Some of the facilitators act as if we know everything. Like me ma'am, I'm coming from KZN, in the rural, I was studying in the village place, so it's difficult for me in other things. I hope next year, I will cope, because now I know that if you need something and want to understand. You have to hustle for that information. It happens that some facilitators don't like you.

**Sizwe:** When you are an expert on Sociology, you take sociology easy subject. So you take it as if this thing is easy, you don't have to explain that much. not that the facilitator is selfish or what.

**Edward:** The most thing that I have been observing lately, is that they tell you to paraphrase, and when you paraphrase you get it wrong. When you tell them you paraphrase they tell you that you didn't explain it according to the book. So now am very confused about how to paraphrase. Now when you write it exactly like in the book,

you still get it wrong, now am really confused because I don't really know which exactly is it. Because they tell us you are not supposed to write it exactly from the book.

**Kate:** But me, ma'am, I think it's better to write it straight from the book, word for word just cut and paste. For an example, what I have experienced here in Sociology, our facilitator use a lot of examples but when it comes to the test 'dololo', when you use those examples you get it wrong, that's why I think it better to write exactly what's in the book. I don't wanna lie, being here it's very nice. Not all facilitators treat students like they already know, some of them know that students are here to learn, those are the facilitators that make you wanna wake up in the morning.

**Zizi:** I remember at the beginning. Our facilitator was addressing us in one of the module we are taking. He/she was like to be here at South campus was rejected by mainstream course. Some facilitators do have patience like they make it by all mean to help us. Like in the first week of this semester, remember you are rejects, don't ever forget that put that in mind. She/he was like remember in the last semester did I taught you this topic, and she started asking us questions and us we don't respond, so she was like if you don't answer this question class dismissed. So she was like if you want to learn or know something, come to class prepared. I was so confused because we are coming from holidays, so I was like she knows that we are rejects he must be like they are still kids we must treat them like that.

**Thabang:** But ma'am to add on that, it's not like we want to be spoon-fed, the only thing we need is help and direction because it's our first time being here in varsity. Some of us were there in the Eastern Cape looking for cattles, some of us busy somewhere like we really do work hard because if everyday I make sure come to class, it not like I don't have anything to do with my life, but because I know somewhere somehow I need help, it mean I want to learn something. In this programme the only one thing that we need is to understand each other, it's so painful when the facilitator to tell you that you just come here to sign the register, to come here to warm up chairs. It's so discouraging. Some facilitators told us that when you fail this module you don't come back here, but we are back here because we do want to be something.

**Zizi:** You must not make students to be afraid of you. When you are a facilitator, ma'am you have to be nice, so when I'm learning something I can be able to express myself to you, but when you like always shouting to students like 'you are stupid, you come

here to eat NAFSAS money, I don't care about you, it's varsity here' you understand ma'am those words.

**Researcher:** Can I please intersect, are you saying in your classes you are told that you are rejects, that you are stupid, that you are told that you come here to warm up chairs or for the register?

**Lydia:** So if you don't understand you just keep quite, and maybe find someone else to help you.

**Thabang:** If let's say you have a morning session, so it's difficult to ask question. Even if you don't understand it's difficult to ask that in class because you are scared. Sometimes when you answer or ask a question in class sometimes I'm even scared to answer in class, because the person will be like 'that is stupid, where did you get something like that?' so you tend to be like a joke in class

**Sizwe:** So because of that, when I choose to keep quite because our answers are bad. We have been told that our answers are bad. It sort of brings the person down.

**Zizi:** Ma'am let me correct that, not in all the classes we are told that. Some of the classes we are attending like skills, that person will ask everyone a question and that person make us all to feel at home in class you understand.

**Edward:** I was even like why can't maybe the maths teacher be the skills teacher or Sociology teacher, because I think I can benefit a lot from this person, like this person enjoys what she is doing, this person has that drive for students to do more.

**Lydia:** The thing is ma'am some facilitators if they have done something for a long time like for 5years. You can even sing it in your sleep, if you get students who are here for the first years of doing Sociology, students who don't even know the meaning of Sociology. And when they find it difficult to understand you get bored with the students, you forget that you have been doing this for a very long time, and this person is doing it for the first time. That is what changes facilitators' attitudes towards students, that they get angry with students when students don't understand what they want them to understand, when students find Sociology difficult. Facilitator are impatient with the students and that is some of the facilitators not all of them.

**Edward:** You know what ma'am, here we don't get enough support in this campus. I don't know about other campuses, but here we don't get enough adequate support with our work here on this campus.

**Researcher:** When you talk about enough support, what exactly do you mean?

**Edward:** Mmh how can I put this?

**Researcher:** some people will talk about having tutors, some will talk about getting assistance in term of writing, some will talk about having people to help them adapt to university life and taking notes, what kind of support are you referring to?

**Edward:** Yes things like that, but not the notes part that one we get. We don't have adequate support like maybe today we were learning about computer, so maybe there is something that I did not understand and crasp what is computer in that session. So when we go to the next session, I might be left behind. If wanna still go back to that main point, where will I learn about that. Maybe when you go to the lecturer to ask, they will tell you that we have already passed that chapter, they tell us that we don't attend class, blah blah blah.

**Thabang:** But ma'am, I think this thing is simple. The only thing we need in this programme is for the facilitator to be friendly with all the students. In that way the student can easily approach the facilitator when they don't understand.

**Edward:** At some point, we were even thinking of having our own private tutors, so that we can pay them so that they can even help us in our own module. Someone who can help us step by step how to approach this and that. We even thought about it, but we got some few challenges, because we really want to pass our modules and out of this campus and further our careers

**Researcher:** Are you saying getting extra help like maybe a tutor to a certain extend will help?

**Edward:** It could help.

**Zizi:** But ma'am, I agree with. But on another point I'm agreeing with him because even if we get a tutor, because I think this thing is simple. We just need someone who like and love what they are doing. It's like when someone washes their cloths for the sake of washing them because, they don't care how they look afterwards.



**Researcher:** are you saying you are just washing your cloths for the sake of washing them, you don't care whether they look good and clean? Is that how you feel about some of the facilitators? That they are just hear to do their job, whether the job is done well and everyone understands doesn't matter?

**Edward:** Yes, they actually tell us straight to our eyes. Sometimes ma'am we are even afraid, like let's say this cupboard is my lecturer, so if I don't understand that cupboard I'm afraid to ask another lecturer because what if the other lecturer finds out that I asked for help elsewhere. How are you going to look at me, how are you going to treat me and how are you going to impact me after finding out that I went to someone for help. Sometimes we think of things like that. Sometimes ma'am we tend to think that the next person will see us as disrespectful, that we are going behind their backs. In a way there will be bad vibes in class, but again in a way we will still be lacking, we are afraid.

**Researcher:** but asking for help from another facilitator, isn't it almost the same thing as asking a friend or classmate to help you? Why should it be a problem when you ask another facilitator for help and it's ok to ask for help from another student

**Zizi:** The problem is that, some facilitators are like if one student can pass with a distinction and you can't, why not ask that student not another facilitator because that student understand and can assist you. You find that that student can assist you but you don't get enough information.

**Edward:** It's not like we don't see what is happening with our lecturer when they are together and doing what they have to do. We can see there is some attitude and vibe going on. We can see that this one is no longer doing what she/he is supposed to do, she is trying to prove the point, like I know better, I look better, I can out smart all of you. You can see that they don't have good communication. And when they doing that you can see the other one going like shaking head. So you see ma'am when we see things like that, it makes are scared of going to the other for help because what if that one finds out.

**Zizi:** But ma'am to add on that, it's not like we blame facilitators, but if we like take communication to other students and ask issues they experience in class. They will tell you different things, that's why I'm saying we are not blaming facilitators, but different students can tell you one and the same thing about one facilitator. Some facilitators

are good, they are people like us, they can be angry. But only if they can leave their family issues back home.

**Edward:** Sometimes we are even scared of going to class, because you don't know if you are going to step on someone toes.

**Thabang:** One important thing is that it's depend on us, it's all about us. We need to remember why we are here and what our long term goals are. We know what even our family expect of us. Sometimes in life you don't have to blame the other person, you have to stand up for yourself. This year I have learnt one new thing, that in life you don't have to try but you do your best to achieve. Everything depends on me as a person, the facilitator has done their job and that at the end of the month they are going to get paid. So me what must I do.

**Zizi:** To add on that, ma'am the facilitators must not forget that we are here for help, if it wasn't the help we will be running our companies back there in the Eastern Cape, so please we are begging them.

**Edward:** I just can't wait for this discussions to commence, because we really need it, that we can start doing whatever that will help us, I cant wait for it.

**Researcher:** You should not see me as a researcher collecting data, but rather as someone that will be working with. You are going to direct what has to happen, in that you are going to identify sections you find challenging, then as a group we will deal with such. You should be prepared to do the work. With your help, the one thing I think I will be able to help particularly when you help me help you.

**Edward:** In my case ma'am, like with one of my modules we are already done with all the themes, but if you were to ask me to apply that in my everyday life I can't, I just can't because I don't understand.

**Researcher:** So for this discussion, it's not about the other modules, but rather mainly about what we can do to help you understand Sociology. One thing that I have observed is that as a student we tend to think that what you have learnt in one module is not applicable in another. For example, students don't use what they have learnt in communication or English to sociology. It's like you don't see the relationship between the modules, hence every now and then, I am going to ask you the topics you are dealing with in other modules so that you can be able to see how one module can help

you better the other. So as some of you might be aware that I'm a former student in the programme, I know how it feels being in this programme, however I can't say I know how you feel, because we are different. Ladies and gentlemen, before we close this discussion, I suggest that you identify challenging parts in Sociology, let's have a schedule that will guide us. You are also welcomed to visit me whenever you feel uncomfortable about anything specifically in Sociology. Thank you for coming.

## **APPENDICE T2: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**Researcher:** Thank you once again for making time to meet today, please speak up so that I can capture all the information. So, today's session is a follow-up of the first session. As I was listening to the recording, there were certain parts that were not clear to me, so I just want you guys to clarify those aspects. So before we start with the questions, I just want to remind you that what discuss in these sessions should not be discussed with anyone who is not part of these group, that is you as individuals you do not discuss what transpire in this meeting with anyone. So if it's possible, let's keep the discussion here, let's not continue with the discussion outside this space.

**Researcher:** One of the issues that came up in our first discussion was that being at university or being at the programme is fun, you experience new things. What are these new things, the fun things?

**Thabang:** I think meeting new people is one of those new things I'm experience, as well as meeting different lecturers/facilitators

**Edward:** It is good actually, it's fun. Like for example, the experiences I have experienced lately having to interact with a lot of people, having new friends, seeing new faces, adjusting to the kind of environment I'm in, trying learn new people having that sense of independence, sometimes working on my own and sometimes asking for help from other people. Personally I usually don't ask for help from other people, because I'm scared to ask for help, but being here made me realise that I can ask for help, I can exercise myself, I can expand everything

**Lydia:** Nna, what I have experienced is challenge, naturally I like challenge, but now it's on another level, so I loved it, I like being independent, I don't like to be told what to do, so I'm able to push myself like to do my level best since being here

**Luyanda:** Meeting new people, making new friends.

**Zizi:** As we are at university level ma'am, now we are from high school then the workload, working on our own. We are no longer spoon-feed, and it's like no one pushing you, even when you are not attending class, you will see in your results that you haven't been attending classes, no one will complain to you that you are going to fail why are you not attending classes.

**Luyanda:** Nna, I think is meeting new people with different languages, and so far I have learnt two-to-three languages even though am not fluent, gaining independence, yes not having someone to tell you what to do, whether you are in class or not, it's your business. You need to push yourself

**Boitumelo:** Okay, what I have experienced it's like I'm getting used to it, like working with other people, like here we do a lot of group assignments. So it's which is something I'm not used to, because I'm used to working on my own so now I have learnt that when you work with other people, it helps a lot. Like when you don't understand something in class, so if you discuss with other people it's when you understand because that's when they explain in your language, that's what I have experienced and I think I'm getting used to it bit by bit. Like ma'am sometimes they explain in mother tongue, like let's say someone doesn't understand English, then someone explains maybe like in Xhosa or Sotho, that's when you crasp.

**Edward:** We have been discovering ourselves bit by bit in most on the things. Since we have been here like lately I have just discovered that I'm a bit bossy sometimes, I like being in charge so I've learnt that I need to tone it down when it comes to working with other people, that doesn't work, as I've always saw myself as a leader. But then now I've observed and discovered that that's a bit too much, I have to pull it down below the levels. I have learnt myself now, I'm a bit up there with other things but then I have to pull myself down a little bit.

**Researcher:** Anything else?

No (**all co-researchers**)

**Researcher:** Another issues or thing that came up in our previous discussion was that when it comes to preparing let's say for the test or exams, you feel like you are not exposed to methods or ways that will guide you on how to approach certain questions. You said you don't have enough resources that will help you do well in your studies, can you elaborate on that? What do you mean when you say you don't have enough resources?

**Kate:** Ok ma'am, for example, when we looking at the structure of the question paper, we do know about the structure. But when the question say discuss something or the question say define a certain concept and you look at the mark allocation of the above

question. Let's say the above definition was allocated two marks, then the next one is for three marks. You don't know for how long you have to discuss for that three marks. You maybe think that because of the above question, that maybe you can discuss the concept for two marks then one mark is for the example.

**Researcher:** When it comes to answering question, let's say you have to answer an essay question, are you sort of trained or prepared as to how you should approach such questions?

**Kate:** Yes ma'am they do tell us how to approach such questions, such as essay questions. But it's lack of manipulations from us. They tell us that the introduction must be like this and this and this, but if how, I don't know ma'am we try, we still are not there yet we still not having that skill yet of what do they require.

**Researcher:** Another thing that came up was with regard to procrastination. You indicated that because there are not parents around, and you are independent, no one tells you what to do and when to do it you tend to procrastinate. So how does your procrastination affect you?

**Thato:** Ma'am procrastination affect me because like if I have to study for a test, I want to study a day or two before, and the work piles up. In the first semester I used to procrastinate a lot, and I saw that that affected my results and a lot. But this semester, I have changed but not too much like I will study a week in advance, and so far it's kinda better and working for me.

**Edward:** I think maybe it's because some of us like working under pressure, when we are under pressure and we can see that you know what right now, time is gone, and that now I have to more concentrate on my studies, and I realise that there is a lot of work that I have to cover. Try to get everything I have done from the start. What she is talking about is what I did in the first semester, like I will study a day before the exam. You know I'm the kind of person who prefers to listen more than reading, but when it comes to studying my books, it's a big problem for me, and I have been struggling with that since high school. You know ma'am in high school I have never touched a book. But now being here I have to touch a book, which I'm really struggling.

**Boitumelo:** Eish ma'am, yes it does, it does affect, because we tend to procrastinate a lot and we don't have enough time to study like she said, and the work load piles up,

when you realise the work has piled up and at some point your brain is going to shut down because you are really tired. So yes, procrastinating affect us a lot because we want to study everything at once.

**Researcher:** when preparing for a test, like in Sociology when you had to write that test, did you formulate own questions that you used as a sort of a guide in preparation for the test?

**Lydia:** Yes, the questions I formulated like from the previous question paper, but changing the content. Then what I did was, to assume of this was the question in the test. Then I will try to answer that question as if I was in the test, I looked at the format of the question paper, and then I started assuming that maybe they ask me to discuss a certain thing so I formulated my questions based on that.

**Luyanda:** What I did was to read everything starting from the perspectives and then the models, everything, I studied everything. I did study politics. When it comes to long questions sometimes I record myself, so that when I don't have time to sit and read, I listen to my recording maybe when I go to campus, I even sing so that I don't forget. And yes, it help a lot and works for me. Like first semester, I only started recording myself late, so I managed to get 61% for sociology and that allowed me to write the exam. But this semester, I started recording myself right from the start, and it's really working for me

**Mamello:** Something else that would really help us to understand the work better, will be to really have someone to challenge us, someone to ask us questions, challenge us so that we can engage in deeper thinking and learning about the issue

**Thato:** But what I think is more, I tend to forget everthing, like because we are told to write exactly from the book like the definition should be exactly from the book, then I forget one word and everything goes away. I don't understand why it has to be like that, like exactly from the book

**Boitumelo:** In that case, I think with the definitions in the book, you need to understand them, like identify the keywords. In that way you just use the keywords in the test, it's not that you have to write exactly as the book

**Sizwe:** Nna I just cram, it helps me ma'am. Because if I cram I will write that thing that I crammed, because if I don't cram, I just write my own things. Like in the test, in that

essay ma'am I crammed everything step by step. I cram everything, like I say maybe the essay will be this one, then I cram half of this one then half of that one when I get to the paper, then I see

**Edward:** As ma'am already says, we are the same WhatsApp group because on my side also, I used to cram. Even on the previous essay of power sharing models. Like in the essay I crammed the power sharing models, I don't think that the essay appeared the way it appeared. Like when I was cramming those models, like in the test, the question said write an essay on power sharing models between the power elite and pluralist model. So when I was cramming paragraph by paragraph, it was so difficult because the information for power elite was this small.

**Zizi:** I do study, but sometimes when I study too much, when am in the exam I forget the information that I studied. Sometimes I mix the information. Like I will write the information for one question on the wrong question. For example in sociology, I took some information from democracy and used it for another question. And sometimes it's not nice it's very hard to study.

**Researcher:** Before we move on to the next person, I just want you to clarify to me. Is it possible like the lady here said earlier, that you confuse the information due to lack of understanding, what do you think? Like immediately when you write the information that belong to democracy to authoritarianism it could mean that you didn't understand what democracy is, could that be the case?

**Zizi:** No ma'am, I do understand. I don't know if it's because it exam time or what, because even if you can ask me those things after the exam I can even sing it for you everything very well. But when am in there I thinking that time is running out so I write everything, then I realise that I made a mistake

**Thabang:** What I do is, I always study. I don't know why but I did politics only, but again when I study I repeat, repeat and repeat until I get it and understand. But at times I cram if I don't understand. She knows.

**Kate:** I think I also cram, especially with sociology, because with sociology we have to use those terms like from the book so sometimes it becomes difficult to remember those, even if you understand because we have to write like it's in the book, it becomes difficult. Even if I cram, when I get to the test I forget everything



**Sizwe:** With me, it also affects me when I don't understand something, when I don't understand something I cram, but the disadvantage is that when I cram and I forget one word I forget everything

**Kate:** For me ma'am in the side of cramming, I'm the master. But the problem is that I can only store the information for a short period of time, after the examination if you can ask me that information why I got maybe 90% I won't know ma'am. But ma'am, when I go to the exam, I can write exactly that. If I could find a house with no people and I go to the kitchen I can say that information may three times and I'm telling you ma'am I wouldn't forget. Once I look up like this the information comes down I tell you

**Researcher:** another thing that you mentioned is that if you could have class tests, I think the word you used was mini tests they can benefit you, how would it benefit you?

**Edward:** Ma'am especially for me, I will know that maybe it can help me relax and put all the information in the right place, like I will be used to it. I think when that time to write come, I will not be worried that eish it's that time of the exam. Like when it's exam I will know that I'm relaxed and it can help me a lot, I will get used that I'm writing

**Zizi:** Ok ma'am, I would like to add something. Is this about a specific module or all other modules that I struggle with? Like ma'am I have a serious problem with computer. Like ma'am, by the way it's going to put me in serious trouble, it's my first time staying in front of a computer, and ma'am like in that venue there are so many students, like ma'am even our lecturer even if she wanted she wouldn't because there is a hand this side and another that side. I don't know what can I do, it's a serious problem it's going to damage my certificate that thing.

**Boitumelo:** I also have a problem with computer, it's my first time doing this computer, and I struggle a lot with computer. And with the time limit, it's so little. And the last test, that is with my second test, I got 50% I don't wanna talk about it, my aim was to get at least 70% for all my modules but this computer (started crying)

**Luyanda:** I think the other mistake that they make there in computer lab, when we do practicals things they give us 3hrs, they give us lot of time. When it comes to test they give us like 30min so we are used to getting relaxed you know you are just typing, but now the test you have to type fast, it's a disaster ma'am

**Kate:** The other issue, when they post the memos and questions on Blackboard, they just post them, you don't understand whether you have to prove yourself that you can type, and it's not moving that thing. You don't know how they go about reaching those things, you don't know whether they mark how fast you type or what.

**Thabang:** The other thing with these mini tests is that for me, I don't know why, I do well in the first test maybe I don't if I have anxiety or what. But I feel like, I think before like we can have a formal test, they can give us those mini test to practice

**Sizwe:** Ma'am I think we should also be given the previous question paper, I think that may help a lot, because we will get used to the structure of the question paper. Like when we see question paper in the test, it will not be new to us, we will be used to it. In Sociology, last semester, I had previous question paper. Like most of the things that were in the previous paper were there in our test, so maybe if we can be given the question paper it can help.

**Edward:** I think what she is saying is that when we get the previous question paper is not that we will study those, thinking that is what is going to be in the exam paper I just thought I should clarify that!!!!

**Researcher:** So what you are saying is that you don't want the question papers to study them, but rather to be familiar with how questions are formulated, be familiar with the paper layout, so that it doesn't scare you when you see it for the first time. Ok, I hear you.

**Edward:** And adding on that point, we don't have mini tests that can help us answer these questions in our classes, so even if we don't have mini test, if we are given those papers we can even use them in our houses to practice and learn more, we can easily recapture what we have learnt

**Zizi:** But ma'am I think everyone has the problem with computer, it's a serious issue. The practicals are easy because we have a lot of time. We get 100% even 90% in our practicals, but when it comes to tests we get 20%, it's like we didn't study, I know nothing with computer. I'm complaining with this thing of computer.

**Mamello:** My only problem with computer is theory, the textbook. I don't know if I'm the one who doesn't understand the textbook, because the textbook show us how we should touch things in computer I don't know where they get questions for theory in

the textbook. Like we did well with the first test I think because she gave us slides, but now with this one we didn't know how and where to study for it.

**Zizi:** The painful part with the theory is that the theory is always the first question, you will find that while you are trying to answer those question that you don't even understand, the time is moving. When you look at the time, you only have 15min left

**Thabang:** It true what everyone is saying, I did not finish any one of the test we had.

**Boitumelo:** I think ma'am with time, we should not waste time on questions that we don't understand or know. I think there're a lot of things that you know, but because you waste time of those questions that you don't know you end up not passing the test, and you run out of time. So what I did is that, when I don't know the question I skip it and move on to the next. When I'm done answering the ones I know, it's then that I go back to those that I didn't understand or those that I skipped, in that way I know that I have answered the ones that am sure of.

**Researcher:** At times you feel like facilitators during facilitation session teach you like you already know!! They forget that they have been doing this for 5yrs-10yrs, so they forget that these information in new to you, so how does this way of doing things affect your studies even more so you attendance for that particular module?

**Zizi:** Ma'am, it affects us a lot. Because, let's say wena (you) are teaching us, and you ask us what is life orientation, you know what life orientation is but for us this is new. So when the next person try to give you wrong answer you look at the person like you know, even your actions shows that you are angry with that person, so next time I will be afraid to answer. So some classes, when you think of attending you think twice, like let me go and let me not go but because it's your life, you end up going. The facilitator need to understand like that we are like small children, you can't force a small children to eat pap and spinach. First of all, you need to make me understand. You can't tell a three month old baby to eat pap and spinach. But one thing I can tell, if you can tell me the definition of life orientation today, and you tell me again next week, I will not forget it. So some of the things you need to tell us so that we know.

**Researcher:** Another thing that came up during our previous conversation, is that some facilitators use demeaning language, like the one that came up most of the time

was that you are 'rejects', that you have been rejected by the main campus. How does that make you feel?

**Zizi:** Like ma'am we all know very well that we are rejects, I know that I can see someone here doing something, but even if you can do anything at the end I know that you are reject, so all you need to do is to mind your own business. We are already told, so we have to accept that we are rejects. So ma'am, when someone in higher position tell you that, all you can do is just to accept, but I know that I'm not a reject, I'm here because I want to do something of my life. I feel very very bad. I can fail Sociology, but I will work hard to pass I will not sleep

**Researcher:** So when you are here, you are told that you are rejects or you come here to warm chairs or you are metals just sitting there without any sense of understanding and thinking! Do you really believe that you are rejects?

**Zizi:** Yes ma'am, right now you are exactly describing us.

**Lydia:** We have in a way adjusted to that word and gotten used to that we are rejects, so there is nothing we can do if the next person sees us in that way. We sometimes even laugh about it.

**Luyanda:** It's not really fun, someone else will be like take with strings like ba enka ka pelo, and some live upto it and not try to work hard to achieve something, some people might easily give up, but not me ma'am.

**Thato:** I'm also with them, you don't have to take negative things that people say about you.

**Zizi:** Making a joke of everything really helps so that it doesn't get to you.

**Edward:** But it hurts though.

**Zizi:** It might happen that some students no longer are attending classes because of those things.

**Mamello:** It very bad actually, I didn't even tell anyone. Like accept for some of my friends what computer facilitators were saying. They were saying that this year students act like they are so dump, but they said that standing next to me, I was even scared of raising my hand to tell them that I was done with my work so that they can help me to submit. It got me so angry that I approached them one by one. I told them

that I didn't like what they were saying about us, it makes us not want to come to class or even ask for help when we don't understand. Even the other facilitators responded to this other one, saying that some of the students are new here and that they are doing computer for the first time, but the other facilitator continued saying all those negative things about us. I told him that I didn't like it.

**Researcher:** one last question, if I'm not mistaken someone has to go and write the test. In our previous conversation, you mentioned that in preparation for test in Sociology, you normally have combined class. You said that you noticed vibes a number of times during those sessions, what do you mean by vibes?

**Zizi:** Yes ma'am, there are vibes. Our facilitators, we love and respect them, they are our brothers and sister and we respect them. In those sessions, it's like someone wants to prove a point to the other in front of students. But us as students we are here to learn and we need information so that we can pass. I like to make an example, example of soldiers. You know ma'am, soldiers, they work together and cover each other but our facilitators don't cover each other. It's like they want to prove a point that someone doesn't know or is not prepared for their work. In future, I would love to see facilitators act and work like soldiers. They need to prepare themselves before they come to those classes, if I'm a facilitator and I see my colleague is missing a point, I will cover him/her, we can see that they don't work together. But what they are doing I don't like. I think my team members here have seen what is going on there. There is no need to expose how much information one has in front of students.

**Kate:** Ma'am, there was this other time when one facilitator was busy teaching us, and the other was sitting there making faces (rolling eyes) in front of students

**Luyanda:** I was like there it goes again.

**Boitumelo:** You know what ma'am, as facilitators use different method, like in those combined classes, when one facilitator explain something in a different way, the other facilitator feels like you have explained something in a wrong way to your students. So in front of the student, the one facilitator will want to correct the other to prove a point to their student and to the other facilitator, even though they are saying the same thing but differently. They tend to criticize each other in front of student, like when the other doesn't explain the way you want, like the one is always adding on what the other is saying.

**Thato:** I think they are not trained for the combined classes. I think they are only trained for that one class, like in Zulu they say “azikwazi ukubusa izinkunzi ezimbili esibayeni esisodwa”.

**Sizwe:** That means we can't have two bulls in the same kraal.

**Mamello:** It is confusing, during those combined sessions, you will hear one facilitator explaining in an easier way, but when you go to the exam, you must remember who will be marking your work and you are afraid to write the easier explanation because someone else will be marking you

**Edward:** And ma'am even with the example you made, one facilitator will say you write straight from the textbook, and the other will say we should write the way we understand as long as we keep the same meaning. It's so confusing ma'am

**Kate:** So ma'am in that way, I don't know if they see the need to combine classes, because I thought they combine classes for us to understand better. But then, when we go back to our original classes, the facilitator will say 'I don't like it when you write like this', the facilitator indirectly referring to what the other facilitator said.

**Zizi:** I think the solution in that point, like in the beginning I wanted to leave that classes and I wished that the other facilitator teaching the other module was the one teaching Sociology, because the person is patient with students and explain the easier was. But I decided to stay in that class as I told myself that what I will do is copy and paste straight from the book. On that point ma'am, I think our facilitator need to give us those food for babies.

**Researcher:** Is everyone fine, anything to add?

**Sizwe:** yes, I have never heard of a building where we can access things like tutors and all that, do we even have such a building? As far I know ma'am, the only support we have is our facilitators, that's if I can call it support.

**Zizi:** ma'am we don't have such a centre because like now, when we need someone to assist us with maybe writing an essay we talk amongst each other.

**Sizwe:** you know what, I think the only place where we can get information in during class sessions. However, we struggle to ask questions in class because we are scared

of our facilitator. We are scared to ask questions due to language (co-researchers are rejects, metals, & warm-up chairs) used by facilitators.

**Lydia:** Since we started working in this group, I now enjoy sociology. I am able to ask questions without fear that other students will laugh at my English, and I do not fear irritating my facilitator.

**Sizwe:** you have no idea how comfortable I feel in this group, and another thing I like is like we have come to work together in this group, we now help each other.

**Zizi:** I am so grateful that I decided to be part of this group because we get to be challenged and in that way we can see where we are lacking. Also having someone to rely on when I don't understand, having someone to show me how to take notes and how to study, it helps

**Mamello:** you know, we are new at varsity, so having this group and you helps. At times because we are told that we are rejects, we wanted to give up on our studies. Let me speak for myself, I am scared of asking questions in class, so because of that I was afraid that I am not going to pass. Like when we started this group, and someone suggested that we formulate a goal that we want to achieve, that no one in this group should feel little. That gave me hope that at least when I want to cry or I need help, I have someone to talk to.

**Lydia:** what I like about this group is that we work together, and that we have an expert in the module working with us, and that makes it easier for me to understand the module.

**Zizi:** you see now, since we started this group, we know who is good at what module, so even after our discussions in this group we still help each other. Since we started working in this group, I have communicated with some of the group members who are doing well in computer, and one lady has been helping me with that module.

**Luyanda:** you know ma'am in computer, when we do practicals we have 3 hours but it's different when I'm home without a computer and as students we are working together to help each other and it helps.

**Boitumelo:** I agree, in practicals we have assistance.

**Mamello:** you know ma'am, we are here to learning, and not only to learn from facilitators but from each other. It was so exciting when I learnt about blackboard and what to use it for. So one of the things I have learnt so far is that for some of us, because I'm shy and at times becomes anxious, when I ask questions using email or on blackboard it becomes easier. Because I don't see the other person's face, and when I get responses, I get to see where I'm lacking and that helps me to want to improve, I therefore feel good about myself.

**Boitumelo:** Adding on that, I use information that I got from blackboard to remind me of what to do, so that helps.

**Kate:** For me, using blackboard and things like whatsapp as form of communication and sharing information, and asking for help does help. Like I get different views, and that makes me engage in deeper thinking. Also having things like articles posted on blackboard is useful because I can do those in my own time and place. So I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class...

**Kate:** For me, using blackboard help us to work together. Like I get different views, and that makes me engage in deeper thinking. Also having things like articles posted on blackboard is useful because I can do those in my own time and place. So I will know what to prepare for the upcoming class.

**Sizwe:** you know ma'am, we need to be exposed to different learning styles and more academic advice and tutors. So for me, if we all attend in one campus I think that will help in service delivery.

**Thabang:** I personally don't have a problem with campuses being segregated...I think UAP being campus on its own has some benefits, like we are able to know each other, and in a way we can get individual attention in classes. We also get to easily adapt to being at varsity.

**Sizwe:** I don't understand why because we are at the same university. I don't like this thing of being call UAP is not good because we are one university.

**Luyanda:** We do have academic advisors on campus. What he does is to help us with planning our studies, and how we should study. He shows us what we can study next year once we completed UAP.



**Thato:** One thing I have learnt from the advisor is that we should plan our assignments, like when we plan we will not procrastinate and feel the workload.

**Mamello:** for me, I think he has taught me skills to link different modules. For example, I used to see these modules as different, I didn't understand why I have to take skills class/module. But since meeting him even for those few minutes, I learnt that the skills that we learn in skills class can be applied in other modules. He also give us information of what we can study for next year.

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**Edward:** I thought English was English, like I didn't think that English had anything to do with Sociology. For example, after discussing in this group how we should write thing like assignment, it was only then I saw that these modules are related.

**Kate:** me too, I thought what we were doing in Communication module was just for that module, same goes for skills module. But since we started working in this group, I see like after working on referencing and paragraph construction, that I use the same structure and style, and that made me to pass my assignment even in that module.

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**Zizi:** you know ma'am, when we ask for help when we don't understand parts of a module, some people say we are dump, even our friends say the module is easy

**Mamello:** you know, before we got to really understand how helpful this group was going to be, and because of the experiences we had with our facilitator, them telling us that we are rejects, I didn't feel comfortable to say that I didn't understand dependency theory because I thought people will see me as "dump".

**Zizi:** Ma'am, I think I should apologise today I talk too much.

**Researcher:** I don't think you should apologise, because this is your experience and reality. Therefore, you are helping the next person to understand your what you are going through. Earlier you suggested what can be done differently so that students can benefit, even though this might not directly benefit you, however you might have a sister or brother or even cousin coming to this programme next year, so you voice might help in changing the challenges you are experiencing for the incoming students.

**Zizi:** Ma'am, talking about vibes, I think we would like to be treated in the same way. Ma'am we talk as students. if like I say we did this in class today, then I talk to someone in a different class, we see that we are not treated the same as we are all students there shouldn't be special treatment. Like if let's say I'm in the 8:00 class, then the other student attend the 9:00 class, we should be treated the same way, because as students we talk. Like yesterday, the 9:00 students were taught how to structure an introduction, I was not taught that. I only found out when I talked to other students.

**Thabang:** You know ma'am, our facilitators here in the UFS, you can find that sometimes they are friendly with a certain group and that group gets all the information they need. But when the other group comes their mood changes, when the mood change you can get to class let's say at 9:00 and at 9:15 class is dismissed, I'm not

saying that happened but it can happen because of one simple question, if no one answers then class dismissed. Like in the first semester, the students were complaining that nothing was done in class because the class was dismissed because they couldn't answer the question, only to find out that the other class continue for the whole session.

**Sizwe:** Nna ma'am, I think the classes should have the same number of students, like 8:00 class should not have 18 students when 9:00 class has 30 students because I think that could be the reason

**Lydia:** On that case, I think I could happen that the numbers were equal because we choose groups at the beginning of the year. So it's possible that the other group has small number because I know that the other people no longer coming to school, they are busy with other things. She is right.

**Kate:** We are fine ma'am, nothing to add.

**Edward:** By the way, in our test we improved a little bit, compared to first semester. Like now when I look at my test, I can now see that I have improved, and I see the chance that I will promote this module. I think we have improved because we are getting help elsewhere that we are attending classes and we know that we are getting additional help.

**Thabang:** Last but not least, we really love our facilitator, only if they can hear this recording I don't want them think we don't like them. We wish that they can change.

**Researcher:** Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming for these meeting and for sharing your experiences. I think I have for now you have clarified and answered the questions that were unclear for me. Should I feel the need for more information, I will communicate. However, we will still continue with our other sessions, that is sessions where we help each other to make sense of the module content and other matters. Thank you for coming and enjoy the rest of your day.

## **APPENDICE T3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**Researcher:** Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, thank you for agreeing to meet today. This is going to probably be our last meeting for this focus group session. Today session, will mainly focus on reflecting on all the sessions we had for the past months. Did the sessions work for you? I would also like us to discuss what came out for during our different sessions, as your concern was with regard to your performance in Sociology. Should this strategy be implemented next year, what would you suggest I do differently? In one of the meetings, one issue came up that seem to have unsettled some of you. That was in relation to academic advising, can we start with that? What is your experience with academic advising you?

**Thabang:** Ma'am can we start with how we, let me say benefitted from you in computer. At least I now know how to type an assignment and look for information on the internet, even though I'm slow when typing.

**Lydia:** You know ma'am, when you said that you will teach us how to use computer, I was like to myself "where does she get the time to do all of this things, how does she know all these?" But again I was like she has been here for so long and I need help so let me see what she will teach me!

**Zizi:** Adding on co-researcher 5: She is jack of all trades! So ma'am when were started discussing the use of computer and you suggested that we take notes of step-by-step of computer that was helpful because I had written notes to use when I was alone.

**Mamello:** When you said we have computers in our hands (referring to smartphones), I was so confused! But then when you asked us to show you the sign that say "on/off" on our phones we all showed you the same thing! You also suggested that we look for the same sign on a computer, and that was clever!

**Thato:** ma'am to show that we learnt a lot from you, we did so well on our presentations, we were able to put pictures on slides even video, and our presentation was so professional.

**Zizi:** In regarding to academic adviser, in this campus, there is a lot number of students, on this campus there is only one academic advisors, and is not enough. For us as students having one academic adviser is not enough. For me ma'am, I only having a chance to manage or have an appointment with him as he was always busy, I could

not meet him in the first semester, as he was fully booked. I could only meet him in the second semester. I could not manage to have an appointment with the academic adviser in the first semester. For me, I think what can be improved is to have more or hire more academic advisers especially for the upcoming students, I think that could be beneficial for those students. because they need the advice on how they can proceed with their careers and the modules they are taking

**Zizi:** Like ma'am for others, it was the first time meeting the academic adviser, when he posted on Blackboard that we are going to have a session to fill up the forms for next year. This was in the second semester, because it was a setup meeting for students to fill those forms.

**Researcher:** why were some of you only meeting the adviser for the first time in second semester? When as far as I know, he is available on campus throughout the year.

**Zizi:** Like I said ma'am, is not easy to access his office. We struggle to access academic advising services, as most of the time the advisor is either fully booked for a month or he is not on campus or there is a long list, or the advisor has meetings or working at other campuses (e.g. regions such as Welkom, QwaQwa, Sasolburg etc.).

**Edward:** it's the same story ma'am as Mr here, we don't get to have meets with him as he is very busy, we have to wait long because there is only one adviser on campus, at times, we find a long que, as it has been difficult to access him.

**Thabang:** It is highly difficult to be able meet up with the academic advisor, because if we look at even the number of students actually here on campus that would really like need his assistance on how to implement and push their careers forward. Whenever you want to go and see him you will see there is a long line, you will see that everyone wants to access him, so it's difficult to use services. Maybe at times we have an hour break and you want to go see him, and when you get there to meet him there is a very long line. As at times, we still have to attend classes, and there is a very long line or maybe they are on lunch or they are somewhere. I think also this is too much work for the academic adviser because it's like he is the only person and he has to handle so many students at once, that is impossible for single person to handle all the students, this is too much work for one person if we look at the number of students at this academy. It's really really impossible, no one can actually do that. Most of us as students we don't even get a chance to meet up with him and have a talk with him the

way we should, because he has to accommodate everyone. Like when you go see him, he will say 1 2 3 go and do this, we don't get a full session like we should like him to breakdown thing the way they should be brokendown, because he has to accommodate everyone.

**Sizwe:** ma'am, nna I don't wanna add something because I have nothing to say. The first day we came here, he said that if the student is struggling with something, we should go see him. Yes ma'am, we are aware of the availability of academic advisor at UAP campus, however, the challenge is with accessing the advisor. At UAP-UFS campus, we only have one academic advisor is available, for me I think the university should hire more academic advisor for upcoming students. I haven't gone to see him because I didn't see the need because I am ok with my modules.

**Researcher:** I think this goes to all of you, there was or is a need for you to see academic adviser, because other than helping you with study methods or structuring your modules, is also about what you are going to study next year. What happens if you are not accepted to the field of study that you applied for? the adviser in my understanding can help you in looking for other options should you not be accepted for what you applied for.

**Researcher:** what do you feel or how do you feel about the information shared with you by the academic adviser? Maybe we can go back as far as during the registrations, what information was provided there, and what information are you provided with now, is the information still the same or does it differ with what you were told during registration?

**Zizi:** no ma'am, the information before the time when we register here at school they said like when you want to do education you can do humanities. But like recently now the information changed, they told us there are small chances that you can do education even here, the guy came from main campus, he told us to continue with humanities, when we don't want to do humanities. It's painful ma'am, even our academic advisor like he try, he tries to fight for us, but we are waiting with painful heart, we still have that little hope that maybe we are going to do education. Maybe if they told us at the beginning of the year maybe that will be better, because they are only telling us now. I don't know whether it's a lecturer, or facilitator, or advisor.

**Researcher:** why didn't you register for education from the beginning? Because as far as I know, we have education on this campus.

**Zizi:** At the beginning of the year, during registration, they say that space is full for education. Then next year when I go to bloem campus, I am going to do the education with no problem, but suddenly it's changed now, they told us that we must continue with humanities then we can later do PGCE, I don't wanna do PGCE. Which is a bad thing for me because I don't wanna do PGCE. I just want do education straight forward. The only thing that brought me here at UFS is to do education not PGCE. Back at home I hear that most teachers who did PGCE, the department of education is taking them out because there are people who did education straight. It pointless for me to do PGCE when I know that back at home that people who did PGCE, they no longer get work.

**Thabang:** ma'am, this university is deceiving us, in that at the beginning of the year, we were promised that after completing UAP, we will be able to register for education at the main campus. Recently, in this semester (second semester), people from main campus came with DV2/3 forms for students to complete, and in that meeting, we were informed that students registered in Humanities will not be accepted for education in 2019. Ma'am we are angry because we were promised that we will study what we want next year. If they told us this information at the beginning of the year maybe I would have stayed at home and wait for next year or applied to other varsity but now it's difficult other varsity's applications are closed, we would have made other decisions, or at least we will have known that there is no space for us in education. Now we are told that we will be competing with first year students from matric, why will this UFS reject its own students? So ma'am, this takes us back to facilitators saying we are rejects, it's like it's becoming true that we are rejects. And ma'am I think between bloem campus and south campus someone is busy deceiving us, because I know someone who was at south campus and is now doing education, so I think someone is deceiving us for the sake of new students coming from matric.

**Sizwe:** I am not going to do education next year, I wanna do nursing, but then apparently, uhm I feel as if the university has failed, has deceived us, has made empty promises regarding our education. That is when we come here in this programme, as we are in this programme, this programme will allow us to go to a higher level and to

go to another campus and be able to continue with our study and be able to study what we wanna study. First of all, it's not everyone doing Sociology that wanted to do sociology, it's not everyone who is teaching that wanted to do teaching. But then, we were suggested that we that you know what go and do teaching and do this, this will access you to do what you wanna do and be where you wanna be. Now everything has changed, everything has changed now. There is a possibility that next year we might study there is possibility we might not study. First of all, yes I'm in sociology now, but then sociology is not what I intended and wanted to do, but because we were promised that when we are in this programme it will access us to higher learning. But then now, as the adviser was here, telling us that you know what, if you wanna do nursing, you better forget about it because they aint gonna take you. They don't take students from south campus in nursing health academy. Because here on this campus, our learning system is so different from theirs, most of the students that are coming from this campus when they get there they fail they don't make it, we are not capable or good enough to make it in nursing, that is what we were told due to those things they experience.

**Lydia:** And also with social work, we cannot be taken from here straight, because we are not fit enough to do social work. Even if I happen to do well maybe because I am going to continue with sociology and but I chose psychology also, even if I do well for social work there will be selection, so there is no guarantee that one day I will do social work. We are not take from here straight, we are fit enough to do social work.

**Kate:** Even in the small book, the yearbook they said that for you to do social work, you must obtain seventy percent (70%) in your modules, but they were told that you cannot be taken from here straight and now they say they don't take students from here (UAP).

**Researcher:** We have done a lot of things in this semester in terms of Sociology. We had sessions where you had to identify difficult sections, then we came together to discuss, however, during those sessions some people will show up and some will not show up. I think I should take as that those who didn't come for those session didn't experience any difficulty or challenges. Let's reflect on all aspects dealt with, like for



discussion of the content, discussion of how to approach different questions and even essays. Tell me, what I did with you, did you find it useful?

**Zizi:** Ma'am for me, like what you did to us, talking on behalf of our groups, like what you did to us was useful, it was useful, it was useful a lot. Because if we like look our results right now, it shows that there is change somewhere somehow. Like already now I think we going to promote the module, unlike first semester it was challenging, it was very difficult, and I think someone did not pass the module because it wasn't easy. So ma'am since you came into our lives in our study like helping us with sociology, you helped us a lot. I give you ten out of ten (10/10). Like you helped us a lot. Like with sociology, when you are a student, you need to find someone who knows sociology, when you do sociology you need someone who loves sociology, someone who understands sociology and can make you understand sociology, and love helping student. I don't think in these group there is anyone who is going to write the exam. Even if there is someone, I think that someone if they continue attending your discussion sessions and do revision for sociology, that person will pass.

**Sizwe:** Like you know ma'am, for me like someone coming from high school, someone from EMS thing I was doing accounting, economic and business studies. Sociology is new to me, I have never heard of the word sociology in my entire life. For me it was challenging, like I found it difficult to understand sociology I didn't know how to take notes for Sociology, even now you teach us how to take notes for Sociology and tackle questions essay. Like now ma'am, I can advise students who find the module difficult, I will advise students to seek for help not to wait until it's too late.

**Mamello:** In my side, I can say it was confusing and difficult. I tried seeking for help but I couldn't find exactly what I was looking for, so now I'm pleased that I don't have that confusion because you guided us where we needed help, I just wanna say thank you for assisting and not feeling tired when we came to you. You helped us a lot, sometimes you had to leave but you sat with us to help us. Sitting in class, we thought we understood, but when we had to do the work on our own it was difficult. So seeking for help really worked. Even in the first semester, I was expecting someone to come in to help us, maybe like a tutor, because even with our lecturers, they are not available to help us and when we ask them for help they couldn't because it seemed like they are giving us answers.

**Edward:** To add on, you know ma'am, what you did with us this second semester really help us. Like all our facilitators will be motivating us to be creative, but when it come to our books and tests we really didn't know what to do. As facilitators will say we need to be creative, and in the test when we write in the way we understand, we get things wrong. So thank you ma'am for the advise and support for this second semester, we really appreciate it.

**Mamello:** especially because this module is difficult, we really needed someone to help us through. This semester was better than first semester, because we now had someone to consult when we didn't understand, unlike first semester it was hard ma'am. You really came through for us, we really appreciate it. Last semester in the test, I was really confused because our lecturer will say we write how we understood, but when you got our feedback we got most things wrong, so meaning we didn't really understand, we didn't really understand that we had to quote from the book, we didn't really understand the work.

**Researcher:** let's talk about the tommenting moments because that is the impression that some of you gave me, like when I would ask you to explain your assignments, what you meant. Some of you were not happy, as you felt like I'm too critical on your assignments and made you work for long hours.

**Kate:** ma'am that really helped a lot, because when you asked us 'what do you mean here?', it really made us to think of lots of ideas, and it made us see that we have to write exactly what we were thinking. It also helped because asking us to explain made us think of different ideas and to be creative and not to be scared of writing our thoughts. It was good. That is why we did good in our assignments.

**Zizi:** you know ma'am if we can bring our old assignments, you will see that we didn't know how to reference. In our sociology class, we were not taught how to reference. Even our facilitator will say 'I know that you were taught how to reference in your other module, so go back to those modules and look at what you were taught'. But ma'am, the facilitator didn't teach us how to reference.

**Thabang:** even if you can check our assignments from other modules, you will see we didn't know how to reference. In those assignments, with referencing we all have question mark, so we didn't know how to reference.

**Edward:** ma'am, speaking on behalf of this group, we now can say we know how to reference.

**Kate:** don't say that, I can't say I totally know how to reference, I think I still need help. I am still struggling to reference.

**Zizi:** eish ma'am, to spent long hours working on assignment wasn't easy, like at time sitting with you for 2-3 hours was hard. But we at least got what we wanted, even though when it was happening it was like hard. It was taking long time and it wasn't easy.

**Researcher:** anything you will like to say before I let you go?

**Mamello:** I would like to say, thank you for everything you have done for us, we are grateful, we wouldn't have done it without you. We really appreciate it.

**Sizwe:** all I can say is that ma'am we love you, we love you a lot (laughter)

**Thabang:** ma'am all I can say is that we thank you, we thank you a lot, like we maybe I can say in Zulu we used to say umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. But honestly we thank you, without you we maybe would have fifty percent (50%) for sociology, but now some of us have eighty percent to ninety percent (80%-90%) for sociology.

**Researcher:** I think I forgot to ask you an important question, did you all promote Sociology:

**All co-researchers** indicated that they promoted and some with distinction, that is a mark between 75-91 %.

**Researcher:** I am not saying you are all not going to promote Sociology, but if let's say someone doesn't promote, how are we going to work on that?

**Sizwe:** ma'am, even though I don't think that's possible, if let's say someone doesn't promote, at least that person will be able to write the exam. We have to help him/her, and that will depend on him/her like a saying in Xhosa ungalithatha ihashe emfuleni kodwa ngeke ulinyazele uba lisele. You can't force someone to help if they don't want help. But ma'am, we are all willing to help him/her.

**Researcher:** how did you feel about this environment, working in this space?

**All co-researchers:** indicated that for them, conducive condition meant that there is someone available to assist, they further indicated that it does not matter whether they are assisted under a tree. All that mattered for them was getting help.

**Edward:** ma'am in here I am comfortable, in that in here even when I am wrong, I am corrected in a nice way and that made me accept my mistakes and , and I was comfortable to say when I don't understand. I was also comfortable in that even if I was wrong, at least my idea was heard, and even the group has always been willing to help, which is not the case in class with facilitators.

**Mamello:** I was comfortable in that small ideas means something when someone would not understand, you made us realise that what we thought as small idea, was actually a good and big idea, which made us have good assignments and presentations.

**Edward:** It was not the best condition having sessions in your (referring to researcher) office, it is small, like right now it's hot. It would have been better if we had our sessions in a class.

**Zizi:** It was good in winter it was good working from your office because it was warm. However where we did our sessions did not matter for me, because all we wanted was to work so that we can promote the module.

**Thabang:** It's comfortable in here (referring to researcher's office) working in your office was comfortable, because seeing your books kept us focused.

**Sizwe:** It was okay, because you are sitting in front of us, and you were able pick up when I had an idea, and you made us share the ideas. Also when one group member shared an idea, the another shared, then another, that forced me to share because I didn't want it to look like I don't know

**Researcher:** what would you say were the risks in being part of this group?

**Sizwe:** okay ma'am, let me start here, thank you for accepting us late. So ma'am, we became liars of where we were going to our classmates, at times I said I was going to the toilet for two hours. We also had to be careful about what we said around other students, because we had to keep our discussions confidential.

**Zizi:** We became liars because we didn't want our facilitator to find out that you were helping us, we didn't want facilitators to find due to fear of being victimised. We were scared for our facilitators.

**Thabang:** we were even scared that they will come to your office, and find us here.

**Researcher:** In closing, ladies and gentlemen, I would really like to appreciate your hard work during the sessions. What I would suggest that you take with you is that, be open to help the next person, what you have learnt from our sessions. I know that you have learnt a lot, therefore, don't see these information as only relevant for these sessions, use what you have learnt to better yourself and others be it academically and personally. Even though this is my study, I truly see this work as ours (researcher and co-researchers). I really can't thank you enough.