

**MEANING IN LIFE AND LIFE STRESSORS AS
PREDICTORS OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS'
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

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STATEMENT

I, Solomon Makola, declare that the thesis submitted by me for the Philosophae Doctor (Child Psychology) degree at the University of the Free State is my own independent work and has not previously been submitted by me at another university/faculty. I furthermore cede copyright of the thesis in favour of the University of the Free State.

S Makola

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my late mother Mrs. Anna Makola.

“A true symbol of the undying power of the human spirit”.

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ABSTRACT

*South African statistics indicate that students are dropping out of institutions of higher learning at an alarming rate. As a result, it is important that factors that ensure better throughput rates should be identified and investigated further. Several factors contribute towards academic performance at university. These factors include cognitive and non-cognitive factors as well as contextual factors. Meaning in life is an example of a non-cognitive factor that helps students to tolerate life stressors more effectively, thus improving adjustment to the life demands, including academic demands. The current research study aims to demonstrate the role that can be played by a sense of meaning in enhancing the academic performance of students. Its overarching objective is to determine whether the life stressors and resources students experience, their meaning in life, and Grade 12 marks can be used to predict the academic performance of first-year students. The research comprises both quantitative and qualitative components. In the quantitative component a random sample of 101 first-year students in the Faculty of Management Sciences studies was selected to participate in this study. A biographical questionnaire, the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) of Crumbaugh and Maholic (1969), and the Life Stressors and Social Resources Inventory-Youth Form (Moos & Moos, 1994), were used to gather data. In the qualitative component a stratified sample of two groups, 10 students with high PIL-scores and 10 students with low PIL-scores, was selected from the 101 participants in the quantitative study. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information. A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to analyse the influence of stressors, resources, purpose in life, and matric performance on the academic performance of first-year students. A computer software package (NUD*IST) was used to analyse the interviews.*

Results from this study indicate that the measuring instruments provided good, internally consistent measures. A relatively high level of meaning was found amongst participants in the present study. The findings suggest that there were three variables that significantly correlated with academic

performance; they are purpose in life, Grade 12 marks, and parents as a resource. It is mainly the variable purpose in life that showed a significant contribution to academic performance. Interestingly, parents as resource is not only significantly linked to academic performance, but it also is significantly linked to purpose in life. Explanation for the significant relationship between meaning in life and academic performance could be found in the fact that the results of the current study also revealed that participants with higher Purpose in life (PIL) scores employed more effective coping strategies in dealing with their stressors than those who achieved low PIL scores. What is distinctive about participants with higher Purpose in Life Test (PIL) scores is that they harbour positive attitudes, seem to be well adjusted, see meaning in the service they will provide, are intrinsically motivated and that they persevere despite being exposed to stressors. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of intervention programs aimed at improving the sense of meaning (the creative, experiential and especially the attitudinal values) of young people.

Keywords:

Meaning, purpose in life, logotherapy, higher education, universities, psychological well-being, exposure to stressors, access to resources, academic performance, parental support, students, matric scores, Grade 12 results.

ABSTRAK

*Suid-Afrikaanse statistiek dui aan dat studente by tersiêre instellings teen 'n ontstellende koers drui. Dit is daarom belangrik dat faktore wat 'n beter deurvloei verseker, geïdentifiseer en verder ondersoek word. Verskeie faktore dra tot akademiese prestasie aan universiteite by. Hierdie faktore sluit kognitiewe en nie-kognitiewe asook kontekstuele faktore in. Sinvolheid van die lewe is 'n voorbeeld van 'n niekognitiewe faktor wat studente help om lewensstressors effektiewer te hanteer en sodoende aanpassing by eise van die lewe, insluitende akademiese eise, te verbeter. Die huidige navorsingstudie is daarop gemik om aan te toon watter rol 'n gevoel van sinvolheid kan speel om die akademiese prestasie van studente te verbeter. Die oorkoepelende doelwit is om te bepaal of lewensstressors en aanvoeling vir sin in die lewe, sosiale hulpbronne asook Graad 12-punte gebruik kan word om die akademiese prestasie van eerstejaarstudente te voorspel. Die navorsing behels beide kwalitatiewe en kwantitatiewe komponente. In die kwantitatiewe komponent is 'n steekproef van 101 eerstejaarstudente in die Fakulteit Bestuurstudies gebruik om aan die studie deel te neem. Die studente is lukraak gekies. 'n Biografiese vraelys, die Sin in die Lewe-toets (SLT) van Crumbaugh en Maholic (1969) en die Lewensstressors en Sosiale Hulpbronne Inventaris-Jeugvorm (Moos & Moos, 1994), is gebruik om die data in te win. In die kwalitatiewe komponent is 'n gestratifiseerde steekproef van twee groepe, tien studente met hoë SLT-punte en tien studente met laer SLT-punte, gekies. Semigestruktureerde onderhoude is gebruik om inligting in te win. 'n Hiërargiese regressie-analise is uitgevoer om die invloed van stressors, hulpbronne, sinvolheidsbeleving en matrieksprestasie op die akademiese prestasie van eerstejaarstudente te ontleed. 'n Rekenaarsagtewarepakket (NUD*IST) is gebruik om die onderhoude te analiseer.*

Resultate van hierdie studie dui aan dat die meetinstrumente goeie, intern-konsekwente meting gelewer het. 'n Relatief hoë vlak van sinvolheid is tydens die studie by deelnemers gevind. Die bevindings dui aan dat daar drie

veranderlikes was wat betekenisvol met akademiese prestasie gekorreleer het: dit is doel in die lewe, Graad 12-punte en ouers as 'n hulpbron. Dit is veral die veranderlike van sinvolheidsbelewing wat 'n betekenisvolle bydrae tot akademiese prestasie getoon het. Interessant genoeg is ouers as hulpbron ook betekenisvol aan doel in die lewe gekoppel. 'n Verklaring vir die betekenisvolle verhouding tussen sinvolheid van die lewe en akademiese prestasie mag moontlik in die feit gevind word dat die uitslag van die studie ook aan die lig gebring het dat deelnemers met hoër Sin in die Lewe- (SLT)-punte doeltreffender strategieë inspan om stressors te bemeester as diegene wat lae SLT-punte behaal het. Wat deelnemers met hoër SLT-punte onderskei, is dat hulle houdings positief is, dat dit voorkom of hulle goed aangepas is, dat hulle sin sien in die diens wat hulle gaan bied, dat hulle instrinsiek gemotiveer is en dat hulle volhou ondanks die feit dat hulle aan stressors blootgestel word. In die huidige studie is gevind dat sin in die lewe 'n betekenisvolle verhouding tot akademiese prestasie het, met die gevolg dat die bevindings van hierdie studies sal bydra tot die ontwikkeling van intervensieprogramme wat daarop gemik is om die gevoel van sinvolheid (die kreatiewe, ervarings- en veral die houdingswaardes) van jong mense te verbeter.

Sleutelwoorde:

Sin, doel in die lewe, sinvolheidsbelewing, logoterapie, tersiêre onderwys, universiteite, psigologiese welsyn, blootstelling aan stressors, toegang tot hulpbronne, akademiese prestasie, ouersteun, studente, matriekpunte, Graad 12-punte.

**Meanings fulfilled, values actualised –
Nothing can erase it, nobody can
make it undone!
Deeds done, loves loved;
Suffering gone through with dignity and courage –
These are not irretrievably lost
but they are irrevocably stored
in the past.**

- Viktor Emil Frankl

	<u>Page No:</u>
STATEMENT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
ABSTRAK	vii

Chapter 1-INTRODUCTION

<i>1.1 ORIENTATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT</i>	1
<i>1.2 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SUCCESS OF STUDENTS</i>	2
<i>1.3 ADMISSION CRITERIA</i>	4
<i>1.4 PURPOSE IN LIFE</i>	5
<i>1.5 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS</i>	7
<i>1.6 RESEARCH METHOD</i>	8
<i>1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS</i>	10
<i>1.8 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION</i>	10
<i>1.9 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS</i>	12

Chapter 2-MEANING IN LIFE

<i>2.1 INTRODUCTION</i>	13
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2.2 PARADIGM SHIFT TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY	13
2.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING	14
2.3.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING	15
✓ Divisions of the Self	15
✓ Divisions of Cognition (Thinking)	15
✓ Divisions of Emotion (Feeling)	16
✓ Divisions of Behaviour	16
✓ Divisions of Social interaction	16
✓ Division of Value directedness	16
2.3.2 FACTORS THAT ENHANCE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING	17
2.3.2.1 SENSE OF COHERENCE	17
2.3.2.2 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE	19
2.3.2.3 HARDY PERSONALITY	22
2.3.2.4 SELF-EFFICACY	23
2.3.2.5 COMPARISON OF SENSE OF COHERENCE, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, HARDINESS AND SELF-EFFICACY	25
2.3.2.6 MEANING IN LIFE	25
2.3.2.6.1 <i>Concepts of Logotherapy</i>	26
2.3.2.6.1.1 Freedom of will	27
2.3.2.6.1.2 Will to meaning	27

2.3.2.6.1.3 Meaning of life	28
2.3.2.6.1.3.1 Resources of the human spirit	29
<i>2.3.2.6.2 Conceptualising the terms Meaning in life and Purpose in life</i>	31
<i>2.3.2.6.3 Meaning in life and Related Concepts</i>	33
2.3.2.6.3.1 Meaning in life and sense of coherence	33
2.3.2.6.3.2 Meaning in life and emotional intelligence	35
2.3.2.6.3.3 Meaning in life and hardy personality	36
2.3.2.6.3.4 Meaning in life and self-efficacy	37
2.3.2.6.3.5 Conclusion	37
<i>2.3.2.6.4 The Relationship between Meaning in life and well-being</i>	38
2.3.2.6.4.1 Meaning and psychological well-being	38
2.3.2.6.4.2 Meaning and social effects	40
2.3.2.6.4.3 Meaning and health benefits	41
2.3.2.6.4.4 Conclusion	41
<i>2.3.2.6.5 Ways to find Meaning in life</i>	42
2.3.2.6.5.1 Creative values	43

2.3.2.6.5.2 Experiential values	43
2.3.2.6.5.3 Attitudinal values	43
2.3.2.6.6 <i>Factors that contribute to a stronger Sense of Meaning/Purpose in life</i>	44
• Self-discovery (Need for Rooted-ness)	45
• Choice (Need for Frame of Orientation)	45
• Uniqueness (Need for Identity)	46
• Responsibility (Need for Relatedness)	46
• Self –transcendence (Need for Transcendence)	47
2.4 CONCLUSION	47
 Chapter 3-FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE 	
3.1 INTRODUCTION	49
3.2 PERSONAL FACTORS	50
3.2.1 COGNITIVE FACTORS	50
3.2.1.1 INTELLIGENCE	50
3.2.1.2 APTITUDE	52
3.2.1.3 LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY	53
3.2.1.4 PREVIOUS ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE	55
3.2.1.5 CONCLUSION	56
3.2.2 NON COGNITIVE FACTORS	57

3.2.2.1 DISPOSITIONAL FACTORS	57
3.2.2.1.1 <i>Motivation and Self-determination</i>	57
3.2.2.1.2 <i>Sense of Purpose</i>	58
3.2.2.1.3 <i>Self-Efficacy</i>	59
3.2.2.1.4 <i>Achievement Expectancies and Optimism</i>	60
3.2.2.1.5 <i>Test Anxiety</i>	61
3.2.2.1.6 <i>Personal Control</i>	62
3.2.2.1.7 <i>Personality Characteristics</i>	63
3.2.2.1.8 <i>Identity Development</i>	64
3.2.2.1.9 <i>Self-Esteem</i>	65
3.2.2.1.10 <i>Interest</i>	66
3.2.2.1.11 <i>Emotional Intelligence</i>	67
3.2.2.1.12 <i>Conclusion</i>	68
3.2.2.2 STUDY BEHAVIOUR	68
3.2.2.2.1 <i>Learning Styles</i>	68
3.2.2.2.2 <i>Study Strategies/Methods</i>	69
3.2.2.2.3 <i>Class Attendance</i>	70
3.2.2.2.4 <i>Time Management</i>	70
3.2.2.2.5 <i>Academic Procrastination</i>	71
3.2.2.2.6 <i>Conclusion</i>	72

3.2.2.4.5 Conclusion	87
3.3 CONTEXTUAL FACTORS	87
3.3.1 BROADER SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS	87
3.3.2 SOCIAL SUPPORT	89
3.3.2.1 FRIENDSHIPS	89
3.3.3 BACKGROUND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT	90
3.3.3.1 CONTINUED CONSEQUENCES OF SEGREGATION	91
3.3.3.1.1 Level of Preparedness	92
3.3.4 CONCLUSION	94
3.4 INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS	94
3.4.1 ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES	94
3.4.1.1 SUPPLEMENTAL INSTRUCTION PROGRAMMES	94
3.4.1.2 STUDENT COUNSELLING	95
3.4.2 SOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES	96
3.4.2.1 TRANSITION WORKSHOPS	96
3.4.2.2 SOCIAL INTEGRATION	96
3.4.2.3 PEER-MENTORING PROGRAMMES	97
3.4.3 TRANSFORMATION	98
3.4.4 FACILITIES	100

3.4.5 ASSESSMENT POLICY	100
3.4.6 SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY LECTURES	102
3.4.7 SUMMARY	103
3.5 CONCLUSION	103
 Chapter 4-MEANING IN LIFE AND EDUCATION	
4.1 INTRODUCTION	106
4.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SENSE OF MEANING IN CHILDREN	106
4.2.1 A SENSE MEANING	107
4.2.2 THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SENSE OF MEANING IN LEARNERS	109
4.2.2.1 SPIRITUALIZING EDUCATION	109
4.2.2.2 THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING	112
4.2.2.3 LACK OF PHILOSOPHICAL, MEANING ORIENTED THEMES IN EDUCATION	116
4.2.3 CONCLUSION	117
4.3 THE IMPACT OF SENSE OF MEANING ON EDUCATION	117
4.3.1 THE ROLE PLAYED BY SENSE OF MEANING IN HELPING STUDENTS ADJUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS	118

4.3.2 REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON THE IMPACT OF SENSE OF MEANING ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	122
4.3.2.1 AGE, SENSE OF MEANING AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	124
4.3.3 CONCLUSION	125
4.4 HOW CREATIVE, EXPERIENTIAL AND ATTITUDINAL VALUES CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT/PERFORMANCE	125
4.4.1 CREATIVE VALUES	126
4.4.2 EXPERIENTIAL VALUES	126
4.4.3 ATTITUDINAL VALUES	127
4.5 CONCLUSION	129
 Chapter 5-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	
5.1 INTRODUCTION	134
5.2 AIMS, GOALS, AND HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY	134
5.3 QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT	136
5.3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN	136
5.3.2 PARTICIPANTS	136
5.3.3 DATA GATHERING PROCESS	137
5.3.4 MEASURING INSTRUMENTS	137
5.3.4.1 BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE	137

5.3.4.2 PURPOSE IN LIFE TEST (PIL)	138
5.3.4.3 LIFE STRESSORS AND RESOURCES QUESTIONNAIRE- YOUTH FORM (LISRES-Y)	139
5.3.5 STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS	141
5.3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	142
5.4 QUALITATIVE COMPONENT	143
5.4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN	143
5.4.2 PARTICIPANTS	143
5.4.3 DATA GATHERING PROCESS	144
5.4.4 DATA GATHERING METHODS	144
5.4.4.1 BRIEF SCENARIO	144
5.4.4.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	145
5.4.5 METHOD OF ANALYSIS	146
5.4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	147
5.5 CONCLUSION	147
 Chapter 6-RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	
6.1 INTRODUCTION	148
6.2. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS	148
6.2.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS	148
6.2.2 INTERCORRELATIONS	152

6.2.3 HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS	155
6.2.4 DISCUSSION OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS	157
<i>Hypothesis 1 –Purpose in life and Academic performance</i>	158
<i>Hypothesis 2 – Stressors and Academic performance</i>	159
<i>Hypothesis 3 –Resources and Academic performance</i>	160
<i>Hypothesis 4 – Previous academic performance and University performance</i>	161
<i>Hypothesis 5 – Age and Academic performance</i>	162
6.3 QUALITATIVE RESULTS	163
6.3.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS	163
6.3.2 RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE STUDY	165
6.3.3 CURRENT SITUATION OF STUDENTS	165
6.3.3.1 OBSTACLES	165
6.3.3.1.1 <i>Family</i>	165
6.3.3.1.2 <i>Peers</i>	167
6.3.3.1.3 <i>Values</i>	167
6.3.3.1.4 <i>Increased Responsibility</i>	168
6.3.3.1.5 <i>Finances</i>	169
6.3.3.1.6 <i>Accommodation</i>	170
6.3.3.1.7 <i>Transport</i>	170
6.3.3.1.8 <i>Administration</i>	170

6.3.3.1.9 <i>Drugs</i>	171
6.3.3.1.10 <i>Summary</i>	171
6.3.3.2 COPING MECHANISMS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS	172
6.3.3.2.1 <i>Coping Mechanisms</i>	172
6.3.3.2.1.1 Faith	173
6.3.3.2.1.2 Positive attitudes	173
6.3.3.2.1.3 Patience and perseverance	173
6.3.3.2.1.4 Responsibility	174
6.3.3.2.1.5 Honesty	174
6.3.3.2.1.6 Counselling	175
6.3.3.2.1.7 Assertiveness	175
6.3.3.2.1.8 Humour	175
6.3.3.2.1.9 Self-acceptance	176
6.3.3.2.1.10 Setting time aside for reflection	176
6.3.3.2.1.11 Substance abuse	176
6.3.3.2.2 <i>Support Systems</i>	177

6.3.3.2.2.1 Family	177
6.3.3.2.2.2 Friends	178
6.3.3.2.2.3 Role models	178
6.3.3.2.2.4 Other activities	179
6.3.3.2.2.5 Institutional support	180
6.3.3.3 CREATING MEANING	180
6.3.3.3.1 <i>Values</i>	180
6.3.3.3.1.1 Creative values	181
6.3.3.3.1.2 Experiential values	181
6.3.3.3.1.3 Attitudinal values	182
6.3.3.3.1.4 Summary	183
6.3.3.3.2 <i>Circumstances</i>	183
6.3.3.3.2.1 Self-discovery	184
6.3.3.3.2.2 Choices	184
6.3.3.3.2.3 Uniqueness	185
6.3.3.3.2.4 Responsibility	185

6.3.3.3.2.5 Self-transcendence	185
6.3.3.3.3 <i>Losing Meaning</i>	186
6.3.4 DISCUSSION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS	187
6.3.4.1 STRESSORS	187
6.3.4.2 COPING MECHANISMS	190
6.3.4.3 SUPPORT SYSTEMS/ACCESS TO RESOURCES	191
6.3.4.4 CREATING MEANING	193
6.3.4.5 CIRCUMSTANCES THAT GIVE MEANING	195
6.3.4.6 LOSING MEANING	195
6.4 AN INTEGRATION OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS	196
6.5 CONCLUSION	200
 Chapter 7-CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY	
7.1 INTRODUCTION	202
7.2 PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE	202
7.2.1 FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	202
7.2.2 MEANING IN LIFE	203

7.2.3 MEANING AND EDUCATION	203
7.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS	204
7.3.1 LEVELS OF MEANING	204
7.3.2 MEANING IN LIFE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	205
7.3.3 MATRIC RESULTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	206
7.3.4 AGE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	206
7.3.5 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESSORS, RESOURCES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	207
7.3.6 PARENTS' INFLUENCE ON MEANING IN LIFE	208
7.3.7 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESSORS AND RESOURCES	209
7.3.8 THE PREDICTION OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	211
7.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	211
7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS	213
7.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY	214
LIST OF REFERENCES	216

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1- Alpha coefficients with regard to the PIL and LISRES-Y scales	140
Table 2- Averages and standard deviation for the total research group	149
Table 3- The PIL ranges of all participants	151
Table 4- Correlations between predictor and criterion variables for the various groups	153
Table 5- Contributions of the predictor variables to R ² with scholastic achievement as criterion	156
Table 6- Averages for focus group 1(High PIL scores)	163
Table 7- Averages for focus group 2 (Low PIL scores)	164
Table 8- Ranges with regard to PIL scores (Focus groups 1 & 2)	164

APPENDICES

Appendix I	- CONSENT FORM	I
Appendix II	- BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE	II
Appendix III	- FOCUS GROUP SCENARIO AND QUESTIONS	III
Appendix IV	- QUESTIONS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS	V
Appendix V	- INDEX TREE	VII
Appendix VI	- SWEDISH SCALE	IX

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 ORIENTATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Preparation for jobs and careers is seen as the primary role of higher education. Higher education institutions are perceived as instruments and agents of economic and/or social change, and to some extent they are also implementation sites of socio-economic policy (Lange & Luescher, 2003). Therefore, university education has become a necessary ingredient for economic progress and social well-being. In his address, at the conference of the Association of African Universities, President Thabo Mbeki, indicated that, *“undoubtedly, today, as in the past, higher education has an important role to play in the economic, social, cultural and political renaissance of our continent and in the drive for the development of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)”* (Mbeki, 2005).

President Mbeki (2005) went further to mention that it is important that higher education should not be separated from life itself, because it is a natural process through which members of the community gradually acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes appropriate to life in their community. Therefore, if a country is to have future leaders and knowledgeable opinion makers, it is crucial that it should invest in its students, by making higher education accessible to them (Mji, 2002).

In South Africa, it is important that issues relating to accessibility of tertiary education should be highlighted. There are two conceptions of access evident in South African Higher Education policy. The first is “access as participation” and second is “access with success” (Ministry of Education, 2001) Access as participation, is concerned with strategies directed at

inclusion of students from previously disadvantaged groups. While access with success, is concerned with ensuring that students succeed at the end of the programmes (Akoojee, 2004).

South African students are dropping out of institutions of higher learning at an alarming rate. According to recent reports, only one in five South African students who registered for a three-year degree in 2000 managed to graduate in 2003 and 50% of those who registered dropped out (Seepe, 2005). The statistics for dropout rate of first-year students, at institutions of higher learning in South Africa, is reported to be 38% and higher; and in some institutions it is as high as 64% (Macfariane, 2006). This is costing both the government (1.5 billion) and the institutions a lot of money (Kgosana, 2007a; Pretorius, 2000; Seepe, 2005; Weber, 2005).

In his keynote address to the Pan Pacific First Year Experience Conference Tinto (1995) mentioned that 75% of students who do not complete their studies attribute the reasons for this to difficulties encountered in the first year of study.

1.2 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SUCCESS OF STUDENTS

With the growing number of students attending university, there is an escalating concern about the factors preventing students from successfully completing their studies (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). These factors can be classified into three main groups: personal factors; contextual factors and institutional factors.

Personal factors, such as the time and energy that students devote to educationally purposeful activities could be regarded as one of the best predictors of student learning (Bitzer, 2003). Other personal factors, which could have an influence on academic achievement, include the student's motivation level, talent, skills, values, intellects, goals, health, social integration, as well as demographic factors like the age of the students,

gender, racial group, and other family variables. In studies of several researchers, age was found to be a powerful predictor of academic performance, with older students performing better than younger students (Ayaya, 1996; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gadzella et al., 2001; Hoskins, 1997; Malefo, 2000; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Besides age, gender was also shown to be a significant predictor of academic success, with females depicting a relative advantage over males (Baker, 2004; Barro, 2001; Gurian & Stevens, 2004; Jackson et al., 2003). Finally, race is another factor that has also been related to academic performance (Swinton, 2004).

Besides personal factors, contextual factors also have an impact on academic performance. Contextual factors are factors which go beyond the scope of higher education institutions, families and individual students. Huysamen (2001) indicates that, *“a demographic variable which is of greater political significance than gender in post-apartheid South Africa, is high school background (which continues as a proxy for a vast array of socio-economic, cultural, racial or ethnic differences, and vice versa)”* (p.130). As a result of financial difficulties, full-time students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds find themselves having to work part-time in order to finance their studies. Research indicates that employment responsibilities have a negative impact on academic performance (Borde, 1998; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Contextual factors such as background school environment also have an impact on academic performance. Background school environment refers to the wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds, which provide students with different life experiences, different opportunities and a great variety of expectations, needs and academic potential (Chikte & Brand, 1996; Goduka, 1996).

Finally, the third group of factors which also impacts on academic performance are institutional factors. Institutional factors are factors within the institution itself such as the proximity of the university, the quality of the learning environment, support services, level of academic challenge, student-staff interaction, admission criteria and selection packages,

including factors within the institution which students have no direct control of.

The above-mentioned factors pose a great challenge for authorities in institutions of higher learning as a result of the fact the most of these factors are not in their direct control. This results in situations where educational authorities are left wondering which factors they should consider before and after admitting first-year students.

1.3 ADMISSION CRITERIA

According to Act No 101 of 1997 the one problem that has been facing institutions of higher learning in South Africa is equity (RSA, 2001). In order to address this problem, most institutions in South Africa introduced admissions testing together with foundation/bridging programmes. These programmes were mainly intended for students who do not comply with admission requirements, due to their poor matriculation results (Koch & Foxcroft, 2003).

While bridging/alternative programmes were successful in increasing the numbers of students from previously disadvantaged groups participating in higher education institutions, the throughput and success rates of these students have not increased. *“The lower pass and graduation rate of learners from previously disadvantaged groups, compared to those of White learners, attest to this”* (Koch & Foxcroft, 2003, p.193). In support of these findings, Dr Adam Habib of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) also found that while 60.9% of the present student population in formerly white South African universities are Black, only 14.9% of these Black students end up graduating (Kgosana, 2007a). This will require admissions measures that differ from current approaches, which mainly consider school matriculation examinations or special university entrance examination, to one that includes a wide variety of personal factors and academic factors (Bokhorst et al., 1992; Fraser & Killen, 2003).

Therefore, a multi-dimensional approach that includes academic and personal factors like interest, attitudes, motivation, self-discipline and sense of purpose, could be helpful in this regard (Fraser & Killen, 2003). It is also important that the performance standards for such approaches should be tailored for the South African context. By using a multi-dimensional approach, the student's level of preparedness for university education is assessed, and areas that might need further development will be identified where necessary. The one group of students that might benefit from a multi-dimensional approach, are students from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Students from historically disadvantaged communities are exposed to numerous stressors that can impact negatively on their academic performance. For example, academic under-preparedness, the fear of failing in tertiary institutions, worry about financial aid and intense competition for available jobs are some of the stressors that influence the adjustment of these students (Khahn, 2002). Such factors can also contribute to lack of meaning and/or purpose in life.

1.4 PURPOSE IN LIFE

Youth more than any other age group are confronted with a number of decisions, such as the choice of a career, a life style, a mate, and a family; which could ultimately result in meaning attainment or loss thereof. A sense of purpose and/or meaning addresses the problems of youth on multiple levels, and it also warns against reductionism in education (Fabry, Bulka & Sahakian, 1979). Therefore Purvis (1979) states that the problems of youth are the problems of man; however they are more complex, intense, demanding, and critical.

In institutions of higher learning, students are essentially exposed to a number of stressors, which ultimately might result in either positive or

negative experiences. In the midst of all these experiences, the youth must decide how they are going to respond to these stressors. In this way they become aware that they are not passive objects controlled by internal drives and external social forces, but active subjects who can take a stance towards the self and the world (Purvis, 1979).

Universities can play a pivotal role in helping youth/students find meaning and purpose in life. The search for meaning in universities is not something new; Sharon Parks has been investigating such issues for more than two decades (Chambers & Parks, 2002). When asked why she focused mainly on college-age-group, and not pre-college or post-college-age group, she indicated that; critical consciousness can begin to emerge as early as sixteen or seventeen years of age. But it does not take place overnight. It takes time, practice, and guidance. It is the function of universities to initiate and guide students on the demands of the broader culture (Chambers & Parks, 2002).

Research has shown that, a strong purpose in life helps people to master emotional problems and stressful life circumstances. Thus, a high sense of purpose is seen as a buffering factor that reduces a person's risk of developing psychological problems, as can be seen from the negative correlation between the scores on Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and MMPI that indicates psychological problems. According to a South African research study conducted by Moomal (1999), there is a significantly positive correlation between meaning in life and mental well-being.

Students' sense of meaning can be an important motivating factor that enables them to be successful in their studies, irrespective of the stressors they are exposed to. According to Giovinco (2001), "*students, especially those having the most difficulty in school, need personal reasons (meaning) to meet learning requirements*" (p.56). Therefore education should not only be focused on skill development, but rather on searching for meaning (Pitino, 2003).

Despite being exposed to stressors, that is, poverty, HIV/Aids, under preparedness and crime, many poor and poorly prepared students do succeed at university and beyond. In the end it is up to the students to decide how they respond to these stressors. With positive attitudes, they are likely to succeed. For them, *“success or failure is an individual matter, a mysterious blend of fate and will”* (Merullo, 2002, p.4).

The challenge facing universities is to acknowledge the diverse needs and cater for the changing and diverse population of first-year students. It is clear from this information that it is important to gather information about the levels of meaning in life that students experience, to find out about the factors contributing to the personal motivation of students, such as meaning in life, and to investigate the factors that contribute to the experience of meaning in life. Acknowledgement and thorough consideration of such factors will ensure that students do not only gain access to university education, but that they also be offered the necessary support, which in turn, will increase their chances of succeeding in their academic endeavours (Mji, 2002). Therefore, the main focus of this research study is on the spiritual dimension, with specific reference to meaning and purpose in life of first-year university students.

1.5 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between students' sense of meaning and their academic performance. The overarching objective of this study is to determine whether the life stressors and resources students experience, their meaning in life, Grade 12 marks and age of first-year students, can be used to predict their academic performance.

Specifically, this research aims at demonstrating the role that can be played by a sense of meaning in enhancing the academic performance of students.

The researcher will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- What are the levels of meaning experienced by these students?
- What is the impact of a sense of meaning on students' academic performance?
- What is the nature of personal and academic stressors students are exposed to?
- What differentiates those students who find meaning in their studies, despite being exposed to stressors, from those who live in similar circumstances but cannot find meaning in their lives?

The first two questions will be answered by the quantitative components of this study, and the last two questions will be answered by the qualitative study.

The following research hypothesis has been formulated for this study:

The researcher postulates that students with a strong sense of meaning are more likely to succeed in their studies irrespective of the stressors they are exposed to.

1.6 RESEARCH METHOD

This study will have a quantitative and a qualitative component.

For the quantitative data, a random sample of approximately one hundred and fifty first-year students in the Faculty of Management Sciences were selected to participate in this study. Participants were selected from the latter faculty because it is the largest, of the two faculties at Welkom campus. Data was gathered by using two questionnaires: (1) *Purpose in Life Test (PIL)* (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969) and (2) *Life Stressors and Social Resources Inventory-Youth Form (LISRES-Y)* (Moos & Moos, 1994).

Academic performance of students in the first and second term was also used as a measure of students' academic performance.

The criterion variable is first-year academic performance. The predictor variables are meaning in life (as measured by the PIL test) and exposure to stressors and availability of resources (as measured by LISRES-Y) as well as Grade 12 academic performance. The influence of age as a demographic variable on first-year academic performance was also investigated.

Qualitative data was collected by means of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Twenty research participants were selected from 150 first-year students who participated in the quantitative study. A stratified sample of two groups, ten students with high PIL-scores and ten students with low PIL-scores were selected. The gender ratio for each group was five male and five female students. By making use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, the researcher hoped to gain information of the subjective experiences of students, with regard to the construct of meaning/purpose in life, and how it impacts on their personal adjustment.

By making use of quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher investigated the construct of meaning/purpose in life and its impact on academic performance, on multiple levels, that is, objectively and subjectively. Thus the two methods complement each other in the sense that they provide the researcher with both descriptive and empirical information, which allows him the opportunity of validating the whole construct of meaning in life, subjectively and objectively. For this purpose, triangulation is used. Triangulation is valuable in testing one source of information against the other to overcome alternative explanations and prove a hypothesis (Fetterman, 1998).

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The following ethical issues were taken into consideration.

- Permission for conducting this research was obtained from the Campus Management of Central University of Technology, Free State (Welkom campus).
- Research participants were fully informed about the nature of the research, and their permission was obtained before the researcher proceeded.
- The privacy of the research participants was respected, and they were assured that all information would be kept confidential.
- No form of deception was used to obtain information.
- All participants were treated equal.
- The researcher was not biased in any way, when gathering data. All qualitative data was assessed or evaluated by an independent person.

1.8 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

Academic performance: For the purposes of this research academic performance is defined as the success or lack thereof, in academic responsibilities by a particular student at a specific university, by the end of the academic year.

Motivation: For purposes of this research, motivation is defined as an awareness of one's need for academic success and determination in ones' studies irrespective of challenges. Students who are motivated will be

marked by their willingness to go on with their studies despite the circumstances confronting them.

First-year students: For purposes of this research, these are students who are registered for the very first time, in the Faculty of Management Sciences at the Welkom campus of the Central University of Technology, Free State.

Logotherapy: This is the theory of Viktor Emil Frankl on healing through meaning. It falls within the domain of Positive Psychology. It emphasises that people can survive any condition in life, as long as they are strong willed, and able to see meaning and purpose in their lives. According to Frankl (1985), “Logos” is stronger than “Pathos”, meaning fulfilment is stronger than suffering. Therefore, a person who has a reason to live can survive anything. There are three ways through which meaning can be found; by creating a deed, by experiencing a deed, and through the attitudes one chooses when confronted with an unchangeable fate or unavoidable suffering. This theory of logotherapy will form the basis of this research.

Purpose in life/Meaning in life: For purposes of this research the two words are used interchangeably. They refer to the extent to which students see meaning and purpose in their lives. That is, the extent to which students are determined to face any circumstances confronting them, and still shape positive meanings out of them.

Stressors students are exposed to/Challenges facing students: In the current research, the two words are used interchangeably. They refer to all aspects, that is cultural and socio-economic, that are perceived as having a negative impact on learning, and thus resulting to failure.

Resources students have access to: They refer to all aspects, that is, cultural and socio-economic, that are perceived as having a positive impact on learning, and thus resulting in academic success.

1.9 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. In this chapter, which serves as an introduction, the researcher provides a more elaborate discussion of the dilemma of poor success rates of South African tertiary students, which includes statistics on dropout and failure rates. A brief introduction to the possible causes of academic failure is presented. The researcher also discusses the construct of meaning in life/ sense of purpose, and its impact on adjustment in general, as well as how it may influence academic performance. This is followed by a brief overview of the essence of the problem the researcher investigated.

In the subsequent chapters, the researcher discusses the following: Chapter two is a conceptualisation of the construct of meaning and purpose in life. Chapter three is a discussion of factors contributing to academic success and failure. Chapter four covers the impact of purpose in life on academic performance and adjustment of students in higher education. In the fifth chapter the research method employed in this research study is discussed and the results presented in chapter six. In the final chapter (Chapter 7) a conclusion of the main results as well as recommendations for future studies are highlighted. The limitations of the study are also presented.

In the next chapter the construct of meaning in life is discussed.

Chapter 2

MEANING IN LIFE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to describe the construct of “meaning in life”, and the impact of meaning in life on general psychological well-being. As a result, before elaborating on the construct of meaning in life, the paradigm shift to positive psychology and specifically the study of human strengths and well-being will be highlighted.

This is followed by a discussion of the factors that determine or enhance well-being, as well as a discussion of the constructs related to meaning in life. These factors are of fundamental importance for research and practice in positive psychology, due to the focus on health, strengths, capacities and well-being. Most of these factors are linked to the humanistic perspective, which is very influential in psychology as a discipline.

Also highlighted in this chapter are several studies, which bear testimony to the relationship between the construct of meaning in life and well-being. A discussion of factors that promote or influence the development of meaning in life will also be incorporated in the last part of the chapter.

2.2 PARADIGM SHIFT TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology, the science that studies human behaviour and attempts to describe, explain and change behaviour, has for many years, directed its attention to things that can go wrong in the human mind. In other words it followed the pathogenic orientation. The emphasis on mental dysfunction or illness developed such significance that a discrete field of study, “psychopathology” was developed. In simple terms psychopathology is understood as “*the study of the illness of the mind*” (Basson et al., 2001, p.4).

The focus of this one-sided, however important, field of human functioning has brought about a highly developed knowledge of people's mental vulnerabilities, deficiencies and ultimate illnesses. The knowledge about what can go wrong in people's minds is so extensive that volumes of descriptive manuals exist containing every category of mental disturbance, described in its finest details. This indeed is very impressive, however on the flip side of the coin is the fact that the discipline of psychology knows very little about what keeps people mentally well and flourishing (Wissing, 2000).

As a result academics and practitioners realised the need for additional knowledge, research into and practical methods to sustain people's inner strengths, growth, adaptive resources and overall well-being. This led to the development of the paradigm of positive psychology. According to Strümpfer (2005), this paradigm is fairly ancient. In his recent work, Strümpfer (2005) referred to publications by authors who cited Jung, Terman, J. B Watson, Maslow, Frankl and Assagioli as early examples of positive psychology. He went further to indicate that a large number of other predecessors are also exemplary of the underlying principles of positive psychology. However literature on people's psychological health and adaptive strengths is very limited. From this perspective the important questions on a theoretical and practical level will be: How is it possible that people survive and some even grow irrespective of the trials and tribulations of life? Where does the bio-psycho-social well-being and strengths originate from, and how can they be enhanced? (Strümpfer, 1990, 1995).

2.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Because until now there is no distinctively named field of psychology which studies psychological strengths, Wissing and van Eeden (1997) suggested the construct of **psycho-fortology**, in which *"not only the origins of psychological well-being should/will be studied, but also the nature,*

manifestations, and consequently ways to enhance psychological well-being and develop human capacities” (p.5). Psychological well-being is a broader construct than mental health. It accommodates other constructs, which focus on human strengths, without being too general and over inclusive. Unlike mental health, which focuses on the absence of psychopathology, psychological well-being focuses on new directions such as capacity building, prevention and enhancement of quality of life (Wissing & van Eeden, 1994, 1997; Wissing, 2000).

2.3.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

What are the characteristics of a person experiencing psychological well-being? Psychological well-being is multi-dimensional in nature; as a result the characteristics of a healthy personality and of a psychologically sound person can be covered in the following divisions of human functioning (Basson et al., 2001, p.6-7; Wissing & Van Eeden, 1994, p.8, 1997, p.13-17; Wissing & Van Eeden, 2002, p.40):

✓ **Divisions of the Self**

A perception of self-esteem and self-worth; the person knows him/herself well and feels comfortable in being him/herself without pretence. The person has positive attitudes towards his/her physical self, which manifests in a health promoting lifestyle full of zest, energy and activity.

✓ **Divisions of Cognition (Thinking)**

Constructive thinking skills; the person can perceive and assess his/her own life circumstances correctly and is actively involved in it.

A realistic attitude about reality; the person's thinking is flexible, mostly optimistic and is characterised by the self-regulating use of learned thinking skills to direct behaviour and master life's demands.

✓ **Divisions of Emotion (Feeling)**

Coping strategies to deal with stress; the person's emotions are mostly positive and characterised by feeling depth and optimism for life. Negative feelings are not avoided or denied but can be mastered. There's a balance between positive and negative feelings. The person has a sense of coherence and is able to master life's challenges (self-efficacy).

✓ **Divisions of Behaviour**

The person's behaviour is self-regulated and he/she is effective in problem-solving, relating to others, dealing with stress and mastering the environment.

✓ **Divisions of Social interaction**

A sense of having social support from family and friends; the person establishes and maintains mostly stable and mutually satisfying relationships with others, in which social support is reciprocated. Empathetic goodwill is shown toward mankind.

✓ **Division of Value directedness**

The person is guided in thought, feeling and behaviour by a personal set of values that promote life satisfaction, meaningfulness and spiritual depth. The person is generally satisfied with life.

A psychologically well person functions as a "whole" in which all the above characteristics are integrated into a complex system which functions effectively as a holistic unit and which "grows" in time. Such holistic integration is manifested in the person's high level of adaptability, satisfaction and mastery of life's demands. As a result, people differ in how they experience and depict psychological well-being (Wissing & Van Eeden, 1994).

2.3.2 FACTORS THAT ENHANCE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

There are a number of factors that enhance well-being. In the next section, only five of these factors are discussed; namely, sense of coherence, emotional intelligence, hardy personality, self-efficacy and meaning in life. Each of these five factors contributes to the previously mentioned divisions of optimal human functioning. Besides these factors, there are others that are still relevant to well-being not included in this chapter.

2.3.2.1 SENSE OF COHERENCE

The first factor that promotes psychological well-being is the construct of “sense of coherence”, which was pioneered by Aaron Antonovsky. He proposed that the human sciences should try to understand why most people are physically and mentally well, irrespective of life’s stressors and demands that are at times so relentless to the extent that one would expect a much higher incidence of illness either physically, mentally or both. Antonovsky’s (1979) steering question was “*whence the strength?*” (p.7), which means that we need to know what causes people to survive and even grow personally, despite all kinds of difficulties. He then coined the concept **saluto-genesis**, which means the origin of health.

After a great deal of examination, discussion and research into people’s ability to deal with life’s stressors and their ability to stay healthy, he came to the conclusion that people’s “*way of seeing the world*” (Antonovsky, 1993, p.725) or their internal orientation (point of reference) had much to do with their strengths. He then introduced the construct sense of coherence (SCO) to describe and measure such an orientation to life.

This sense of coherence (SOC), which is believed to generate and enhance physical and mental health, is defined by Antonovsky (1987) as:

A global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring, though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one’s internal and external environments in

the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (p.19).

The three numbered portions of the definition describe three core components which Antonovsky (1987) identified on the basis of a qualitative study of a number of persons who had experienced major trauma with unavoidable major consequences for their lives, but were coping remarkably well. A description of each of these core components follows (Antonovsky, 1979, pp.124-128; also 1987, pp.16-19).

Comprehensibility, the cognitive (thinking) component, refers to the extent to which individuals perceive the stimuli from both within and without as clear, ordered, structured and consistent information, and on the basis of which he or she can expect that these stimuli will in future also be orderable, explicable and even predictable. It means that the perceptions make cognitive sense. The division of human functioning linked to this component is the division of cognition.

Manageability, the instrumental (action) component, refers to the extent to which people perceive the events of their life as experiences that are, at least, bearable, or better still, can be coped with, or even better, challenges that can be met. The 'available resources' referred to in the definition may be under the person's own control but may also be under the control of legitimate others who have the power to resolve matters in their interest, for example, a spouse, relative, friends, a physician, leaders, formal authorities, the trade union, a political party or God. The division of human functioning linked to this component is the division of behaviour.

Meaningfulness, this is the motivational component, which refers to the extent to which the person feels that life makes sense emotionally, rather than cognitively. At least some of the problems and demands of living are

felt to be welcome challenges, motivating one to invest energy. The division of human functioning linked to this component is the division of emotion.

In terms of these components, a person with a weak SOC would:

- perceives internal and external stimuli as noise, not information, as inexplicable disorders and chaos, and as unpredictable;
- experiences the events of life as unfortunate things that happen to her/him and which victimise her/him unfairly;
- feels that nothing in life matters much, or worse, that life is full of unwelcome demands and wearisome burdens (Antonovsky, 1987).

Antonovsky (1987) postulates that in order for a person to maintain a strong SOC, there are four spheres that cannot be excluded, namely his/her own feelings, (division of emotion), immediate interpersonal relations (division of social interaction), the major sphere of activity, such as work (division of behaviour) and existential issues of death, inevitable failures, shortcomings, conflict and isolation (division of value directedness). Research has also supported the relationship between sense of coherence and well-being. Studies conducted by several researchers (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1985; Kalimo, Pahkin & Mutanen, 2002; Larsson & Setterlind, 1990; Ryland & Greenfeld, 1991; Ying & Akutsu, 1997), found that SOC seems to be a general stress resistance resource and a good predictor of well-being. Studies examining student samples revealed that undergraduate students with a high sense of coherence are less anxious (Hart, Hittner & Paras, 1991). In a South African study on university students by Hutchinson (2005), a strong relationship was found between sense of coherence and student's ability to cope.

2.3.2.2 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The second construct related to psychological well-being is the construct emotional intelligence (EI). The concept of "emotional intelligence" resulted

from an increasing recognition that other aspects besides cognitive abilities play a role in life performance (Goleman, 1996). As indicated the psychology of well-being is a multidimensional approach to the pursuit of optimal human functioning and as a result, emotional intelligence is an important dimension of this multidimensional approach (Fouche, 1998).

More specifically, the habits of emotional wellness refer to the ability to (i) maintain a fairly constant emotional state with moderate responses to the flow of life events, and (ii) experience a high proportion of positive over negative states (Goleman, 1996). In addition, at the centre of personal well-being lies self-responsibility. This entails self-control and taking responsibility for one's own choices, actions and emotions.

In this light, emotional intelligence (EI) can be defined as a set of skills and competencies such as initiative, empathy, building trust and self-discipline, which affect a person's ability to cope under different pressures and circumstances (Scott, 2005).

The following 15 characteristics are typical of emotionally intelligent individuals: (Brady, 1998; Goleman, 1996, p.34; Goleman, 1998, p.26-27, p.54; Swart, 1997; Wolmarans, 1998, p.23-25)

- **Emotional awareness.** (Division of Emotion). They display the ability to recognise, differentiate between and understand the cause of their own feelings.
- **Emotional independence.** (Division of Emotion). Their emotions are not influenced by the emotional states of people around them, because they tend to have an internal locus of control. Taking responsibility is an important function of emotional independence.
- **Stress tolerance.** (Division of Emotion) They have an optimistic orientation towards change and towards their ability to handle situations, and feel that stressors can be controlled.
- **Self-regard.** (Division of Self). They have the ability to respect and accept themselves as basically good.

- **Assertiveness.** (Division of Self). They have the ability to express feelings, beliefs, thoughts and to defend their personal rights.
- **Self-actualisation.** (Division of Value directedness). They realise their optimal potential through engagement in activities in the pursuit of meaning and purpose in life.
- **Interpersonal relationships.** (Division of Value directedness). Emotionally intelligent people have the ability to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with “significant” others.
- **Happiness.** (Division of Value directedness). This implies satisfaction with life and the ability to enjoy life. A lack of happiness can be seen in depression, guilt, withdrawal, anxiety, and a lack of drive.
- **Empathy.** (Division of Social interaction). They display awareness, understanding and appreciation of the feelings of others. Empathy is grounded in the ability to identify correctly and respond genuinely and appropriately to the emotions of others.
- **Social responsibility.** (Division of Social interaction). They cooperate in and make constructive contributions to their social community.
- **Problem-solving.** (Division of Cognition). They can identify and define their problems effectively and can explore and implement creative and appropriate solutions.
- **Reality testing.** (Division of Cognition). They have the skill to test the correspondence between their own experience and objective reality.
- **Flexibility.** (Division of Cognition). They are able to adapt their thoughts, feelings and actions to changing circumstances.
- **Optimism.** (Division of Cognition). This refers to the ability to maintain hope, to have a positive outlook on life, and not to shy away from problems, conflict and confrontation.
- **Impulse control.** (Division of Behaviour). They have the capacity to resist or delay action emerging from impulses, drives or temptation.

Research studies have also supported the relationship between emotional intelligence and well-being. According to a study by Bar-On (2005) emotional intelligence and subjective well-being are significantly related. The latter study also revealed that emotionally and socially intelligent individuals experience a higher sense of well-being than those who are less emotionally and socially intelligent. To complement the findings of Bar-On (2005), a longitudinal study by Ciarrochi and Scott (2006) found that low levels of emotional competence correlated negatively with well-being.

Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000) indicate that the pioneers of emotional intelligence have made claims that this construct can be learned,

yet a good deal of research into many personality traits that are listed as part of emotional intelligence indicates that they can have rather considerable genetic, biological, and early-learning contributions, which, as with other parts of personality, make them difficult, albeit not impossible, to change (p.111).

2.3.2.3 HARDY PERSONALITY

Hardy personality, a concept pioneered by Kobasa, is a third factor highlighted in this chapter which promotes psychological well-being. Using existential personality theory as the foundation, Kobasa (1979) proposed hardiness as a global personality concept which regulates stress-health relationships. Hardiness was conceived as having three components (Kobasa, 1982, p.6-8, p.10-12):

Commitment (vs. alienation), a belief in the truth, importance and value of what one is and what one is doing; also a tendency to involve oneself actively in many situations in life, for example, work, family, friendship and social organisation. This component can be linked to three divisions of human functioning; division of self, division of social interaction and division of value directedness.

Control (vs. powerlessness), a tendency to believe and act as if, by and large, one can influence the events of one's life through what one imagines, says and does, with an emphasis on personal responsibility. This component can be linked to two divisions of human functioning; division of cognition and division of behaviour.

Challenges (vs. threat), an expectation that change, rather than stability, is the norm in life and that change will present one with opportunities and incentives for personal development. This leads one to be more aware of and more responsible for how time is spend. The division of human functioning linked to this component is the division of emotion.

The above-mentioned concepts were conceived as components of a single inseparable constellation and not as independent aspects. The outcomes of a study conducted by Allred and Smith (1989) support the hypothesised cognitive style of the hardy person. The latter study, reports that during high stress condition, hardy individuals endorsed more positive self-statements than did persons low on hardiness. In addition hardy subjects reported more positive self-statements in high stress conditions. On the contrary less hardy subjects reported fewer positive thoughts in the high stress conditions (Allred & Smith, 1989). In a study conducted by Collin (1992) hardiness acted as a buffer, moderating the effects of stress on a tendency for drug abuse.

2.3.2.4 SELF-EFFICACY

According to cognitive behaviourists the one thing that is more important than what a person is *actually* capable of doing, is what a person *thinks* he or she is capable of doing (Bandura, 1997). Thus, the fourth factor which promotes psychological well-being, incorporated in this chapter is "self-efficacy". Self-efficacy may be regarded as a person's *belief* that s/he can cope with a difficult situation. It is a feeling of adequacy and efficiency in dealing with life. The concept can be traced back to the work of cognitive-

behaviourist Albert Bandura. According to his theory, confidence is related to the trait of self-efficacy, which refers to the extent to which a person believes that he or she has resources and skills to cope with a situation (Bandura, 1997). A person who measures high on self-efficacy experience low anxiety and is able to meet new challenges effectively, as opposed to one who measures low on self-efficacy (Louw & Edwards, 1998).

At the centre of self-efficacy is the right “attitude”. Positive attitudes cultivate success. Individuals with high self-efficacy bounce back from failures. Their approach is one of how to handle things rather than worrying about what can go wrong (Bandura, 1986). But how can a person move from negative to positive beliefs about themselves? Firstly, on an abstract level by practising positive (but also realistic) thoughts about themselves. This also means setting goals that are attainable. Secondly, on a concrete level by developing a competency of any kind in order to expose one to successful experiences. This will enable a person to take calculated risks and to seek out more demanding challenges. Mastering these challenges in turn increases the person’s sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Having this attitude will make one more likely to make the best use of whatever skills they may have, or to do what it takes to develop them (Goleman, 1996). The divisions of human functioning linked to this construct are the division of self, cognition and behaviour.

High self-efficacy, implying expectations of success, usually leads to a successful outcome and thus enhances self-esteem. Low self-efficacy, entailing expectations of failure, usually results in an unsuccessful outcome and thus lowers self-esteem. In a study by Peng, Shu-hau and Li (2005) significant differences were found between subjective well-being among students with different self-efficacy levels.

2.3.2.5 COMPARISON OF SENSE OF COHERENCE, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, HARDINESS AND SELF-EFFICACY

Before discussing the fifth construct (meaning in life), a brief conclusion about the four concepts is tabled. The above-mentioned constructs overlap in the sense that each has a meaning component. They acknowledge that challenges are part of life and that it is the responsibility of each individual to face up to them. As a result, the four constructs explain why a person needs to have goals in life. Each contribute explanations on why some people are well adjusted despite the challenges facing them. The constructs also fit well within the well-being paradigm because they each emphasise one or more divisions of human functioning. To strengthen the relationship between the four concepts, literature revealed that different researchers have also found significant relationships between each of the four concepts and well-being. In the next section the construct of meaning in life is discussed.

2.3.2.6 MEANING IN LIFE

The fifth factor that promotes psychological well-being, and which is also the central focus of this chapter, is the construct of “meaning in life”. Having meaning in life is a central aspect of being human. Questions relating to what is the meaning of life, has always been at the centre of philosophical discussions. People are always evaluating their lives in an effort to reach for greater values they want to live for (Längle, 2004). Psychological attention to the concept of meaning in life has its origin in the writings of Dr. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) of Vienna, and in the efforts of many psychologists who have attempted to theorise about and define positive psychological functioning (Adler, 1997).

Contrary to Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, Victor Frankl hypothesised that; it is not only a repressed will to pleasure or power that can result in sickness, but that a repressed will to meaning, can produce similar results. In fact, he positioned the will to meaning at a superior level than the will to

pleasure and power. Pleasure, according to Frankl is not an end in itself but the results of a person having discovered meaning, while power according to Frankl is said not to be an end in itself but a means to an end, namely to find meaning. However meaning or logos, in Frankl's view is not the results of or a mere means to an end, but it is an essence. Human beings are essentially the only animals capable of searching for meaning in their lives (Barnes, 2000; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Scully, 1995). Frankl (1967) named this meaning focused theory and philosophy logotherapy.

In the next section, the origin of the construct meaning in life namely logotherapy is discussed and concepts closely related to will to meaning are clarified. The importance of sense of meaning to well-being is also highlighted.

2.3.2.6.1 Concepts of Logotherapy

From his experiences in three concentration camps during World War II, Frankl came to realise that life has meaning under all circumstances, and that it is psychologically damaging when a person's search for meaning is blocked (Frankl, 1985).

Logotherapy is described as the third Viennese school of psychotherapy (Greening, 1998). It falls under the category of existential psychology. However logotherapy moves beyond existential analysis in the sense that it is essentially more than analysis of existence or being (Frankl, 1967). In this sense, logotherapy is not only concerned with being but also with meaning.

The term logotherapy when it is translated literally means "therapy through meaning" (Frankl, 1978). Barnes (2000) states that this term at times can be misleading and be misunderstood because therapy means the healing of illness, which is only part of logotherapy's intended function. Logotherapy is not only a method to cure the sick, but is also a method to maintain health or wellness through a worldview that stresses what is right with people rather

than what is wrong (Barnes, 2000; Moomal, 1999; Shek, 1992). Besides its use in psychotherapy, other applications of logotherapy include helping people find more meaning in life by means of its philosophy.

Logotherapy's view of man is based on three pillars, the freedom of will, the will to meaning and the meaning of life.

2.3.2.6.1.1 Freedom of will

The first pillar of logotherapy is freedom of will. Human beings are faced with different conditions and influences - biological, psychological, and socio-cultural - however these factors do not determine how an individual should respond to his or her life situation (Das, 1998). Thus, logotherapy maintains that a human being is not free from conditions, but free to interact with any condition confronting him/her and take a stance against it (Frankl, 1988). According to Frankl (1967), *"only two classes of people maintain that their will is not free: schizophrenic patients suffering from the delusion that their will is manipulated and their thoughts controlled by others, and alongside them, deterministic philosophers"* (p.2).

As a result, freedom of will is exercised through self-distancing or self-detachment. Man is not only able to break away from a situation, but also from him/herself. He or she also has the capability to choose his attitude towards him/herself and towards life. Man's freedom to choose is part of the story, but not the whole truth, because freedom should be coupled with responsibility (Frankl, 1988; Wong, 2001).

2.3.2.6.1.2 Will to meaning

The second pillar of logotherapy is the will to meaning. In logotherapy, man is not perceived as a closed system of physiological reflexes and psychological reactions and responses to stimuli; he is instead an open system. Man is always reaching out to the world. Thus logotherapy is

opposed to the homeostatic principle, which views man as a being, basically concerned with maintaining or restoring inner equilibrium. Instead, man is seen as a being living with purpose (Frankl, 1988). Thus, the will to meaning is man's determination to find meaning and purpose in life and this will to meaning is the basic motivation for living.

According to Frankl (1988), man is pushed by drives, but pulled by meaning, and it is his/her decision to respond to the latter. Will to meaning is separate from a drive to meaning in the sense that a person acts willingly, they are in control (Frankl, 1967). Thus man is directed to meaning. Besides being directed to meaning, man is also confronted with meaning. Once man is confronted with meaning, it is his/her duty to act responsibly. Logotherapy perceives being responsible as being fundamental to human existence.

2.3.2.6.1.3 Meaning of life

The third and last pillar is meaning of life. Logotherapy contends that life has meaning and purpose under all circumstances, even in the face of difficulties (Frankl, 1978). According to Manheimer (2000), the crisis of meaning is inescapable, and logotherapy helps people to find meaning in their lives. It also helps people to transform their predicament into a human achievement; because for logotherapy suffering bears meaning as long as it changes one into a better person (Frankl, 1978). Meaning is unique to each person; therefore it is the duty of each individual to discover the meaning of each specific situation confronting him or her.

The writings of Victor Frankl make a substantial contribution toward the development of a theoretical foundation for meaning. But what is meaning? Frankl describes the concept of meaning as follows: *"We do not just attach and attribute meanings to things, but rather find them; we do not invent them, we detect them"* (Frankl, 1967, p.31). From an existential analytic and logotherapeutic context, meaning is understood as a relationship of two given facts: *the challenge of the situation*; and *one's understanding of*

oneself, in other words, what a person thinks and feels in terms of who they are or should be (Längle, 2004). Therefore, meaning is a gestalt emerging from the crux of both inner and outer reality. Personal meaning is a non-physical power deep in our conscience, our mind, our ability to feel and to sense. What needs to be outlined here is the fact that personal meaning is a complex achievement of the human spirit.

According to Frankl (1988) a human being consists of the mind, body and spirit. The spirit is not a religious concept but a universal human dimension. Therefore it is difficult to practice logotherapy without understanding the human spirit or the spiritual dimension of human existence. The individual's spiritual dimension plays an important role in motivation especially when one is faced with difficult life circumstances (Fabry, 1988). The human spirit is our healthy core, it remains intact, even when the psychobiological organism is wounded (Wong, 2001).

The spirit is dialogical in nature. Being a dialogical force it brings us into repeated confrontation with other people, other things and with ourselves. This dialogical interaction lays the ground for a basic condition of living: for people discover what is possible at the centre of the given facts. All of that which is not yet fixed represents the existential field waiting to be realised. Through our spirit we are directed towards dialogue and relationship, where we become conscious of possibility, where we become conscious of what awaits us, what might challenge us, reach out to us or invite us. This is our existential reality and as an existential truth, it is at the same time our future. It is because of our spirit that we are competent in sorting out the factual, what is given, from what is possible thereby establishing the specifically human dimension of existence (Frankl, 1997).

2.3.2.6.1.3.1 Resources of the human spirit

Frankl (1988) regards the human spirit as the “spiritual medicine chest” of logotherapy. The following are the most important resources of the human spirit, which serve a very important function in motivation and well-being:

- **The will to meaning.** This is a very important resource. Meaning is the ultimate goal. If meaning is repressed, one feels empty (Frankl, 1985, 1988).
- **Task orientation.** To lead a complete life, people need to know that tasks await them, both short-term and long-term. Commitment to a task pulls people out of pathology, sustains them when facing difficult times, and prevents relapse (Fabry, 1988).
- **Conscience.** Deep inside, each person knows what is right and wrong. Conscience is the compass needle that points in the direction of the meaning of the moment (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997).
- **Self-transcendence.** The ability to reach beyond oneself, towards other people to love and support is one of the strongest elements in the spiritual medicine chest. It is powerful in the sense that it provides a cure when one feels defeated (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997).
- **Self-distancing.** Each person has *“the defiant power of the human spirit”* (Frankl, 1967, p.99). In self-distancing, the spiritual “you” steps away from the “physical you”, and it is often the first step necessary for motivation towards wellness. Physical illnesses and emotions such as fear and anger are part of our body and psyche; however one can take a stand against them in their spirit (Fabry, 1988).
- **Humour.** Being able to laugh at one self is a practical way of self-distancing. Meaning enables people to sometimes laugh at their own predicaments, and thus in accepting them (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997).

All people face challenges and encounter painful life circumstances. However people do not respond in the same way to these conditions. One person might break down, another might disregard them, and the third person might take them as a challenge (Fabry, 1988). It is not so much the predicament, but the stand that one takes towards it, that is important. In

actual fact it is not the predicament, but the unhealthy attitude that causes distress. Modification of attitudes leads a person away from perceiving him or herself as a helpless victim (of drives, genes, environment, society, and the past), to seeing him or herself as someone in control, irrespective of the circumstances. The emphasis is on the potential of each situation (Fabry, 1988).

According to Frankl (1967) man does not need a tensionless state, but the striving and struggling for something worth yearning and searching for. Man does not need to release tension, because it is the challenge of the concrete meaning of his/her personal existence that should be fulfilled only by him/her. The tension between subject and object does not destabilise health and wholeness, but makes them stronger. This is also what guarantees and sustains his/her mental health; escaping from any stressful situation would result in feelings of inner emptiness or an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1967). Frankl (1967) mentions that, *“if architects want to strengthen a decrepit arch they **increase** the load that is laid upon it, for thereby the parts are joined more firmly together”* (p.69). Therefore, if we want to promote mental health, we should not be afraid to increase the load of people’s responsibility to fulfil the meaning of their existence (Frankl, 1967).

In the previous section the origins of the concept of the will to meaning, namely logotherapy, was discussed. In the next section the concepts purpose in life and meaning in life will be conceptualised.

2.3.2.6.2 Conceptualising the terms Meaning in life and Purpose in life

The concepts “meaning in life” and “purpose in life” are core constructs for existential psychology, and have more recently influenced the mainstreams of psychiatry and psychology. In the next section the relationship between these concepts and related concepts are explored. To achieve this, the broader definitions of both concepts will be dealt with before the focus narrows down to specific elements entailed in the definitions.

Purpose in life has been defined by Ryff (1989), as having goals in life and a sense of directedness, a feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, harbouring a belief that gives life purpose, and having aims and objectives for living. Central to the definition of purpose in life is a feeling that life has meaning.

On the other hand, the concept **meaning in life** has been defined as, “*the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfilment*” (Reker & Wong, 1988, p.221). Central to this definition of meaning in life, is seeing purpose in one’s existence. As a result, the concepts meaning in life and purpose in life seems very similar.

In looking at the elements of the above-mentioned definitions, one realises that both concepts have an emotional and a cognitive component. The emotional component alludes to what Shek (1992) named *quality of existence*, for example feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, sense of fulfilment, coherence; while the cognitive component touches upon the *purpose of existence* (Shek, 1992), referring to having goals in life, a sense of directedness, harbouring a belief that gives life purpose, cognizance of order, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals.

As a result, the elements entailed in the definition of both constructs seem to suggest that a person who has a sense of purpose in life experiences life as meaningful, and that a person who has a sense of meaning in life, experiences life as purposeful. Both definitions emphasise that one has to feel that life is meaningful (quality of existence); besides feelings one should also establish beliefs and goals to bring the feelings to life or actualise them (purpose of existence) (Shek, 1992).

After conceptualising the constructs of meaning in life and purpose in life, in the next discussion the construct of meaning in life is compared to the four factors that enhance well-being, which were discussed earlier on in section

2.3.2; that is, sense of coherence, emotional intelligence, hardy personality and self-efficacy.

2.3.2.6.3 Meaning in life and Related Concepts

One of the objectives of this chapter is to discuss psychological well-being, with specific reference to meaning in life. Earlier in this chapter, four constructs that enhance well-being were discussed, namely sense of coherence, emotional intelligence, hardy personality, and self-efficacy. Each of these constructs overlap to some degree with meaning or purpose in life. In the next section, similarities and differences between meaning in life and the four constructs are highlighted.

2.3.2.6.3.1 Meaning in life and sense of coherence

The first relationship we will explore is between the constructs of meaning in life and sense of coherence. Both constructs emerged out of studying experiences of people who survived traumatic events. With meaning in life, Frankl wrote the theory based on his subjective experiences, and with sense of coherence, Antonovsky wrote his theory from the subjective experiences of people he studied. Irrespective, a number of similarities emerged from the two constructs.

According to Antonovsky (1993) people's "way of seeing the world" or their internal orientation (point of reference) had much to do with their strengths. He then introduced the construct "sense of coherence". Similar to Antonovsky, Frankl (1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997) states that the human "will to meaning" is the basic motivation for living, and in the same way the construct "meaning in life", originates from this. Therefore, both authors believed that, behind each and every individual there is an internal constructive force that gives their lives direction. This force is believed to generate and promote mental and physical vitality.

Both theories state that stimuli derived from one's internal and external environments may pose certain challenges, however resources (mental and emotional) are readily available to meet the demands (Antonovsky, 1993).

The construct of sense of coherence is divided into three main components, which contain some elements similar to meaning in life. The first component is comprehensibility, which places an emphasis on the cognitive (thinking) component. In similar ways, meaning in life also emphasises the cognitive component by encouraging people to take a stand towards their predicaments and by maintaining positive attitudes (Antonovsky, 1993; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997).

The second component is manageability, the instrumental (action) component. Similarly meaning philosophy states that life never runs out of choices and that people should learn to make choices. Meaning philosophy also talks about the ability-to-respond (responsibility) to situations.

Lastly, Frankl's (1967) concept of meaning/purpose in life and Antonovsky's (1979) concept of sense of coherence (SOC) are similar in the sense that, Antonovsky's SOC also includes a "Meaningfulness" dimension and was intended to describe a personality construct that "*insulates people against the potential harm of stressors of health*" (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992, p.134). However, in Frankl's literature, the meaningfulness dimension of SOC is considered the most important dimension. In a South African study on first-year university students, Hutchinson (2005), reports significant correlations between meaning in life and various aspects of sense of coherence, especially the meaningfulness aspect.

Antonovsky (1987) maintained that there are four spheres that cannot be excluded if the person is to maintain a strong SOC, namely, his/her own feelings, immediate interpersonal relations, the major sphere of activity (work, really) and existential issues of death, inevitable failures, shortcomings, conflict and isolation. Antonovsky's (1987) four spheres, and especially the last three, are closely related to what Frankl (1967) terms, the

three ways in which meaning and purpose can be found, namely; meaning can be found in what you do (work), what you experience (interpersonal relations), and the attitude one adopts towards unavoidable suffering (pain, guilt and death).

Both theories cover most of the divisions of well-being as outlined in section 2.3.1, that is, divisions of self, cognition, emotion, behaviour, social interaction and value directedness.

The focus now shifts to the relation between meaning in life and emotional intelligence.

2.3.2.6.3.2 Meaning in life and emotional intelligence

The first similarity observed between meaning in life and emotional intelligence is that, both constructs emphasise that at the centre of personal wellness lies self-responsibility, which entails self-control and taking responsibility for one's own choices, emotions and actions.

Secondly, while emotional intelligence is a trait that can be acquired and developed, sense of meaning is a trait that can also be discovered and strengthened. Both constructs are concerned with how individuals respond to their immediate environment. They are also both concerned with two related facts, that is, the challenge of the situation and how one understands him/herself or what a person thinks and feels in terms of who they are or should be. Lastly, both constructs emphasise the inner and outer realities of a person adjusting to life circumstances. A study by Kanne (2002) demonstrated that emotional intelligence is linked to developing more advanced meaning structures.

However, the two constructs focus on totally different domains of functioning. Sense of meaning places a stronger emphasis on the human spirit or the soul while emotional intelligence focuses more on human

emotions and the importance of emotional awareness and self-regard as determinants of well-being.

In the next section focus is on the relationship between hardy personality and meaning in life.

2.3.2.6.3.3 Meaning in life and hardy personality

One of the components of hardiness is commitment, this component is closely related to Frankl's construct of meaning/purpose in life which also emphasises that meaning can be found through task commitment, such as (a) what you do, (b) what you experience, and (c) the stand you take in a situation of unavoidable tragedy (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Kobasa, 1982; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

Similar to Frankl (1988), who recognised that human beings are subjected to a wide variety of limiting conditions and influences (biological, psychological, and socio-cultural), but did not believe that these limiting conditions and influences totally determine an individual's response to his or her life situation, Kobasa (1979) also emphasised that individuals can and should take control of their lives.

Lastly, both constructs acknowledge that no human life is free from suffering and that problems or challenges present people with opportunities for growth. What is important is not the challenges people come across, but how people respond to them, and with the right attitudes they are likely to overcome such challenges (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Kobasa, 1979, 1982).

The differences between the two constructs is that, hardy personality seems to focus more on adjusting to stressful situations while the construct of sense of meaning is concerned with finding meaning in everyday life and in

every situation, be it in the meaning of the moment and/or in the ultimate meaning.

In the next section focus is on the relationship between self-efficacy and meaning in life.

2.3.2.6.3.4 Meaning in life and self-efficacy

Literature on self-efficacy and meaning in life indicate that individuals who score high on the two constructs mobilise their cognitive and emotional resources effectively in dealing with challenges. At the centre of both self-efficacy and meaning/purpose in life, is the right “attitude”. Positive attitudes cultivate success. Their approach is one of how to deal with demands/situations rather than worrying about what can go wrong. In a study conducted by Dewitz (2005), a positive relationship was found between self-efficacy beliefs and purpose in life.

According to Savolaine and Granello (2002) an individual's belief system can influence and enhance his or her sense of meaning, while simultaneously an individual's sense of meaning may guide the person towards adopting certain beliefs. In a study conducted by Skrabski (2005), sense of meaning was positively related to self-efficacy.

2.3.2.6.3.5 Conclusion

It is evident that some degree of similarity exists between meaning in life and each of the four constructs included in this chapter. This occurs despite the fact that these constructs emerge from quite different philosophical roots and were developed from research on widely different kinds of samples. The language used in these theories is quite different, however all of them emphasise capabilities, strengths, and potentialities. In addition to the prevention and treatment of illness, their primary concern is with maintenance and enhancement of well-being.

The next section will explore research studies that investigate the relationship between meaning in life and well-being.

2.3.2.6.4 The Relationship between Meaning in life and well-being

The work of Frankl inspired some researchers, to investigate the concept of meaning/ purpose in life and how it influences adjustment and general functioning. Thus, a number of studies argue for the mediating effects of meaning in life on well-being. The majority of these investigations used the Purpose in Life Test (PIL), developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964), to assess Frankl's construct of meaning in life. In this section the discussion will focus on the relationship between meaning in life and general well-being, with specific reference to psychological well-being, social effects and health benefits.

2.3.2.6.4.1 Meaning and psychological well-being

In several studies (Meraviglia, 2005; Pinquart, 2002; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), a strong relationship was found between meaning in life and well-being. According to Ryff and Singer (1998a, 1998b), experiencing purpose in life is a central aspect of well-being. A South African study on university students conducted by Moomal (1999) found a positive relationship between meaning in life and well-being. In support of this finding, a recent South African study by Hutchinson (2005), also on a group of university students, found that students with a high sense of meaning in life seem to cope much better because they employ effective coping strategies and consequently experienced better psychological well-being.

A comparison of two regression analysis by Scannell, Allen and Burton (2002) revealed that well-being measures were more associated with affective (fulfilment) meaning than with cognitive (framework) meaning. This

suggests that, although cognitive and affective meaning is associated with a person's well-being, it is more important to feel that one has meaning in life than to have a structure for that meaning. This supports Frankl's view that,

Only if we recognise that there are two different dimensions involved is it possible to understand how on one hand we can meet people who in spite of success are caught in despair, while on the other hand we come across people who in spite of failure have arrived at a sense of fulfilment and even happiness, because they have found meaning even in suffering (Frankl, 1978, p.42).

In order to position the construct of meaning in life within the domain of psychological well-being Frankl (1978, 1988) mentions that there are two different kinds of individuals: Those who are pessimistic about life and those who are optimistic. In explaining the differences between the two individuals Frankl (1978, 1988) cites the following example, pessimistic individuals when presented with a bottle of milk which is half empty will normally reject it and demand a full bottle, while optimistic individuals will accept it and also be grateful that at-least there is something in the bottle. According to Frankl (1978, 1988) individuals with a high sense of meaning are also optimistic about life, and thus he makes mention of the optimistic triad, love, faith and hope.

In support of Frankl's view, a South Africa study by Grounds (2001) found a significant relationship between meaning in life and optimism. Similar to people with a high sense of meaning, optimists are more resilient in the face of stress, adversity, or loss. They actually suffer less when exposed to serious stressors (Leung, Moneta & McBride-Chang, 2005; Miller, 2002; Türküm, 2005). According to Maynard (2006) personal optimism correlates strongly with psychological well-being.

Evidence is also available from research studies which indicate that lack of meaning is associated with psychopathology. People who lack meaning in their lives find it difficult to cope with life stressors. In a review of work on the construct, Yalom (1980) stated that a lack of meaning in life was

associated with psychopathology. In a study by Ruffin (1984) meaninglessness was significantly related to anxiety, while Newcomb and Harlow (1986) found that meaninglessness in life mediated the relationship between uncontrollable stress and substance use. In a study conducted by Pinquart (2002), purpose in life showed a strong negative correlation with depression. This supports Frankl's view that, lack of purpose in life may be associated with boredom, hopelessness, substance abuse, depression, and loss of will to live (Frankl, 1988).

2.3.2.6.4.2 Meaning and social effects

According to a study by Debats, Drost and Hansen (1995) meaningfulness was found to be strongly related to contact with self, others and the world, whereas meaninglessness was related with a state of alienation from self, others and the world. In a study conducted by Yalom (1980), a positive sense of meaning was associated with strong religious beliefs, membership in groups, commitment to tasks, life values, and clear goals. In a more general sense, such meaningful involvement could help prevent the "existential vacuum" construct suggested in logotherapy (Frankl, 1988). This problem is characterised by an underlying insecurity about the value of one's life, leading to lack of meaning and resulting in unfulfilling states ranging from frustration to boredom. If an individual's sense of meaning and purpose is intact, it seems unlikely that such uncertainty would arise or continue. Also, when an inner satisfaction is not maintained, an individual might be more tempted to fill the void with any number of substitutes in an attempt to compensate, some of which are not conducive to wellness (for example, addictive behaviours, unhealthy relationships), and can increase stress. When these voids are filled with meaning, these temptations are less likely to have the same attraction, and thus wellness is improved (Savolaine & Granello, 2002).

2.3.2.6.4.3 Meaning and health benefits

An extension of these ideas is that meaning may have a stress-buffering effect (Westgate, 1999). According to Lazarus and DeLongis (1983) foundations of personal meaning influence processes of stress and coping. This suggests that the level of stress may still be the same but that an individual's capability to deal with stress improves when there is a sense of meaningfulness related to it.

When one has a feeling of purpose and meaning it can help alleviate the stress caused by painful facts of life. For example, respective studies (Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000; Meraviglia, 2005) reported that cancer patients who reported a high degree of meaning in their lives coped much better with their illness than those who reported a lesser sense of meaning.

Furthermore, in a study conducted in Botswana, meaning in life was also found to be effective in helping HIV positive patients cope with their HIV status (Plattner & Meiring, 2006). Interviews revealed that the acceptance of the HIV-infection turned out to be an important aspect in the meaning making process that helped the participants to maintain a balance in their psychological well-being. Park and Folkman (1997) regard acceptance as a means of resolution in the sense of reconciling a stressful situation with one's goals, values and believes. Acceptance affords a person the opportunity to somehow be in charge of his/her situation as it is the person who decides to make 'peace' with the situation (Plattner & Meiring, 2006).

2.3.2.6.4.4 Conclusion

Evidence provided by past and recent research studies revealed that the construct of meaning in life is strongly related to well-being. In a number of studies (Meraviglia, 2005; Pinquart, 2002; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Ryff & Singer, 1998a, 1998b; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), associations between the construct of meaning in life and well-being have

been found. A South African study on university students conducted by Moomal (1999) also supported a positive relationship between meaning in life and well-being. In the next section a number of ways that assist in finding meaning will be discussed.

2.3.2.6.5 Ways to find Meaning in life

After having discussed the construct of meaning in life and how it fits within the well-being paradigm, its relation to other constructs in this paradigm, as well as a review of literature on the relations between this construct and well-being; one question still remains: How can an individual find meaning in life?

Meaning of life differs from person to person and from one situation to another. In this sense meaning is unique or relative, and it is the duty of each individual to give his or her life meaning (Shari, 1997). Because each meaning is unique, we cannot have universal meanings of life, but instead there are situations that have something in common and therefore give rise to common meanings (Das, 1998). Thus, people who live in a given society or even across cultures and in different historical times, share these meanings which Frankl called “values”.

Values help in the search for meaning, but they also complicate it. When one is faced with a situation where meaning has to be accomplished, values furnish the meaning. On the other hand, a conflict between two values may ultimately result in existential frustration (Das, 1998). There are three principal values that help people to find meaning and therefore promote well-being:

2.3.2.6.5.1 Creative values

Creative values refer to what a person gives to the world in terms of his creations, that is, by achieving tasks. Everyone, in one way or another, draws meaning from doing something. In this sense the desire to make a difference, becomes the primary source of authentic meaning and motivation (Pattakos, 2004). Thus meaning could be achieved through work, artistic pursuits, as well as causes in which one can be active, to create something of value such as hobbies and sport (Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000).

2.3.2.6.5.2 Experiential values

Experiential values refer to what a person takes from the world in terms of encounters and experiences with other human beings. The greatest of which is love: the knowing, appreciating and respecting of others in all their uniqueness and singular worth (Giovinco, 2001; Shantall, 1997).

2.3.2.6.5.3 Attitudinal values

Attitudinal values entail the stand one takes to his predicament, in case he must face a fate which he cannot change. This is the reason why life never stops to have meaning, because even if a person is deprived of both creative and experiential meanings he or she is still challenged by a meaning to fulfil, that is, by the meaning inherent in the right way of suffering. Suffering without meaning is likely to bring despair, however suffering with positive attitudes (meaning) is likely to bring fulfilment (Frankl, 1997). What matters in this case is the attitude that one adopts. Attitudinal values offer man the most wonderful opportunities to achieve human greatness. These values are relevant when people are faced with the tragic triad: (i) pain, (ii) guilt, and (iii) death (Frankl, 1988). Pain denotes to human

suffering, guilt the awareness of our shortcomings and death our awareness of the shortness of life (Frankl, 1967, 1988).

When meaning philosophers speak about the “tragic” triad one should not be misled into thinking or assuming that meaning is as pessimistic as existentialism is said to be. But meaning is an optimistic approach to life, because it teaches that there are no tragic and negative aspects that could not be, by the stand one takes to them, transmuted into positive accomplishments (Frankl, 1988). Instead, psychological distress is more likely to originate from our attempts to shield the reality of pain, guilt and death as unavoidable facts of life.

Suffering is not an essential condition for meaning, but it tends to inspire the search for meaning. Frankl (1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997) noticed that people are willing to accept suffering, if they are convinced that this suffering has meaning. However suffering which lacks meaning results in despair. With a strong sense of purpose, people do not ask for the reason for suffering, but they realise meanings and choose the right attitudes. With a sense of purpose, people often put on a heroic stand towards suffering and come to realise that unavoidable suffering gives them the opportunity to bear witness to “*the defiant power of the human spirit*” (Frankl, 1967, p.99). As a result, sense of purpose provides an answer to the tragic triad through attitudinal values and the so-called optimistic (heroic) triad: faith, hope and love. Frankl (1967) states that, by means of the correct positive attitude, unavoidable suffering is changed into a heroic and victorious achievement. That is why life never runs out of meaning until the last breath, until a man’s death.

2.3.2.6.6 Factors that contribute to a stronger Sense of Meaning/Purpose in life

After discussing some of the possible ways through which meaning can be found, it is important also to discuss factors which contribute to a stronger sense of meaning.

The following are the five circumstances that enhance a sense of meaning and purpose in life; self-discovery, choices, uniqueness, responsibility, and self-transcendence.

- **Self-discovery** (Need for Rooted-ness)

Firstly people can enhance their sense of meaning by discovering their true selves. This does not only involve a process of discovering themselves behind the masks they have put on for self-protection so that they can to be loved, accepted and be successful, but it's a process of discovering who they really are deep inside of themselves. As a result, when responding to the meaning of the moment an individual should take ownership of such responses. This is not an easy task, because every person is composed of many facets. However, the spiritual element contains the true essence of an individual and it enables the person to take a stand towards the limitations of the body, psyche, character and personality. Deep inside of each individual there is a voice that guides him or her to meaning and it is the responsibility of each individual to respond to this voice (Boeree, 2002; Fabry, 1988; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Giovinco, 2001).

- **Choice** (Need for Frame of Orientation)

Meaning is enhanced if people realise that they have choices in each and every situation. A situation where people don't see choices will seem meaningless. Life never stops to have choices, and the more choices one has in a given situation, the more meaning will become available. Thus conditions do not determine an individual, but an individual determines whether to yield to them or brave them. As a result people should be able to distinguish situations they can change, from those they cannot change. If a situation can be changed, the meaning of the moment is to change it. Even in a situation that is unchangeable people have choices: They can change their attitude towards that

particular situation (Boeree, 2002; Fabry, 1988; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Giovinco, 2001; Kalmar, 1982).

- **Uniqueness** (Need for Identity)

Everyone is unique. Meaning is enhanced when people realise that they are unique. People are likely to find meaning in situations where they are not easily replaceable. Uniqueness becomes evident not so much by what a person is, but by how important they are in relationships with other people or in situations. It is true that no one is irreplaceable; however there are many circumstances where it does matter whether or not a person exists. Apart from our uniqueness in what and how we contribute to relationships, uniqueness is also reflected in creativity. People do not create poems, pictures, songs and collages, in the same way (Boeree, 2002; Fabry, 1988; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Giovinco, 2001).

- **Responsibility** (Need for Relatedness)

Being human is being responsible, the ability to respond to the “meaning offerings in each new situation”. Meaning is enhanced if a person learns to be responsible. Life will have meaning if a person learns to take responsibility where they have a choice and if they learn not to feel responsible, when faced by an unchangeable fate. Just as pleasure without meaning is empty, power without purpose is corrupt, choice without responsibility is meaningless. Frankl found long ago that a responsibility conflict might result in a new kind of psychological distress. Traditionally, psychological distress is understood as being produced by repressed trauma or past conflict. Research in logotherapeutic literature, reports that today’s patients suffer from “repressed responsibility conflict”, emanating from a conflict between two sets of values, or a conflict between societal values and personal conscience (Boeree, 2002; Fabry, 1988; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Giovinco, 2001).

- **Self –transcendence** (Need for Transcendence)

Self-transcendence refers to the capacity to reach beyond oneself to others, to love someone, or even to accomplish something in life. To transcend, is to move beyond something, rather than simply “dealing” with it (Burnay, 2001). Meaning fulfilment and loving encounters give man a reason to be happy (Gill, 1979). Therefore, an awareness of others is very important in helping people find meaning in their lives (Pitino, 2003). Self-transcendence is the specifically human capacity to reach beyond yourself and act for the sake of someone you care about, or for the sake of a cause that means something to you. It is important because it encompasses all the other areas where meaning is achieved. It turns defeat into victory, but it is difficult to achieve (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997).

All the above-mentioned factors are very important in the development of a sense of purpose. They emphasise the important role that can be played by the construct of meaning in sustaining and maintaining well-being.

2.4 CONCLUSION

There is no one theory or philosophy that can explain human behaviour with certainty. All theories by themselves are incomplete, and so is the construct of meaning/purpose in life. As a result, the chapter is concluded with a critical evaluation of this construct.

From literature on psychological well-being (for example, sense of coherence, hardy personality, and the like), one realises that, even though a wide variety of concepts are used to explain the different characteristics of well-being; there are many similarities between them. The importance of finding meaning seems to be a critical component in most of these constructs.

The construct of meaning in life offers a holistic view of the entire being in the here and now. It emphasises that, although meaning is subjective, it cannot be found in one place. Meaning can be found everywhere, even in the face of difficulties. It encourages people to transcend their biological, environmental and historical influences. Therefore meaning-philosophy is optimistic and constructive. Thus, it is open to integration with other constructs.

The main goal of the construct of meaning is to help people find meaning or recover meaning in their lives. A meaning centred approach focusing on meaning centred creatures will naturally embrace spiritual matters. In this sense the theory seems to be too religious and not sufficiently scientific or rigorous. We do not deny that the construct of meaning in life is spiritual, however it is not spiritual in a religious context but in a pure human context. Deep inside of themselves, people know what is *right* and *wrong*; it does not require a specific religious denomination to teach them that. This is something that resides inside of each and every human being, that is, in their conscience.

One of the criticisms against the construct of meaning in life is that it is too dependent on Frankl and his intuitions. Frankl himself has emphasised that the construct of meaning in life does not belong to him. He encourages other people to build on this construct; and by integrating other constructs in the domain of positive psychology, as it was the case in this chapter, the construct can be expanded.

It is an undisputed fact that one cannot focus on meaning alone, because this will be equivalent to following a narrow path. Individuals should be aware that they are physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, social, as well as contextual beings. They are dynamic and thus should be treated that way.

Factors that impact on academic performance are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher discusses factors that impact on the academic performance of students. As a result, a number of pre-and post-enrolment factors, coupled with internal and external factors that have an influence on success or failure at tertiary level, are presented. These factors are divided into three main categories, that is, personal, contextual, and institutional factors.

A large number of students who enter university do not persist beyond the first year. Therefore, it is important that the variables that contribute to academic achievement and retention; together with potential risk factors for academic failure, should be identified in order to ensure better throughput rates (Eiselen & Geysler, 2003).

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate a vast range of determinants of academic performance in higher education. A multitude of predictors, for example, verbal abilities, gender, aptitude test scores, family financial characteristics and personality traits, have been identified as factors influencing university achievement (Ayaya, 1996; Bauer & Liang, 2003; Hoskins, 1997; Jackson et al., 2003). In addition to pre-enrolment factors, researchers also identified a number of post-enrolment factors, such as study methods, time management, class attendance and many more, that could have a strong influence on academic success (Fraser & Killen, 2003).

According to the findings of a study conducted by Smittle (1995), the academic performance of students in institutions of higher learning is

influenced by both academic and non-academic factors. This could provide a possible explanation why universities are finding it difficult to target all problem areas in their endeavours to pinpoint students at risk. Academic factors refer to factors directly related to teaching and learning, like writing skills, study methods, difficulty of the course, and many more; while non-academic factors are those factors that are indirectly related to teaching and learning, such as motivation, personality, interest and others.

Personal and institutional factors that influence academic performance include cognitive and non-cognitive factors on personal level as well as managerial, social and academic factors on an institutional level. The personal factors (cognitive, emotional and demographic) interact with institutional factors (course availability, teacher effectiveness, students support services, and peer and faculty relationships) to determine academic performance (Drysdale, Ross & Schulz, 2001).

3.2 PERSONAL FACTORS

The discussion firstly focuses on personal factors. Personal factors are those factors, which directly relate to an individual. Two main categories of such factors will be discussed; cognitive factors and non-cognitive factors.

3.2.1 COGNITIVE FACTORS

According to Baker (2004), cognitive factors are considered to be the strongest predictors of academic performance. In the next section, the following cognitive factors are discussed; intelligence, aptitude, language proficiency and previous academic performance.

3.2.1.1 INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence is a general mental capability that involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend ideas and language, and

learn. In psychology, the study of intelligence is related to the study of personality but is not the same as creativity, personality, character, or wisdom (Wikipedia, 2006). Intelligence quotient (IQ) tests are generally used to measure intelligence, and they have been extensively used both for research as well as for selection purposes across a range of educational spectrums, from primary school to university level. Petrides et al. (2005), report that, Walberg (1984) in a meta-analysis of over 30,000 journal articles, found a strong correlation between cognitive ability and academic performance at school level. In a recent study conducted by Ridgell and Lounsbury (2004), general intelligence was also found to be significantly positively related to academic achievement. In support of the above-mentioned studies South African studies (Myburgh, Grobler & Niehaus, 1999; Swartz, 1998) also found a significant relationship between intelligence and academic achievement. In a study by Myburgh, Grobler and Niehaus (1999) IQ accounted for the greatest share of the variance in students' scholastic achievement.

However, Petrides et al. (2005) went further to indicate that, there is a small body of research that suggests that the relationship between cognitive ability and academic performance may often be weaker than expected, and at times even failing to reach statistical significance levels. They state that more evidence from research indicates that the correlation between cognitive ability and academic performance tends to decline as students move on in the education system, decreasing from about $r=.7$ in elementary school to as little as $r=.4$ at university (Petrides et al., 2005).

As it is depicted in this chapter, a great body of research has revealed that other factors seem to play a role in academic performance, as an individual advances in the education system, however the importance of intelligence the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend ideas and language, and learn cannot be neglected.

3.2.1.2 APTITUDE

An aptitude is an innate inborn ability to execute certain tasks. Contrary to intelligence, aptitudes may be physical or mental. Aptitude tests are widely used to measure specific abilities. The purpose of using such tests is to predict how an individual will perform on some criterion before placement or training decisions are made. Many dimensions of aptitude has been identified and described, including: (Isaacson, 1985; Sax, 1989; Wikipedia, 2006).

- ✓ **Inductive reasoning**, which is a measurable aptitude for how well a person can identify a pattern within a large amount of data.
- ✓ **Ideaphoria** also called creative imagination describes an experience where one feels a constant blitz of new ideas, creating a euphoric state of idea creation.
- ✓ **Creativity (or creativeness)** is a mental process involving the generation of new ideas or concepts, or new associations between existing ideas or concepts.
- ✓ **Spatial-temporal reasoning** is the ability to visualise spatial patterns and mentally manipulate them over a time-ordered sequence of spatial transformations.
- ✓ **Verbal reasoning**, which is the ability to understand and use concepts based on words.
- ✓ **Numerical reasoning**, which is the skill in quantitative reasoning and the use of basic mathematical competencies.
- ✓ **Mechanical reasoning**, which is the ability to understand and solve simple problems involving physical laws.

Proponents of intelligence quotient view intelligence as being a single measurable characteristic affecting all mental ability, while the perspective of aptitude breaks mental ability down into many different characteristics which are more or less independent of each other. Thus in a given person some may be low and others high (Wikipedia, 2006). Aptitude means

having a mental talent to do certain things better, and it results to situations where an individual might be good in some activities as compared to others.

Within the education sector aptitudes are important. In previous studies (Roth, 1996; Rubin, 1977) high verbal aptitude was strongly related to academic performance. A recent study by Petrides et al. (2005) supports the findings of Roth (1996) and Rubin (1977). However, according to Petrides et al. (2005), verbal ability was found to be a more powerful predictor of academic performance in the lower levels of education, than in the higher grades, for example, in Grade 12. On the contrary a South African study by Grobler, Grobler and Esterhuysen (2001), found a significant relationship between verbal aptitude and academic achievement amongst high school learners. The above-mentioned earlier studies of Roth (1996) and Rubin (1977) also reported a significant relationship between high verbal aptitude and grade point averages (GPA) of students in institutions of higher learning. In support of these studies a South African study on university students by Van Eeden, De Beer and Coetzee (2001) also found a significant relationship the verbal scale of the General Scholastic Aptitude Test (GSAT) and first-year performance.

From analysis of the literature, there seems to be substantial support for the important influence of aptitude on academic performance, however researchers seem to differ on whether the influence decreases or increases as learners progress to higher levels of education.

3.2.1.3 LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

General language proficiency and reading ability in particular, is an extensively important aspect in academic success. In many developing countries where the medium of instruction at the university is not the first language of its students, it is expected from the applicants to prove adequate proficiency in the medium of instruction. Relatively few studies investigated the relationship between pre-entry level English language proficiency of students who enter higher education institutions with English

as a medium of instruction and academic performance. Studies have suggested that, there is a statistically significant relationship between language proficiency and academic performance (Alexander, 2004; Ayaya, 1996; Eiselen & Geysers, 2003; Stoyhoff, 1997). According to these studies, being able to communicate effectively and efficiently in the medium of instruction of a particular university is one of the factors that determine academic success. Therefore, university students with poor communication skills in the medium of instruction do experience some difficulties in their studies. In support of the above-mentioned studies South African studies (Jansen, 2004; Van Eeden, De Beer & Coetzee, 2001) also found a significant relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement.

Furthermore, Seelen (2002) states that it is not enough to illustrate that there is a significant relationship between school performance in English and university performance without taking overall school performance into account. Within the Southern African context, three studies reported that there is no significant relationship between pre-entry English proficiency and academic performance (Ayaya, 1996; Samkin, 1996; Van Zyl-Smit, Matitz & Niekerk, 1993). According to the results of a recent study conducted by Seelen (2002) in Lesotho, COSC (Cambridge Overseas School Certificate) English was found to be a very poor predictor of academic performance when measured in combination with overall school performance. Irrespective, the latter study does not discard the fact that English proficiency is very important, as it is a language of job opportunities and international competitiveness.

Being conversant in the medium of instruction used by institutions of higher learning has its own advantages. According to van der Walt and Brink (2005) better relationships between the lecturers and the students as well as more relaxed classroom environments are established when students are taught in their mother tongue. On the opposite, the medium of instruction might also serve as an obstacle or stressor if students are not well conversant in the language.

When students have language problems, especially reading problems they will find it difficult to comprehend the learning content. In a South African study conducted by Pretorius and Ribbens (2005), one of their findings was that, reading is probably the most important skill that students need in the learning context. Reading is not only important in learning the subject matter, but also determines whether students will be able to reproduce the subject matter during tests and examinations (Roberts et al., 1999). As a result students who read slowly are at a disadvantage when preparing for final exams.

3.2.1.4 PREVIOUS ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Matriculation results seem to play a very important role in the admission of first-year students. This emphasises the general support that previous academic performance is a good predictor of future performance. According to a study conducted by McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) on factors predicting academic performance in first-year Australian university students, university entry scores were found to be a significant predictor of students' academic performance. In other words, the findings of their study suggest that students with good matriculation results are more likely to continue achieving well at university. However, they went further to suggest that, university entry scores should be interpreted with caution.

The results of American and British studies have also indicated that, performance at school is a relatively good predictor of performance at university (Baker, 2004; Peat, Dalziel & Grant, 2001). Previous South African research has also strongly associated university performance with final school aggregate (Bokhorst, Foster & Lea, 1992). Recent South African studies (Bosch, Boshoff & Louw, 2003; Lourens & Smit, 2003) have supported the important role of Grade 12 aggregate as predictor of first-year students' success.

While some researchers persist with their argument that school matriculation examinations are a good predictor of university academic performance; others disagree (Borde, 1998; Killen, 1994). Those who disagree, state that final school aggregates should not be used on their own, but they should be used in conjunction with other factors. In an earlier comparative study at the University of the Witwatersrand, Shochet (1986) found that matriculation rating was only a significant predictor for advantaged students. For disadvantaged (mostly, Black) students a very low correlation was found between the relationship between school and university performance. In support of Shochet's study, a South African study by Smit (1997) also found that matric results of White students have the strongest correlation with their university results, while for Black students no significant relationships were found.

3.2.1.5 CONCLUSION

The above-mentioned cognitive factors play a very important role in academic performance. Without a certain level of intelligence, previous academic experience, a good command of the medium of instruction and an innate inborn ability to execute certain tasks, it will be difficult for students to meet learning requirements. While cognitive factors are being considered the strongest factors in predicting future performances, they often result in explaining a relatively small percentage of the variance in academic success on tertiary level. It is important that other factors should be brought into the picture to compliment the cognitive factors. As a result Lourens and Smit (2003) mention that future research should focus on a more complete and accurate picture of the retention characteristics. Such research needs to look into pre-and post-enrolment factors, both academic and non-academic. It is the intention of the researcher to focus both on previous academic performance and other personal factors that impact on academic performance.

In the next section non-cognitive factors are discussed.

3.2.2 NON COGNITIVE FACTORS

Many researchers have highlighted the need to incorporate variables other than cognitive factors in studies of individual differences in academic achievement. Therefore, after having discussed cognitive factors, the following non-cognitive factors are presented in the next discussion; 1) Dispositional factors, 2) Study behaviours, 3) Personal adjustment and 4) Demographic factors.

3.2.2.1 DISPOSITIONAL FACTORS

Dispositional factors are personal characteristics (Cohrs, Abele & Dette, 2006), which could either serve as internal stressors or as internal resources to the individual student. In this section the following innate features are discussed, motivation, sense of purpose, self-efficacy, achievement expectancy, persistence, test-anxiety, personal control, personality, identity development, self-esteem, interest and emotional intelligence.

3.2.2.1.1 Motivation and Self-determination

The concept of motivation can be studied from divergent views. Within the educational domain one view was put forward by Deci and Ryan (1985), which suggests that behaviour can be intrinsically motivated, extrinsically motivated, or a-motivated. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations could serve as internal resources in education, however their effects differ. An individual, who is intrinsically motivated, undertakes activities voluntarily and he or she becomes satisfied from such engagements, while an extrinsically motivated person acts for the sake of gaining rewards. On the opposite of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is a-motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Within self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) a-motivation refers to the absence of motivation. Such behaviours may result from feelings of not being able to complete tasks successfully, not expecting an activity to produce favourable results, or not putting value on certain activities. Without a sense of purpose or expecting events to change over time, such

individuals are likely to experience increasing feelings of incompetence and uncontrollability; which is a state similar to learned helplessness. Thus, a-motivation could be correctly referred to as an internal stressor.

In a study conducted by Baker (2004), such a-motivated behaviours are associated with a number of negative outcomes; poor psychosocial adjustment to university life, high levels of perceived stress, and poor general well-being. On the opposite, intrinsic motivation, and especially intrinsic motivation to learn, relates significantly to a number of favourable outcomes; positive university adjustment, lower perceived stress, positive well-being and academic achievement (Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997). A South African study by Bosch, Boshoff and Louw (2003), has also reported a significant relationship between motivation and academic achievement. Within the self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation to know refers to undertaking activities for exploration, and the pleasure and satisfaction experienced while learning and it is related to global constructs like the search for meaning (sense of purpose) (Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997), which is also one of the central constructs of this study.

According to cognitive evaluation theory, a subdivision of self-determination theory, one factor known to influence motivation is level of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When applied within the educational domain, the theory suggests that when students are supported (by parents and teachers) in being autonomous, particularly to choice and decisions about their studies, they develop high levels of intrinsic motivation and low levels of a-motivation. On the contrary, self-determined motivation is weakened when students perceive that they have little control over what to do and how to do it.

3.2.2.1.2 Sense of Purpose

Students in South African institutions of higher learning are exposed to a number of stressors, for example poverty, HIV/Aids and crime. However, irrespective of the stressors they are exposed to, literature indicates that

students with a high sense of meaning cope much better academically and in terms of their personal adjustment. According to Merullo (2002), a number of poor and poorly prepared students do succeed at university and beyond, and therefore, it is debatable to consider economic or educational disadvantage as an acceptable reason for lack of progress and poor motivation. Students have a choice in how they want to respond to these stressors. With positive attitudes they are likely to succeed (Liddell & Davidson, 2004). For them, *“success or failure is an individual matter, a mysterious blend of fate and will”* (Merullo, 2002, p.4).

On the opposite of sense of purpose, which is an internal resource, is sense of meaninglessness, which could be regarded as an internal stressor. The impact of this construct on education is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

3.2.2.1.3 Self-efficacy

The beliefs that students hold about themselves are very important. Central to these beliefs are students' judgement of their ability to complete a task or do well in an activity, or self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986). The process of building and utilizing self-efficacy beliefs is internal. A person adopts certain behaviour, evaluates the results of their actions, then uses these interpretations to create and develop beliefs about their ability to engage in consequent behaviours in similar tasks and activities, and behave in congruence with the beliefs created (Bandura, 1997). For example, in a school setting the beliefs students develop about their academic abilities help determine what they do with the knowledge and skills they have learned. As a result, their academic performances are, in part, the result of what they come to believe they have achieved and can achieve. This might also help to explain why the performance of certain students might differ, irrespective of their related abilities (Pajares, 2002).

Ever since the inception of the concept of self-efficacy by Bandura in 1977, researchers have investigated its impact on academic performance.

Consequently, two decades of research findings by Bandura, together with recent research findings, have confirmed that students' academic self-efficacy beliefs influence their academic achievement (Bandura, 1997; Lane & Lane, 2001; Lane, Lane & Kyprianou, 2004; Multon, Brown & Lent, 1991; Pajares 2002). In support of these studies a South African study by Bosch, Boshoff and Louw (2003), also found a significant relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement.

3.2.2.1.4 Achievement Expectancies and Optimism

Closely related to self-efficacy, is achievement expectancy. In a study conducted by House (1993), on achievement expectancies, his study indicates that students' achievement expectancies were significant predictors of their academic performance. The following nine items were used as measures of achievement expectancies in the study: earning a B average at university, graduating with honours, failing one or more subjects in university, needing tutoring assistance, obtaining a bachelor's degree, needing extra time to obtain a degree, transferring to another university, dropping out of university temporarily, and dropping out of university permanently. When analysed, using stepwise multiple regression, two specific expectancies (expectancies of earning at least a B average and of graduating with honours) were the first two variables to enter the regression equations for two, four and eight semesters when the entire sample was considered (House, 1993).

It is unfortunate that some of the factors that contribute to students dropping out and failing are difficult, if not impossible to resolve at tertiary level. Various psychological theories have alleged to offer hope. According to these theories, factors such as self-perceptions and expectations of success have a significant impact on motivation and achievement. In support of these theories, a research study by Meltzer et al. (2004) supports the idea that students who display positive academic self-perceptions are more likely to work hard and to use more effective strategies in their schoolwork. However, other researchers seem to differ. They indicate that it is

unsuccessful students who seem to have unrealistically high expectations about their future. In support of this view a research study conducted by Ochese (2001) found uniform patterns of negative relationships between over optimistic self-perceptions and academic performance.

Irrespective of the above-mentioned contrasting evidence, the value of realistic positive self-perception cannot be ignored, and it can serve as an important resource for students if it encourages students to adopt affective study behaviour. Therefore, it is important that researchers should examine the quality of the optimism before predicting whether this optimism is functional or dysfunctional. Secondly, the context under which this optimism occurs is important in the sense that it will determine whether it is adaptive or maladaptive (Ochese, 2001).

3.2.2.1.5 Test Anxiety

Test anxiety manifests itself in two dimensions, traditionally referred to as: - 1) emotionality and 2) cognitive test anxiety (worry). In terms of *emotionality*, high levels of test anxiety are typically evident through physiological responses that are present during evaluative sessions, such as increased heart rate, dizziness, nausea and feelings of panic (Deffenbacher, 1980). On the other hand, cognitive test anxiety refers to an individual's cognitive reactions to the evaluation sessions, before, during, and after evaluative tasks. Thoughts commonly held during such sessions include comparing one's performance to those of peers, considering consequences of failure, excessive worry over evaluation, low levels of confidence, feeling unprepared for tests and loss of self-worth (Deffenbacher, 1980).

Clear and persistent data is available to give support to models of test anxiety that focus on the cognitive domain as one of the factors contributing to academic failure. In a study conducted by Cassady and Johnson (2001) it became evident that students with high, medium, and low levels of cognitive test anxiety differ in their performance levels on course exams and

on the SAT. Students with lower levels of test anxiety, performed much better than students with high levels of test anxiety in the SAT. It is important to note that the SAT score differences are important because they may prevent students with test anxiety entry into institutions of higher learning. Again in course examination performances, Cassady and Johnson (2001) found that; students with low anxiety outperformed those with high anxiety by nearly 1 standard deviation. Consistent with these findings Chapell et al. (2005) found that, the grade point averages of low anxiety students was higher than those of high anxiety students.

Cognitive test anxiety, as an internal stressor, could have detrimental effects on academic performance in the sense that it could interfere with the true potential of students. Thus, students with high potential could find themselves underachieving as a result of cognitive test anxiety (Cassady & Johnson, 2001; Chapell et al., 2005).

3.2.2.1.6 Personal Control

Although the transition from high school to university requires students to take up greater responsibility for their academic development, accomplishment of sufficient independence and autonomy appears to be confusing. Periodically students' sense of personal control and mastery is undermined by low-control experiences. In these situations, "achievement striving" can lead to a paradox of failure. It is for these reasons that a number of research studies concluded that for students to be successful, autonomy, or perceived personal control, is essential (DeAngelis, 2003; Killen, 1994; Morgans, 2002; Perry, 2003; Wycoff, 1996).

According to Perry (2003), "*perceived control is viewed as a relatively stable psychological disposition affecting students' motivation and achievement-striving as manifested, in class tests, term assignments, course grades, GPA, and so forth.*" (p.315). Therefore, academic control is believed to mirror students' beliefs about whether they have certain characteristics as personal qualities, that contribute to their academic performance, such as

intellectual ability, physical power, effort expenditure, task plans, social skills and educational experience. What is interesting about academic control is the fact that it is more encompassing; it mobilises most internal resources of an individual.

3.2.2.1.7 Personality Characteristics

Personality characteristics have also been linked to academic performance. In a South African study conducted by Van Eeden, De Beer and Coetzee (2001), emotional sensitivity was significantly related to academic success. Research studies have also indicated an increasing interest in the validity of measures of non-clinical personality dimensions; particularly the five dimensions of personality, that is, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. In these studies (Bauer & Liang, 2003; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003; Gray & Watson, 2002; Nguyen, Allen & Fraccastoro, 2005), the dimension of conscientiousness was found to be a valid predictor of academic performance. A recent study by Conard (2006) has also supported this finding. In his study, Conard (2006) discovered that, of the five traits, conscientiousness predicted three academic outcomes- grade point average (GPA), course performance, and attendance-, incrementally over academic ability and other traits. To put it more practically, one standard deviation increase in conscientiousness transformed into 0.11 increase in GPA (on a 0-4.0 scale) and a 2% increase in course performance, even after controlling for SAT. In addition, the latter study also discovered that, besides conscientiousness, the other four traits did not provide incremental validity for academic outcomes. This is due to the fact that, students who are more conscientious are more likely to be considerate and careful in the way they execute their daily tasks, such students would for example study and prepare for classes in time. Therefore, when students put care and thought into their studies, it is likely that they would become organised and efficient, and this in turn will have a positive impact on their academic performance (Bauer & Liang, 2003; Gray & Watson, 2002).

Contrary to positive effects of conscientiousness on academic achievement, in a study conducted by Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2003) neuroticism was found to be a negative correlate and predictor of academic achievement. This negative correlation may be associated with anxiety characteristics of neurotic personalities. In this study neuroticism was not only a significant correlate in examination performance, but also of final-year project results.

Just like intelligence, many personality characteristics play an important role in education. Motivation can be conceptualised in terms of personality characteristics. Therefore some personality characteristics may be more resourceful in motivating students to learn, while others might interfere with their learning.

3.2.2.1.8 Identity Development

Researchers like Boyd et al. (2003) found one way of investigating students' preparedness for tertiary education is to assess the level of their identity development and relate it to academic readiness. In their study on the relationship between identity processing style and academic success in undergraduate studies; their results illustrated that students categorised as having an information identity processing style appeared to be very well prepared for university (Boyd et al., 2003). Information-oriented individuals were defined, in accordance with Berzonsky' model in Boyd et al. (2003), as those individuals who seek and are open to personally relevant ideas and feedback, have good problem solving skills, and test and revise aspects of their identity. Therefore information identity processing style serves as an important resource for students.

Information-oriented individuals are more aware of themselves and their surroundings. When students know who they are, they are more likely to be aware of their strengths and shortcomings, and more willing to take command of the learning environment. The results of study conducted by Adams (2005) on Black American students in predominantly White

universities, revealed a statistically significant relationship between identity development and increased persistence that is, students becoming more aware of themselves, their history and culture; and believing that they are equipped to succeed in an indifferent environment (Adams, 2005).

3.2.2.1.9 Self-Esteem

Many studies support the role of self-esteem as a positive correlate of academic performance. In a study conducted by Davies and Brember (1999) a moderate correlation was found between self-esteem and students' grade point averages (GPA). However a study by Bowles (1999) reports a stronger relationship between self-esteem and academic performance. A study by Schweiker-Marra and Pula (2005) arrived at similar conclusions. In their study improved self-esteem correlated with improved academic performance. Despite these findings, other researchers do not support the view that high self-esteem leads to better grades (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). They infer that self-esteem is a result, and not a cause of achieving better grades.

As a way of establishing causal preference, several studies have explored the main reasons behind the positive relation between self-esteem and academic performance. Some studies also explored the possibilities of whether a third variable, such as socio-economic status (SES) or intelligence (IQ), could be responsible for the correlations between self-esteem and academic performance. A study conducted by Bachman and O'Malley (1986), found that self-esteem correlates with academic performance; however their more sophisticated statistical analysis (that is, path analysis) did not indicate any causal role for self-esteem. They then concluded that shared prior causes, including family background, ability, and early school performance, affect self-esteem and later educational attainment and were responsible for the correlation between the two. In support of Bachman and O'Malley's (1986) study, Bennett's (2003) study found that the self-esteem of students was dependent on the grades they obtained, and that low grades affected the students' motivation.

Psychologists have long believed that school experiences such as academic successes and failures, social rejection or acceptance from classmates, and rewards and punishments from educators have a major impact on the self-esteem of students. A student's global self-esteem is also likely to be affected by other factors besides academic achievement like family relationships and acceptance by friends (Beumeister et al., 2003). Therefore self-esteem does not develop on its own, but is dependent on other factors. When circumstances are positive, students' internal resources are strengthened and a high self-esteem is likely to ensure; however when circumstances are negative, students' internal resources decrease, stressors increase and low self-esteem develops.

3.2.2.1.10 Interest

The level of interest a person shows in an activity influences the level of commitment they will invest in those activities. The more a student shows interest in the course he or she is pursuing, the more he or she will be motivated to complete that course. In a South African study conducted by Fraser and Killen (2003) on factors influencing success or failure of first-year and senior students, students were requested to prioritise factors contributing to success. The student's '*interest in the course*' was ranked as one of the most important factors contributing to academic success.

On the contrary, it is a common factor, especially amongst the previously disadvantaged groups, that students enrol in courses they are not interested in. This problem is caused by a number of factors such as lack of career guidance, shortage of qualified teachers especially in mathematics and science, financial problems, and poor matriculation results. In a recent study conducted by Tickell and Smyrnios (2005) on predictors of tertiary accounting performance, their findings revealed that the type of secondary school attended, previous year's academic grades, and level of interest in accounting as a discipline and profession proved to be significant influences on academic performance.

When students show interest in the course or degree they are studying, they are more likely to be committed to their studies. As a result interest could serve as an important resource for students; while low interest could serve as a stressor.

3.2.2.1.11 Emotional Intelligence

Individual differences in emotional skills and competencies as assessed by measures of emotional intelligence (EI) may also relate to academic performance. The concept of emotional intelligence emerged from the increasing recognition that other factors beyond cognitive abilities play a significant role in performance (Goleman, 1996). As a result, a number of studies have investigated the impact of emotional intelligence on academic performance. In a study by Jordan (2000) emotional intelligence was found to be significantly related to a qualitative measure of classroom performance amongst Australian undergraduate students. Studies by Jaeger (2003) and Austin et al. (2005) also found a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance. In support of the above-mentioned studies a South African study by Kapp (2000) found a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance.

Emotional Intelligence is a very broad construct that incorporates many variables. Maximising one's potential at university requires constant adjustment to the demands of the university, to demands of authority, demands of peer acceptance, family demands and to the frequent conflict in demands from these and other areas. A successful orientation involves a positive attitude towards studies, a positive view of the self, support from the environment, constructive engagement in learning, controlling other impulses and feeling part of the university. Emotional intelligence (EI) therefore shapes one's degree of success (Austin et al., 2005; Fox & Spector, 2000). The relevance of emotional intelligence in academic settings lies in the recognition that individuals can connect their emotions to

solve problems and manage stressful tasks they face in their academic endeavours (Fox & Spector, 2000).

3.2.2.1.12 Conclusion

Literature indicates that besides cognitive factors, dispositional factors such as motivation, a sense of purpose, self-efficacy and many more, are very important in academic settings. Some of these factors serve as internal resources that facilitates coping in academic environments, while others may serve internal stressors that result in failure. After having discussed dispositional factors that impact on academic performance, the next section focuses on study behaviour.

3.2.2.2 STUDY BEHAVIOUR

Similar to cognitive factors, dispositional factors do not operate on their own. There are certain behaviours that should accompany them. Some of these behaviours are positive (resource), in the sense that they lead to success; while others are negative (stressor), because they result in failure. In the next section the following factors related to study behaviour are discussed: learning styles, class attendance, time management, and procrastination.

3.2.2.2.1 Learning Styles

Research on learning styles indicate that students become academically successful in learning environments that complement their learning styles. The results of a study conducted by Jones, Reichard and Mokhtari (2003), indicate that most students' learning style preferences differed extensively across four different subject-area disciplines: English, mathematics, science, and social science. They found that of the 103 students who participated in their study, 83 changed learning style modes for two or more disciplines.

In a study conducted by Drysdale, Ross and Schulz (2001), learners who think sequentially were found to be better suited for science and maths-

related fields; while random learners excelled in fine arts courses. All learning styles performed equally well in the liberal arts and social sciences. Therefore different styles, with contradictory types of regulation, have differential impacts on academic outcome (Boyle, Duffy & Dunleavy, 2003).

However minimal research has been conducted on the abilities of students to identify learning style characteristics of disciplines that do not complement their learning styles and adjust their learning styles to meet the demands of those disciplines (Drysdale, Ross & Schulz, 2001; Jones, Reichard & Mokhtari, 2003; Ross, Drysdale & Schulz, 2001; Vermunt, 2005). According to the research findings of Jones, Reichard and Mokhtari (2003), even though students may have some insight regarding how they learn, many may simply not be consciously aware of their learning style in general, let alone learning in different disciplines. It is therefore important to enhance student's awareness of their own learning style to enable them to effectively manage their learning habits and strategies.

3.2.2.2.2 Study Strategies / Methods

Despite the fact that a number of studies were conducted on "study strategies", so far there is no definite definition of this concept. Basically, the concept of study strategies should consist of a range of behaviours, like note taking, organizing information, scheduling, ability to concentrate, personal motivation and ways of mentally storing information (Yip & Chung, 2005). In addition, a successful set of study strategies should include an interaction of at least four factors: (i) nature of the task; (ii) nature of the materials; (iii) cognitive and affective characteristics of students; and (iv) motivation. Thus manipulation of these behaviours is the key to academic success and one of the most pragmatic questions in research.

So far examination of these issues has mainly been conducted in Western countries. Only a few studies on these aspects focused on African countries, such as South Africa. In a study by Bosch, Boshoff and Louw (2003), a significant relationship between learning strategy and academic

achievement was found. In support of the above finding, a South African study by Eiselen and Geysers (2003) found that students with ineffective study strategies are likely to experience difficulties in their studies. The situation could be worse if the study strategies are carried-over from high school. A study conducted by Yip and Chung (2005) in China found that, the effective study strategies used in the final school years might not work at university. Thus it is important that students should develop new study strategies adapted specifically for academic demands of different learning phases of higher learning.

3.2.2.2.3 Class Attendance

There are certain degree programs that are offered only through contact sessions. In such programs class attendance is highly beneficial to students. In a study by Launius (1997), class attendance was highly correlated with academic achievement in examinations and outside assignments. In the latter study, students who attended classes performed better than those who skipped classes. Consistent with this finding a study by Moore (2005) found that students with better academic records are those who attend classes regularly.

Class attendance is important because it shows commitment. It is in the classroom where students are able to interact with lecturers and classmates. Most valuable information like what is expected from students, tests, assignment and explanation of the learning content, is communicated during class sessions. In this way class attendance can become an important resource for students (Launius, 1997; Moore, 2005).

3.2.2.2.4 Time Management

Effective time management is very crucial in an institution of higher learning. The more students invest their time on academic activities, the greater their chances of succeeding academically (Marlowe et al., 2002). According to research findings by Jackson et al. (2003), lower levels of procrastination

and less overall time engaged in social and recreational activities are associated with academic success. Students, who are academically more successful, are those who manage their time effectively. Such students are better able to prepare for tests and assignments in time (Stoynoff, 1997). Later studies have also indicated that the time and energy that students devote to educationally purposeful activities, is important (Bitzer, 2003; Jackson et al., 2003).

Time is something that is readily available; however each person makes decisions on how they want to use it. Closely related to time management is discipline. It is through discipline that students are able to manage their time effectively, because it enforces a sense of responsibility. Therefore before students can be taught how to manage their time effectively, they should first be taught how to be disciplined citizens (Couzins & Smith, 2005; Fretty, 2005).

3.2.2.2.5 Academic Procrastination

Academic procrastination refers to an inclination to postpone tasks related to one's studies so that they are not entirely completed by their expected dates or have to be completed in a rush (Orpen, 1998). In a study conducted by Orpen (1998) on the causes and consequences of academic procrastination among university students; the researcher wanted to determine whether students who are intrinsically motivated about their studies procrastinate less than those whose studies are externally regulated. The results of this study depicted that students whose academic motivation is largely controlled by external constraints and rewards are more likely to procrastinate than those whose motivation is not controlled by external factors. The results of this study also suggest that academic procrastination is negatively related to academic performance (Orpen, 1998).

What is lacking amongst students with academic procrastination is commitment, and in this way it can serve as a stressor. Their lack of

commitment is clearly depicted in their tendency to derive motivation from external sources. Students who are externally motivated are more concerned with proving a point, and they give up easily when faced with challenging tasks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

3.2.2.2.6 Conclusion

For students to be successful, it is important that their study behaviour should be adapted for the learning environment. In this way they will realize the importance of developing learning styles that are suitable for their programmes, effective study methods, class attendance and effective time management. After having discussed study behaviour, the next section discusses personal adjustment.

3.2.2.3 PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT

The change from school to university is a major life transition to which many students have extensive difficulty adjusting. This process of adjustment is multidimensional, and as a result it compels students to develop useful coping strategies for adapting to a huge number of new demands including those found in the academic, social and emotional spheres of development (Sennett et al., 2003). Therefore, failure and/or possible discontinuation of studies, normally occurs in situations where students are unable to manage this transition (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004).

3.2.2.3.1 Adjustment

More and more students from respective communities are enrolling into tertiary institutions. *“Because of lack of traditional academic cultural socialization, many students find it difficult to adapt to learning environments that, in some situations, have conflicted with the students’ cultures, values, and belief systems”* (Jones, Reichard & Mokhtari, 2003, p.363). While the number of students from various communities increases, the dropout and failure rate is also on the increase, especially in the first-year of study.

According to a number of authors, (Bitzer, 2003; Bojuwoye, 2002; Bokhorst et al., 1992; Eiselen & Geysers, 2003; Fraser & Killen, 2003; Huysamen, 2001; Khahn, 2002; Lourens & Smit, 2003; Mji, 2002; Nyamapfene & Letseka 1995; Pretorius, 2000; Sennett et al., 2003; Wood, 1998; Zaiman, Van der Flier & Thijs, 1998), some of the stressors that influence the adjustment of first-year students in South African institutions of higher learning, can be classified in the following categories:

- Under-preparedness, inferior schooling, lack of career orientation
- The fear of failing in tertiary institutions
- Lack of study and/or poor study skills, and time management.
- Proximity of the university
- Appropriate admission criteria and good selection packages.
- Poor social integration
- Studying through a second or third language
- The poor quality of the learning environment of some tertiary institutions
- Inadequate goal setting
- Lack of interest in the course (mismatch between students and field of study)
- Socio-economic status (Financial difficulties)
- Family and personal problems
- Low self-esteem
- Parenthood
- Health of the student
- Intense competition for available jobs

The students' social status position has been identified as one of the factors that affect access to coping resources among Black students (Malefo, 2000). Therefore a '*supportive community*' which does not only include students' peers, but other members of the university staff like professional counsellors rendering '*responsive counselling services*', and lecturers can

serve as support system that would mediate the stress experienced by these students (Fleming, 1984).

3.2.2.3.2 Life Crises Experienced by Students

One of example of life crises students experience is bereavement. Losing a significant person, through death, is considered to be one of the most stressful life experiences. In a country like South Africa, where the rate of HIV and Aids mortality is alarming, it is possible that more students are affected. According to a report by the Medical Research Council (MRC) HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death in South Africa (PLUSNEWS, 2005). In recent study Purdue University researchers found that university students who experience the death of a family member or friends also experience a corresponding drop in academic performance during the semester the loss takes place. In this specific study Servaty-Seib, Hamilton and Medaris (2006) found that bereaved undergraduates had significantly lower grade point averages (GPA) than a comparative group of non-bereaved students.

3.2.2.3.3 Well-being/Health of Student

Wrong study methods and poor time management skills could also be aggravated by the student's emotional and mental well-being. High levels of stress may have a negative effect on mastery of the academic curriculum, as evidenced in a study conducted by Steward et al. (1999), on the relationship between stress-related measures and academic performance during the first two years of medical school.

Recent research findings have also indicated that compared to less psychologically distressed students, first-year students who are more psychologically distressed do not put much effort in their academic activities (Bauer & Liang, 2003; Becker & Luthar, 2002; DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004; Malefo, 2000; Strahan, 2003). This might be due to the fact that students who are more psychologically distressed might spend more psychological energy on emotional and mental stability as well as

interpersonal relationships. Such students may not be aware of the importance of spending most of their energy on academic activities. Lectures and/or workshops on time management, study skills and balance of social and academic activities can help promote successful adjustment of these students.

3.2.2.3.4 Drug Use

Drug abuse has a detrimental effect on all dimensions of human functioning. Therefore it was not surprising that in a study conducted by Barnes (2000), on the academic performance of drug users and nonusers; nonusers always outperformed users on achievement scores and course grades. These findings were supported by the findings of Jenkins (2002).

3.2.2.3.5 Social anxiety and Persistence

Social skills do play an important role in university adjustment and academic success. Tinto (1993) has suggested that students' willingness and ability to integrate themselves into the social and cultural life of the university community has a major impact on whether they will persist academically. He indicated that the intentions of students, their personal goals, and commitment to the institution serve as mediators for effects of other variables, like student's socio-economic status (SES) and ethnicity, and as a result they shape the degree of academic and social integration which ultimately affects the students' decision to stay or leave.

However, there is the question of whether social skill deficits play a role in poor university adjustment. It is known that people who are socially anxious have a tendency of underrating their performance in social settings, although the effect of social anxiety on academic performance is not clearly known. In study a conducted by Strahan (2003), social phobia was found to be prevalent in a significant number of students, even at clinical level. However, this social anxiety did not reach significance as a predictor of students dropping out. It was then concluded that, even though students

experienced considerable anxiety, they seem to have managed their anxiety and persisted with their studies. The one reason why these students persisted in their studies, despite the social anxiety, could be attributed to the fact that, even though university and its social challenges may be quite stressful for these students, they may be differentially sensitive to the stigma of dropping out of university and not being successful in the eyes of others (Strahan, 2003).

3.2.2.3.6 Conclusion

A number of factors contribute towards the adjustment of students in institutions of higher learning. As a result it is important that students need to be aware of these factors so that they can develop skills and behaviour patterns that will enable them to adjust well in education settings. In the next section, demographic factors are discussed.

3.2.2.4 DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Besides personal factors, demographic factors also have an impact on academic performance. In the next section, demographic factors such as age, gender, race, and family variables will be discussed.

3.2.2.4.1 Age

In several research studies, age was found to be a powerful predictor of academic performance, with older students performing better than younger students (Ayaya, 1996; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gadzella et al., 2001; Hoskins, 1997; Malefo, 2000; Myburgh, Grobler & Niehaus, 1999; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). This could be due to the fact that older students could be more motivated and more mature, thus for them studying is more for personal development rather than a means to an end (Hoskins, 1997; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002).

In a study conducted by Ofori (2002), age positively correlated with academic performance despite the fact that older students came to the course with lower entry points. This observation is interesting when one takes into consideration that many older students have more stressors, such as family commitments (for example, taking care of children) and fewer sources of influential and emotional support, at home. Thus, Ofori (2002) indicated that one of the factors that contributed to academic success amongst older students was their greater support-seeking behaviour like making follow-up visits to the lecturers, attending academic support programmes and making use of social support services on campus.

With age comes experience. Michelson (1991) discovered a significant relationship between age and coping efforts. Therefore it is possible that older students are better equipped to deal with stressors. Low social integration as a result of older students being less likely to participate in campus social activities could also be one of the factors contributing to these students achieving better marks academically.

3.2.2.4.2 Gender

Besides age, gender is another variable that may influence academic performance. A South African study conducted by Huysamen (2001), discovered that, *“irrespective of their high school background, the tertiary-academic performance of women was under-predicted and that of men was over-predicted”* (p.136). In a number of studies (Baker, 2004; Barro, 2001; Gurian & Stevens, 2004; Jackson et al., 2003), gender was shown to be a significant predictor of academic success, with females depicting a relative advantage compared to males. Earlier studies (for example, Ayaya, 1996; Hoskins, 1997; Jackson et al., 2003, Kiosseoglou, 1998) have confirmed that female students tend to perform better than males. However, the pattern of the gender differences was found to be inconsistent and ever changing as a result of the subject matter, aspirations and other factors, like identity development.

More recent statistics from the United States revealed that females are doing better than males, with boys obtaining 70 percent Ds and Fs opposed to about half of the As, constituting two-thirds of learning disability diagnoses, and higher incidents of brain-related learning disorders such as ADD/ADHD. They also revealed that 80 percent of high school dropouts and fewer than 40 percent of university students are males (Gurian & Stevens, 2004).

Similar trends are found globally.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), recently released its three-year study of knowledge and skills of males and females in 35 industrialised countries (including the United States, Canada, the European countries, Australia, and Japan). In this study, girls outperformed boys in every country. The statistics that brought male scores down most significantly were their reading/writing scores (Gurian & Stevens, 2004, p.24).

With regard to reasons behind the gender differences, previous studies have found that women are generally more motivated towards academic activities (Karsenti & Thibert, 1994), display a more self-determined motivational profile (Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997) and tend to have higher levels of desire to finish university and persistence than men (Allen, 1999).

3.2.2.4.3 Race

Race is another factor that has been related to academic performance, with Blacks scoring lower than Whites in examinations (Swinton, 2004). In the United States, University grades for Blacks and Hispanics were lower, on average, than those for Whites, even when comparing students who obtained similar scores on admission tests (Barro, 2001).

Zaaiman, Van der Flier and Thijs (1998) mentioned that, throughout the world, the probability of students' success in higher education, is influenced

to a great extent by their home and school backgrounds. Thus the quality of educational opportunity is closely related to family socio-economic status (SES). In the case of South Africa, both family socio-economic status (SES) and educational opportunity are strongly related to racial group membership (Zaaiman, Van der Flier & Thijs, 1998).

In an American study conducted by Thomas (2004), one of the encouraging results of this study was that Black students no longer lag behind White students when limited measures of socio-economic status (SES) and school effects were controlled. However, as a result of the disparities in incomes and educational environment, it is unfortunate that these score gaps will continue to exist even in the near future (Thomas, 2004).

3.2.2.4.4 Family Variables

It has been well documented in research that family plays an important role in the development of a child, as well as their academic performance (Bird, 2003; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Although there has been a clear link between family variables (that is, family functioning, family status and demographic variables) and academic performance in school age children and teenagers, there is limited literature with regard to university students. The influence of family background certainly continues to be relevant at the tertiary level. The results of a study conducted by Walker and Satterwhite (2002) suggest that although family variables continue to be important at tertiary level, its effect on academic performance is small.

The following family variables are discussed in the next section: family structure, parenting style, parental involvement, parental education, first-generation students and socio-economic status (SES) of the family.

3.2.2.4.4.1 Family structure

Single-parent households have been on the rise since the 1970s and in many areas this represents the "norm" rather than the exception (Hak-Ju, 2004). In 2001 there were approximately 27.32% single-parent households in South Africa (Amoateng, 2004). For good reasons, these realities have raised concerns about the relationship between family structure and academic performance, especially in institutions of higher learning.

Family structure in general and differences in family structures are important as it impacts on the availability of resources, socialization processes, and parent-child relationships (Upthegrove, Roscigno & Zubrinsk, 1999). Amongst younger children, the findings of a study by Hak-Ju (2004) discovered that different family structures influence children's academic achievement. In the latter study children from two biological parent environments performed better than those from single-parent settings. To the contrary, Walker and Satterwhite (2002) found that students from single-parent homes were performing equally well as those from two-parent homes, across different racial groups. Thus for these students, the presence of only one parent provided them with enough resources to cope, depending on the socio-economic situation.

A South African study by Cherian and Malehase (2000) discovered a significant relationship between parental control and scholastic achievement among children from two-parent families. However their study did not find a relationship between the two variables for single-parent children. This could be due to the fact that a single-parent has fewer economic resources than two-parent families and this may have negative effects on the children's outcomes.

In looking at the issue of single-parents special attention needs to be given to the context under which these families are formed. The effects of a father

or mother, who has been absent from birth, are not similar to recent family dissolutions. Recent family disintegrations as a result of death or divorce could have adverse effects on students. In any family the quantity of time and quality of time the parents spend with their children, are two different contexts that should be interpreted carefully. Some two-parent households do not provide quality time for their children (Brill, 2004).

3.2.2.4.4.2 Parenting styles and students' goal orientation

The study of students' goal orientations is directed at the types of learning goals students adapt in academic situations. Two types of goals are distinguished: the mastery goal, and the performance goal (Ames & Archer, 1988). Students who are oriented towards the mastery goal are interested in learning new skills and improving their understanding and competence; while students who orient towards performance goals are more concerned with proving their ability or avoiding negative judgements of their competence (Ames & Archer, 1988).

Research conducted with children (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) have revealed that learners with mastery goals seek out challenge and persist despite the difficulties they face, see mistakes as opportunities for learning, and are more likely to be intrinsically motivated. Learners with performance goals see intelligence as fixed, avoid challenging tasks with the intention of avoiding criticism, and are less likely to be intrinsically motivated.

Studies in high school and university have led researchers to conclude that older students are possibly using both goal orientations at the same time (Ames & Archer, 1988; Archer, 1994). The goals that students adopt are clearly related to the way they approach potential learning situations. It might also be possible that parenting styles -authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive - in the home environment are strongly related to the development of student goal orientations.

In a study conducted by Gonzalez, Greenwood, and WenHsu (2001), authoritarian parenting, especially from fathers, which emphasises obedience and more punitive measures of discipline management was related to a goal orientation where students are concerned with proving their ability. This style of parenting is related to extrinsic motivational orientation, a construct related to the performance goal orientation (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). The mother's authoritativeness was positively related to a student's mastery orientation. It was hypothesised that parents who place emphasis on autonomy instead of obedience are more likely to have children who are concerned with personal mastery. Such students are more likely to face challenges, will experience pleasure in studies, and are more intrinsically motivated. Lastly, Gonzalez, Greenwood, and WenHsu (2001) also discovered that parental permissiveness was related to extrinsic motivational orientation and some of the poorest outcomes on measures of work-orientation and self-reliance (Gonzalez, Greenwood & WenHsu, 2001).

Closely related to the above study, a South African study conducted by Malefo (2000), found a significant positive relationship between academic performance and the Family Environment Scale factor of Control. The results of this study are similar to those reported by Coopersmith (in Berg, 1991) which suggests that clearly defined and enforced limits and rules in the family have a positive effect on academic performance. The above-mentioned factor of Control is closely related to the authoritative parents; whom in their parenting style tend to take time to explain rules, place less emphasis on strict obedience and are more likely to encourage autonomy. Therefore such family environments would enable students to know when they have failed, the extent of their failures, and give them an opportunity to learn from their failures (Berg, 1991).

Contrary to the above studies, which advocate for an authoritative parenting style, studies from the East present a different perspective with regards to the impact of parenting styles on academic performance. They argue that much of the studies from the West have been based on samples which are

predominantly White, European American families, and western measures of parenting styles. Specifically negative relationships between Baumrind's parenting styles and academic performance have been demonstrated for African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American studies (Chao, 2001). In these studies authoritarian parenting was often related to higher achievement for Asian American samples. Research indicates that authoritarian parenting is often witnessed in traditional Eastern societies (Chao, 2001).

In a comparative study on East Indian and Canadian adolescents, Garg et al. (2005), reports, that the East Indian findings may bring to light the significance of specific aspects of authoritative parenting across cultures. In general, authoritative parenting seems to reflect high levels of family cohesion and parental concern (Hein & Lewko, 1994). Therefore the important impact of these two variables might reveal similar socialisation experiences between the two groups of adolescents. The weak relationship between parenting style and academic achievement found in their study tends to support recent evidence that parenting style is not conclusively related to adolescent achievement in all ethnic groups (Chao, 2001).

The impact of parenting style can only be understood within the specific culture in which it takes place, and it also calls for greater cultural sensitivity. Irrespective, unity and parental involvement remain the two critical, universal values of good parenting. These values are strongly associated with the authoritative style of parenting (Chao, 2001).

3.2.2.4.4.3 Parental involvement and support

To what extent does the parental involvement and support influence academic achievement in institutions of higher learning? In a South African study by Moller (1995) parental involvement was significantly related to academic performance. In a study by Gonzalez, Greenwood, and WenHsu (2001), a positive relationship was found between parental involvement and

authoritative parenting. Parental involvement was also related to a mastery goal orientation. According to Cutrona et al. (1994) parental support seems to function as a buffer during stressful times, it facilitates coping. In a study conducted by Wycoff (1996), there was a significant relationship between emotional support received, especially from mothers (in 90% of respondents), and student's subsequent academic achievement.

However, it is a known fact that families are not always supportive. A recent study conducted by Charles, Dinwiddie and Massey (2004) indicates that Black university students, even those who currently occupy important positions in society, are exposed to considerably more family stress than their White or Asian counterparts.

Parental involvement and support is very important for student success. When students know that their parents are behind them, they are more likely to be motivated to achieving their goals. However it is important that students and parents have a common understanding of their mutual expectations. In other words students should not feel pressured to please their parents, as it might be the case with authoritarian parents, which ultimately results in students adopting performance goals (Gonzalez, Greenwood & WenHsu, 2001).

3.2.2.4.4 Parent education

Parents serve as important role models for their children. However, research findings seem to differ in this regard. A study by Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1997) found a positive relationship between parental social class and academic achievement. In support of this finding, South African studies (Jubber, 1994; Myburgh, Grobler & Niehaus, 1999) also found a significant relationship between the parents' level of education and academic performance. On the contrary, other studies commented on a negative relationship between parent education and performance

(Gonzalez, Greenwood & WenHsu, 2001; Lamborn et al., 1991; McCartin & Meyer, 1988).

Despite contrasting views on this issue, a parent who did not attend school has a diminished bargaining power in preventing dropout decisions. However, a successful parent serves as a positive role model, a benchmark (Hak-Ju, 2004). This point will be explored further in the next section on first-generation students.

3.2.2.4.4.5 First-generation students

First-generation students are those whose parents have not attended an institution of higher learning. The adjustment from high school to university is challenging for most students, and it might even be traumatic for first-generation students. In 1992, the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 28 percent of 12th graders in the United States were first-generation students. This figure represented 22 percent of those who entered postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 (Chen, 2005). Approximately 43 percent – 4 in 10 – first-generation students who were admitted in institutions of higher learning during this period left without a degree by 2000, and only 24 percent graduated with a bachelor's degree. On the opposite, a large majority (68 percent) of students whose parents were college graduates had completed a bachelor's degree, and only 20 percent left without a degree.

In the South African context, such first-generation students are most likely to be Black Africans, whose disadvantaged educational and socio-economic circumstances result from the inequities of apartheid (Sennett et al., 2003). Some of the first-generation students have family and background characteristics that are associated with attrition, and as result, they are more likely to experience many tensions and stresses when they get to university (Chen, 2005).

According to Khahn (2002) some of the challenges facing first-generation university students are fear of failing, worry about financial aid and a feeling that they have to be more dedicated to their studies. They are also concerned about helping their parents out after completing their studies. Mji (2002) states that a large number of students in South African universities come from families who cannot afford university education. Some first-generation college students may feel guilty about going to institutions of higher learning while their families are struggling to survive financially. Depending on how students interpret the above stressors, it is likely that it might have a negative impact on their motivation levels, and failure may result.

3.2.2.4.4.6 Socio-economic status of the family

The results of a study conducted by Ross, Cleland and Macleod (2006) on medical students indicate that students' perceptions of their own levels of debt, rather than level of debt *per se*, correlates with academic performance. They also found that, students who worry about money have higher debts and perform less well than their peers in degree examinations. In addition, an earlier study by Punch (1966) also suggested a positive relationship between academic achievement and high socio-economic status (SES), as indicated by the social and occupational status of parents. However, a South African study on female students, by Malefo (2000), did not support a statistically significant relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance. An earlier study by Nettles (1988) reported a negative relationship between low socio-economic status (SES) and academic performance.

Therefore, socio-economic status (SES) could have a direct relationship on academic performance, with low SES having a negative impact and high SES having a positive impact (Punch, 1966). As well as an indirect relationship with additional variables such as worry about financial

constraints impacting on the students' performance especially in situations where such variables are not mediated (Ross, Cleland & Macleod, 2006).

3.2.2.4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that a number of demographic factors play a role in determining academic performance. With regard to age, a number of researchers report that older students perform much better than younger students, because they are more motivated. Gender is another factor mentioned, with female students performing better than male students. In a number of studies race was also significantly related to academic performance, with White students performing better than Black students. Many factors such as socio-economic status and lack of role models interact with race. On the subject of family variables several factors were discussed; family structure, parenting styles, parental support, parent education, first-generation students and socio-economic status of the family. University education is quite demanding, both in human (support) and economic (finance) resources. Parents are an important source of these resources; unfortunately many parents lack the necessary resources to provide sufficiently for their children. In the next section contextual factors are discussed.

3.3 CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Contextual factors refer to the broader circumstantial issues related to the social and economic situations of students. In the next section the following factors are discussed, broader socio-economic factors, social support and background school environment.

3.3.1 BROADER SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

An article, in the Mail & Guardian (Macfarlane, 2006) entitled ***Shock varsity dropout stats***, indicated that, according to a report tabled before parliament

by education Minister Naledi Pandor, 50% of undergraduate students dropout of institutions of higher learning in South Africa. The statistics for drop out rate of first-year students, at institutions of higher learning in South Africa, is reported to be 38% and higher; and in some institutions it is as high as 64% (Macfariane, 2006). This is costing both the government and universities a lot of money (Kgosana, 2007a; Pretorius, 2000; Seepe, 2005; Weber, 2005).

Two main reasons are cited as being major causes of the high dropout rate; 1) students who are ill-prepared for higher learning, and 2) financial difficulties (Legotlo et al., 2002; Macfariane, 2006). Research has also shown that in developing nations, like South Africa, dropout and repetition ratios seem to be more prevalent among students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Legotlo et al., 2002). As a result, according to Dr Adam Habib, "*for marginalized students every day is a struggle-where to find food, textbooks and resources*" (Kgosana, 2007a, p.5).

There are also situations, where full-time students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are compelled to work part-time in order to finance their studies. Depending on the workload and the extent to which a particular student can handle both activities at the same time, such conditions are likely to pose great challenges to first-year students. Research indicates that employment responsibilities have a negative impact on academic performance (Borde, 1998; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). In a study conducted by Borde (1998), there was a negative relationship between hours of employment and academic performance. Therefore the study suggests that full-time first-year students with part-time employment find it difficult to cope with academic responsibilities. However, this depends on age and work experience. According to a study conducted by Marlowe et al. (2002), older first-year students seem to cope much better with a combination of the demands of employment and studies than younger students.

3.3.2 SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is a significant independent predictor of academic achievement (Bauer & Liang, 2003; DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004). The formation of social relationships, orientation to a new environment, and physical comfort are important aspects of a student's transition to tertiary institution; which could be useful in safeguarding the individual from the harmful impact of stress (Bauer & Liang, 2003; DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004).

It is a well known fact that the academic successes of students are not only affected by their academic ability and knowledge, but also by how well they think they are capable of succeeding in their examinations, that is, their academic self-confidence. Such confidence can be raised considerably by the support they receive from friends, family and fellow classmates. However, social support from these respective sources is not equally helpful in improving academic performance, as a result of its effect on confidence (Bauer & Liang, 2003; DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004; Orpen, 1996). This is due to the fact that students do not have the same kind of relations with people outside and inside the classroom, thus the support from these two sources probably have different effects on confidence and ultimately on academic performance.

In a study conducted by Orpen (1996) on the interactive effects of social support and test anxiety on student academic performance, the results indicate that the relationship between anxiety and performance is moderated by outside (that is, by friends and family) support but not by support from classmates. In the next section the focus of the discussion is on the significance of friendships on academic performance.

3.3.2.1 FRIENDSHIPS

Traditionally, research on youth friendships focused on the negative consequences, such as peer group pressure; however, youth friends may

be a basis of social capital for one another. A study conducted by Crosnoe, Cavanagh and Elder (2003) attempted to broaden this image by examining whether academically oriented friendship groups can promote, rather than hinder adjustment in an education setting. Their research findings concluded that, by means of modelling, support, reinforcement, and coercion, academically oriented friends socialise each other into greater academic commitment and achievement. Secondly, overachieving and committed students become friends because their academic resemblance provide common ground or serve as attractions for them (Crosnoe, Cavanagh & Elder 2003).

By entering into a friendship with an academically oriented peer, students gain entry to a new pool of social, psychological and instrumental resources, such as social and emotional support for meeting challenges. These resources can promote dedication to studies, integrate the youth into the normative order of education, and elevate the importance of education in the student's life (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Crosnoe, Cavanagh & Elder 2003). Conceptualising friendships as social capital involves selecting friends who have valued resources and being influenced by these resources. This conceptualisation may shed light on the reasons why some students struggle academically, while others are able to cope. The context in which this social capital takes place is important, and thus academically oriented friendships may only be valuable in certain circumstances (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Crosnoe, Cavanagh & Elder 2003).

3.3.3 BACKGROUND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The South African student population comes from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds that give them very different life experiences, different educational opportunities and a great variety of expectations, needs and academic potential (Chikte & Brand, 1996; Goduka, 1996).

3.3.3.1 CONTINUED CONSEQUENCES OF SEGREGATION

The legacy of segregation will continue for many years. This legacy has ensured that people remain in segregated areas, and even after 13 years of democracy many things have not changed in South Africa. As a result of segregation, many Black people are still faced with poverty and the social problems associated with it, resulting in Black students facing an elevated risk of stressful life events, which undermine academic performance (Akoojee, 2004; Sennett et al., 2003).

In South Africa, the inferior quality of Black African identity due to the influence of apartheid policy has long been a critical issue. Under the apartheid system, racial classification defined every aspect of ordinary life. People were classified in four population groups; White, African Black, Coloured and Indian. The schools of the four groups were controlled by different education authorities and they received very different levels of resources. This resulted in Whites receiving superior education, and Blacks receiving the most inferior. Very few schools were built for Blacks, and this resulted in over-crowded classes, lack of basic materials such as books, paper and equipment, and poorly trained teachers. With the replacement of the apartheid regime by a democratically elected government there has been some improvement. At present, schools are desegregated and resources are fairly distributed (Sennett et al., 2003).

The scars left by segregation are not only visible in South Africa, but they are visible in other countries like the United States. Civil rights movements have transformed race relations in the United States, which resulted in transformation of higher education. However, despite all these efforts, African American students continue to under-perform relative to their White and Asian counterparts, earning lower grades, progressing at a slower pace, and dropping out at higher rates. More worrying is the fact that such discrepancies are visible even after controlling for factors such as SAT scores and family socio-economic status (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

Segregation can affect university academic performance in a number of ways. South African and American studies (Coleman, 1993; Gelman, 1999; Hamber, 2000; Massey & Fischer, 2002) revealed that segregation lowered academic performance by exposing Black people to unusually high levels of social disorder and violence while growing up. They hypothesised that long-term exposure to stress undermined cognitive development along several dimensions, including memory, attention, and frustration. In addition to the long-term effect, segregation has other more contemporaneous effects on academic performance. Specifically, irrespective of the fact that students may personally reside in an integrated and safe university campus, their friends and relatives who come from segregated neighbourhoods continue to experience the daily realities in a poor, racially isolated environment. Therefore, because Black students are connected to people living in neighbourhoods that display higher concentrations of poverty and greater rates of disorder and violence, they are at a much greater risk of experiencing stress indirectly through their social networks. Without doubt, this has an impact on the students' adjustment and performance at university (Coleman, 1993; Gelman, 1999; Hamber, 2000; Massey & Fischer, 2002).

3.3.3.1.1 Level of Preparedness

Irrespective of the fact that South Africa has a democratically elected government, change on the ground has been very slow and learners who attend traditionally Black African schools are still educationally disadvantaged (Sennett et al., 2003).

In an investigation conducted over a period of two years, among South African universities, it became evident that first-year students experience major learning problems that originate from a certain level of "under-preparedness" (Nyamapfene & Letseka, 1995). This problem emanates from a shortage of suitably qualified teachers, overcrowded classes, lack of basic materials such as books, paper and equipment, in the secondary

school years (Gilmour & Soudien, 1994; Mji, 2002). In support of this view, a study conducted by Legotlo and Van der Westhuizen (1996) on problems facing new principals, found that shortage of resources was one of their major concerns. In addition Mji (2002) found that Black African schools frequently lacked the capacity to teach mathematics, the natural science and commerce based subjects. This situation is made worse by the fact that more than 12 000 teachers in South Africa only have a Grade 10 or a matric certificate (Kgosana, 2007b).

Legotlo et al. (2002) strongly link lack of resources in Black African schools with the poor performance in Grade 12. With students feeling under-prepared for university studies, it is likely that their motivation levels are influenced negatively. A South African study by Miller, Bradbury and Acutt (2001), found that a small proportion of under-prepared university students did improve their academic performance, while the larger proportion were unable to cope with academic demands. This poses a difficulty as to whether under-prepared students should be given or denied access to institutions of higher learning, as it is difficult to provide convincing evidence that under-prepared students do not have the ability to cope. Thus higher education authorities are faced with the difficult task of distinguishing under-prepared students from unprepared students (Miller, Bradbury & Acutt, 2001).

A report on the right to basic education released by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) explores the meaning, content and context in which the right to basic education is experienced in South Africa. One of the significant findings of this report is that quality education is not taking place in this country. According to the report, poverty, HIV/Aids and insufficient teacher development are inhibiting quality education. It is also argued that the daily reality for many pupils, particularly in rural areas and townships, are incongruous with the legislation and policies of the department of education (SAHRC, 2006). Among other problems, sexual abuse of girls by teachers and a high mortality rate was highlighted as being major setbacks for education in South Africa.

3.3.4 CONCLUSION

In the previous section, contextual factors were discussed. The high number of undergraduates dropping out of university is a major concern for both the government and higher education authorities. This dilemma seems to be more prevalent amongst students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Social support as a resource and stressor was mentioned, especially the role played by friendships. Lastly, issues related to the school environment background were also discussed. In the next section factors directly related to institutions of higher learning are discussed.

3.4 INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Institutional factors are those factors which are directly associated with institutions of higher learning, namely; academic support, social support services, transformation, access to resources and assessment policy.

3.4.1 ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

Academic support services are extra curricular activities aimed at assisting either high-risk students in normal courses or average students in high-risk courses.

3.4.1.1 SUPPLEMENTAL INSTRUCTION PROGRAMMES

Supplemental instruction (SI) is a unique mode of student academic assistance intended to help students in high-risk university courses master course content while developing efficient learning and study strategies suitable for that course (Ramirez, 1997). Unlike services that concentrate on the needs or deficiencies of students, SI recognises the inherent difficulty of a course. In a study conducted by Ramirez (1997), SI was found to have a positive effect on the academic performance of students in high-risk

courses. The study also found that students with low motivation, as confirmed by their previous university performance, maintained consistent improvement after participating in SI programmes. As a result, SI is an important resource for students.

3.4.1.2 STUDENT COUNSELLING

Institutions of higher learning are examining effective means of increasing student retention and completion rates, and due to lack of substantive proof, the value of undergraduate student counselling in this context is being questioned. This situation prompted Rickinson (1998) to investigate the relationship between undergraduate student counselling and successful degree completion. The outcome of this study strongly suggested that counselling intervention assisted first-year students, who were at the risk of leaving in their first-term, to adjust to new social and academic demands of the university environment (Rickinson, 1998). A review of both international and national research conducted by Botha et al. (2005) supports the need for student counselling and development, and purports that it is impossible for South African institutions of higher learning to function effectively without this service.

The utilization of student counselling services, on and off campus, can serve as a very important resource for helping students deal with some of the internal and external stressors they may come across at university and in their communities. In the South African situation, the needs of ill-prepared students make it even more obvious that student counselling can be a valuable service that could assist in preventing students from dropping out of university (Botha et al., 2005).

3.4.2 SOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES

Besides academic support services, social support services are also a valuable resource for students. The following institutional social resources are discussed in the next section; transition workshops, social integration, and peer-mentoring programmes.

3.4.2.1 TRANSITION WORKSHOPS

Transition to university involves adapting to a new academic and social environment. Students can be helped through this transition by means of workshops aimed at building coping skills of students. The outcome of a study conducted by Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2001) indicates that students who attended transition workshops are adjusting more successfully to university life than students who did not, both in academic and social domains. In this regard, transition workshops can serve as an important resource for first-year students.

3.4.2.2 SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure states that, the lower the degree of student social and intellectual integration into academic and social communities in the institution, the greater the likelihood of student dropout and departure. Therefore, it is important that first-year students first need to attend to the development of a social network before putting their focus on pursuing academic activities, thus becoming knowledgeable about the negative influence of social activities on academic performance.

With the recent shift in enrolments, more Black students are enrolling in historically White institutions. As a result, these students would need to adjust to a culture that is different to their own. According to Haralson (1996) the most important factor that most Black students mention as being important for survival at predominantly White institutions was to be involved in peer group support, followed by determination to succeed, parent/family

support and faculty support. In support of Tinto's model, a study by Kelly (1996) found that academic performance and social integration were important measures of long-term persistence. Further evidence of the importance of social integration is provided by Kennedy, Sheckley and Kehrhahn (2000) who found that many first-year students persisted in their studies because their social integration and feeling of "belonging" with the institution seemed to compensate for poor academic performance. Contrary to the above findings, in a study by Liu and Liu (2000) social integration was not a significant factor in the student's decision to stay. According to Liu and Liu (2000) satisfaction, academic performance and academic integration contributed most significantly to student persistence.

3.4.2.3 PEER-MENTORING PROGRAMMES

Besides academically oriented friendships, peer-mentoring programmes can also be helpful to new incoming students. In the United States, peer-mentoring programmes were initiated as a way of steering first-year students away from house parties; which are reported to have a negative impact on their academic performance as a result of drinking and smoking. Studies conducted by several authors indicated that there is a relationship between substance abuse and poor academic performance (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004; Morgans, 2002; Santovec, 2004; Sullivan & Risler, 2002). Therefore, peer-mentoring programmes were initiated in order to help first-year students form social ties without having to attend house parties. They also encouraged students to participate in campus organisations and meet in small groups to talk about university life (Santovec, 2004). Santovec (2004) reports that peer-mentoring programs proves to be successful in the sense that it helps a large number of first-year students to adjust effectively to university life. In a study by Fox and Stevenson (2006) mentoring was also found to have a positive effect on the student's academic performance. In contrast to this finding, Sanchez, Bauer and Paronto (2006) found that mentoring intervention does not seem to have an impact on academic performance, as measured by the student's grade point average (GPA).

In a Southern Africa study conducted by Mohono-Mahlatsi and Van Tonder (2006), a number of strengths of the mentoring system were identified, including opportunities to ask questions freely, to learn from mistakes and to share ideas.

Students are not only intellectual beings but they are also social beings. Therefore universities must not only assist first-year students in adjusting to academic demands, but also need to address the demands for effective social adjustment of students.

3.4.3 TRANSFORMATION

One of the ways in which institutions of higher learning can ensure effective teaching, is by recognizing the diversity of the student population. In recent years, there has been an escalating concern about the competence of university education in meeting the needs of its demographically diverse students. It is believed that universities of the 21st century would need to renew its curriculum, teaching strategies, student learning environments, and empower students through equipping them with effective study skills.

In a speech prepared for delivery at the University of Cape Town, the minister of education Naledi Pandor warned that while the overall structure of the student body at South African higher education institutions is changing to illustrate the demographic profile of society more broadly, there are still problems (Sapa, 2004). Black women remain under-represented in a number of key areas of study, and the success rates of Black students also remain lower than that of White students, she said.

According to a book by Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University and Willam G. Bowen, former president of Princeton University, racial preferences at top colleges and universities have helped African Americans to get ahead. Their argument was based on the 75 percent graduation rate

among Blacks at those institutions, as compared to the 40 percent graduation rate from the all Black college students (Bok, 1998).

With the recent changes in South Africa, phrases like equity and diversity have an integral part of the higher education policy. These phrases were derived from legislation to redress the past historical imbalances (Cassim, 2005). While equity is concerned with the use of processes, tools, and ways to promote equal opportunities; diversity is about attaining multicultural institutions that are free from all forms of discrimination. Besides featuring in policy, equity and diversity are also important in the transformation agendas of institutions of higher learning. However the one critical question remains: Are South African universities succeeding with transformation? The reality is that while some universities are succeeding in equity and diversity others are lagging behind (Cassim, 2005). While the number of Black students in South African universities has increased, the staff composition has not changed. White staff members are still dominating (Cooper & Subotsky, 2001). Three obstacles were noted in the National Plan for Higher Education (RSA, 2001); 1) low numbers of Black and women postgraduate students, 2) inadequate levels of support for postgraduate students, and 3) the inability of higher education institutions to compete with the private and public sectors in salaries.

In South Africa, students from previously disadvantaged communities fail to complete their studies. Koch and Foxcroft (2003) mention that, *“the lower pass and graduation rate of learners from previously disadvantaged groups, compared to those of White learners, attest to this”* (p.193). According to a report by Dr Adam Habib of the Human Sciences Research Council, while at present 60.9% of students in formerly white South African institutions of higher learning are Black, only 14.9% of these Black students end up graduating (Kgosana, 2007a). This suggests that a new strategy should be developed, to ensure “access with success”.

3.4.4 FACILITIES

Administrative structures and academic organisation are a prerequisite in institutions of higher learning. Even more important for numerous students is access to excellent libraries, laboratories, museums, computer centres, recreational facilities- and dedicated scholars whose teaching interest are in line with the needs and interest of students (Cameron, 1999). As a result, facilities are essential components of the academic environment and important resources that are a prerequisite for higher learning.

An interesting factor linked to academic performance in tertiary institutions is the availability of facilities, such as residences. While most institutions have residences, not all students are accommodated in those residences. To make matters worse, some institutions do not have residences at all, and students are expected to find accommodation on their own. This shortage or lack of university residences results in a situation where students resort to private boarding in places that do not promote studying, and thus they end up failing and /or dropping out of university(Desjardins, Kim & Rzonca, 2002/2003). All of the above-mentioned factors could serve as stressors for students.

3.4.5 ASSESSMENT POLICY

Admission testing remains a source of controversy. Questions asked about the reliability and validity of standardised tests are; whether they are biased against certain racial groups, if the elimination of these tests would create a more racially diverse first-year class, and whether they would help in terms of enhancing success rate of admitted students. These are some of the questions that emerged over the years concerning admission tests.

Differences between racial groups in their performance on standardised tests including the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) have been investigated considerably both in academic journals and in the popular press (Zwick, 1999). Researchers, social theorists, and politicians have offered a wide

number of reasons for these score differences, ranging from socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and genetic factors to test bias. In California, for example, Time and the Princeton Review, a test development company, mentioned that studies show persistent race bias in the SAT, with White males achieving better scores than all other groups (Zwick, 1999).

However, when academic researchers investigate the fairness of the SAT, their focus is not the average scores achieved by each group. Instead they consider how well the SAT predicts college grades for each group? In America, researchers found that using the SAT to predict university grade point averages (GPA) for Black and Latino test-takers resulted in inaccurate information. The predicted grades were higher than the actual grades for these groups (Bracey, 2001; Zwick, 1999).

On the other hand, proponents of the SAT argue that, given the wealth of data available, claims that the test is ineffective have largely been subjective. Barro (2001) indicates that research has proved that SAT scores have a strong predictive power for students' university grades. For example, every three years the United States Department of Education embarks on the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), which gives information for a nationally descriptive sample of colleges on students' grade averages (GPAS), admissions-test scores (SAT included), and other family and school variables. Barro (2001) looked at the NPSAS studies for 1990, 1993, and 1996, which provided 33,000 observations for his analysis. From this sample, admission-test scores were found to be a strong predictor of academic performance amongst first-year university students; however, a great deal of individual discrepancy in grades remains unexplained. Consistent with this study, reports from recent research (Jackson et al., 2003; Marlowe et al., 2002); also indicate that higher admission-test scores are one of the most significant individual predictors of academic performance.

In the case of South Africa, until a new admission-test is developed, the General Scholastic Aptitude Test (GSAT) will remain the best alternative to

admitting prospective first-year students who do not meet the minimum admission requirements. In a South African study conducted by Smit (1997) a statistically significant relationship was found between the GSAT of White students and their academic performance, however the GSAT of Black students did not show a statistically significant relationship with their academic performance.

3.4.6 SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY LECTURES

Sexual harassment is a problem in all sectors, workplaces, schools, and even in institutions of higher learning. According to Prinsloo (2006) more than 30% of girls are raped in South African schools. The seriousness of sexual harassment in South African institutions of higher learning has been highlighted in the press by phrases like "*One blanket, one course*". Studies conducted in South African universities reports that all forms of sexual harassment were prevalent and experienced on campus in varying degrees (Braine, Bless & Fox, 1995; Mayekiso & Bhana, 1997). In many instances such cases are not taken seriously as being harmful and degrading to students. It is also sad to realise that some students do not seem to know what sexual harassment is, and as a result they cannot protect themselves (Shumba & Masiki-Matima, 2002).

In a study conducted by Shumba and Masiki-Matima (2002) in Zimbabwe, the results of their study revealed that there is widespread sexual harassment of female students by male lecturers, and also that there are different perceptions of harassment held by male and female students. Their study suggests that sexual harassment in an education setting seems to have a greater impact on female students' progress than male students. For example, 72% of females and only 5% of males agreed that sexual harassment by some lecturers interferes with their studies.

Sexual harassment is damaging to all people and may impact negatively on the academic performance of students.

3.4.7 SUMMARY

A number of academic support services available to students in institutions of higher learning have been discussed. In this regard the value of counselling was also highlighted. Universities should not only support students academically but they should also render social support to them. As a result, transition workshops were found to be valuable in supporting students in the transition from school to university. Another important factor discussed in this section is transformation. For South Africa and its young democracy, transformation is essential; however while student numbers from disadvantaged groups are rising, changes in staff composition and institutional culture remain a problematic issue. The other sad reality highlighted in the literature is the prevalence of sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning. Such incidents without doubt prevent students from realising their optimal potential.

3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented some findings about factors that impact on academic performance. The academic performance of students in institutions of higher learning is influenced by both academic and non-academic factors. These factors can be divided into three broad categories; personal, contextual, and institutional.

The personal factors are subdivided into two main categories; cognitive factors and non-cognitive factors. Some researchers consider cognitive factors to be the strongest predictors of academic performance (Baker, 2004). Many courses at university require students to have strong cognitive abilities and thus certain criteria are put in place for selecting students for such courses, for example, medicine, science and engineering. As a result, higher levels of intelligence are necessary in such courses. Intelligence is not the only determinant of academic achievement, the students' aptitude is also important.

Besides intelligence and aptitude, this chapter also looked at the importance of students being conversant with the medium of instruction of universities they are attending. While researchers hold contradictory views on this point, the importance of language proficiency in institutions of higher learning cannot be totally disregarded (Jansen, 2004; Van Eeden, De Beer & Coetzee, 2001). Language in an institution of higher learning is important in ensuring that students understand the learning content and are able to reproduce what has been learned.

Researchers also seem to differ on whether previous academic performance contributes significantly to the prediction of present and/or future academic performance. It is an undisputed fact that matriculation scores serve as an important measure of the academic strengths of students, however the majority of South African Black African students are ill-prepared by their background school environment; and as a result it becomes difficult to separate students with potentialities to succeed at university from those who do not have the required potential (Miller, Bradbury & Acutt, 2001; Sennett et al., 2003). This results in situations where universities are left with the risk of selecting potentially successful students of whom many will fail eventually. The use of the General Scholastic Aptitude Test (GSAT) is helpful to some extent, but not in all respects. Besides intelligence and aptitude, literature also indicates that demographic factors such as age (Malefo, 2000), gender (Kiosseoglou, 1998), race (Zaaiman, Van der Flier & Thijs, 1998), and family variables (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002) also have an impact on academic performance. The negative impact of poor socio-economic background on academic performance was also highlighted (Akoojee, 2004; Sennett et al., 2003).

Dispositional factors such as motivation (Bosch, Boshoff & Louw, 2003), sense of purpose (Merullo, 2002), self-efficacy (Pajares, 2002), achievement expectancies (Meltzer et al., 2004), and many more, could serve as inner resources for students. On the contrary the absence of these

resources could result in detrimental effects on performance. The above-mentioned factors do not produce results on their own, but they are internal resources that should be transformed into productive behaviours such as being familiar with their learning styles, using effective and efficient study methods, time management, and class attendance. Research studies have associated the above-mentioned behaviours with academic achievement (Bosch, Boshoff & Louw, 2003; Boyle, Duffy & Dunleavy, 2003; Moore, 2005; Stoyhoff, 1997). Academic procrastination on the other hand, has been associated with failure (Orpen, 1998).

Institutions of higher learning are looking at ways of retaining students, while at the same time ensuring throughput at the end. The importance of student counselling has also been emphasised (Botha et al., 2005). Counselling services, on and off campus, can help students to deal with some of the internal and external stressors they come across in the university and in their communities. Institutions of higher learning should also ensure that important measures such as academic support, social support, sufficient transformation, access to resources and culture fair assessment tests and policies, are put in place.

In conclusion, it seems as if the disparities in educational opportunities amongst learners from different racial groups will continue well into the future. The recently released report of South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2006) bears testimony to this. Black students will not only continue to be faced with poverty, but they may continue to be faced with the challenge of being under-prepared for institutions of higher learning for a long period of time.

The specific relevance of meaning in life for students is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 4

MEANING IN LIFE AND EDUCATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A number of factors having an impact on academic performance were identified and discussed in chapter three. Amongst these factors is the construct of “meaning in life”. The aim of this chapter is to explore the relationship between meaning in life and education. First we look at the development of sense of meaning in children. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of sense of meaning on education as well as a discussion of the impact of lack of meaning on education. The chapter is concluded with a discussion of how creative, experiential and attitudinal values contribute to academic adjustment and/or success.

4.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SENSE OF MEANING IN CHILDREN

Even though having meaning is not “biologically essential”; the question of meaning in life is present in everyone’s life. All people have a need for meaning or purpose in their lives (Baumeister, 1991) or in Frankl’s words “*people have the will to meaning*”, that is, “*the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence*” (Frankl, 1985, p.123). Without meaning people ultimately lose their wish or reason to live.

The subsequent discussion focuses on factors that contribute to the development of sense of meaning in children. More specifically, the discussion focuses on the role played by parents and educators in helping children develop a sense of meaning in their lives.

4.2.1 A SENSE OF MEANING

Parents play a very important role in the development of a sense of meaning in their children. In a recent study by Campbell (2005), students were asked to indicate whether their primary source of insight into the meaning of life was religion, science, family and friends, or the media. The outcomes of the study revealed that students indicated that their greatest insight into meaning in life came from family and friends. Such findings are impressive, however the one question remains, how can parents assist their children in this regard?

Sense of meaning is not something that can be given to children but it is something that they can comprehend. To be able to achieve this, children first need to have a “conception of the good”. A conception of the good is something that parents can teach their children. Each child has a “positive right” to be taught a conception of goodness. It is through this conception that children come to know about *right* and *wrong* (Frankfurt, 1990). It is also through this conception of goodness that children learn to adopt goals and values necessary for successful living. Raising children with a conception of goodness gives them an added advantage because having goals and values is a prerequisite to finding meaning in life, and therefore a “right” of children (Ruyter, 2002). This right can be achieved by raising children in a “morally” healthy environment. Children can use a conception of goodness that their parents have offered them to make sense of their lives and find meaning in life (Ruyter, 2002). As a result a conception of goodness lays a good foundation for the development of a sense of meaning.

It is also possible that, as children become mature, they might discover that they no longer value the ideals or hold the beliefs passed on to them by their parents. Thus, children should be assisted in learning to reflect upon the conception of goodness within which they are raised. Reflection requires the freedom to be allowed to reflect, which implies that children must be given the freedom to explore other conceptions of goodness and they

should not be emotionally or cognitively restricted by their parents. Educating children about goodness can improve reflection. By receiving education about other conceptions of good, children can deal with those conceptions and learn to discover such explorations positively (Ruyter, 2002).

Empirical research findings have also suggested that parents play an important role in instilling a sense of meaning in their children. In a recent study conducted by Humphrey (2005) ninety percent of the respondents mentioned the impact of their childhood on their ability to find purpose. An earlier study by Shek (1987) reports a positive correlation between parental treatment and meaning in life. One interesting discovery in Shek's (1987) study was that both paternal treatment (PT) and maternal treatment (PT) showed a stronger positive correlation with Purpose in life (PIL) scores than with other measures of psychological well-being. Therefore, in looking at the relationship between the parents as resource and sense of meaning it becomes necessary that researchers should also explore the qualities of parenthood that facilitate the development of a stronger psychological well-being in children.

In order to assess the linkages between the two variables, that is, parental qualities and adolescent psychological well-being, Shek (1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b) in subsequent studies, found that adolescent' perceptions of parental qualities concurrently and longitudinally predicted psychological well-being. Shek (1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b) postulates that in addition to psychological distress resulting from negative parental qualities; positive parental qualities were found to be associated with adolescent life satisfaction, self-esteem and purpose in life. As discussed in chapter three negative parental qualities include authoritarian styles of parenting (See 3.2.2.4.4.2), while positive parental qualities include authoritative parenting styles (See 3.2.2.4.4.2). In particular, Shek (1997, 1999a, 1999b) proposed that meaning as a basic motivational force within the family may influence different aspects of adolescent adjustment.

The next discussion focusses on the role played by education in developing sense of meaning amongst learners.

4.2.2 THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SENSE OF MEANING IN LEARNERS

Formal education can also play an important role in the development of sense of meaning in children (Lukas, 1989). According to Ruyter (2002), “meaningful education”, is the kind of education that helps students to find their meaning in life. Primarily such meaningful education does not help learners to acquire an understanding of why they live or what the purpose of human life is; but it helps them to acquire a sense of meaning of their own life. Giovinco (2001) mentions that it is the duty of education “...to help students identify goals and seek their unique paths to reach their goals in personally meaningful ways” (p.50).

Giovinco’s (2001) call for education to assist students in their pursuit of meaning is consistent with the following remarks Frankl (1988) made about education:

Today education cannot afford to proceed along the lines of tradition, but must elicit the ability to make independent and authentic decisions. In an age in which the Ten Commandments seem to lose their unconditional validity, man must learn more than ever to listen to the ten thousand commandments arising from the ten thousand unique situations of which his life consists (p.64-65).

Therefore it is the responsibility of educational institutions to assist learners to arrive to such realisations (Finck, 2002). Educators can achieve this by spiritualising education.

4.2.2.1 SPIRITUALISING EDUCATION

As it was indicated in chapter two, central to the concept of meaning/purpose in life is the human spirit. In recent years most of the literature that

focuses on holistic and /or spiritual education has also suggested that traditional approaches to education do not address the spiritual needs of young people adequately (Moffett, 1994). For many people, any mention of spirituality is a problem because it is perceived as having a link with religion. As a result, Moffett (1994) argued that spiritualising education is intended to include everyone despite their perceptions of other worlds or other worldliness because it makes people aware of the importance of being good to others in order to enrich their own lives. He went further to argue that, spiritualising education is a much needed transformation.

Instead of constructing an education system that is pushed by drives, educators should construct an education system pulled by the human spirit. This will only happen once they redefine a student as more than a two-dimensional human being comprised of a body and mind. Instead, educators should recognise the three-dimensional quality of the theory of humanity pioneered by Frankl and numerous others: mind, body, and spirit (Finck, 2002; Mustakova-Possardt, 2004). Zohar and Marshall (2000) give insight into this aspect in their discussion of spiritual intelligence (SQ), which they described as a process that;

unifies, integrates and has the potential to transform material arising from the other two processes (that is, mind and body). It facilitates a dialogue between reason and emotion, between mind and body. It provides a fulcrum for growth and transformation. It provides the self with an active, unifying, meaning-giving centre (p.7).

The argument Zohar and Marshall (2000) put forth is that spiritual intelligence (SQ) is important for the effective functioning of the students' intelligence quotient (IQ) and emotional quotient (EQ). The one mistake educators make in today's education, is to fail to recognise students as three-dimensional beings. Thus they deny that quality which makes students uniquely human: the spirit. Chandler, Holden and Kolander (1992) indicate that spirituality is a catalyst to finding meaning in life.

There has been a move in the last decade towards developing a spiritual dimension in education as a feature of curriculum policy and educational research. In countries like Canada, Britain, and the United States, one response to the problems of youth was through acknowledging that many educational programmes, which are mainly directed at cognitive learning, do not provide for the emotional, and spiritual needs of learners (De Souza, Cartwright & McGilp, 2004). In addition, the four 'pillars' of lifelong learning documented by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) - learning to live, learning to know, learning to do and learning to be - have some qualities that encourage the concept of a spiritual dimension in education (Delors, 1996). As a result, the Office for Standard Education in Britain issued educational policies to both religious and secular schools, which clearly outlines that "spiritual", is not synonymous to "religious"; and that all areas of the curriculum may contribute to learners' spiritual development (De Souza, Cartwright & McGilp, 2004). As a result, these policies bring to light the growing movement to treat religion and spirituality as separate entities.

A study conducted by De Souza, Cartwright and McGilp (2004) found that if educators and educational programmes recognised their potential to take care of the spiritual aspect of the lives of their students, it is possible that the number of students who have a positive sense of self, would increase. In the same way there may be less competition and striving for material gains and an increase in sharing of gifts and talents to the benefit of all (De Souza, Cartwright & McGilp, 2004).

According to Hindman (2002), students in institutions of higher learning are on a spiritual quest to find purpose and that purpose in life can be intentionally nurtured in the higher education setting. In the next section focus is on the role played by institutions of higher learning in the promotion of students' sense of meaning.

4.2.2.2 THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

In order to understand the contribution of meaning in life to education, we also have to look at the contribution of universities. In a review of the mission statements of American universities, Humphrey (2005) found that most institutions included in their statements teaching, research, and service. Not even a single institution indicated that their mission was to assist students in finding their purpose. According to Humphrey (2005) the mission statements of most institutions of higher learning was more concerned with helping students to choose a major as opposed to finding meaning. In a similar review of the mission statements of South African universities, the researcher also found that not even a single institution indicated that their mission was to help students in finding their meaning/purpose in life.

Several researchers have made significant contributions on how institutions of higher learning can assist students in their search for meaning. In the next section work of only four of these researchers will be discussed, namely, Arthur Chickering, Christy Moran, Sharon Parks and Kathy Humphrey. Each of these four authors contributed insight on how higher education authorities can assist students find meaning.

Arthur Chickering (1969) developed his psychosocial theory of the development of traditional-aged university students. His theory evolved out of Erickson's theory of human development, especially Erickson's adolescent stage. However he does not use the phrase "stage" or "age" in his theory but "vector location". His theory includes seven vectors which are, Developing competence, Managing emotions, Developing autonomy, Establishing identity, Freeing interpersonal relationships, Developing purpose, and Developing integrity (Chickering, 1969). For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on Developing purpose.

In a revised version of Chickering's theory, Reisser and Chickering (1993) described the developing purpose vector in the following manner:

“Developing purpose requires formulating plans for actions and a set of priorities that integrate three major elements: (1) vocational plans and aspirations, (2) personal interest, and (3) interpersonal and family commitment” (p.212). From the definition of this vector is clear that in order for one to search for purpose they must have a plan, and show willingness to engage one’s soul, will, intellect, emotions and imagination to find their purpose. The students’ personal interest may help them or distract them from finding purpose (Reisser & Chickering, 1993). Reisser and Chickering (1993) report that for many students, their spiritual interests becomes very important resources that helps them to find their purpose.

Christy Moran (2001) is the second researcher who contributed knowledge in this area. She completed a document review of information that contains clinical and psychological research in the area of purpose in life. Moran’s (2001) review is based on Viktor Frankl and Arthur Chickering’s theories.

The third researcher who also contributed insight in the area is Sharon Parks. She has been investigating meaning in life at universities for more than two decades (Chambers & Parks, 2002). Similar to Chickering (1969), Sharon Parks focused on traditional aged university students.

Recent work by Kathy Humphrey also added knowledge to this area / endeavour of institutions of higher learning in assisting students in their search for purpose. In a study conducted by Humphrey (2005) with university students, the respondents indicated that they believe that university personnel can assist students in their search for purpose (Humphrey, 2005).

From a review of the work of these researchers (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Chickering, 1969; Humphrey, 2005; Moran, 2001; Reisser & Chickering, 1993) the following list of recommendations was tabled for university personnel who are interested in helping students in their search for meaning

- Students should be provided with an opportunity to experience different subjects and co-curricular activities that will encourage them to try new things (Humphrey, 2005; Reisser & Chickering, 1993). This can be achieved if university personnel can create various experiential opportunities for students, so that they can try various activities through classes, internships, community service, and career fairs (Humphrey, 2005; Reisser & Chickering, 1993).
- Students should be helped to prioritise their skills (Reisser & Chickering, 1993).
- Student affairs practitioners should be willing to invest quality time with students and deem this the priority task within their job descriptions. Quality time with students will afford more opportunities for meaningful conversations to occur (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Moran, 2001).
- Student affairs practitioners should practice the art of asking questions, listening and reflecting in order to engage in meaningful intentional conversations with students about existential issues (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Moran, 2001).
- Student affairs practitioners, in all areas of administration should incorporate issues of purpose in life into every aspect of their work with students (Humphrey, 2005; Moran, 2001).
- Universities should serve as “mentoring environments” (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Humphrey, 2005). Historically, mentoring has been considered as the manner in which the old assist the young to achieve their goals and to become the next generation of wise people (Rapuleng, 2002). This is not simply one-to-one mentoring. But an awareness of the power of a mentoring environment or a mentoring community, where students come to see something in a new way and come to realise larger possibilities (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Humphrey, 2005). Mentors are therefore advisors, educators, counsellors, and role models who pass their experience on to less experienced people (Mohono-Mahlatsi & Van Tonder, 2006).
- Mentoring communities within universities should provide support. This does not only take the shape of practical support such as

financial aid, to cite one, but it might also take the form of an encouraging word (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Humphrey, 2005). Thus university personnel should see latent talent in the lives of their students, beyond what they may be able to see in the moment. They should recognise their potential (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Humphrey, 2005).

- It is important for universities to build mentoring relationships that challenge students to ask questions such as, what is the purpose of my life and studies? Such questions can be attractive and significant; however at first they might disturb and haunt students (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Humphrey, 2005; Moran, 2005). It is also the responsibility of educators to create a safe environment where students can explore these existential questions (Kessler, 1998/1999).
- It is important for universities to provide a mentoring environment that motivates students (Chambers & Parks, 2002). By doing so, mentoring will help ease the students' transition from scholar to student and from student to qualified professional (Mohono-Mahlatsi & Van Tonder, 2006).
- Students should also be provided with opportunities to develop spiritually. As a result, students should be helped to build a spiritual base. When students understand that they are part of something much bigger than themselves, their ability to find purpose will be made easier (Reisser & Chickering, 1993; Humphrey, 2005).
- Last, but not least, student affairs practitioners cannot help students to find purpose unless they have found their own. Thus student affairs practitioners should spend time reflecting on their own values, beliefs and purpose in life in order to be able to effectively lead students in doing the same (Moran, 2005; Humphrey, 2005).

Within an education set-up, students can be assisted through student counselling centres (Botha et al., 2005) to look at options, define attitudes, and take responsibility for decisions in and outside the lecture hall. With training, educators and student counsellors can apply the construct of

meaning in life, and also teach youth about the importance of making choices and taking responsibility of their actions and their attitudes (Giovinco, 2001). In its broadest sense, the construct of meaning in life is not only reserved for therapists, rather, when understood, it can be applied by all people, including students, under all circumstances.

The next section will focus on the role played by education in promoting sense of meaninglessness.

4.2.2.3 LACK OF PHILOSOPHICAL, MEANING ORIENTED THEMES IN EDUCATION

It is the responsibility of education to provide man with the means to find meanings (Frankl, 1988). However, at times, education adds to the existential vacuum and this result in emptiness and meaninglessness. Scientific findings are often presented to students in a reductionist manner. Therefore students are exposed to teaching along the lines of a mechanistic theory of man plus a relativist philosophy of life. A reductionist approach tends to reduce man from a human being to a thing or an object (Frankl, 1988).

Frankl (1988), states that education, at times, avoids confronting youth with ideals and values. Such an education system is still based on the homeostasis theory directed by beliefs that as few demands as possible should be imposed upon youth. Tension is not something that can be avoided. A sensible amount of tension, such as that inspired by a meaning to fulfil, is an intrinsic part of being human and is very important for mental well-being (Frankl, 1988).

Despite more than a decade of headlines about “a generation at risk”, the lack of spiritual guidance and opportunity in the lives of youth continues to be rarely noticed as one of the factors resulting in self-destructive and violent behaviour. As a result, youth resort to drugs, sex, gang violence and even suicide as a way of searching for connection and meaning, and as a

way to escape the pain of being unable to discover a genuine source of spiritual fulfilment (Kessler, 1998/1999). Therefore, it stands to reason that in an age of the existential vacuum, such as the one we are confronted with, the most important task of education, instead of being satisfied with communicating traditions and knowledge, should also cultivate the ability that allows learners to find unique meanings (Frankl, 1988).

4.2.3 CONCLUSION

Both parents and educators play a very important role in the development of sense of meaning. Parents are perceived as playing a primary role in this regard because they are responsible for instilling a conception of goodness in their children, while educators through spiritualising education play a secondary role. In the next discussion focus will be on the impact of sense of meaning on education.

4.3 THE IMPACT OF SENSE OF MEANING ON EDUCATION

The importance of meaning in life in education encouraged the Second World Congress of Logotherapy in April 1982 to choose “Education for Responsibility” as its theme. Yet, a survey of 1500 American universities and colleges at the time revealed that only 57 of them used meaning philosophy in some way (Nackord, 1983).

The greatest contribution of the construct of meaning in life to students is the hope it offers them (Roberts, 1980). Meaning in life’s first approach to students’ problems comes through its philosophy. The one lesson we learned from meaning philosophy is the urgent questioning of the meaning of life. Such questioning is more likely to occur during adolescence (Roberts, 1980). The students’ concern with this question is not pessimistic or pathological, but is a sign of true human nature (Roberts, 1980).

According to Frankl (1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997), man is not an object, waiting to be manipulated or controlled by circumstances, but a human being with meaning and purpose awaiting him/her. He/she lives with intentionality. Meaning in life is effective in assisting all people, young and old, in changing their behaviour and attitudes; and within the educational system it is not only diplomatic, but also practical. Educators and mental health professionals will find the construct of meaning in life effective because it is action-oriented, and as a result, it encourages people to be responsible for their lives (Kalmar, 1982; Wirth, 1985).

4.3.1 THE ROLE PLAYED BY SENSE OF MEANING IN HELPING STUDENTS ADJUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

The importance of finding meaning in life is widely accepted and well documented. One of the reasons why there has been much interest in the field is that finding meaning is associated with survival or effective coping (Courtenay & Truluck, 1997). Research findings suggest that individuals with a high sense of meaning in life are more likely than those with low meaning in life to withstand being exposed to stressors (Edwards & Holden, 2001; Hullett, 1994).

A second reason which make finding meaning important, is that it provides answers to the question “Why?” Such questions are very critical for survival. To highlight the importance of this question, Frankl (1985) used a quote by Nietzsche: *“He who has a **why** to live for can bear almost any **how**”* (p.106). As a result the construct of meaning in life affords students the opportunity to ask questions such as “What is the meaning of my life” (Moran, 2001). In providing answers to this question students come to realise that they are equipped with the most important resource for dealing with the stressors they are exposed to; which is a sense of meaning.

As it was highlighted in chapter three, research studies indicate that exposure to stressors such as poor socio-economic backgrounds (Ross, Cleland & Macleod, 2006), single-parenthood (Hak-Ju, 2004), authoritarian

parenting styles (Gonzalez, Greenwood & WenHsu, 2001), being a first-generation student (Chen, 2005), poor background school environment (Akoojee, 2004; Sennett et al., 2003), lack of institutional facilities (Desjardins, Kim & Rzonca, 2002/2003) and sexual harassment (Shumba & Masiki-Matima, 2002), has a negative impact on students' academic performance. Meaning helps students to tolerate being exposed to these stressors better, thus preventing or decreasing potential stresses related to circumstances. In this way the stressful conditions may still be present, however the student's capacity to deal with the stressors improves when a sense of meaning is related to it (Savolaine & Granello, 2002).

Authors of the wellness model have often cited meaning and purpose as an important characteristic of the well individual (Hetter, 1980; Ryff & Singer, 1998a, 1998b). The one way that meaning might have positive effects on individual's wellness is related to intra-psychic functioning or psychological well-being. For example, meaning can help in inspiring a sense of personal values and students may be guided by such values in order to overcome their stressors. In other words the stressors are no longer perceived as something frustrating but as a challenge (Purvis, 1979). In a study by Chambel and Curren (2005) general well-being was found to have a direct impact on student performance. As a result, because psychological well-being is strongly related to sense of meaning (Meraviglia, 2005; Pinqart, 2002; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), one can infer that sense of meaning might also have a positive impact on academic performance.

A study by Edwards and Holden (2001) on undergraduate students, found that students who believed that their life had meaning used more effective coping strategies. They also found that when exposed to stressors such students are less likely to consider suicide as their escape. Edwards and Holden (2001) mention that, "*life meaning acts as a protective factor or buffer between coping styles and suicidal manifestations*" (p.113). In this way sense of meaning is a very important resource for coping. One can also infer that because they used more effective coping strategies, students

with high meaning also cope much better academically. Several research studies discussed in chapter three indicated that students who use effective coping strategies such as motivation and self-determination (Bosch, Boshoff & Louw, 2003; Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Lane & Lane, 2001; Lane, Lane & Kyprianou, 2004; Pajares 2002), achievements expectancies (House, 1993), personal control (DeAngelis, 2003; Killen, 1994; Morgans, 2002; Perry, 2003) and identity development (Boyd et al., 2003), produce better academic results.

On the opposite scale, meaninglessness may result in a number of problems, for example, depression and aggression to the self or others, problems of concentration in the lecture-hall, difficulties in relating to others, lack of initiative, insecurity and many forms of irresponsibility. Research conducted at Idaho State University found that 51 of the 60 students, who had seriously attempted suicide, mentioned that, they did so because “life meant nothing” to them (Roberts, 1980). In support of this finding, a study by Edwards and Holden (2001) postulate that the stress and confusion that emanates from a lack of understanding of one’s life purpose can be dangerous, because it may contribute to suicide amongst students. A study by Silverman (2004) found that suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst university students.

Research studies have also associated sense of meaning with healthy lifestyles. A study conducted by Das (1983) on university students clearly demonstrated that students with a stronger sense of purpose are healthier. Studies by respective researchers also found that students who have discovered meaning are less likely to be involved in illegal drug use and alcohol abuse (Mineham, Newcomb & Galaif, 2000; Nam, Heritage & Kim, 1994). As indicated in chapter three, a study conducted by Barnes (2000) found that students who do not use drugs always outperformed those who used them on achievement scores and course grades.

On the contrary, according to Roberts (1980), a significant inverse relationship has been found between a sense of purpose in life and drug

use amongst youth. A study by Nam, Heritage and Kim (1994) found that students who lacked meaning were more apt to get involved in the use of illegal drugs and alcohol abuse. Studies conducted by Kinnier et al. (1990, 1994) found similar results. According to Barnes (2000) such behaviours have a detrimental effect on education.

Meaning may also have an effect on an individual's behaviour by influencing both the initiation of new habits and adherence to existing habits (Hermon & Hazler, 1999; Prochaska, 1995). In an education setting this is essential because for students to be successful they need to adopt behaviours that will support their learning. From this we can infer that because meaning has an influence on the initiation of new habits and adherence to existing habits, students with high meaning are more likely to adopt effective study behaviours. As it was indicated in chapter three, research studies found that study behaviours such as, course specific learning styles (Boyle, Duffy & Dunleavy, 2003; Drysdale, Ross & Schulz, 2001; Jones, Reichard & Mokhtari, 2003), effective study strategies/ methods (Bosch, Boshoff & Louw, 2003; Yip & Chung, 2005), class attendance (Launius, 1997; Moore, 2005), and time management (Bitzer, 2003; Jackson et al., 2003; Marlowe et al., 2002) contribute to academic success.

In a study by Rahman and Khaleque (1996) problem students were compared to normal students with the help of the Purpose in Life Test (PIL). The results of their study showed that purpose in life is an important variable associated with problem behaviour. The study found that the sense of meaning of problem students was lower as compared to those of the better adjusted students. As it was indicated in chapter three, in several research studies problem behaviours such as ineffective study methods (Eiselen & Geysler, 2003), not attending classes (Launius, 1997; Moore, 2005), and academic procrastination (Orpen, 1998), have been associated with poor academic performance. From this we can infer that problem students might also encounter difficulties in their studies.

Meaning is not only important for intrapersonal functioning, but also for interpersonal functioning. Thus, meaning may enhance the students' sense of the importance of others, especially when the sense of meaning is directed to others; for example, when students see the purpose of their studies in serving others (Mack, 1994). Finch (2002) reports that, modern students are concerned with a materialistic, self-serving drive whose goal is to get the highest paying job available. These problems seem to emanate from loss of meaning in the educational avenues (school and family). In a study conducted by Wilding and Andrews (2006), desire for money and status correlated negatively with academic achievement. According to Wilding and Andrews (2006) this could be due to the fact that students with such motivations neglect their studies while pursuing other activities which are also more likely to lead to the desired rewards. As a result, such students are easily distracted from their studies.

In the next section some of the studies that investigated the relationship between meaning in life and academic performance are reviewed.

4.3.2 REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON THE IMPACT OF SENSE OF MEANING ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Most of the research undertaken on meaning in life has mainly focused on the relationship between purpose in life and depression and other psychological or physical disorders. Although sense of meaning has been found to predict engagement and success in mental and physical well-being (Debats, Drost & Hansen, 1995; Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000; Meraviglia, 2005; Moomal, 1999; Pinquart, 2002; Plattner & Meiring, 2006; Savolaine & Granello, 2002; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), the body of published research which examines the relationship between meaning in life and academic performance appears to be limited.

An earlier study by Nackord (1983) found a significant relationship between meaning in life and academic achievement. In Nackord's study (1983), two groups of students were compared with each other. Group A composed of

high scholastic achievers, and group B from a low-performance class of students who received remedial assistance. The first hypothesis in the study explored the argument that there is a correlation between scholastic performance and meaning orientation. Testing this hypothesis revealed that the high achievers obtained an average score of 124.4, which was 12 points higher than the score indicating a definite purpose and meaning in life, while low achievers obtained an average score of 74.9, or 17 points below the score, indicating a lack of purpose and meaning (Nackord, 1983). Thus the results of this study confirmed the argument which supported a relationship between meaning orientation and scholastic achievement.

In a South African study conducted by Du Plessis (1982), comparing anxious and non-anxious female first-year students, the study found that the anxious group manifested significantly greater indices of problematic adjustment in terms of personal, home, social and formal relations. The study also found that the anxious group had an inadequate sense of meaning and a lower level of academic aspiration- 10% terminated their studies in the first five months, while no dropouts occurred in the non-anxious group (Du Plessis, 1982). As a result an indirect relationship was found between sense of meaning and academic performance.

More recently, a PhD study by Greenway (2005) hypothesised that there are variables that could add explanatory power to current models of student learning and success. This study specifically looked at academic engagement as a variable that has been under-investigated, and purpose in life as a variable that has been left out in higher education research. Even though purpose in life did not directly predict academic success, the outcome of this study revealed that academic engagement is a strong predictor of university student success and that purpose in life and faculty-student interaction was significantly predictive of students' level of academic engagement after controlling for student background characteristics (Greenway, 2005).

The above-mentioned studies bear testimony to the fact that intrapersonal attributes such as sense of purpose needs to be taken into consideration in addressing problems of today's youth. The contributions of purpose in life to students is yet to be fully recognised, however substantial evidence is already in place to demonstrate that this dynamic, viable theory and practice can help us understand students and help them help themselves when they ask questions like, "What is the meaning or purpose of my existence?"

4.3.2.1 AGE, SENSE OF MEANING AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Some research studies have indicated that student background characteristics, like age, seem to have an impact on sense of meaning (Weinstein & Cox, 1989). Therefore a suggestion was made that research needs to look at purpose in life among individuals where educational levels are similar and age is the main variable.

To this effect, Geiger, Weinstein, and Jones (2004), conducted a study that compared students of traditional age group (age < 25) and non-traditional students (age > 25) on the PIL test to see if purpose in life could explain the differences found between the two groups in terms of academic self-efficacy, academic performance and classroom preferences. In this study, non-traditional students were found to have higher PIL test scores than students of traditional age group, and performing much better academically than younger students.

As it was indicated in chapter three, several researchers have also found that older students report better academic performances (Ayaya, 1996; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gadzella, et al., 2001; Hoskins, 1997; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002), despite fewer sources of social support. One of the explanatory reasons could be that, experience comes with age. To cite one example, a study by Michelson (1991) discovered a significant relationship between age and coping efforts. As a result, older students are better equipped to deal with stressors.

In looking at the relationship between sense of meaning, age, and academic performance, it would only be fair to compare students in the same age groups to see if purpose in life could explain the differences found between them in terms of academic performance. In a recent South African study by Hutchinson (2005), on students of traditional age group, no significant relationships were found between age and sense of meaning in life. One of the aims of the present study is also to look at the impact of sense of meaning on the academic performance of students of traditional age group.

4.3.3 CONCLUSION

The construct of meaning in life plays a very important role in education. Several research studies have supported the relationship between this construct and successful adjustment, as well as coping in education settings. There are studies that found a significant relationship between this construct and academic performance.

The focus of the next section is on how the three values which promote sense of meaning, that is, creative, experiential and attitudinal values, can contribute to academic adjustment and/or performance.

4.4 HOW CREATIVE, EXPERIENTIAL AND ATTITUDINAL VALUES CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT/ PERFORMANCE

In chapter two we discussed three values that can promote sense of meaning, that is, creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. In this way, meaning philosophy led the way in helping us identify our individual paths for being inventors of values, by placing emphasis on our highest capabilities. These values are important because they serve as resources that might contribute to the students' successful adjustment and performance. In the next section focus is on how students can use these values within an education setting.

4.4.1 CREATIVE VALUES

Students can give meaning to their lives by realising creative values, that is, by achieving tasks. Creative values relate to what a person gives to the world and the way in which an individual acts or deals with human conditions (Giovinco, 2001). All students are unique and the same applies to their values and goals. It is important for students to take cognisance of the importance of taking responsibility of their career paths. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each student to clarify his or her values and goals and to find ways to actualise them in their studies and careers (Pattakos, 2004). An article in a university newspaper on the higher risk of depression for university students indicated that career uncertainties are one of the major causes of depression (Rengito, 2003).

If students find that interacting with others is an important personal value, it is important that they find a way in which their studies and careers can offer meaningful human encounters. Similarly, if they truly value personal creativity, it is important that they find a way through which their studies and careers can offer opportunities for creative expression. When creative values are realised, students will be more interested in their studies (Pattakos, 2004).

The level of interest a person shows in an activity determines the level of commitment they will invest in those activities. The more a student shows interest in the course he/she is pursuing, the more he/she will be motivated to complete that course (Fraser & Killen, 2003; Tickell & Smyrniotis, 2005). According to Reisser and Chickering (1993) lack of ability to select a major course of study dramatically decreases the probability of graduation.

4.4.2 EXPERIENTIAL VALUES

Some people are waiting for the BIG meaning to be revealed to them; however it is important for them to realise that every situation has its own

meaning (Giovinco, 2001, Shantall, 1997). Every person achieves meaning from doing something. Students can give meaning to their lives by realising experiential values, that is, by experiencing the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Life derives meaning from pursuing various goals, personal projects, strivings and studies. It is important for students to realise that ultimately, they alone are responsible for their personal career path and for detecting the meaning of each situation (Giovinco, 2001, Shantall, 1997).

Students could learn to be more appreciative of this important value by realising that not everybody is afforded an opportunity to attend a tertiary institution. In other words, it is important for students to learn to appreciate and accept what life presents to them (Pattakos, 2004).

4.4.3 ATTITUDINAL VALUES

Last but not least, students can realise meaning by choosing the right attitude. The attitudinal values are the highest possible values (Frankl, 1967). They are also the most important in the sense that they relate to the attitudes students adopt when faced with a fate they cannot change (Merullo, 2002). When students are exposed to stressors, such as, poverty, HIV/Aids, crime, being unprepared for university, mismatch between student and field of study, studying through a second or third language, and many more, choosing a positive attitude during these times does not only influence the academic performance of students but also their health and well-being. Likewise, a negative attitude may serve to accentuate their stress and, in effect, result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, it is important for students to realise that they can't always control what happens to them in any particular moment, but they do have a choice to respond in a positive or negative way (Pattakos, 2004).

This is the reason why life never stops to have meaning, because even a student who is deprived of both creative and experiential meaning is still challenged by a meaning to fulfil, which is to choose the right attitudes towards suffering. Suffering without meaning is likely to bring despair,

however suffering with positive attitudes (meaning) is likely to bring fulfilment (Frankl, 1997). What matters in this case is the attitude that one adopts.

As it was indicated in chapter three, literature states that a number of poor and poorly prepared students do succeed at university and beyond, and therefore, it is important for students to realise that the stressors they are exposed to do not have to preclude academic success. Students' attitudes and choices play an important role in determining the outcome of their studies, in spite of the challenges or stressors they are faced with. With positive attitudes, they are likely to succeed (Merullo, 2002). For students to maintain positive attitudes they do not only need to maintain positive thoughts, but they also need to harbour positive emotions.

Meaning in life is not only concerned with immediate factors, but also with what is achievable in the future, instead of blaming what is in the past. It is important for students to look at where they are, where they want to be, and what is needed for them to accomplish that goal. Thus, students are encouraged to take charge of their personal actions and attitudes (Frankl, 1967).

To highlight the importance of attitudinal values, Frankl (1988) indicates that Rolf H. Von Eckartsberg conducted a study at Harvard University to look into the adjustment of Harvard's graduates. The results of the latter study revealed that despite the fact that they were successful in their professional lives as lawyers, doctors, surgeons, and analysts; many reported that were caught up in existential vacuum. They were experiencing a phenomenon which could be described as *despair despite success* (Frankl, 1988).

In an ideal world students should be assisted towards a phenomenon which can be described as *fulfilment with success*. A world in which students realise all three values, this however, at times seems impossible to imagine. There are situations, due to one reason or the other, where students do not realise their creative and/or experiential values. In such situations students

can still be helped to maintain positive attitudes despite their challenges and/or failures (Frankl, 1967).

4.5 CONCLUSION

One of the greatest contributions of the construct of *meaning in life* for students is that it offers them hope (Roberts, 1980). Meaning in life's first approach to students' problems comes through its philosophy. Meaning philosophy challenges students to question the purpose of their existence. As a result, students who attempt to provide answers to such questions show true signs of well-being. Educators and mental health professionals will find the construct of meaning in life effective because it is action-oriented. It encourages students to be responsible for their lives (Wirth, 1985).

In order to understand the *contribution of meaning in life to education*, we also have to look at the contribution of universities in helping students in their search for purpose in life. Several researchers have made significant recommendations of how university personnel can assist students in their search for meaning, for example in playing a mentoring role, incorporating issues of purpose in life into every aspect of their work with students and many more (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Chickering, 1969; Humphry, 2005; Moran, 2001; Reisser & Chickering, 1993). However, more evidence is needed on why this search for meaning is significant in academic settings.

From the literature review, it has become evident that academic performance is a very complex construct, determined by the interaction between *personal, contextual and institutional factors*. On a personal level, cognitive as well as dispositional factors play an important role. The one significant cognitive factor that also serves as one of the predictor variables in the present study is previous academic performance. Research studies, especially South African studies on Black African university students, provide opposing views on the significance of previous academic

performance on academic performance in subsequent years. Some studies indicate that previous academic performance is important (Bokhorst, Foster & Lea, 1992), while others disagree (Shochet, 1986; Smit, 1997). Irrespective of the conflicting views, previous academic performance remains the only reliable and significant measure of students' future performance. In order to determine whether students will be able to cope with academic demands of higher education, a reliable measure of their cognitive ability is necessary; as a result previous academic performance is important in this regard. In the present study, this factor was included to add knowledge on the significance of this contested variable on future performance.

On the dispositional level, research studies found that factors like motivation (Bosch, Boshoff & Louw, 2003), sense of purpose (Merullo, 2002), self-efficacy (Bosch, Boshoff & Louw, 2003), achievement expectancy (Meltzer et al., 2004), test anxiety (Cassady & Johnson, 2001), personal control (Morgans, 2002), personality (Van Eeden, De Beer & Coetzee, 2001), identity development (Boyd et al., 2003), self-esteem (Schweiker-Marra & Pula, 2005), interest (Tickell & Smyrnios, 2005) and emotional intelligence (Kapp, 2000), play an important role in academic performance.

Besides personal factors, literature has also identified the following **contextual factors** as having an impact on academic performance, broader socio-economic factors (Legotlo et al., 2002), social support (Bauer & Liang, 2003), friendships (Crosnoe, Cavanagh & Elder 2003) and background school environment (Coleman, 1993; Gelman, 1999; Hamber, 2000; Massey & Fischer, 2002). **Institutional factors** such as academic support services (Ramirez, 1997; Botha et al., 2005), social support services (Peat, Dalziel & Grant, 2001; Santovec, 2004), transformation (Macfarlane, 2006), facilities (Desjardins, Kim & Rzonca, 2002/2003), assessment policy (Barro, 2001), and sexual harassment by lecturers (Shumba & Masiki-Matima, 2002) have also been linked to academic performance.

Exposure to some of the above-mentioned factors, for example poor physical health, lack of finance, and negative life events might serve as stressors, with detrimental effects on academic performance; while the availability of factors such as parental support, academic friendships, and positive life events might serve as a resource, with a positive impact on academic performance.

There is a need for more South African research on factors that contribute to academic performance. One of the purposes of the present study is to determine the impact of **exposure to stressors** and **availability of resources** on the academic performance of first-year university students; as well as the role played by sense of meaning as a resource for students exposed to such environments. The one critical question that emerges from literature in this regard is, which factors are the best predictors of academic performance? It is the aim of this research to provide answers to such questions.

Societies we live in are getting more complex and demanding, and this might lead to a situation where students are questioning the meaning of education and the meaning of their lives. Especially for South African students who encounter numerous stressors such as poverty, HIV/Aids and crime, and have to cope with limited resources. Literature has commented on how **sense of meaning** can serve as a resource for students when they are exposed to stressors. Of significance is that research studies have found that students with a high sense of meaning cope much better when exposed to stressors, than those with low sense of meaning (Courtenay & Truluck, 1997; Edwards & Holden, 2001; Hullett, 1994). Students with high sense of meaning also engage in behaviour that lead to academic success (Hermon & Hazler, 1999; Prochaska, 1995). As a result, literature supports the logical connection between meaning in life, successful adjustment (effective coping skills) and academic performance; as well as a logical connection between lack of meaning, difficulty adjustment (poor coping skills), and academic failure.

Literature has also revealed that, even though earlier and more recent American studies support the relationship between ***meaning in life and academic achievement*** (Greenway, 2005; Nackord, 1983), very few studies have been conducted in this regard. As a result, there is a need for more research studies which investigate the relationship between the two variables (meaning in life and academic performance). The current study will add knowledge in this field.

The one critical question that emerges from literature on the relationship between meaning in life and academic performance is what makes students with high meaning cope and/or perform much better academically than those with low meaning? As a result, what is missing from the literature in this field are research studies which investigated the defining characteristics of students with high meaning and those with low meaning. One of the objectives of the present study is to investigate the differences between the two groups.

Finally, literature also depicts that the three ***values*** that promote sense of meaning, that is, creative, experiential, and attitudinal values, can also play an important role in educational settings. These values are important because they serve as resources which might contribute to the students' successful adjustment and performance. Within an educational setting, students can employ these values in the following manner: Firstly students can give meaning to their lives by realising creative values, that is, by achieving tasks. Therefore, it is important for students to find a connection between their studies and their personal values and goals. Secondly students can realise creative values by clarifying his or her values and goals and find ways to actualise them in their studies and careers (Pattakos, 2004). It is also important for students to realise that ultimately, they alone are responsible for their personal career path and for detecting the meaning of each situation. Lastly, it is important for students to realise that when they are exposed to stressors, such as, poverty, HIV/Aids, crime, being unprepared for university, mismatch between student and field of study, studying through a second or third language, and many more, choosing a

positive attitude during these times does not only influence their academic performance but also their health and well-being.

The next chapter elaborates on the research methods that were followed in undertaking the current study.

Chapter 5

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the research method is discussed. Firstly the research design and objectives of the study will be presented, followed by a discussion of the research participants, data gathering process and the measuring instruments. The chapter will be concluded by a brief discussion of the statistical methods used to analyse the data.

5.2 AIMS, GOALS, AND HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

This research investigates the role of a sense of meaning in enhancing the academic performance of first-year students.

The researcher compares the influence of purpose in life with factors such as exposure to stressors and resources as well as previous academic performance as predictors of academic performance of first-year students. The influence of age as demographic variable on academic performance is also determined.

The researcher postulates that students with a strong sense of meaning are more likely to succeed in their studies irrespective of the stressors they are exposed to or the resources they have access to.

The researcher attempts to answer the following specific research questions: -

- What are the levels of meaning experienced by these students?
- What is the impact of a sense of meaning on students' academic performance?

- What is the nature of personal and academic stressors students are exposed to?
- What differentiates those students who, despite being exposed to stressors, find meaning in their studies, from those who live in similar circumstances but cannot find meaning in their lives?

The research comprises of both quantitative and qualitative components. The first two research questions will be answered by the quantitative study, and the last two questions will be answered by the qualitative study.

The following are the research hypothesis tested in the quantitative study:

- 1 H₀ Sense of meaning is not significantly related to academic performance.
- 1 H₁ The level of meaning experienced by students is positively related to academic performance.
- 2 H₀ There is no significant relationship between the frequency of stressors experienced by students and their academic performance.
- 2 H₁ The frequency of stressors experienced by students is negatively correlated to their academic performance.
- 3 H₀ The resources accessible to students are not significantly related to their academic performance.
- 3 H₁ The resources students have access to, are positively related to their academic performance.
- 4 H₀ Previous academic performance is not significantly related to academic performance at university.
- 4 H₁ Previous academic performance is positively related to academic performance at university.
- 5 H₀ Age is not significantly related to academic performance.

5 H₁ Age is significantly related to academic performance, with older students performing better academically than younger students.

5.3 QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT

5.3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

In the quantitative component, a correlation design has been used with first-year academic performance as the criterion variable, and life stressors and resources, meaning in life, Grade 12 marks and age as predictor variables.

5.3.2 PARTICIPANTS

A random sample of 101 first-year students in the Faculty of Management Sciences, at the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT) (Welkom Campus), was selected to participate in this study. Participants were selected from the latter faculty because it is the largest, of the two faculties at Welkom campus.

Defining characteristics of the total group research participants:

- The mean age of the group was 19.38 years with a standard deviation of 1.29. The youngest participant was 17 years old and the oldest was 22 years old.
- With regard to gender distribution, males accounted for 27 participants (26.73%) and females accounted for 74 participants (73.26%).
- Participants from schools located in an urban area numbered 28 (27.72%), from semi-urban schools 51 (50.49%), and from rural schools 22 (21.78%).
- Although English was the primary means of communication, participants listed their home language as South Sotho 71 (70.29%), Xhosa 18 (17.82%), Tswana 5 (4.95%), Afrikaans 5 (4.95%), Tsonga 1 (0.99%) and Zulu 1 (0.99%).

5.3.3 DATA GATHERING PROCESS

In the second week of the first-term, notices were posted on *notice boards* on campus, requesting all first-year students in the Faculty of Management Sciences to meet with the researcher in the main hall the following week at a scheduled time (Tuesday between 10h00 and 11h00). Students were then supplied with details of the purpose of the meeting. One hundred and fifty (150) participants were randomly supplied with a set of questionnaires and requested to remain in the hall. The researcher then gave the hundred and fifty participants instructions on how they should complete the questionnaires. Because of time limits and the fact that the questionnaires normally takes 90 to 120 minutes to complete, the participants were allowed to take them home. As a result, the questionnaires were completed individually and returned to the office of the researcher.

One hundred and one (101) students participated by completing and returning the questionnaires, thereby yielding a return rate of 67%. There were no exclusions as all questionnaires received were fully completed. This response figure was satisfying given the time required to complete the questionnaires.

Furthermore, the average results of the first-and second-term results of the 101 students who participated in this study were used as a measure of the academic performance of those students.

5.3.4 MEASURING INSTRUMENTS

The measuring instruments consisted of the following measures.

5.3.4.1 BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is self-compiled (See Appendix II), and consisted of items that serve to gather information on age, gender, qualification, student number, home language, race, name of school attended, geographic

location of school and Grade 12 subjects and symbols. Using the Swedish Scale, the Grade 12 marks were converted to a total numerical value (See Appendix VI).

5.3.4.2 PURPOSE IN LIFE TEST (PIL)

The *Purpose in Life Test (PIL)* of Crumbaugh and Maholic (1969) was administered to measure the extent to which students experience a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. This scale is composed of 20 items, which are answered according to a seven point rating scale. In each item, position four is designated as “neutral”, and different illustrative terms are given for position one to seven. Subjects are asked to mark one position for each item, and add the score. The total scores range from 20 to 140. A score of 92 or less indicates a low meaning orientation. Scores from 93 to 111 reflects a moderate level of sense of meaning, while a score of 112 or more shows a definite meaning and purpose in life.

Examples of the 20 items include: “I am usually: completely bored (1)—exuberant, enthusiastic (7)”. “If I could choose, I would: prefer to have never been born (1)—like nine more lives just like this one (7)”. “As I view the world in relation to my life, the world: completely confuses me (1)—fits meaningfully with my life (7)”; and “with regard to suicide, I have: thought of it seriously as a way out (1)—never given it a second thought (7)”.

In a study conducted by Seeman (1991) the PIL had an alpha coefficient of 0.91, indicating a high level of internal consistency. The following authors reported the split-half reliability of the test to be in excess of 0.90 (Crumbaugh, 1968; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964, 1969; Reker, 1977).

The PIL has also been widely used in the past (Du Plessis, 1982) and more recently (Van Jaarsveld, 2004) in South African studies. In the study by Van Jaarsveld (2004) an alpha coefficient of 0.86 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.85 were obtained for the PIL.

- ***Motivation for the use of the scale in the current investigation***

Since the researcher is interested in the impact of sense of meaning on academic performance, the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) was used to measure the degree to which participants experience life as meaningful or meaningless. Hutzell (1988) mentions that Crumbaugh developed the PIL as part of his work to scientifically justify Frankl's concept that the strongest motive behind human beings is to find meaning and purpose in life.

5.3.4.3 LIFE STRESSORS AND RESOURCES QUESTIONNAIRE- YOUTH FORM (LISRES-Y)

The *Life Stressors and Resources Questionnaire-Youth Form* (Moos & Moos, 1994) was administered to measure a variety of stressors, such as, living conditions, financial problems and social support as well as social resources such as parental support. The questionnaire consists of 209 items broadly divided into two sections, namely life stressors and social resources. The subscales of life stressors (SS) are: Physical Health (PH), Home and Money (HM), Parents (PAR), Siblings (SIB), Extended Family (FAM), School (SCH), Friends (FR), Boyfriend/Girlfriend (BG) and Negative Life Experience (NLE). The subscales for social resources (SR) are: Parents (PAR), Siblings (SIB), Extended Family (FAM), School (SCH), Friends (FR), Boyfriend/Girlfriend (BG), and Positive Life Experience (PLE). A high score indicates a high level of stress or the presence of adequate resources in a specific domain. This measuring instrument has proved to be reliable and valid. The internal consistency index ranges from 0.79-0.88 for Stressor scales and from 0.78-0.91 for the Social Resources scales. The Cronbach alpha-coefficients in a South African study conducted by Wissing (1996) ranged between 0.79 and 0.88 for the life stressors and between 0.78 and 0.91 for the social resources scales.

- **Motivation for the use of the scale in the current investigation**

The LISRES-Y questionnaire discussed above was included to measure what the participants perceive to be the resources they have access to and the stressors they are exposed to in their community. According to Smittle (1995), the academic performance of students in institutions of higher learning is influenced by multiple factors. By using this scale the researcher wanted to have insight into some of the factors, positive and negative, which participants are confronted with in their everyday life.

To investigate the reliability of the PIL and LISRES-Y for the current study, alpha coefficients were calculated for the current sample. The analysis was done with the help of the SPSS computer programme (SPSS Incorporated, 2001) as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Alpha-coefficients with respect to the PIL and LISRES-Y scales.

LISRES Scales/PIL	α- coefficient
Stressors: Physical health	0,577
Home and money	0,854
Parents	0,864
Friends	0,679
Negative life events	0,761
Resources: Parents	0,891
Friends	0,830
Positive life events	0,600
Purpose in Life (PIL) Total score	0,842

It is clear from Table 1 that with the exception of physical health and positive life events scales, acceptable internal consistency measurements were obtained. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) coefficients of 0.6 and above are considered acceptable for non-cognitive constructs. Although the reliability of one of the scales (Physical health) was not that high, it was decided to keep them in the analyses that follows because the coefficient was just slightly below 0.6.

5.3.5 STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS

To investigate the research hypothesis and to provide answers to some of the research questions, hierarchical regression analyses were performed. In this case meaning in life, stressors and resources, Grade 12 performance and age are the independent variables, and the students first-year academic performance were the dependent (criterion) variables. The method followed was to first determine the total variance explained by the predictor variables jointly (full model) with regard to the criterion (academic performance). Thereafter, one of the predictor variables was omitted to determine that specific variable's contribution to the explanation of the variance. In some cases, the set of variables (for example, all the stressors) was also omitted to determine the contribution of the set of variables to the explanation of first-year academic performance. The percentage variance explained by a specific variable(s) is indicated by R^2 (quadrated multiple correlation coefficient).

The hierarchical F -test was used to determine whether the contribution by a specific variable or set of variables to the R^2 value is statistically significant. The way in which this test can be calculated is as follows:

$$F = \frac{(R^2_{y.1\dots k_1} - R^2_{y.1\dots k_2}) / (k_1 - k_2)}{(1 - R^2_{y.1\dots k_1}) / (N - k_1 - 1)}$$

Where:

$R^2_{y.1\dots k_1}$ = Quadrated multiple correlation coefficient for the large number of independent variables

$R^2_{y.1\dots k_2}$ = Quadrated multiple correlation coefficient for the smaller number of independent variables

k_1 = Larger number of independent variables

k_2 = Smaller number of independent variables

N = Total number of cases

(Van der Walt, 1980)

When the significance of an increase in R^2 is investigated, it is also necessary to calculate the effect size of the contribution by a specific predictor(s). The effect size indicates the contribution to R^2 in terms of the proportion undeclared variance of the full model. According to Van der Westhuizen, Monteith and Steyn (1989), the effect size of the individual contributions can be calculated in terms of f^2 with the help of the following formula:

$$f^2 = \frac{R^2 - R^2_1}{1 - R^2}$$

Where:

R^2 = proportion variance declared by the full model

R^2_1 = proportion variance declared by the smaller number of independent variables

According to Cohen (Steyn, 1999), the following guideline values can be used:

$f^2 = 0,01$: small effect

$f^2 = 0,15$: medium effect

$f^2 = 0,35$: large effect

Both the 5% and 1% level of significance were used in this study. The results that follow were obtained with the help of the SAS computer program (SAS Institute 2003).

5.3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Management of Central University of Technology, Free State (Welkom Campus). All students who participated in this study completed a consent form (See

Appendix I). Participants were assured that all information would be treated as confidential and anonymous.

The questionnaires were administered by the researcher, and completed individually by the participants. Data was analysed by an independent researcher with extensive experience of the SPSS programme.

5.4 QUALITATIVE COMPONENT

5.4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

In the qualitative component, an exploratory design was used. Data was collected by means of in-depth interviews. The type of in-depth interviewing used, is directed at learning about events and activities that cannot be learned directly. In this type of interviewing, the participants are the informants in the truest sense of the word (Taylor & Bogdan, 1997). The role of the participants is not simply to reveal their views, but to describe what happened. To gain information about the participants' authentic experiences, *emotionalism* will be used. According to emotionalism, interviewees are viewed as experiencing subjects who actively construct their social worlds. Emotionalist interviewers want to access the subject behind the person, given the role of respondent (Silverman, 2001).

5.4.2 PARTICIPANTS

Twenty research participants were selected from 101 first-year students who participated in the quantitative study. A stratified sample of two groups, that is, 10 students with high PIL-scores (High Meaning Group) and 10 students with low PIL-scores (Low Meaning Group) was selected. The average PIL score of each group is presented in Chapter 6.

Defining characteristics of the research participants:

- The mean age of the Low Meaning Group was 19.3 years and that for the High Meaning Group was 19 years.
- The gender ratios for each group were five male and five female students.
- Participants in the Low Meaning Group, from schools located in an urban area numbered 2, from semi-urban schools 5, and from rural schools 3. Participants in the High Meaning Group, from schools located in an urban area numbered 1, from semi-urban schools 9, and none from rural schools.

5.4.3 DATA GATHERING PROCESS

Data was collected by means of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Firstly, the researcher presented each focus group with a brief scenario (See Appendix III) aimed at eliciting the participants' comments on factors contributing to their sense of meaning. The duration of the focus group discussions was 60 minutes.

Secondly, individual semi-structured interviews (See Appendix IV) were conducted by the researcher to investigate the subjective experiences of respondents on the construct on meaning in life, the stressors they were exposed to and resources they had access to. The purpose of dividing the students into two groups was to explore differences between those with a high sense of meaning and those with a low sense of meaning.

5.4.4 DATA GATHERING METHODS

The following are the methods used to gather qualitative data.

5.4.4.1 BRIEF SCENARIO

The scenario used, was adopted from Joseph Fabry's (1988) book, *Guide Posts to Meaning*. In addition the researcher compiled 16 open-ended

questions to help the participants elaborate further on the scenario (See Appendix III).

5.4.4.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

For individual interviews, the researcher compiled 25 open-ended questions to help the participants elaborate further on themes that emerged in the focus group session (See Appendix IV).

The questions were grouped according to the following topics:

➤ ***Stressors they are exposed to***

What are the types of challenges you were faced with, before you came to this campus?

What types of challenges were you faced with when you first arrived at this campus?

➤ ***Coping mechanisms***

How did you cope with these challenges?

Are there things that you learned from the past that can be applied to the current situation?

➤ ***Support systems***

Who are your role models? What do you admire about them? Do you have any qualities they have?

How much time do you spend with your family? With friends?

➤ ***Creating meaning***

Is it true or false that life has meaning under all circumstances and at all times; please motivate your response?

Where do you see meaning in your studies? The service you will provide? The prestige you will gain after completing your studies? The money you will make?

- ***Motivation for the use of interviews in the current investigation***

According to Taylor and Bogdan (1997) social scientists rely largely on verbal accounts to learn about social life. The researcher is interested in the impact of a sense of meaning on academic performance. By using in-depth interviews, one comes to understand the participants' perspectives on factors that contribute to the experience of meaning in life as expressed in their words.

5.4.5 METHOD OF ANALYSIS

To answer some of the research questions, data from focus group sessions and individual interviews was analysed and interpreted by an independent researcher. In interpreting the results, the independent researcher conducted a discourse analysis to look for themes relating to students' experience of meaning. A computer software package (NUD*IST programme) was used (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997).

All of the qualitative interviews were tape-recorded, with the participants' permission. The recordings were then transcribed into MSWord documents. These documents then formed the basis for 17 raw data files for the QSR NUD*IST program (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997). One document each was created for the individual interviews with the eight high meaning and the seven low meaning respondents. Two additional documents were created for the focus group sessions with the High and Low Meaning Groups. These documents were imported into, and then analysed with the NUD*IST program. A display of the full index tree as coded by NUD*IST is shown in Appendix V.

The primary focus of the qualitative analysis was to investigate the subjective experiences of respondents on the construct on meaning in life,

the stressors they were exposed to and resources they had access to. The meaning experiences of respondents were categorised into creative, experiential and attitudinal values.

The results obtained were related to and integrated with those of the quantitative study to adequately describe the essence or nature of the students' experiences of meaning and its influence on their studies. For this purpose, triangulation was used (Fetterman, 1998).

5.4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All students who participated in this study completed a consent form (See Appendix I). Participants were assured that all information would be treated as confidential and anonymous. The condition of the confidentiality that group members are not allowed to discuss other members' issues outside the session was also discussed in the focus group session. Feedback was provided to participants and those who displayed signs and symptoms of pathology were advised to go for counselling.

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were also conducted by the researcher, but the interpretation of transcribed data was conducted by an independent researcher with extensive experience of the NUD*IST programme.

5.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the procedures that were followed in conducting the quantitative and qualitative research were discussed. In the next chapter, the result are presented and discussed.

Chapter 6

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the research findings of the quantitative study are presented first. Subsequent to the presentation of the research findings, the results are discussed. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of the qualitative results.

6.2. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

6.2.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

The descriptive statistics (averages and standard deviations) with respect to all the relevant variables, for the qualitative component, were calculated and are presented in Table 2. The ranges with respect to the Purpose in Life scores of all participants (male and female) as well as those of participants with high, moderate, and low scores were calculated and are presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Averages and standard deviations for the total research group

Variables	N	\bar{X}	SD
First-year performance (criterion)	101	56,05	10,59
Grade 12 mark (Swedish scale)	101	26,10	5,68
Age	101	19,38	1,29
Stressors: Physical health	101	1,17	2,17
Home and money	101	15,40	8,36
Parents	101	7,86	5,65
Friends	101	6,15	4,74
Negative life events	101	10,65	6,42
Resources: Parents	101	10,77	5,95
Friends	101	21,42	8,18
Positive life events	101	10,78	3,73
Purpose in Life (PIL)	101	110,07	18,11

The participants obtained a mean percentage of 56.05 and a standard deviation of 10.59 for the criterion variable **first-year performance**. The scores obtained in this study are closely related to those of a South African study conducted by Huysamen and Roozendaal (1999) with university students, in which a mean score of 55.78 and a standard deviation of 12.45 were obtained. However, in the latter study, the criterion was the mean percentage mark accumulated over all the courses that were required by the students' respective degree curricular up until the end of their third-year. Therefore, the slightly higher mean score of the current group should be interpreted with caution.

With regard to the predictor **Grade 12 marks**, participants obtained a mean score of 26.10 and a standard deviation of 5.68. The scores obtained in this study are lower than those of a South African study by Huysamen and Roozendaal (1999) with university students, in which a higher mean score of 34.51 and a standard deviation of 6.27 were obtained. Considering that participants in this study are predominantly Black South Africans, while participants in the earlier study were predominantly White South Africans

(Huysamen & Roozendaal, 1999), the vast difference in the mean scores of **Grade 12 marks** of these two groups could be influenced by socio-economic disparities. Shochet (1986) in a comparative study at the University of the Witwatersrand found that matriculation rating was only a significant predictor for advantaged students. For disadvantaged (that is, Black) students a correlation of 0.15 was found between the relationship between school and university performance.

In reporting the **stressors and resources**, participants' scores showed considerable variation between the individual scores. Only 8 variables of the **LISRES-Y** were used in this study (5 stressor scales and 3 resources scales). In comparing the group results of the current study to a South African study on adolescents (George, 2005) slight differences were recorded in the stressor subscale home and money (HM) with a mean of 15.40 to the mean of 11.36 in George's (2005) study, which was considerably higher amongst the participants in this current research study. For the subscale friends as a resources (FR) a mean score of 21.42 was found compared to the mean of 24.45 in George's (2005) study, which was lower amongst the participants in this research, with the scores of the 6 remaining scales, being closely related to those of George (2005). Therefore the participants in the present study reported their friends to be a less important resource as what the group of adolescents in George's (2005) study did. It might be because of developmental differences- young adults might focus more attention on intimate adult relationships than on friendships. The participants of this study were also in the early stage of adjusting to university campus life and might not have established strong bonds with new acquaintances.

The participants achieved a mean of 110.07 and a standard deviation of 18.11 for the predictor variable **Purpose in life**. According to the cut off criteria this mean score indicates a moderate level of meaning. The scores obtained in this study are higher than the scores obtained by the participants of Zika and Chamberlain' study (1992) in which a mean of 105.87 and a standard deviation of 13.77 were obtained. A recent American study by

Schumbenberg (2004) also obtained a lower mean score of 107.83 and a standard deviation of 15.43. In a South African study by Moomal (1999) participants obtained a mean score of 99.09, which is also lower compared to the one obtained in this study, however, a closely related score of 18.38 for the standard deviation was obtained. As a result it seems as if the participants of the current study experience a relatively high degree of purpose in their lives.

Table 3: The **PIL** ranges of all participants

Participants	N	N%	PIL Range
All Participants	101	100%	62 -140
All Female Participants	74	73.27%	62 -138
All Male Participants	27	26.73%	78 -140
All participants (M & F) High PIL scores	52	51.48%	112 -140
All participants (M & F) Low PIL scores	20	19.80%	62 - 91
All participants (M & F) Moderate PIL scores	29	28.71%	95 -111

Looking at Table 3 the levels of meaning for all participants in this study ranged from 62 (low score) to 140 (high score). The PIL range for the present study is higher than that of a study by Schumbenberg (2004), in which a range of 43 to 137 was obtained. The range for female participants, in the present study is from 62 to 138, and that for males is from 78 to 140. Consistent with the findings of the present study, a study on African-American men and women, by Krause, Broderick, and Broyles (2004) reported lower scores on the PIL amongst women, as compared to those of men.

According to the criterion provided by Crumbaugh and Maholic (1969), a score of 92 or less is indicative of low meaning. A score between 92 and 112 shows moderate meaning. A score of 112 or more shows a definite

meaning in life. In the current study, the range for participants with high meaning scores is from 112 to 140, for participants with a moderate meaning level is from 95 to 111 and for participants with low meaning scores is from 62 to 91.

In terms of percentages, of the one hundred and one (101) participants in this study, 51.48% of participants indicated that they experienced a definite meaning in life, 28.71% experienced moderate meaning and 19.80% indicated that they lack meaning and purpose in life. Based on these percentages it can be concluded that the majority of participants in the study experienced a definite sense of meaning in their lives. The average score for High Meaning Group is 124.73, or 11.73 points higher than the score indicating a definite purpose in life. This score is closely related to that of the participants of Nackord's (1983) study, who obtained an average of 124.4 for a High Meaning Group. The average score for Low Meaning Group in this study is 81.5, or 10.5 points below the score indicating a lack of meaning and purpose. This score is higher than that of Nackord's (1983) participants who obtained a score of 74.9 for Low Meaning Group. It can be concluded that most of the participants in the current group experience a clear sense of meaning in life.

6.2.2 INTERCORRELATIONS

Before presenting and discussing the results of the hierarchical regression analyses, the correlations between the predictor variables and the criterion, as well as correlations between predictor variables will be indicated and discussed. The Pearson's product momentum correlation coefficients between the variables are indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlations between predictor and criterion variables for the various groups

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 First-year performance	39**	48**	-02	09	06	09	-02	24*	13	09	-01
2 Grade12 mark	-	18	06	12	-02	09	04	05	01	-01	-12
3 PIL score		-	-15	-02	-08	-20	-12	32**	04	05	02
4 Stressor: PH			-	10	15	02	08	03	-01	-01	-18
5 Stressor: HM				-	09	-04	16	-11	-22*	-16	12
6 Stressor: PAR					-	14	26**	10	19	15	03
7 Stressor: FR						-	26**	-11	22*	15	-18
8 Stressor: Neg. life							-	-04	06	25*	-08
9 Resource: PAR								-	30**	26**	01
10 Resource: FR									-	33**	-11
11 Resource: Pos. life										-	-01
12 Age											-

Note: Decimal omitted

** $p \leq 0,01$

* $p \leq 0,05$

The correlation coefficients in Table 4 show that on the 1% level of significance there are significant correlations between the criterion (first-year performance) and Grade 12 marks (0,39) as well as PIL scores (0,48). On

the 5% level there is a significant correlation between the criterion (first-year performance) and Parents as a resource (0, 24). These significant coefficients are all positive, indicating that the higher the first-year performance, the higher their scores in respect of Grade 12 marks, Purpose in life and Parents as a resource.

On the 1% level, there is a significant correlation between Purpose in life and Parents as a resource. This positive significant coefficient indicates that the higher the PIL scores, the higher the Parents as a resource. This also seems to suggest that parents play a significant role in the development of a sense of purpose amongst their children. Similar to the findings of the present study, Shek's (1987) study found that both paternal treatment (PT) and maternal treatment (PT) showed a stronger and more positive correlation with PIL scores than with any other measure of psychological well-being.

On the 5% level, there is a significant correlation between Home and Money as a stressor and Friends as a resource. The significant coefficient is negative suggesting that when a person is exposed to stressors related to home and money, the less positive they experience their friends as a resource. Again, on the 1% level there is a significant correlation between Parents as a stressor and Negative life events. The significant coefficient is positive, suggesting that if a person experiences problems with a parent or loses a parent, for example through death, they are more exposed to negative life events. As the correlation does not indicate a causal relationship, it may also mean that the negative impact of frequent exposure to negative life events also impact negatively on the relationship between parents and their children.

Though on a 5% significance level, problems in relations with friends (stressor) have also been positively related to negative life events. Suggesting that if a person has problems in his/her relationship with friends, he/she might be more exposed to more negative life events; or it may also mean that the negative impact of frequent exposure to negative life events

also impact negatively on the relationship between individuals and their friends.

A significant correlation (1% level) was also found between parents as a resource and friends as a resource as well as positive life events. These significant coefficients are all positive, suggesting that if things are well with parents, it seem to have a positive impact on the relationship with friends and people experience more positive life events; or it might mean that people who tend to perceive their relationships as more positive also have a tendency to perceive positive life events.

Lastly, correlations were found on the 1% level of significance between Friends as a resource and positive life events; which seem to suggest that when relations with friends are positive, a person experiences more positive life events; if a person experiences more positive life events, they perceive their relationship with friends more positively.

6.2.3 HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS

The hierarchical regression analysis was performed in order to investigate the contributions of various predictor variables to the explanation of the variance in academic performance of first-year students. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are indicated in Table 5.

Table 5: Contributions of the predictor variables to R² with scholastic achievement as criterion

Variables in the analysis	R ²	Contribution to R ² : full minus reduced model	F	f ²
1. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[stres]+[reso]	0,3737	1 – 5 = 0,0135	0,64	
2. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[stres]+pos	0,3632	2 – 5 = 0,0030	0,43	
3. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[stres]+frr	0,3673	3 – 5 = 0,0071	1,01	
4. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[stres]+par	0,3700	4 – 5 = 0,0098	1,40	
5. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[stres]	0,3602			
6. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[reso]+[stres]	0,3737	6 – 12 = 0,0324	0,93	
7. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[reso]+neg	0,3415	7 – 12 = 0,0002	0,03	
8. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[reso]+frs	0,3604	8 – 12 = 0,0191	2,73	
9. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[reso]+pas	0,3467	9 – 12 = 0,0054	0,77	
10. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[reso]+hms	0,3505	10 – 12 = 0,0092	1,31	
11. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[reso]+phs	0,3419	11 – 12 = 0,0006	0,09	
12. [mark]+[pil]+[age]+[reso]	0,3413			
13. [mark]+[pil]+[stres]+[reso]+ [age]	0,3737	13 – 14 = 0,0008	0,11	
14. [mark]+[pil]+[stres]+[reso]	0,3729			
15. [mark]+[age]+[stres]+[reso]+[pil]	0,3737	15 – 16 = 0,1485	21,21**	0,24
16. [mark]+[age]+[stres]+[reso]	0,2252			
17. [pil]+[age]+[stres]+[reso]+[mark]	0,3737	17 – 18 = 0,0749	10,70**	0,12
18. [pil]+[age]+[stres]+[reso]	0,2988			

Key: [mark=Grade 12 mark; pil=purpose in life; age=age of learner; reso=resources; stres=stressors; pos=positive life events; frr=friends as resource; par=parents as resource; neg=negative life events; frs=friends as stressor; pas=parents as stressor; hms=home and money as stressor; phs=physical health as stressor; [] indicate a set of variables]

** p ≤ 0,01

* p ≤ 0,05

The results showed that the predictors together explain 37, 37% of the variance in first-year academic performance. This is significant on the 1% level [$F_{11;89} = 4,83$; $p < 0,01$]. When the contributions of the different sets of variables (stressors and resources) to R^2 for the criterion are investigated, it is clear that the resource variables (positive life events, friends and parents) explained 1, 35% of the variance in first-year academic performance while the stressor variables (negative life events, friends, parents, home and money and physical health) explained 3, 24% of the variance. In both instances the contribution is not significant on at least the 5% level.

When the contributions of individual predictors (age, PIL and Grade 12 mark) to R^2 for the criterion are investigated, it is clear that there are significant contributions on the 1% level. It is mainly the variable Purpose in life that shows a significant contribution to the criterion. On its own it explains 14, 85% of the variance in first-year academic performance. From table 5 it is also evident that Grade 12 marks (Swedish Scale) show a significant contribution to the criterion on the 1% level. On its own it explains 7, 49% of the variance in first-year academic performance. These two contributions have an effect size of 0, 24 and 0, 12 respectively, indicating medium (Purpose in life) and small (Grade 12 marks) practical value of the results. Thus the contribution of purpose in life can be considered to be of moderate practical significance. It can be concluded that it is mainly two predictors (See also correlation coefficients in table 4) that contribute significantly to the academic performance of first-year students, namely Purpose in life and Grade 12 marks.

6.2.4 DISCUSSION OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between students' sense of meaning and the extent to which it influences academic performance. In order to investigate this relationship without bias, the researcher identified other variables that may also affect academic performance, that is, age, life stressors and resources, and Grade 12 marks.

From these variables, five null and alternative hypotheses were formulated (See chapter 5).

In the next section the results of the quantitative study are discussed and related to each hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 – Purpose in life and Academic performance

In the first hypothesis, the null hypothesis states that sense of meaning is not significantly related to academic performance. A significant correlation was found between purpose in life and first-year academic performance. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis that states that students with a strong sense of meaning are more likely to succeed in their studies, was supported by the results of this study. The findings confirm those of a study by Nackord (1983), which proposed a significant relationship between meaning orientation and scholastic achievement. More recently, results of a study by Greenway (2005) reported that academic engagement is a strong predictor of success amongst university students and that meaning in life was significantly predictive of student's level of engagement. Therefore, Greenway's (2005) study seems to suggest that when students have high levels of meaning, they are likely to show more dedication in their studies, which ultimately leads to success. The results of the present study indicate that the sense of meaning of first-year students at the Central University of Technology, Free State (Welkom Campus) is significantly higher than the scores reported for comparative British and American samples (Schumbenberg, 2004; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), as well as those of a South African sample (Moomal, 1999).

Contrary to the concept of academic engagement is academic procrastination, which was negatively related to academic achievement in a study by Orpen (1998). While academic procrastination is related to extrinsic motivation or even a-motivation, academic engagement can be related to intrinsic motivation, and especially intrinsic motivation to know. Literature explains intrinsic motivation to know as the capacity to undertake

activities for exploration and experiencing pleasure and satisfaction while learning. It is related to global constructs like the search for meaning (Vallerand, Fortier, Guay, 1997). In a study conducted by Baker (2004), intrinsic motivation to know has been related to a number of outcome variables like positive university adjustment, lower perceived stress, positive well-being and academic achievement.

Hypothesis 2 – Stressors and Academic performance

In the second hypothesis, the null hypothesis states that there is no significant relationship between the frequency of stressors experienced by students and their academic performance. In the present study, there were no significant correlations found between the stressor variables (Home and money, Parents, Friends and Negative life events) and academic performance. As a result the null hypothesis was accepted.

There were also no significant correlations between individual stressor variables and academic performance. Looking at home and money as a stressor, a South African study on female students by Malefo (2000), also did not find a statistically significant relationship between socio-economic (SES) status and academic performance. On the contrary, research by Nettles (in Malefo, 2000), found a negative relationship between low SES and academic performance.

In terms of parents and friends as stressors, contrary to the findings of the present study, Servaty-Seib, Hamilton and Medaris (2006) report that, losing a significant person through death is considered to be one of the highest stressors. In a recent study, Purdue University researchers discovered that university students who experience the death of a family member or friends also experience a corresponding drop in academic performance during the semester the loss takes place. In this specific study Servaty-Seib, Hamilton and Medaris (2006) found that all bereaved undergraduates had significantly lower grade point averages (GPA) than a comparative group of students.

Exposure to traumatic incidents like continued consequences of segregation have also been attributed to impacting on academic performance in a number of ways. South African and American studies (Coleman, 1993; Gelman, 1999; Hamber, 2000; Massey & Fischer, 2002) revealed that segregation lowered academic performance by exposing Black people to unusually high levels of social disorder and violence while growing up. On the contrary, the results of the present study contradict the above-mentioned findings. It might be that the homogeneity of the sample influenced the results. Most participants were Black Africans, where most came from backgrounds where they were exposed to high levels of social disorder and violence. As a result there could not have been sufficient variety in the sample with regard to negative and positive life events, for this specific variable to make a significant contribution to the academic performance of the participants.

Hypothesis 3 – Resources and Academic performance

In the third hypothesis the null hypothesis states that, the resources accessible to students are not significantly related to academic performance. Amongst the three resource variables (Positive life events, Friends and Parents) used in this study, only one (Parents as a resource) is significantly related to academic performance. Thus the null hypothesis is partially rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis, which states that the resources students have access to, are positively related to academic performance especially with regard to parents as a resource.

Literature on family variables indicates that within an education setting, parents play a multidimensional role of support; which could have a significant impact on academic performance (Bird, 2003; Cherian & Malehase, 2000; Hak-Ju, 2004; Punch, 1966). However, some research studies reported contrasting evidence (Gonzalez, Greenwood & WenHsu, 2001; Lamborn et al., 1991; Malefo, 2000; McCartin & Meyer, 1988; Walker

& Satterwhite, 2002). The current study supports the important role of parents as a resource.

In the present study, parents as resource, is not only significantly linked to academic performance, but it is also significantly linked to a sense of purpose. This finding suggests that there is a significant relationship between parents as resource and students finding meaning and purpose in life; in other words the higher the sense of meaning amongst students, the higher the variable of parents as resource. These findings also seem to suggest that parents play an important role in instilling a sense of meaning in their children. A more recent study by Campbell (2005) concurs with the findings of the present study that parents play a very important role in the development of sense of meaning in their children.

Hypothesis 4 – Previous academic performance and University performance

In the fourth hypothesis, the null hypothesis states that previous academic performance is not significantly related to academic performance at university. The results of this study seem to suggest that matriculation scores are still useful in predicting university achievement. In this study, previous academic performance is significantly correlated with first-year academic performance. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis, which states that previous academic performance is positively related to academic performance at university. This finding concurs with the finding of McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001), Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2001) and Baker (2004). Previous South African Studies (Bokhorst, Foster & Lea, 1992), as well as recent findings (Lourens & Smit, 2003) also support the results of the present study. Even though the sample of the current study constitutes of mostly African Black students, previous academic performance was still an important predictor of first-year academic performance.

Hypothesis 5 – Age and Academic performance

In the fifth hypothesis, the null hypothesis states that, age is not significantly related to academic performance. From the results of the present study, there were no significant correlations observed between age and academic performance; as a result the null hypothesis is accepted. On the contrary, in some research studies, age was found to be a powerful predictor of academic performance, with older students performing better than younger students (Ayaya, 1996; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gadzella et al., 2001; Hoskins, 1997; Malefo, 2000; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002).

The inter-correlations between age and other independent variables, like Purpose in life, were also not significant. In line with the findings of the present study, a South African study by Hutchinson (2005) on traditional first-year students, also did not find any significant relationships between age and sense of meaning in life. Contrary to this finding, a number of studies reported a positive correlation between sense of meaning and age, with older students scoring higher on the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and subsequently obtaining a much higher grade point average (GPA) than younger students (Geiger, Weinstein & Jones, 2004).

Finally it can be concluded that there are three variables that significantly correlated with academic performance, they are Purpose in life, Grade 12 marks, and Parents as a resource. All three variables correlated positively with academic performance indicating that the higher the Purpose in life, Grade 12 marks and Parents as a resource, the higher the academic performance.

The hierarchical regression analysis was performed in order to investigate the contributions of various predictor variables to the explanation of the variance in academic performance in first-year students. The results showed that the predictors together explain 37, 37% of the variance in first-year academic performance. This is significant on the 1% level [$F_{11;89} = 4,83; p < 0,01$]. When the contributions of individual predictors (age, PIL and Grade 12 mark) to R^2 for the criterion are investigated, it is clear that

there are significant contributions on the 1% level. It is mainly the variable Purpose in life that showed a significant contribution to the criterion. On its own it explained 14, 85% of the variance in first-year academic performance.

6.3 QUALITATIVE RESULTS

6.3.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Though mostly used in quantitative data, the descriptive statistics of the sample selected for the qualitative study is also included. This quantitative data is used to compare the two groups, in terms of age, Grade 12 points, Purpose in Life Test (PIL) score, and first-year performance. As a result, the averages with respect to the relevant variables of participants in the two focus groups - top 10 participants (five male and five female) with high PIL scores (focus group 1), and the bottom 10 participants (five male and five female) with low PIL score (focus group 2) - were calculated and are presented in Table 6 and 7. The ranges with respect to the PIL scores of participants in the two focus groups were also calculated and are presented in Table 8.

Table 6: Averages for focus group 1 (High PIL scores)

Variables	N	\bar{X}
1st year Ave %	10	57,6
Age	10	19,3
Gr.12 pts	10	27,6
PIL score	10	133,6

Table 7: Averages for focus group 2 (**Low PIL** scores)

Variables	N	\bar{X}
1st year Ave %	10	45,4
Age	10	19
Gr.12 pts	10	25,5
PIL score	10	77,6

Table 8: Ranges with regard to **PIL** scores (Focus groups 1 & 2)

Participants	N	PIL Range
Top 10 (5 male & 5 female) High PIL	10	128 - 140
Bottom 10 (5 male & 5 female) Low PIL	10	62 - 91

In comparing the two focus groups, the mean for participants in the first focus group is 133.6, or 21.6 points higher than the score indicating a definite purpose in life, and the mean for participants in the second focus group is 77.6, or 14.4 points lower than the score indicating a lack of meaning. The mean for academic performance of participants in the first focus group is higher (57.6) than the mean for participants in the second focus group (45.4). The mean age for the two groups is closely related, 19.0 and 19.3 respectively, however the mean for their Grade 12 points (Swedish scale) differs by approximately two points. The mean Swedish scale score for participants in the first focus group is higher (27.6) and those in the second focus group are lower (25.6).

The PIL score range for participants in the first focus group is from 128 to 140, and for participants in the second focus group is from 62 to 91.

The above averages and ranges, in Tables, 6, 7, and 8, were included as a way of highlighting the similarities and differences between the two groups. These averages and ranges will also be related to the themes that emerged from the focus group sessions and individual interviews.

6.3.2 RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

Although the primary focus of the qualitative analysis was to determine the extent to which creative, experiential and attitudinal values played a role in creating meaning for the students, an analysis of their current situation with regard to their experience of obstacles and resources were also conducted.

6.3.3 CURRENT SITUATION OF STUDENTS

In the interviews with the students, several typical subjects kept recurring. In the process of coding, these were sorted into meaningful groups and subgroups. The major groupings are the obstacles faced by the students, and the coping mechanisms and support systems they rely on when facing these obstacles.

6.3.3.1 OBSTACLES

A brief overview of the obstacles students faced will be given, together with relevant interview quotes. It should be remembered that while only a small sub-sample of the students was selected for the interviews (chiefly because of the practical problems surrounding such interviews); these do represent the larger sample, which represents the larger student body as a whole.

6.3.3.1.1 *Family*

Probably the most common problem experienced in family life was with the death of either a parent or sibling, sometimes leaving the students without immediate family—an important source of nurture and support. As one student put it:

“I am the last born, both my parents died, my older brother live in Pretoria, my sister Orkney and my other brother Klerksdorp. So when I go home I’m all-alone”.

Added to that is the emotional loss and bereavement of losing a loved one. One student from the Low Meaning Group related how he was still, after many years, unable to deal with the suicidal death of his brother.

This is what he said:

“The time when my brother died, we were like twins. So, when he died, he died committing suicide, so after that I asked myself he didn’t say anything, he didn’t do nothing. I asked myself, why did he do it?”

Another problem, which came up, was the break-up of families through divorce. One student from the Low Meaning Group said:

“I had this miserable dreadful thing that was happening, divorce and everything of parents. It kind of shock me a lot, it kind of shook me very much”.

He continued to mention the following:

“After the divorce and everything, I started drinking a lot, started not sleeping at home so after the mistake I got a little support from friends and it didn’t cover exactly what I was going through”.

A third problem was families (parents) forcing their will on students in terms of where and what they should study.

One student made mention of being forced by her family to study a course in financial management which she did not want to do, instead of journalism, which she did want to do. Another student noted that because she was raised by her grandparents (her parents still being teenagers at the time of her birth), she was emotionally estranged from her parents. This student said the following:

“You will not understand because I was not raised by my parent I’m staying with my grandparent. So when I’m with my parents right now, I just sit there and I don’t have anything to say to them. If I am with them I just want money, that’s all”. She went further to say, *“... my parents had me when*

they were still teenagers they were too young. So I realise that it's not good to have teenage parents".

6.3.3.1.2 Peers

The heading given to this section is relatively non-specific, because the range of problems experienced in this area was so vast. The most common problem students experienced was arriving at a university and suddenly being out of contact with old school friends. One student said:

"I felt very disappointed at first, disappointed that I have to start all over again, making friends".

Many students found it difficult to make new friends, felt lonely, and felt as if they did not belong. Those students who were fortunate enough to go to university together with their school friends were emphatic about how it helped them cope with the new circumstances.

The second most common problem experienced was the negative influence of the peer group. Peer pressure was very real to the students who participated in the interviews. Students were scared of making the wrong friends, or mentioned negative influences that their friends had had on them, for example through excessive partying. Clearly, it is important to students to not only make new friends, but also to make friends who are on the same level and who share the same goals and aspirations.

6.3.3.1.3 Values

Only one student mentioned something in the regard, saying:

"There were a few things that went against my beliefs, but I managed to overcome them".

While this might well have resorted under the previous heading (Peers), it might as well have referred to classroom experiences or learning material. As the student did not elaborate, it was decided to make separate mention

of this. Despite the lack of clarity on what is meant, it is obvious that moving from a relatively protected school environment to a tertiary institution will always bring about challenging new experiences, also leading students to re-examine long-held values and norms.

6.3.3.1.4 Increased Responsibility

The move from teenager to adult, from scholar to student is one with a dramatic increase in responsibility and concomitant self-control. Many of the students found this adjustment difficult, while others had no difficulties at all. Very interestingly, in the focus group sessions, all of the students in the High Meaning Group reported no difficulty in adjusting to university from high school, while all the students from the Low Meaning Group found it very difficult.

The increased responsibility centred around two primary areas: Firstly, students now, unlike in school, had to own responsibility for their studies. Those who had already begun with this process in school found no difficulties in dealing with the increased workload and lack of supervision, while those who had allowed themselves to be spoon-fed (a word used by one student) at school, struggled. As one student put it:

“The change was difficult, because at high school there is homework and if you don’t do it you will be punished so here at university no one tells you that you did not do my job. So no one controls you at university, you must control yourself, so at high school you are still under the control of teachers”.

The second challenge was dealing with greater independence. Many students found themselves having to provide the financial means for their studies themselves, or had to fend for themselves in terms of finding accommodation and preparing food, and making their own decisions about how best to spend their time. As one student put it:

“The challenge that I faced it was responsibility, because my mother is not here to look after me anymore”.

6.3.3.1.5 Finances

Although most students had this problem, the scope was relatively small: Many students found that they did not have enough money to fully pursue their study (and other) dreams. More range was found in the consequences this had: Some had to make compromises in terms of where they would study (campuses closer to home, campuses with lower tuition fees). Others had to make plans to obtain registration fees, and loans. Money was generated through work/business, loans, bursaries, and from family members.

The following are some of the comments from the High Meaning Group:

"My mother only had R500-00 for me to register. So she asked my sister to help her so that I may register. So I had financial problems".

"I choose this institution because of financial matters. So I saw that my standard of finance is lower. So I have heard that this campus have lower fees, that's why I have come to this campus".

"I had difficulties paying some school fees in high school, which is the same thing which applies here and automatically still burdens me but I plan to cope with it and to know that now that I'm healthy I can cope with it".

The following are some of the comments from participants in the Low Meaning Group:

"Besides that I had money problems. My parents died, both of my parents died. My father died last year, so they had to bury him with my money, my school money".

"Because there was lack of financial, lack of money at home and no one could afford to pay fees for school fund".

"I did have financial problems".

6.3.3.1.6 Accommodation

Many students do not live close to the university. As such, finding a place to stay presented a real challenge. As one student put it:

"I had to look for accommodation. Before I found accommodation I struggled with transport".

One student assumed that there would be hostels to stay in, and upon arriving and discovering that there were not, had to suddenly make alternative arrangements.

Even students who did find accommodation discovered that living in strange place has its own challenges: From difficult landlords to unruly co-tenants, and many more. One student said:

"...the only thing that I can say is the residence; we don't have the residence in the school, because we are living in a private accommodation. We are living with the landlord they sometimes become angry, and when they are angry they take all of us and they regard you as a problem".

6.3.3.1.7 Transport

As was already mentioned above, transport to far-away campuses either resulted in students not being able to attend the campus of their choice (it being too far off), or being separated from their families for long periods of time because of the expensive transport costs to such far-away places.

6.3.3.1.8 Administration

A very large range of problems is included here. Basically, students find negotiating the administrative requirements of large universities challenging. More than one student reported studying a second or third choice course because the university did not offer their preferred choice, and they were not able to go to other universities (whether because of admission

requirements, finances, distances, and so forth.). Also, coming to a strange place and finding out where to register, apply for bursaries, and so forth, was found to be particularly daunting. One student had the reasonably exceptional experience of having an ID document with an incorrect ID number (a slip-up on the side of the Department of Home Affairs), which created problems during the registration process.

6.3.3.1.9 Drugs

Some students reported that alcohol abuse was a problem, and one student reported smoking marijuana, and finding it difficult to stop. As one student put it:

"I smoke cigarette but lately I m trying to run away from, from... (Pause)... (Whispering) Marijuana, you know, because it makes me tired when I have smoked too much".

6.3.3.1.10 Summary

It is interesting to note that the first two categories of problems relate to parts of the students' lives from which it should be hoped they would receive support, not hindrance: Their families and friends. It is, however, the very nature of life that even those closest to us are not always able or willing to help us in life.

Furthermore, problems are often interrelated. For example, one student's father died, and the family had to use the student's study money to pay for the funeral. Death of a family member, especially a parent, often means that the student will face financial difficulties as well. Even divorce can have the same implications, with the parents refusing to continue supporting their children. One student described how his father cancelled a policy open to students whose parents are employed by the government, through which their children could gain access to study-loans.

While participants from High and Low Meaning Groups equally experienced the above-mentioned challenges and difficulties; it seems as if students from the Low Meaning Group found it more difficult to adjust at university as compared to those from the High Meaning Group. With regard to how they coped with challenges they mentioned the following.

One student said: *"I was not able to cope with them"*.

While another said: *"My parents pushed me a lot, they pushed me and I was with my friend who did well at school they tried to motivate me"*.

The third student put it this way: *"I didn't have that thing to go and sit and study, so there was a lot of work here and I didn't know what to do man, but I tried"*.

The fourth said: *"It's just that, I can't, I can't, I can't (repeats)... (Pause) cope more with the situation. To just accept the situation the way it is seems hard, you know"*.

6.3.3.2 COPING MECHANISMS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

From the previous section, it is evident that students face many challenges when coming to university, and also that no students are exempted from some or other challenge. Although all students have to find ways to cope with these challenges, the sad fact is that not all do. It is thus important to know what coping mechanisms and support systems are available to the students, and how well they are functioning.

6.3.3.2.1 Coping Mechanisms

When asked how they dealt with the various challenges and problems they faced, students mentioned a wide variety of coping mechanisms. These will be briefly summarised below:

6.3.3.2.1.1 Faith

One of the most commonly mentioned coping mechanisms was faith. Although no deeper exploration was undertaken during the interviews, most of the respondents referred to generally Christian concepts, one respondent indicating Rastafarianism. In terms of Christian concepts, one student from the High Meaning Group said:

“It starts inside. Even when it is difficult or you go through difficult times, you must say to yourself God let me not see these things, let me just be me, and that these problems I must encounter it”.

Aspects of faith were mentioned which could be aligned with both intrinsic and extrinsic religion (Allport & Ross, 1967). In other words, both Christian activities and relationships within the Christian community provided a base for support, as well as more abstract qualities such as trust and belief.

6.3.3.2.1.2 Positive Attitudes

Many students also found the strength to cope through their positive attitudes. The reference here was to maintain a positive attitude in the face of problems (being positive, believing in oneself, being confident and motivated), and not losing heart, as well as on positive personality traits, such as being calm and humble, gaining an understanding of what is happening, and not wanting to let people down. Also, students found that they should not dwell on the negatives, but see them as “stepping stones” for future success.

6.3.3.2.1.3 Patience and Perseverance

A related coping mechanism was the student’s ability to apply patience and perseverance, even when tempted to lose hope. For example, one student from the High Meaning Group said:

“I just learned how to be patient and every just turned to be okay. There was support from family; especially my uncle was there. Though I needed my mom the most but my uncle played a role and also friends”.

Added to this was a coping mechanism this researcher defined as acceptance and accommodation, which, although similar to patience, is also different in important ways. While those who showed patience continued to persist and persevere in the face of obstacles, the accepters and accommodators simply accepted the obstacle, and resolved the dilemma, not by solving the problem, but by changing themselves or their attitude towards it. While the former is marked by dogged persistence, the latter is marked by resignation (but not necessarily negative resignation).

6.3.3.2.1.4 Responsibility

A number of students noted that the way in which they dealt with problems was to assume personal responsibility for a solution. This may have been in terms behaving responsibly and accepting responsibility for the consequences of their actions (for example studying instead of partying), to actively doing something instead of waiting for others to do things for you (for example, finding out about, and applying for, bursaries on your own), or being self-reliant/self-supporting.

6.3.3.2.1.5 Honesty

Honesty with oneself was also mentioned twice in the focus group interview with low meaning students as a means of coping with the challenges of university life. One student said:

“I must be honest to myself in order to reach something that I want to reach”.

6.3.3.2.1.6 Counselling

Although counselling could be thought of as a support system rather than a coping mechanism, it deserves mention here already because one respondent in the Low Meaning Focus Group stated that even though counselling services are available, students need to motivate themselves both to use, and to prepare themselves for counselling. Students, as it were, need to counsel themselves as well as seek professional counselling.

6.3.3.2.1.7 Assertiveness

A number of students admitted that part of the process of coping with the challenges of life at the university was to withdraw/remove themselves from negative influences, be it friends, parties, alcohol, and so forth. Basically, they had to learn to say “no”.

6.3.3.2.1.8 Humour

Related to both the above point, as well as taking responsibility for themselves, students had to learn self-discipline. It was evident from the responses that this is not something one quickly acquires, like learning some piece of knowledge in class, but is rather the fruit of a life spent learning discipline. For those students who mentioned it, however, it also appeared to be a very important means of coping with life’s difficulties.

One student mentioned that laughing about life’s difficulties helped to make sense of it and give the sense that life was worth living. This is how he put it: *“It encourages me because sometimes when I think of what have happened, I just laugh, because sometimes it was not that easy. Most people don’t understand, they say you are just playing, when you tell them. But I will say life was worth living”.*

6.3.3.2.1.9 Self-acceptance

Two students also found that accepting themselves for who they were, and not attempting to imitate other people made an important contribution to how they dealt with problems.

6.3.3.2.1.10 Setting time aside for reflection

Personal time was seen by a number of students as a means of coping, during which they could reflect on their lives and gain power through that introspection. It allowed them to examine their strengths and weaknesses, and focus their energy on those areas. Reflecting on the past was an important way of rehearsing solutions to previous problems, thus empowering them to deal with new problems. Furthermore, personal time was spent dreaming of the future-an important motivator for those students who did so. Personal time was also spent relaxing, very often on casual reading.

However, some students, from the Low Meaning Group, found personal time distracting. They indicated that they thought of bad things from the past when they were alone, or that they experienced loneliness when they are by themselves.

6.3.3.2.1.11 Substance abuse

Finally, one student mentioned that he made use of narcotics (marijuana) to cope with situations, although its usefulness as a coping mechanism can be doubted.

It is, in conclusion, important to note that most of the coping mechanisms mentioned above were found to be unique to either the High or Low Meaning Groups. The exceptions to this were humour, positive attitudes,

responsibility, (amongst high meaning respondents), honesty, counselling, and drugs (amongst low meaning respondents). However, each of this found mention in only one interview, and thus it is dangerous to make any assumptions about their relevance towards determining meaning.

6.3.3.2.2 Support Systems

Students relied on a number of support systems as they met the challenges of university life.

6.3.3.2.1 Family

It can be confidently said that, with very few exceptions, the students' families were their most important sources of support and motivation, and the ones they wanted to please most. Families provided both tangible and intangible support: They provided assistance with accommodation, assistance with finances, and assistance with administrative matters. And the assistance was even more appreciated, because it often came at great personal sacrifice. Perhaps even more important, though, is the intangible support: moral support, comfort, training in life skills, what is right and wrong, and love and unconditional acceptance—a haven of safety. As one student put it, *"You can choose your friends but not your family"*. Family members, especially mothers, were also selected as role models more than any other category (See 6.3.3.2.2.3).

When the families did not provide the support they should have, it was sorely missed, and sometimes even led to resentment. Another sad reality faced by many of the students was the loss of some or all of their immediate family, which resulted not only in the bereavement felt at such a loss, but also in the loss of support from these vital caregivers.

6.3.3.2.2 Friends

Having friends at university was very important to the students. Those who did not have friends felt lonely and out of place, those who came to the university together with their friends relished the support, and those who were able to make friends after initially having none noted the dramatic improvement it made. However, the equation is more complex than that. Friends alone are not enough. They must be friends who exert a good, not bad, influence on the individual. It was noted that they needed to choose friends wisely, and some students regretted having made the wrong friends. It should, however, also be noted that most, but not all, of the students spent more time with their families than their friends.

Interestingly, when asked what made their friends good to them, it was the fact that their friends accepted them and were on the same level. When asked why people liked to befriend them, the response was generally not that they accepted their friends (as one would expect), but that they were good conversationalists and fun/nice to be with.

6.3.3.2.3 Role models

Although not a support system *per se*, students were asked to indicate the influence of role models in their lives. Opinions here varied greatly. Some students thought role models were not important at all. Others thought they were very important. Some chose celebrity personalities (actors, musicians, sports stars, Nelson Mandela) as their role models, many chose important family figures, especially their mothers, and some nominated themselves as their own role models, thinking that it can better motivate them to achieve success. Generally, celebrity role models were chosen either because of certain skills and successes, or because of success despite initial hardship (that is, growing up poor but still becoming successful—examples mentioned were Brad Pitt and Oprah Winfrey). In other words, these role models had a common basis with the students and

also represented a desirable goal that the students had not yet achieved. Family role models were chosen because of their personality traits (patient, supportive, caring, and so forth.). Two quotes from the interviews are worth highlighting in connection with role models:

“I do have a role model. They are important because everything that you do you are going to look at that specific person. So are going to do exactly what that person is doing. So, if that person acts negative you are going to act negative. So I think your role model should be positive”.

“Well you can’t say your role model its maybe Naomi Campbell because you don’t know her. I think it must be a person who is close to you. Some one you see every day and would be able to learn a lot from. Yes I think it’s important to have role models in my life. They encourage me. They show me how to do things, like my MOM she is my role model”.

Most students from the High Meaning Group chose family members as role models, while most students from the Low Meaning Group chose celebrity personalities as their role models.

6.3.3.2.2.4 Other activities

An important aspect of giving meaning to life is service to others. This does not only provide support to others, but to the individuals themselves as well. When the students were asked whether they were involved in any such activities, it became apparent that none of them were. Some did take part in what can be considered extra-mural activities, like singing in a choir, or playing in a soccer/basketball team. Two students were involved in the youth league, and several had hobbies like reading, going to the movies or watching TV, doing drama, writing short stories or poetry, music, and making clothes.

6.3.3.2.5 Institutional support

It is not insignificant that students can rely on the university itself for support with their studies. One of the services mentioned is the availability of professional counselling. Furthermore, administrative support was mentioned several times, especially service from financial advisers in terms of bursaries and loans (which helps resolve probably the most common problem-finances). In fact, the availability of loans and bursaries, together with tuition costs, was a major factor in the choice of which institution to study with. The quality of tuition was also mentioned once, and the fact that administrative staff must be “good people that will not laugh at you that will help”.

6.3.3.3 CREATING MEANING

The literature has revealed that meaning in life is found through different values. There are also certain circumstances that strengthen meaning in life. These are examined in turn, after which focus is given to the students' struggle and failure to find meaning in life.

6.3.3.3.1 *Values*

As was mentioned before, there are three ways in which meaning can be found:

- (1) through creative values (what people give to life),
- (2) through experiential values (what people take from life), and
- (3) through attitudinal values (acceptance of an unchangeable fate).

Each of these will be explored in terms of the student responses from the various interviews.

6.3.3.3.1.1 Creative values

Many of the students expressed creative values when asked what gives meaning to their lives. They wanted to achieve their goals, to see their dreams come true, to become successful, and to excel at their chosen or desired field of work. Sometimes, these values were frustrated, as when they could not study the course they wanted to, or attend the university they wanted to attend. In these instances, they had to learn to adapt (attitudinal values) or remain frustrated.

A number of students also had creative values on the side of artistic expression, such as making music, writing stories and poetry, and so forth.

6.3.3.3.1.2 Experiential Values

While a number of experiential values were mentioned which gave meaning to the students' lives, these values were mentioned much less than either creative or attitudinal values, which were more or less equally often mentioned (See the discussion of attitudinal values below). The very experience of receiving an education, especially a tertiary education which many of their peers were not fortunate enough to achieve, provided a strong sense of meaning. Some students seemed not to be interested in their courses, like one student indicated, *"I'm not really enjoying the course that I'm doing"*.

Even those students who initially claimed that being at the university did not add meaning to their life, admitted that their good fortune at being able to receive a tertiary education while so many others could not, did add a sense of meaning to their lives. Furthermore, the experience of prestige and status also provided meaning, as did the experience of building relationships, either from supportive and accepting friendships, or from supportive, sacrificing familial relationships. It was also interesting to realise that a number of students indicated that they see meaning in the

'money' they will make after completing their studies. One student's comments are particularly insightful:

"The money I will make, because everything depends on money. Life is all about money".

While another student said:

"The services I will provide will provide meaning. I never thought of success when I chose my field. The money I will get I will be satisfied with it. I think what is more important is what I will be doing".

Although the question of intrinsic and extrinsic religion again arises (that is, is this an experiential or perhaps a creative value?), some students did note that their faith in God did give their lives a sense of meaning.

Finally, one student noted that her life had gained added meaning because of the positive feedback she had received after losing weight.

6.3.3.3.1.3 Attitudinal Values

Many students noted the importance of a positive attitude in providing life with meaning. They learned to accept things that they could not change, and continue with their lives (Also see 6.3.3.2.1). However, it should be noted that a number of students struggled to accept things the way they are, that is, to accept the bad things that have happened to them.

One student's comments, from the Low Meaning Group, are particularly insightful:

"The challenges basically I thought it was... (Pause), it's something that someone experiences during your lifetime, but I just ask myself why me, why me, why me (repeats)?... Yes. It's just that, I can't, I can't, I can't (repeats)... (Pause) cope more with the situation. To just accept the situation the way it is seems hard, you know".

While another student, from the High Meaning Group, said:

“There are some things that you cannot change and to some things that you can change, it is up to you whether you choose to change that fact or you don’t. If ever I have to force myself to be accepted for some people I wouldn’t do it. It took me some time and hard work to make me who I am. To accept me for whom I am”.

6.3.3.3.1.4 Summary

It should be noted that both the High and Low Meaning Groups expressed all three sets of values. Some differences, however, did stand out. Firstly, amongst those who gave expression to creative values, all of those who could not see meaning in their studies were from the Low Meaning Group.

Secondly, almost all participants from the Low Meaning Group indicated that the money they will make and/or status that they will gain after completing their studies is more important than the service they will provide. Of significance is that, even though participants from the High Meaning Group also experienced financial difficulties, none of them indicated that they see meaning in the money they will make after completing their studies.

Lastly, amongst those students who gave expression to attitudinal values, all those who struggled with them were from the Low Meaning Group. While this researcher believes that this is significant, it should be interpreted with caution, as there were one or two students from the Low Meaning Group who did not struggle with an attitude of acceptance.

6.3.3.3.2 Circumstances

It was also mentioned that there are five circumstances that lead to a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in life:

- (1) self-discovery,

- (2) choices,
- (3) uniqueness,
- (4) responsibility, and
- (5) self-transcendence.

These were also searched for in the experiences of the students, although it should be remembered that the interview schedules were not directed at eliciting information about these aspects, and thus relatively little useful data was collected on these topics.

6.3.3.3.2.1 Self-discovery

Some students noted that in order for life to have meaning, one has to be honest with oneself about oneself, to *“look at your weaknesses and your strong points and... know where you must work hard”*. This can be seen in the belief of several students that they should be their own role models. When asked where he saw meaning in his studies, one of the high meaning students responded:

“I think the service I will be providing, because it is important. I’m not learning... (Pause) I’m not in this institution to become arrogant after finishing. I’m here to learn and observe and then with my experience I must plant it in the community and for the people”.

6.3.3.3.2.2 Choices

As was mentioned before, a number of students had experienced frustrating choices, either in terms of the course they wanted to follow, the institution at which they wanted to study, their accommodation, and so forth. Although this issue was not delved into deeper, most of the students did exercise the choice of changing their attitude, for example by learning to appreciate the university they were at, even though it was not their first choice.

6.3.3.3.2.3 Uniqueness

Through learning to accept themselves for whom they are (also reflected by their desire to be their own role models), gave the students a feeling of uniqueness, which added to their experience of having a meaningful life.

6.3.3.3.2.4 Responsibility

The literature points out that when people take responsibility for their choices, the meaningfulness of their lives is increased. The experience of the students confirmed this, as learning independence and discipline through assuming responsibility did increase the meaning they experienced in their own lives.

6.3.3.3.2.5 Self-transcendence

Lastly, it was noted that having the capacity to transcend one's own needs and reach out to others, increases the meaning experienced in life. A few students noted that the meaning they derived from their studies was rooted in the way it would empower and enable them to serve other people.

A few examples are included:

"I see meaning because the course that I'm doing deals with people and it will makes me realise my weak points or my strong points".

"I took this course because I like working with people and I'll be learning more from them. It's not because of money or anything but just because ill like working with people".

"I think the service I will be providing, because it is important. I'm not learning... (Pause) I'm not in this institution to become arrogant after

finishing. I'm here to learn and observe and then with my experience I must plant it in the community and for the people".

Notably, this was the only of the five sets of circumstances discussed in this section that was reflected upon only by students from the High Meaning Group.

6.3.3.3.3 *Losing Meaning*

Students were asked what detracted from the meaning in their lives. Although a large number of students said that there was nothing, some did offer information in this regard. Also, information was gleaned from the focus group sessions in this regard. Generally, life situations (challenges, losses, problems), which the students had not been able to cope with, resulted in their lives having a sense of meaninglessness. One student mentioned non-specific "wounds" caused by "difficult times" which had not healed, and which made the student's life not worth living. Another student struggled to let her dream of becoming a journalist die after having been forced to enrol for a financial course. Another could not deal with being abandoned by her mother, and having to lose her father and grandmother (presumably her caregivers). Another student had to deal with his brother's suicide and his parents' divorce, and could not come to grips with either.

One student summed it up well:

"Ja! There are factors and situations that make me think that life does not have a meaning. Because I think Life is unfair man. I don't understand why some people have to have all the things and I have to work hard for everything. It's just too hard for me".

Again here, it is notable that while not all of the students from the Low Meaning Group expressed these feelings of meaninglessness (some said that life did, have meaning for them), none of the students from the High Meaning Group grappled with these issues. Although they also had experienced setbacks, life still had meaning for them.

6.3.4 DISCUSSION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

While this research aims at investigating the role played by sense of meaning on academic performance, the researcher deemed it necessary to also gain information of the subjective experiences of respondents, with regard to the construct of meaning/purpose in life and how it impacts on their personal adjustment. From the qualitative research findings we come to realise that sense of meaning has a significant impact on personal adjustment. However, the one question remains, what differentiates those students who have scored high on the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) from those who scored low. To be able to answer this question, the subjective experiences of the two groups of respondents were explored and related to literature on meaning in life. In doing so, the similarities and differences between the two groups were witnessed.

Before exploring the meaning experiences of respondents, an analysis of their current situation was also conducted to determine whether students with high and low meaning are exposed to similar or different stressors. From the data it is evident that both groups were exposed to similar stressors. The following are some of the stressors they were exposed to.

6.3.4.1 STRESSORS

The most common stressor experienced was with family life. It has been well documented in research that a family plays an important role in the development of a child, as well as their academic performance (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). In terms of family variables respondents were exposed to the following stressors, death of a family member, divorce, parents choosing careers for children and emotionally estranged parents.

With regard to peers, the range of problems in this area was vast. Students reported that lack of contact with old friends, difficulty making new friends, and negative influence of peer group are some of the difficulties they

encountered. According to several authors (Bauer and Liang, 2003; DeBerald, Spielmans & Julka, 2004), the formation of social relationships, orientation to a new environment, and physical comfort are important aspects of a student's transition to tertiary institution that may be useful in safeguarding the individual from the harmful impact of stress.

One respondent mentioned something related to values, saying "*there are a few things that went against my beliefs, but I managed to overcome them*". Values help in the search for meaning, but they also complicate it. When one is faced with a situation where meaning has to be accomplished, values furnish the meaning. On the other hand, a conflict between two values may ultimately result in existential frustration (Das, 1998).

The transition from teenager to adult, from scholar to student is one with a dramatic increase in responsibility and concomitant self-control. Many respondents in this study found this adjustment difficult, while others had no difficulty at all. Jones, Reichard and Mokhtari (2003) indicated that because of lack of traditional academic cultural socialization, many students find it difficult to adapt to learning environments that in some way are different to the students' cultures, values, and belief systems. Increased responsibility for studies and having to deal with independence are some of the obstacles students face.

Most of the respondents reported that they had financial problems. According to Mji (2002), a large number of students in South African Universities come from families who cannot afford university education. As a result, some of these students may feel guilty about going to institutions of higher learning while their families are struggling to survive financially. Due to lack of funds, and the fact that most respondents are from outside areas, most of them are separated from families for longer periods because of expensive transport fees.

The one common stressor respondents were exposed to on the campus where the present study was conducted is lack of accommodation. As a

result respondents had to find private boarding with difficult landlords and unruly co-tenants. Research findings indicate that non-resident first-year students have higher dropout tendencies than resident students (Desjardins, Kim & Rzonca, 2002/2003).

Some of the stressors respondents were exposed to were directly related to the institution. The campus where this research was conducted is very small, with very limited academic programmes. As a result, most respondents ended up studying a second or third choice course because the university does not offer their preferred choice. Coming to a strange place and not knowing where to go was also identified as stressor. One respondent's ID number was incorrect and it created problems during registration.

Some of the respondents reported alcohol and marijuana abuse as being their stressors, with one finding it difficult to quit. Drug abuse has a detrimental effect on human life. Therefore, it was not surprising that in a study conducted by Barnes (2000), on the academic performance of drug users and nonusers; nonusers always outperformed users on achievement scores and course grades.

While both High and Low Meaning Groups were equally exposed to the above-mentioned stressors, there were two exceptions. Very interestingly, in the focus group sessions, all of the respondents in the High Meaning Group reported no difficulty in adjusting to university from high school, while all the respondents from the Low Meaning Group found it very difficult to adjust. According to Sennett et al. (2003), the process of adjustment is multidimensional, and as a result it compels students to develop useful coping strategies for adapting to a huge number of new demands, including those found in the academic, social and emotional spheres of development. Therefore, failure and/or possible discontinuation of studies normally occur in situations where students are unable to manage this transition (DeBerald, Spielmans & Julka, 2004). Secondly, all respondents who indicated that they used substances were from the Low Meaning Group.

6.3.4.2 COPING MECHANISMS

From the above information, it is evident that respondents are exposed to respective stressors, and also that no respondents are exempted from being exposed to stressors. Although all respondents have to find ways to cope with being exposed to these stressors, the sad fact is that not all do. The following are some of the ways through which respondents coped with the stressors:

- some resorted to faith
- many maintained a positive attitude
- others applied patience and perseverance
- a number of them assumed personal responsibility for a solution
- honesty with oneself was also mentioned
- counselling
- assertiveness was considered by others
- humour was also mentioned
- self-acceptance
- setting time aside for reflection, and
- on a negative note, substance abuse
- social support

Even though both groups resorted to some form of coping mechanism when exposed to stressors, the significant difference between the two groups is that some of the respondents in the Low Meaning Group made use of self-destructive mechanisms. For example, one of the students mentioned that he made use of narcotics (marijuana) to cope with situations, although its usefulness as a coping mechanism can be doubted. According to Roberts (1980) a significant inverse relationships have been found between purpose in life and drug use amongst youth. A fairly recent study conducted by Kinnier et al. (1994), on youth substance abuse and psychological health, discovered that as drug usage increase, depression, low self-esteem and meaninglessness gradually becomes more prominent.

Some of the respondents from the Low Meaning Group indicated that they found having personal time distracting because they thought of bad things from the past when they are alone or that they experienced loneliness when left to themselves. According to Roberts (1980) when meaning is not discovered, and therefore cannot be fulfilled, the “will to meaning,” which is the primary motivational force, becomes frustrated and this results in an “existential vacuum,” or sense of meaninglessness. A continuing frustration of the will to meaning can result to noögenic neurosis or, beyond that; it can lead to boredom, depression, addiction, or aggression. Many students become victims of these effects after they have failed in their attempts to find meaning in their lives.

6.3.4.3 SUPPORT SYSTEMS/ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Respondents relied on a number of support systems as they met challenges of university life. Most respondents identified their families as the most important source of support and motivation. Thus respondents found a sense of meaning in life through loving relationships with significant others. According to Cutrona et al. (1994), parental support seems to function as a buffer during stressful times, it facilitates coping. Literature also identifies families as being important in the development of sense of meaning in their children. In a more recent study by Campbell (2005), students were asked to indicate whether their primary source of insight into the meaning of life was religion, science, family and friends, the media, or none of these. The outcomes of the latter study revealed that students indicated that their greatest insight into meaning in life came from family and friends.

The present research findings also revealed that having friends at university is very important to the respondents. Those who did not have friends felt lonely. According to literature on meaning, the one way through which a person can find meaning in life is through what s/he takes from the world in terms of encounters and experiences with other human beings. The greatest of which is love: the knowing, appreciating and respecting of

others in all their uniqueness and singular worth (Giovinco, 2001; Shantall, 1997).

It was also interesting to realise that many respondents chose family figures, especially their mothers, as their role models. Family role models were chosen because of their personality traits (patient, supportive, caring, and so forth.). In a study conducted by Wycoff (1996), there was a significant relationship between emotional support received, especially from mothers (in 90% of respondents), and student's subsequent academic achievement. Few celebrity personalities were also identified as role models. Celebrity role models were chosen because of certain skills and successes. Most respondents from the High Meaning Group chose family members as role models, while most respondents from the Low Meaning Group chose celebrity personalities as their role models.

In terms of institutional support, one of the services mentioned is the availability of professional counselling. The outcome of a study conducted by Rickinson (1998), strongly suggested that counselling intervention assisted first-year students, who were at the risk of leaving in their first-term, to adjust to new social and academic demands of the university environment.

Administrative support was also mentioned, especially service from financial advisers in term of bursaries and loans, which helps to solve the most common problem of lack of finance. As a matter of fact, the availability of loans and bursaries, plus the tuition costs, was the major factor in the choice of the institution to study with. In a study conducted by Ross, Cleland & Macleod (2006) on medical students the students' perceptions of their own levels of debt rather than level of debt *per se* correlates with academic performance. They also discovered that, students who worry about money have higher debts and perform less well than their peers in degree examinations. Therefore, in the latter study there was an indirect relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance.

6.3.4.4 CREATING MEANING

After having discussed the nature of stressors the respondents were exposed to, the researcher wanted to investigate what differentiates those respondents who find meaning in their studies despite being exposed to stressors, from those who live in the same circumstances but are not able to find meaning in their lives.

Literature has revealed that sense of meaning is found through three different kinds of values; creative values (what a person gives to life), experiential values (what a person takes from life), and attitudinal values (acceptance of an unchangeable fate) (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Giovinco, 2001; Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000; Pattakos, 2004; Shantall, 1997). The results of the present study have revealed that both high and low meaning respondents expressed all three values, however some differences were noticed.

Firstly, amongst respondents who gave expression to creative values, all of those who indicated that they do not see meaning in their studies are from the Low Meaning Group. This could also mean that these respondents experienced an existential vacuum as a result of pursuing a career they do not like. Literature states that, an existential vacuum is the one phenomenon that is increasing and spreading. Frankl (1988) states that, more and more people suffer from lack of content and purpose in life, and this state of affairs is responsible for many failures in all spheres of life, including education. According to Rengito (2003) career uncertainties are one of the major causes of depression.

Secondly, almost all respondents from the Low Meaning Group indicated that the money they will make and/or status that they will gain after completing their studies are more important than the service they will provide. Literature mentions that, irrespective of their backgrounds, money should not be the only thing that drives people to careers. Approximately 30 years ago the American Council on Education executed a study on life

goals. Of the 171,509 students who participated in the study, 68.1 percent of them indicated that their highest goal was to establish a meaningful philosophy of life (Finck, 2002). More than a quarter of a century has gone by since the survey was conducted, and the pendulum has swung away from a search for a meaningful philosophy of life towards a materialistic, self-serving drive whose goal is to get the highest paying job available. Money should not be the only thing that draws people to education. It should not be considered an end in itself, but rather a means to an end (Finck, 2002). In a study conducted by Wilding and Andrews (2006), desire for money and status correlated negatively with academic achievement. This could be due to the fact that students with such motivations neglect their studies while pursuing other activities, which are also more likely to lead to the desired rewards. As a result, such students are easily distracted from their studies.

Finally, amongst those respondents who gave expression to attitudinal values, all those who struggled with these values were from the Low Meaning Group. According to Merullo (2002), students in institutions of higher learning are exposed to a number of stressors; however, irrespective of the stressors they might be faced with, students with a high sense of meaning cope much better academically and in terms of their personal adjustments. As a result, a number of poor and poorly prepared students do succeed at university and beyond, and therefore, it is inconclusive to consider economic or educational disadvantage as an acceptable reason for lack of progress and poor motivation (Merullo, 2002). At the end it is up to the students to decide what they make out of the stressors. With positive attitudes, they are likely to succeed. For them, *“success or failure is an individual matter, a mysterious blend of fate and will”* (Merullo, 2002, p.4). The results of a study conducted by Wycoff (1996) discovered that students with a positive view of their academic ability coupled with a strong sense of personal responsibility for their academic future were more likely to achieve academically.

6.3.4.5 CIRCUMSTANCES THAT GIVE MEANING

Literature mentions that there are five circumstances which strengthen meaning; self-discovery (by discovering their true selves), choices (meaning-philosophy contents that; life never stops to have choices), uniqueness (everyone is unique), responsibility (being human is being responsible), and self-transcendence (the capacity to reach beyond oneself to others) (Boeree, 2002; Fabry, 1988; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Giovinco, 2001).

Notably, of the five circumstances, self-transcendence was the only one that was reflected only by respondents from the High Meaning Group. Self-transcendence is the specifically human capacity to reach beyond yourself and act for the sake of someone you care about, or for the sake of a cause that means something to you. Self-transcendence is difficult to achieve. It is important because it encompasses all the other areas where meaning is achieved. It turns defeat into victory. Motivation to find meaning is important in this regard. To sum it up, Frankl (1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997), mentioned that, one of the main features of human existence is the capacity to rise above all conditions – in other words to transcend them.

6.3.4.6 LOSING MEANING

Besides the different values and circumstances that assist in meaning attainment, focus was also placed on factors that result to meaninglessness amongst respondents. Although a large number of respondents indicated that nothing distracted them from attaining meaning in their lives, some did offer information in this regard. Generally, life situations (exposure to stressors, losses, problems), which the respondents had not been able to cope with, resulted in their lives having a sense of meaninglessness. According to Roberts (1980), when meaning is not discovered, and therefore cannot be fulfilled, the “will to meaning”, which is the primary motivational force, becomes frustrated and this results in an “existential vacuum”, or sense of meaninglessness. A continuing frustration of the will

to meaning can result to noögenic neurosis or, beyond that; it can lead to depression, addiction, or aggression. Many students become victims of these effects after they have failed in their attempts to find meaning in their lives (Roberts, 1980). Notably, most of the respondents from the Low Meaning Group grappled with feelings of meaninglessness. One respondent made mention of “wounds” caused by “difficult times” which had not healed, and which made the respondent’s life not worth living.

All people have problems, carry burdens, and suffer pains, however they do not respond in the same way to these conditions. One person might break down, another might disregard them, and the third person might take them as a challenge (Fabry, 1988). Once more, while not all respondents from the Low Meaning Group expressed these feelings of meaninglessness, none of the students from High Meaning Group grappled with these issues. Although they also were exposed to stressors, life still had meaning for them. According to Fabry (1988), it is not so much the predicament, but the stand that one takes towards it, that is important.

6.4 AN INTEGRATION OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Two methods of investigation were used in this study, quantitative and qualitative. In the quantitative study information was gathered by means of questionnaires, while interviews were used in the qualitative study. The purpose of this section is to determine whether the results of the two methods of investigation complement each other or whether they contradict one another.

The results of the quantitative data revealed that sense of meaning is significantly related to academic performance. To complement this important finding, the descriptive statistics of the focus groups also revealed that, participants with the highest PIL scores, performed much better than those with the lowest PIL scores. The mean for the first-year average

percentage of High Meaning Group is 57.7%, while for those in the Low Meaning Group is 45.4%. Past and recent research studies have also alluded to the significant impact of sense of meaning on academic performance (Greenway; 2005; Nackord, 1983).

After discovering that meaning has an impact on academic performance, it became necessary to look at what makes respondents with high meaning unique. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were used to gain information of the subjective experiences of students with regard to the construct of meaning in life, and how it has an impact on personal adjustment.

The qualitative responses of participants in the semi-structured interviews support the data of the quantitative study in the following manner. In the qualitative data, a significant correlation was found between the criterion (first-year performance) and Parents as a resource (0, 24). To complement this important finding, in the qualitative responses, most respondents, with very few exceptions, indicated that their families were their most important sources of support and motivation, and the ones they wanted to please most. This finding puts emphasis on the fact that, students from loving and meaning-filled homes with parents who are positive role models influence better performance of their children throughout their lives. Literature on family variables indicates that within an education setting, parents play a multidimensional role of support; which could have a significant impact on academic performance (Bird, 2003; Cherian & Malehase, 2000; Hak-Ju, 2004; Punch, 1966). However, some research studies reported contrasting evidence (Gonzalez, Greenwood & WenHsu, 2001; Lamborn et al., 1991; Malefo, 2000; McCartin & Meyer, 1988; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002).

In the qualitative responses, participants also indicated that families provided both tangible and intangible support: They provided assistance with accommodation, assistance with finances, and assistance with administrative matters. The assistance was appreciated because it often came at great personal sacrifice. Perhaps even more important, though, is

the intangible support: moral support, comfort, training in life skills, what is right and wrong, and love and unconditional acceptance-a haven of safety. As one student put it, *"You can choose your friends but not your family"*. To show their appreciation, family members, especially mothers, were also selected as role models more than any other category.

In terms of inter-correlations, the results of the quantitative study revealed a significant correlation between parent as stressor and negative life events. This significant correlation is positive suggesting that if a person experiences problems with a parent or loses a parent, for example through death, they are more exposed to negative life events. To complement this finding, one respondent in the qualitative study indicated that his father died, and the family had to use the student's study money to pay for the funeral. Divorce also had some implications for respondents with parents refusing to continue supporting their children.

Problems in relations with friends have also been positively related to negative life events. Suggesting that if a person has problems in his/her relationship with friends he/she might be more exposed to negative life events. Findings from the qualitative study also revealed that the most common stressor respondents were exposed to, was arriving at university and suddenly being out of contact with old school friends. To make matter worse, respondents found it difficult to make new friends, as a result they felt lonely, and also felt as if they did not belong. Once more exposure to negative life events, such as making or meeting wrong friends also impacted negatively on the relationship between the respondents and their friends, because it resulted to excessive parting. Santovec (2004) reports that house parties have a negative impact on students' academic performance as a result of drinking and smoking. Studies conducted by several authors indicated that there is a relationship between substance abuse and poor academic performance (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004; Morgans, 2002; Santovec, 2004; Sullivan & Risler, 2002).

The quantitative study also revealed significant correlations between friends as resource and positive life events, which seem to suggest that when relations with friends are positive a person experiences more positive life events. Alternatively when a person experiences more positive life events they perceive their relationship with friends more positively. In the qualitative study when respondents who perceive their relationship with friends more positively were asked what made the friends good to them; they indicated that it was the fact that their friends accepted them and were on the same level.

The results of the qualitative study revealed that even though respondents in the Low and High Meaning Groups were equally exposed to stressors; high meaning students coped much better, despite being exposed to stressors. In the quantitative study, there were no significant correlations found between the stressor variables (Home and money, Parents, Friends and Negative life events) and academic performance. Literature indicates that students in institutions of higher learning are met with a number of challenges. However, irrespective of the challenges they might be faced with, students with a high sense of meaning cope much better, academically and in terms of their personal adjustments (Merullo, 2002).

The following are some of the distinct characteristics of high meaning respondents. High meaning respondents seem to be well adjusted. They harbour positive attitudes. Such attitudes make them to see meaning in their studies despite being exposed to stressors. They are able to turn defeat into victory. Their motivation to undertake activities comes from within. Their focus is more on the service they will provide after completing, rather than the money they will make. Because their lives are filled with meaning, they do not resort to drugs and other substances to find meaning. They are self-transcendent, which is the specifically human capacity to reach beyond themselves and act for the sake of someone they care about or for the sake of a course that means something to them. In Frankl's terms they have the capacity to rise above all human conditions – in other words transcend them (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997). The above-

mentioned characteristics could explain why students with high meaning achieve better results.

The following are some of the distinct characters of low meaning respondents. One responded tried to fill his existential void by abusing substances like alcohol and marijuana. When exposed to stressors they are unable to see meaning in them. For example, one respondent mentioned non-specific “wounds” caused by “difficult times” which had not healed, and which made the respondent’s life not worth living. Again, respondents with low meaning find it difficult to set aside time for reflection, because they think of bad things from the past or they experience loneliness. They are more extrinsically motivated, for example for them meaning in their studies comes from the money and prestige they will gain after completing. Because of their existential vacuum they find it difficult to adjust to new environments. The above-mentioned characteristics could explain why students with a low sense of meaning are unable to cope when they are exposed to stressors, which ultimately results to academic failure.

6.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the results of the quantitative and qualitative studies were presented. Subsequent to the presentation, the results were discussed. The measuring instruments used have shown a good internal consistency. The results of the quantitative study indicates that the sense of meaning of first-year students at the Central University of Technology, Free State (Welkom Campus) is significantly higher than the scores reported for comparative British and American samples (Schumbenberg, 2004; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), as well as those of a South African sample (Moomal, 1999).

A significant correlation was also found between purpose in life and first-year academic performance. These findings are similar to those of a study by Nackord (1983). More recently, results of a study by Greenway (2005)

reported an indirect relationship between meaning in life and academic performance.

The qualitative responses of participants in the semi-structured interviews support the data of the quantitative study, which highlighted significant differences between respondents with low meaning scores and those with high meaning scores. Judging by their responses most of the participants in the High Meaning Group seem to know their purpose of existence and as a result they also lead quality lives. Their lives are filled with both purpose and quality of existence. What is distinctive about this group is that they harbour positive attitudes, are well adjusted, face challenges, are intrinsically motivated, self-transcendent and they persevere.

With regard to the Low Meaning Group, judging by their responses, most of the respondents also seem to know and understand the whole construct of purposeful existence; however they don't seem to be leading quality lives. Intellectually they were able to substantiate on the whole construct of meaning in life, but emotionally their lives lacked what can be referred to as quality of existence. Distinctive features of this group are: negative attitudes, substance abuse, negative attitudes, extrinsic motivation, and existential vacuum.

In the next chapter the conclusion, recommendation and limitations of the current study is presented.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter a brief overview of important contributions in the literature is presented. This is followed by a summary of the main research findings as well as the recommendations for future studies. The chapter concludes with comments on the limitations of this research study.

7.2 PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE

7.2.1 FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Several factors contribute towards academic performance at university. Therefore it is important that these factors should be highlighted and addressed to ensure better throughput rates (Eilselen & Geysler, 2003). These factors can be divided into three major categories, which are personal factors, contextual factors and institutional factors. Some authors like Baker (2004), have considered cognitive factors such as intelligence, attitude, language proficiency and previous academic performance, as the strongest predictors of academic performance at university.

However, many researchers saw the need to incorporate variables other than cognitive factors in studies of individual differences in academic achievement. In the category of dispositional factors, the one factor that is incorporated, which is also the central focus of this present study, is the construct of meaning in life.

7.2.2 MEANING IN LIFE

Meaning in life is a construct that originates from the philosophical writings of Dr. Viktor Frankl (1902-1997) of Vienna, who was the originator of logotherapy, and in the efforts of many psychologists who have attempted to theorise about and define positive psychological functioning. However it is important to note that logotherapy is not only used in curing illness but, it is also used in maintaining health or wellness (Barnes, 2000; Moomal, 1999; Shek, 1992).

Several research studies have also supported the relationship between the construct of meaning and well-being (Meraviglia, 2005; Pinquart, 2002; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Despite all these findings, the one central question remains, how does one discover meaning in life? According to Frankl (1997) there are three principal values that help people to find meaning, through creative, experiential and attitudinal values.

7.2.3 MEANING AND EDUCATION

The construct of meaning in life is not only used in enhancing and maintaining well-being, but play an important role in education (Ruyter, 2002). Parents and educators play a very important role in the development of sense of meaning (Campbell, 2005; Ruyter, 2002). Education as an important socializing agent has an impact on an individual's sense of meaning; alternatively sense of meaning also has an impact on education.

Students in institutions of higher learning are exposed to many stressors, and a sense of meaning can serve as a very important resource to enable them to cope with these stressors (Chambers & Parks, 2002). At the heart of this adventure is the opportunity that universities can serve as "mentoring environments" (Chambers & Parks, 2002; Mohono-Mahlatsi & Van Tonder, 2006; Rapuleng, 2002). Failure to do so would result in meaninglessness amongst students (Frankl, 1988).

The greatest contribution of the construct of meaning in life to students is the hope it offers them (Roberts, 1980). However, very few studies have investigated the impact of sense of meaning on academic performance. Amongst those studies conducted, significant relationships were found with the construct of meaning in life and academic performance (Greenway, 2005; Nackord, 1983).

7.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

A response rate of 67% was achieved in this study. The participants consisted of one hundred and one (101) students in the Faculty of Management Sciences. Results from this study indicate that the measuring instruments provided good internally consistent measures. Except for the subscale of Physical Health (Stressor), alpha coefficients were all considerably above the 0.60 cut-off points suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) for non-cognitive constructs. The Parents (Resource) subscale of the LISRES-Y measured the highest α -value (0.891), whereas the Physical Health (Stressor) subscale of the same scale was slightly lower (0.577), and thus should be interpreted with caution. The Purpose in Life (PIL) scale reflected a high value of internal consistency (0.842).

7.3.1 LEVELS OF MEANING

The results indicate that the sense of meaning of first-year students at the Central University of Technology, Free State (Welkom Campus) is significantly higher than the scores reported for comparative British and American samples (Schumbenberg, 2004; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), as well as those of a South African sample (Moomal, 1999). Therefore the presence of a significant level of meaning amongst participants in the present study and a higher percentage of them experiencing meaning bodes well for the general adjustment of these students. Literature indicates that meaning in life is very important for the general functioning of individuals.

Studies conducted by Zika and Chamberlain (1992) as well as Meraviglia (2005) found a strong relationship between meaning in life and a number of different measures of psychological well-being (both positive and negative). South African studies conducted by Moomal (1999) and Hutchinson (2005), supported the positive association between meaning in life and with mental well-being.

7.3.2 MEANING IN LIFE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

In line with the high levels of meaning found amongst participants of the present study, a significant correlation was also found between purpose in life and first-year academic performance. This finding concurs with those of a study by Nackord (1983). More recently, a study by Greenway (2005) reported an indirect relationship between sense of meaning and academic performance. In Greenway's (2005) study academic engagement was found to be a strong predictor of success amongst university students and meaning in life contributed significantly to student's level of engagement. In the current study the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) predicted academic performance even better than the score of the Swedish scale (previous academic performance).

An explanation for the significant relationship between meaning in life and academic performance could be found in the fact that the results of the qualitative study also revealed that participants with higher Purpose in Life Test (PIL) scores used more effective coping strategies than those with low PIL scores. What is distinctive about participants with higher Purpose in Life Test (PIL) scores is that they harbour positive attitudes, seem to be well adjusted, see meaning in the service they will provide, are intrinsically motivated and that they persevere despite being exposed to stressors. An extension of these ideas is that meaning may have a stress-buffering effect (Westgate, 1996). According to Lazarus and DeLongis (1983) foundations of personal meaning influence processes of stress and coping. This suggests that the level of stress may still be the same but that an individual's

capability to deal with stress improves when there is a sense of meaningfulness related to it.

The participants with lower Purpose in Life Test (PIL) scores experienced difficulty in adjusting to the transition from high school to university. The distinctive features of this group are that their career goals seem to be more materialistic, their attitudes are negative and thought patterns seemed to be more negative, they derive motivation from extrinsic factors, and they depict feelings of inner emptiness or meaninglessness. As result they are unable to cope when exposed to stressors. This supports Frankl's view that, lack of purpose in life may be associated with boredom, hopelessness, depression, and failure (Frankl, 1988).

7.3.3 MATRIC RESULTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Previous academic performance (Grade 12 marks) also showed significant contribution to academic performance. These findings support those of several researchers overseas (Baker, 2004; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Peat, Dalziel & Grand, 2001) and South African Studies (Bokhorst, Foster & Lea, 1992; Lourens & Smit, 2003). The present study therefore does not support the views of Shochet (1986) and Smit (1997), who proposed that matric results are a poor predictor of academic performance for students from disadvantaged groups. The current study gives further support to the notion that school aggregates should not be used exclusively, but they should be used in conjunction with personal factors such as meaning in life. As a result, the findings of the present study still confirm the value of matriculation results as a good predictor of academic performance in tertiary institutions.

7.3.4 AGE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The present study did not find any significant relationship between age and academic performance, between age and sense of meaning or any other variable used in this study. Consistent with this finding a South African

study by Hutchinson (2005) did not find any significant relationships between age and sense of meaning. On the contrary, in a study by Geiger, Weinstein and Jones (2004) older students obtained higher scores on the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and subsequently they also obtained a much higher grade point average (GPA) than younger students. The reasons for such discrepancies could be attributed to the fact that participants in the present study are first-year students with a mean age of 19.38 years. Their ages ranged from 17 to 22 years which means that they fall in the category of first-year students of traditional age group and therefore one explanation of the finding is that there was not sufficient variation in the ages of participants to contribute significantly to variance in academic performance.

7.3.5 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESSORS, RESOURCES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

No significant correlations were found between the stressor variables (Home and money, Parents, Friends and Negative life events) and academic performance in the current study. There were also no significant correlations between individual stressor variables and academic performance. This contradicts the findings of Punch (1966) who found a positive relationship between academic achievement and high socio-economic status (SES). In a study conducted with medical students Ross, Cleland and Macleod (2006), found that the student's perception of their own levels of debt, rather than the debt per se correlates with academic performance. Therefore from the findings of the latter studies it is evident that financial constrains could have a direct and an indirect impact on academic performance. On the contrary, a South African study by Malefo (2000) on female students, did not find a statistically significant relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and academic performance. It might be that the homogeneity of the current sample influenced the results. Most participants were Black Africans; most came from backgrounds with high levels of social disorder and violence. This could have resulted in insufficient variation with regard to negative and positive life events, for this specific variable to make a difference.

Between the three resource variables (positive life events, friends and parents) used in this study, only one (Parents as a resource) is significantly related to academic performance. This finding puts emphasis on the advantage of a loving and meaning-filled family environment in contributing to positive outcomes in children, both in terms of their academic achievement and personal adjustment throughout their lives. Also that, parents who are more interested in their children's studies encourages them to perform better academically. Literature on family variables indicates that within an education setting, parents play a multidimensional role of support, which could have a significant impact on academic performance. For instance, some researchers have highlighted the significance of two-parent families in academic achievement (Cherian & Malehase, 2000; Hak-Ju, 2004), however others have indicated that family structure has no impact on success (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). The importance of this factor warrants more research on the nature and influence of parental relationships.

7.3.6 PARENTS' INFLUENCE ON MEANING IN LIFE

The results of the inter-correlations emphasised the following relationships between variables. Parents as resource, is not only significantly linked to academic performance, but it is also significantly linked to purpose in life. These findings seem to suggest that parents play an important role in instilling a sense of meaning in their children. They also stress the fact that children find sense of meaning through loving relationships with the significant others in their lives. Similar to this finding, a study by Shek (1987), found a positive correlation between parental treatment and psychological well-being. Interestingly, Shek's (1987) study found that, parental treatment correlated more positively with PIL scores than with any other measure of psychological well-being. Shek's (1987) study also found parenting styles to be very influential in the development of purpose in life. Therefore, in looking at the relationship between parents as resource and sense of meaning it becomes necessary that we should also explore the

qualities of parenthood that facilitates the development of a stronger psychological well-being in children.

In subsequent studies Shek (1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b), found that adolescent' perceptions of parental qualities predicted psychological well-being. Shek's studies found that positive parental qualities are associated with adolescent life satisfaction, self-esteem and purpose in life. In particular, Shek (1997, 1999a, 1999b) found that meaning as a basic motivational force within the family may influence different aspects of adolescent adjustment.

Parents also serve as a resource for students by being positive role models to them. The current study (qualitative component) found that most participants identified with their family members as their role models. According to Hak-Ju (2004) a successful parent serves as a positive role model for children. In support of this view South African studies (Jubber, 1994; Myburgh, Grobler & Niehaus, 1999) reported a significant relationship between the parents' level of education and academic performance.

Most participants in the current study also showed much appreciation of the support they received from their family members. Bird (2003) indicates that for older learners the parenting role is less about specific skills and more about motivation. Cutrona et al. (1994) mention that parental support facilitates coping, it functions as a buffer during stressful times. In support of this view, a study by Wycoff (1996) revealed a significant relationship between mothers' emotional support and subsequent academic achievement of students.

7.3.7 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESSORS AND RESOURCES

The results of the inter-correlation revealed a significant, though negative, relationship between Home and Money as a stressor and Friends as a resource, which seem to suggest that when a person is exposed to stressors related to home and money, the less positive they experience their

friends as a resource. A significant relationship between Parents as a stressor and Negative-life-events was also found. The relationship is positive, suggesting that if a person experience problems with a parent or loose a parent, for example through death, they are more exposed to more negative life events. The most common stressor most participants in the current study were exposed to is death of either a parent or sibling, sometimes leaving the participants without immediate family support. The break-up of families through divorce was another cause of distress. This resulted in situations where some parents refused to take care of the needs of some the respondents after the divorce. Family structure also came up, with some respondents indicating that their grandparents raised them, and as a result they feel emotionally estranged from their parents. As the correlation does not indicate a causal relationship it may also mean that the negative impact of frequent exposure to negative life events also impact negatively on the relationship between parents and their children.

Problems in relations with friends (stressor) have also been positively related to negative life events. Suggesting that, if a person has problems in his/her relationship with friends, he or she might be more exposed to more negative life events; or it may also mean that the negative impact of frequent exposure to negative life events also impact negatively on the relationship between individuals and their friends. With regard to peers the most common stressor the participants in the current study were exposed to was arriving at university and suddenly being out of contact with old school friends. Many found it difficult to make new friends, and felt lonely and out of place. The negative influences of peer pressure also came up, for example excessive partying.

There are also significant relationships between parents as a resource and friends as a resource as well as positive life events. All these relationships are positive, suggesting that if things are well with parents, it seem to have a positive impact on the relationship with friends and people experience more positive life events; or it might mean that people who tend to perceive their

relationships as more positive also have a tendency to perceive positive life events.

7.3.8 THE PREDICTION OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The three variables that significantly correlated with academic performance in the present study are Grade 12 marks, Purpose in life and Parents as a resource. The coefficients of all three variables are positive, indicating that the higher their first-year performance, the higher their scores in respect of Grade 12 marks, Purpose in life and their experience of Parents as a resource.

The hierarchical regression analysis was performed in order to investigate the contributions of various predictor variables to the explanation of the variance in academic performance in first-year students. The contributions made by individual predictors, (Age, PIL and Grade 12 mark) were found to explain 37.37% of the variance in first-year academic performance. It is mainly the variable Purpose in life that showed a significant contribution to the criterion. On its own it explained 14.85% of the variance in first-year academic performance. These findings concur with those in the literature; Nackord (1983) found a significant relationship between meaning orientation and scholastic achievement. More recently, results of a study by Greenway (2005) reports that, academic engagement is a strong predictor of success amongst university students and that meaning in life was significantly predictive of student's level of academic engagement.

7.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of the following limitations. The limitations of the research point to the parameters/scope of the research.

- The sample size was small and to this effect not all the stressor and resource subscales of the LISRES-Y were included.
- The research was limited only to one institution. The study might have had better face validity if it was conducted in different institutions, different campuses and different faculties.
- The population and sample of the research are first-year students in one faculty. A random sample from all first-year students could have been more valuable.
- The inclusion of more variables especially dispositional such purpose in life and other cognitive factors such as aptitude could give a greater understanding of factors that impact on academic performance.
- The sample was homogenous with regard to race, age, and factors related to the background home environment. The age-span of the sample was too narrow to assess the impact of age on academic performance, or even the impact of age on sense of meaning.
- The questionnaires were only administered in the beginning of the year; it would be interesting to know the levels of meaning of students at the end of the academic year in order to assess the development of sense of meaning during their first-year at university.

Irrespective of the above-mentioned limitations, it is envisaged that the outcomes of the research could have relevance to other universities around the country, because of the similarities in the circumstances of students in South Africa.

7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for practice:

- The findings of this research study may contribute to the development of admission criteria that will incorporate more personal variables such as meaning in life.
- In the present study meaning in life was found to be significantly related to academic performance. As a result, the findings of this study may contribute to the development of intervention programs aimed at improving the sense of meaning (the creative, experiential and especially the attitudinal values) of young people. Considering the important contribution of sense of purpose on academic performance, we should use more time and energy to promote it.
- In the present study the results indicate that students with a high sense of meaning cope much better than those with low meaning in life. The findings of this research study may contribute to the development of “peer help programmes” in which students with high purpose in life will be selected to be mentors for those who find it difficult to adjust. This will afford students who find it difficult to adjust the opportunity to adapt the coping mechanisms of those with high meaning.
- Student affairs professionals could assess all students in the beginning of their study course with the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and try to identify those with low PIL scores, to participate in programs or interventions aimed at promoting their resources or coping skills.
- The instruments used to measure variables in this study were not developed in South Africa, and thus we need a better and more reliable measure of stressors and resources that South African students experience. This would enable us to identify

and deal with stressors and resources directly related to our students.

Recommendations for future research:

- In future the current study should be replicated; larger groups of students from a greater variety of faculties should be used, to see whether one could replicate the study with larger groups.
- The present study should encourage future longitudinal studies, where researchers do not only assess purpose in life in the first-year, but also in senior classes. This will help to determine whether this finding with purpose in life is beneficial only in the first-year of study, or also in subsequent years.
- Research studies on the relationship between purpose in life and other indications of personal adjustment can also make a positive contribution to our understanding of determinants of psychological well-being. For example, different symptoms of stress and also different indicators of success like leadership, adjustment, coping and many more need to be investigated.
- The terms *meaning in life* and *purpose in life* have been used very often in the current study. These terms might sound too abstract for people who have not come across them and thus great care should be taken in elaborating them.
- A research study should be conducted on a cross-cultural level to see whether purpose in life is as important for people from advantageous groups and those from disadvantageous groups.

7.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The findings obtained in this research are a step in the right direction in trying to add knowledge in the area of factors that impact on academic

performance in institutions of higher learning. Very little research has been conducted on the impact of meaning in life on academic performance; as a result the current study adds knowledge in this field. The findings are good news to institutions of higher learning and parents, as sense of meaning was proved to be significant in ensuring success in institutions of higher learning. Parents as resource were found to play an important role in developing sense of meaning in their children. From these findings a certain intervention program could be developed which will make a significant contribution to improving the throughput level of first-year students.

Despite the doubts of some writers regarding the significance of matriculation results on university performance, the present study confirms earlier research findings, which advocates for matriculation aggregate as one of the factors predicting academic success in tertiary institutions. However the current study also confirms that matriculation scores should not be used on their own they should be used in conjunction with other factors, such as meaning in life.

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Appendix I

CONSENT FORM

I hereby give Mr Solomon Makola permission to access information to my first and second semester academic marks, for research purposes.

All information will be kept confidential and no individual will be identified in the research report.

Permission granted: YES / NO.

If YES, please put in your student number.

Student No:.....

Appendix II

BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Date:..... Gender: Male: / /Female: / /
2. Date of Birth:.....
3. Age:.....
4. Name of course/degree or diploma:.....'
5. Student Number:.....
6. Home Language:.....
7. Race: White/ /Asian/ /Africa/ /Other/ /please specify.....
8. Name of school attended:.....
9. City/Town where this school is:.....
10. Year in which Grade 12 was completed:.....
11. Grade 12 Subjects and symbols:

Grade 12 subjects	HG/SG	Symbol
1.....
2.....
3.....
4.....
5.....
6.....
7.....
8.....

12. Sport activities:.....
13. Leadership positions:.....

Appendix III

FOCUS GROUPS SCENARIO

“Life is difficult. It has more moments of boredom and pain than moments of joy. Yet if you are aware that life has meaning and offers you a meaning potential in every situation, you will become a yes-sayer regardless of what happens to you.

You have to learn to distinguish two contrasting circumstances: those of fate- which you cannot change- and those of freedom- which you can change. Obviously the meaning in situations you can change lies in the freedom to change them.

It is less obvious to most people that the meaning in an unchangeable situation also lies in freedom- not in the freedom to change what cannot be changed, but in the freedom to change your attitude toward the unavoidable. You can find a meaningful attitude towards something that is meaningless. The negatives is not ignored but is guided into positive channels” (Joseph Fabry, 1988, p. 7).

QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

1. What are your comments on this extract?
2. Is it true or false, that life has meaning under all circumstances and at all times; please motivate your response?
3. How did you choose this university and campus?
4. What are the types of challenges were you faced with, before you came to this campus?
5. What gives meaning to your life?
6. What detracts you from the meaning you experience?
7. Did your involvement with tertiary training add to your meaning experience?
8. Is there any meaning you gain from your studies? Please explain?

9. How important are role models in your life? Who are your role models?
10. How important is family to you?
11. How important is having time for you? What do you do with that time?
12. Looking back at your life, how do you feel about it?
13. How was the change from high school to university?
14. What are types of challenges were you faced with, when you first arrived at this campus?
15. How did you overcome them?
16. What did you learn from them?

Appendix IV

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

1. What are your comments on this extract?
2. Is it true or false, that life has meaning under all circumstances and at all times; please motivate your response?
3. How did you choose this university and campus?
4. What are the types of challenges were you faced with, before you came to this campus?
5. How did u cope with these challenges?
6. How do you feel about being a student in this university and campus?
7. What are the situations/factors that add meaning to your life?
8. What detracts you from the meaning you experience?
9. Did your involvement with tertiary training add to your meaning experience?
10. Where do you see meaning in your studies? The service you will provide? The prestige you will gain after completing? The money you will make?
11. Besides studying what other activities are you involved in? Hobbies? Volunteer work?
12. Of these activities, how many do you share with your family and how many do you share with your friends?
13. What is the nicest compliment you ever received?
14. Who are your role models? What do you admire about them? Do you have any qualities they have?
15. How much time do you spend with your family? With friends?
16. Are you satisfied with the time you spend with your family? With friends?
17. Why do people invite you to spend time with them?
18. Do you have special time for yourself? What do you do with that time?
19. Looking back at your life, how do you feel about it?
20. Are there experiences from the past (both negative and positive), which added meaning to your life?

21. Are there things that you learned from the past that can be applied to the current situation?
22. What are your strong points? Your talents?
23. What are types of challenges were you faced with, when you first arrived at this campus?
24. How did you overcome them?
25. What did you learn from them?

Appendix V

INDEX TREE

(1) Obstacles

(1 1) Obstacles and Challenges

(1 1 1) Finances

(1 1 2) Accommodation

(1 1 3) Peer influences

(1 1 4) Family problems

(1 1 5) Entrance requirements and Admission

(1 1 6) Responsibility for Studies

(1 1 7) Drug abuse

(1 1 8) Transport

(1 1 9) Value clashes

(1 2) Coping mechanisms

(1 2 1) Faith

(1 2 2) Positive attitude

(1 2 3) Patience

(1 2 4) Responsibility

(1 2 5) Honesty

(1 2 6) Counselling

(1 2 7) Avoiding negative influences

(1 2 8) Self-discipline

(1 2 9) Acceptance

(1 2 10) Humour

(1 2 11) Self-acceptance

(1 2 12) Drugs

(1 2 13) Personal time

(2) Acquiring Meaning

(2 1) Circumstances

(2 1 5) Self-discovery

(2 1 6) Choices

(2 1 7) Uniqueness

- (2 1 8) Responsibility
 - (2 1 9) Self-transcendence
- (2 2) Values
 - (2 2 1) Creative values
 - (2 2 2) Experiential values
 - (2 2 3) Attitudinal values
- (2 3) Losing meaning
- (3) Support systems
 - (3 1) Family
 - (3 2) Friends
 - (3 3) Role models
 - (3 4) Other activities
 - (3 6) Institutional support
- (5) Self-perception

Appendix VI

SWEDISH SCALE

Symbol obtained in a grade 12 subject	A	B	C	D	E	F
Higher Grade	8	7	6	5	4	3
Standard Grade	6	5	4	3	2	1