

**LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY
STUDENTS AT AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENT WORK

I, Nthabiseng Motaung, identity number 860315 0869 082 and student number 2004044372, do hereby declare that this research project submitted to the University of the Free State for the degree MAGISTER ARTIUM, is my own independent work and complies with the Code of Academic Integrity, as well as other relevant policies, procedures, rules and regulations of the University of the Free State and has not been submitted before to any institution by myself or any other person in fulfilment (or partial fulfilment) of the requirements for the attainment of any qualification.

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SIGNATURE OF STUDENT

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AC	: Abstract Conceptualization
AE	: Active Experimentation
CA	: Constructive Alignment
CE	: Concrete Experience
CTL	: Centre for Teaching and Learning
ELT	: Experiential Learning Theory
HE	: Higher Education
HEA	: Higher Education Academy
ILO	: Intended Learning Outcome
NAPT	: New Academic Tutorial Programme
NMMU	: Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
NSFAS	: National Student Financial Aid Scheme
RAG	: Receive and Give
RO	: Reflective Observation
RTP	: Residence Tutorial programme
SA	: South Africa
SAQA	: South African Qualification Authority
SOLO	: Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome
SRC	: Student Representative Council
UFS	: University of the Free State
US	: University of Stellenbosch
VAK	: Visual Auditory Kinaesthetic

ABSTRACT

Key words: first year experience, student teaching and learning, transition into university, workload

This study reports on learning challenges that first-year Psychology students experience at an institution of higher education (HE). The aim of the study was to determine and understand first-year Psychology students' learning experience of academic learning, social learning and other environmental aspects that have an influence on learning during their first-year. A qualitative research method was applied to explore students' learning experiences and perceptions of how to manage workload and challenges that students face during their first-year of study. The convenient sampling method was applied in the study. The data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire and a face-to-face interview with one Psychology lecturer. The data of the study was analysed by means of content analysis where themes developed from responses of participants.

Most first-year students are expected to become autonomous students in their learning throughout their undergraduate degree and beyond. They are exposed to various environments at the university such as the library, lecture halls which are much bigger than classes in secondary school, tutorial classes and other aspects which include teaching and learning styles, study methods, writing assignments, tests, examinations, assessments criteria and working in groups. First year students need support from lecturers, peers and other role players to assist with the transition process from secondary school to HE. The implication of the study is that during transition process, there is a huge possibility that students could drop out and even fail during the first semester. With the support from lecturers and more first year programmes students could adapt easily.

In conclusion, students experience a myriad of challenges during their first year even though challenges may not be the same. Students are not sure what to expect from the university. Social activities such residence activities or Receive and Give (RAG), lack of support from lecturers, poor time management, the transition process, financial constraints, and academic workload and lecturers feedback emerged as the factors having the greatest impact on students' learning and academic success.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENT WORK.....	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	II
LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	III
ABSTRACT.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	V
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	XI
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XII
LIST OF TABLES.....	XIII

CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY	1
1.1 ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY	1
1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIM.....	2
1.2.1 Statement of purpose.....	2
1.4 CONCEPTS CLARIFICATION.....	3
1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	3
1.5.1 Research design.....	3
1.5.2 Sampling	4
1.5.3 Data collection.....	4
1.4.4 Data analysis	4
1.6 VALUE OF THE STUDY	5
1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION.....	5
1.7 LAY-OUT OF THE STUDY	6
1.8 CONCLUSION.....	6
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
2.1 INTRODUCTION	8
2.2 THEORIES OF LEARNING	9
2.2.1 Skinner’s Operant Conditioning learning theory	9

2.2.2 Kolb’s experiential learning theory.....	9
2.2.3 Social learning theory	10
2.2.4 Cognitive learning theory	10
2.2.5 Constructivist learning theory	11
2.2.6 Behaviourist learning theory	11
2.3 STUDENTS TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO HIGHER EDUCATION	12
2.3.1 Adjustment to the higher education environment.....	12
2.3.2 Student’s withdrawal	13
2.3.3 Student retention	14
2.4 STUDENT LEARNING	16
2.4.1 Deep and surface approaches to learning.....	16
2.4.2 Learning styles	18
2.4.3 Kolb’s Experiential Learning theory	19
2.5 TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT	22
2.5.1 Teaching strategies	23
2.5.2 Assessment of student learning	24
2.5.2.1 <i>Self- assessment</i>	24
2.5.2.2 <i>Formative assessment</i>	25
2.5.2.3 <i>Summative assessment</i>	25
2.5.2.4 <i>Continuous assessment</i>	25
2.5.3 Constructive Alignment	25
2.5.4 Constructive feedback to students.....	26
2.5.5 Tutorial classes	27
2.6 FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC SUCCESS	28
2.6.1 Approach to learning.....	28
2.6.2 Students motivation	29
2.6.3 Learning environment.....	30
2.7 CHALLENGES FACING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS	30
2.7.1 Access to success.....	31
2.7.2 Financial challenges.....	32
2.7.3 Learning challenges	33
2.8 CONCLUSION.....	34
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	36
3.1 INTRODUCTION	36
3.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	36

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	37
3.3.1 Paradigm.....	38
3.4 SAMPLING METHOD AND POPULATION	39
3.5 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS.....	39
3.5.1 Questionnaire.....	40
3.5.2 Interview	40
3.5.3 Coding categorising.....	40
3.6 ROLE OF RESEARCHER	41
3.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA AND DATA VERIFICATION STRATEGIES.....	41
3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION.....	43
3.10 CONCLUSION.....	43
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF THE STUDY	45
4.1 INTRODUCTION	45
4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	45
4.2.1 Age and Gender of second year Psychology students.....	45
4.2.2 Language-related aspects	46
4.2.2.1 <i>Home language of Psychology students (Question 3)</i>	47
4.2.2.2 <i>High school language of instruction.....</i>	47
4.2.3 Students who chose Psychology as a career choice (Question 6)	48
4.2.4 Students who did not choose Psychology as a career choice (Question 6).....	49
4.3 The social and physical (Environment) experience	50
4.3.1 Physical environment (Question 7)	50
4.3.1.1 <i>Hostel experience.....</i>	50
4.3.1.2 <i>Student houses.....</i>	51
4.3.1.3 <i>Student centre.....</i>	52
4.3.1.4 <i>Lecture halls.....</i>	52
4.3.1.5 <i>Library</i>	52
4.3.1.6 <i>Other experiences of physical environments on campus</i>	53
4.3.2 Social environment (Question 8).....	53
4.3.2.1 <i>Fellow students.....</i>	54
4.3.2.2 <i>Making friends.....</i>	54
4.3.2.3 <i>Hostel activities.....</i>	55
4.3.2.4 <i>Students experiences of RAG.....</i>	55
4.3.2.5 <i>Other responses by first-year students.....</i>	56
4.3.2.6 <i>Social influence on student learning.....</i>	56

4.3.3 Expectations of first-year students	57
4.3.3.1 <i>Students' expectations of their first-year at university</i>	58
4.3.4 Transition from high school to university	58
4.3.5 Challenges of first-year students (Question 11)	59
4.3.5.1 <i>Transport challenges</i>	59
4.3.5.2 <i>Finances</i>	60
4.3.5.3 <i>A place to stay (accommodation)</i>	60
4.3.5.4 <i>Other challenges</i>	61
4.3.6 Overcoming challenges (Question 12)	62
4.3.6.1 <i>Transport</i>	62
4.3.6.2 <i>A place to stay</i>	62
4.3.6.3 <i>Finances</i>	62
4.3.6.4 <i>Other ways to overcome challenges</i>	62
4.4 ADJUSTING TO THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT	63
4.4.1 Academic workload	63
4.4.2 Learning	64
4.4.3 Assignments, tests and examinations	64
4.4.4 Attending classes	65
4.4.5 The lecturers	66
4.4.6 Academic challenges	66
4.4.6.1 <i>Factors that contributed to academics success of first-year Psychology students</i>	67
4.4.7 Support from lecturers (Question 15)	68
4.4.8 Students working on their own (Question 16)	69
4.4.9 Students' working in a group (Question 17)	70
4.4.10 Study methods	70
4.4.10.1 <i>Summaries</i>	71
4.4.10.2 <i>Tables</i>	71
4.4.10.3 <i>Mind maps</i>	71
4.4.10.4 <i>Memorising from the text</i>	71
4.4.10.5 Other study methods	71
4.4.11 Time spent on learning outside of class time (Question 19)	72
4.4.12 Place of study (Question 20)	73
4.4.13 Lecturers' feedback on assignments and tests (Question 21)	74
4.4.13.1 <i>Understanding of the feedback provided from lecturers on assignments and</i>	74

<i>tests</i>	74
4.4.14. Feedback from lecturers on assignments and tests assisted/ did not	75
assist students to improve academically (Question 22)	75
4.4.15. Understanding the lecturer in class (Question 23)	76
4.4.16. Coping with the amount of assignments (Question 24)	76
4.4.17 Teaching and learning methods	77
4.4.17.1 <i>Watching videos in class</i>	78
4.4.17.2 <i>Listening to the lecturers</i>	78
4.4.17.3 <i>Did practical task in class</i>	78
4.4.17.4 <i>Note taking</i>	79
4.4.17.5 <i>Other responses to teaching and learning methods</i>	79
4.4.18 Deep or surface approach to learning	80
4.4.18.1 <i>Memorisation of task (Question 26)</i>	80
4.4.18.2 <i>Students learn just enough to pass tests (Question 27)</i>	81
4.4.18.3 <i>Applying knowledge meaningfully (Question 28)</i>	82
4.4.19 The UFS offers tuition in both Afrikaans and English	83
4.4.19.1 Language of tuition (Question 29)	83
4.4.20 Consultation with lecturers	84
4.4.20.1 <i>Appointments with lecturers (Question 30)</i>	84
4.4.21 Academic assistance from lecturers, peers and other forms of students	85
succeed academically	85
4.4.21.1 <i>Seeking academic help from lecturers (Question 31)</i>	85
4.4.22.2 <i>Seeking academic help from peers (Question 32)</i>	86
4.4.22.3 <i>Other assistance to help students to succeed academically (Question 33)</i>	86
4.4.22.4 <i>Tutorial classes (Question 34)</i>	87
4.4.22.5 <i>Making use of study plan (Question 35)</i>	87
4.4.23 Motivation to succeed academically (Question 37)	88
4.4.24 Student repeating their first-year (Question 38)	88
4.4.25 How first-year students can be assisted to succeed academically	91
(Question 44)	91
4.4.26 Psychology student's best experience during their first-year of study	92
(Question 45)	92
4.4.27 Psychology student's worst experience during their first-year of study	92
(Question 46)	92
4.5 SUMMARY OF RESULTS	93

4.6 CONCLUSION	97
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	99
5.1 INTRODUCTION	99
5.2. PURPOSE STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	100
5.3 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY	101
5.3.1 What are the learning challenges that first-year Psychology students	101
experience at an institution of HE	101
5.3.1.1 <i>Transition</i>	101
5.3.1.2 <i>Financial challenges</i>	103
5.3.1.3 <i>Transport challenges</i>	103
5.3.1.4 <i>Place of residence</i>	104
5.3.1.5 <i>Student learning experience</i>	104
5.3.1.6 <i>Teaching and learning</i>	106
5.3.2 What factors contribute to first-year Psychology students not succeeding...	110
academically?	110
5.3.3 Strategies to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning	111
challenges	111
5.3.4 Implications of the research findings of the study	114
5.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	115
5.5 POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH	116
5.6 CONCLUSION	117
LIST OF REFERENCES	118
APPENDIX 1: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT	130
APPENDIX 2: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY AT UFS	132
APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONNAIRE OF FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGYSTUDENT'S	
LEARNING EXPERIENCE	133
APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY	
LECTURER	154
APPENDIX 5: ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPLICATION	156

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letter of informed consent.....	130
Appendix 2: Permission to conduct research at the University of the Free State	132
Appendix 3: Questionnaire of first-year Psychology student’s Learning experience.....	133
Appendix 4: Interview questions for first-year Psychology lecturer.....	154
Appendix 5: Ethical clearance application.....	156

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle.....	20
Figure 4.1: Age of Psychology students who participated in the study.....	46
Figure 4.2: Home language of Psychology students.....	48

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 High school language of instruction of Psychology students.....	48
Table 4.2 Students experience of their physical environment at the University of the Free State.....	50
Table 4.3 Responses of students on how much they spent per week.....	72
Table 4.4 Reasons of students repeating their first year.....	89
Table 4.5 Responses of students who struggled with Psychology.....	89
Table 4.6 Responses of students who struggled with other modules.....	89
Table 4.7 Responses of students who did not understand the content of the module.....	90
Table 4.8 Responses of students to factors which contributed to their first year.....	90

CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

Enrolling at a university for the first time is often exciting and challenging for most students. Transition can also be a challenge for first-year students (Leibowitz, Van der Merwe and Van Schalkwyk, 2009; Lowe and Cook, 2003:53; Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordström, 2009:158). This immediate change of Higher Education (HE) makes first year students to acknowledge their personal responsibility of both academic and social life, moving from a controlled environment of high school and family (Lowe and Cook, 2003:5.3). Therefore, transition is very important to students' academic achievement, learning environment and personal life because it is the introduction process (Hultberg, Plosa, Hendryb, and Kjellgrena, 2008:48).

Students' perception of coming to the university is that they assume that it will be an exciting social life and a reasonable demand of academic work. Another perception is that students think that their learning experience in high school would not be different from that of university level including the learning styles and approaches. One of the reasons for students to enter HE is freedom and running away from house chores (Lowe and Cook, 2003:58-59). Students' expectations of HE are influenced by the way in which they are prepared in high school (Lowe and Cook, 2003:53). Hultberg *et al.* (2008:47) add that the way students are introduced to HE influences their academic life.

Most first-year students who enrol at an institution of HE are underprepared and struggle to become independent learners and independent thinkers (Groves, Bowd and Smith, 2010; Johnston, 2010). Students in their first-year are expected to adjust to a social and academic environment which involves, among others, being exposed to various teaching styles, which may not always be compatible with their particular learning styles. The environment, unmet expectations and financial pressure are some factors that can have an influence on the retention of first-year students (Heaton-Shrestha, May and Burke, 2009:83). The result of not performing well and dropping out is shown to be due to an unpleasant transition to new academia and the social demands of university life. A lack of success among first-year students is

mostly caused by drop-out (Lowe and Cook, 2003:53). Therefore, participating in HE involves a series of successive decisions first-year students have to make, the environment they have adjust to, and teaching and learning styles they need to adopt.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIM

First-year students encounter many challenges such as academic work load, finances, personal problems, a lack of contact with academic staff and they also find it difficult to summarise notes for themselves. These challenges may adversely affect their academic success (Rowley, Hartley and Larkin, 2008:400). Lowe and Cook (2003:66) found that one third of students showed that they have difficulties in coping with the academic work load and others with self-directed study. Students have to familiarise themselves with classes from small to big and different classroom arrangements.

Most first-year students do not know which method they should use to study. The study skills and learning strategies that students learned in high school are not applicable for the independent style of learning in HE. The academic staff thinks that students will adapt to teaching styles, study skills such as note-taking and time management during the course of the year (Lowe and Cook, 2003:54). First-year students' need support to achieve and improve on their study methods. Thus teaching/facilitation methods of lecturers will also play a big role assisting students to succeed academically.

1.2.1 Statement of purpose

The aim of this study was to identify the learning challenges that Psychology students experience during their first-year of study at the University of the Free State (UFS). The above raises the following research questions:

- What are the learning challenges that first-year Psychology students experience at institutions of HE?

- What factors contribute to first-year Psychology students not succeeding academically at the UFS?
- What strategies can the UFS implement to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning challenges?

1.3 DEMARCATION OF THE RESEARCH

The study falls within the field of HE because of it focuses on student experience, teaching and learning. Both themes are currently applied within the field of HE research. The first-year students were identified at UFS during tutorial classes (Tight, 2012:9).

1.4 CONCEPTS CLARIFICATION

Learning can be defined as a way in which students acquire knowledge through studying and can be motivating, rewarding and exciting (Byrne, Flood and Willis, 2002:28; Thompson and Thornton, 2002:792).

First-year refers to “first-year of study of an undergraduate or postgraduate student in a higher education institution” (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006:1).

1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research and methodology of the study was focused on theoretical framework of the literature, the assumption regarding learning experience of first-year students. The paradigm from which the researcher selected was mainly used to understand the students learning experience and the perspective from the lecturer through conducting interview. The methods used in the study are the means used gathering and analysing data.

1.5.1 Research design

A qualitative research approach was applied in this study supported by quantitative research study. It is an exploratory-descriptive research design where perceptions of

first-year Psychology students regarding their learning experiences were obtained. The target population for the study was second year students who are enrolled in a Psychology course at the UFS. The purpose of selecting second year Psychology students is to share their experiences during their first year of study. An interpretivist paradigm for this study was used, where students' views and interpretations were obtained.

1.5.2 Sampling

Participants were selected by means of convenience sampling which is a non-probability sampling method. This is a convenient method for exploratory research (Maree and Pietersen, 2007:177). The sample consisted of 59 Psychology students. One first-year Psychology lecturer was interviewed to obtain their perceptions based on challenges that may affect the learning experience of first-year Psychology students.

1.5.3 Data collection

Data for the study was collected through an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix 3) and face-to-face interview (see appendix 4) with one lecturer where digital voice recorders was used in order to gain students' personal learning experiences, learning challenges and problems they faced during their first-year of study. All participants were requested to supply biographical information for a demographic basis. The participants received an informed letter of consent (see Appendix 1) to sign, explaining the purpose of the study and the rights of the respondents. The aim of the face-to-face interview with the lecturer (see appendix 4), was to gain insight into the perception on learning experiences of first-year students.

1.5.4 Data analysis

The data analysis was done by means of content analysis, where themes that develop from the discussions and interviews took precedence. Content analysis is used to analyse interviews, focus group and open-ended questions on surveys and recapitulate message content (Nieuwenhuis, 2007b:101). Information from the demographics was displayed graphically using descriptive statistics. Descriptive

statistics are used to organise, summarise and describe collected data in a significant way either numerically or graphically (Salkind, 2008:8; Pietersen and Maree, 2007:11).

1.6 VALUE OF THE STUDY

The results of the study provided an insight into the challenges that affect or contribute to first-year Psychology students' success and learning challenges at an institution of HE. The researcher was interested to know what learning experiences students had during their first-year and how they managed their personal problems, pressure, demands of academic work and overcame their learning challenges. This study will also assist lecturers with information on learning experiences of first-year Psychology students which will provide them with valuable insight into how they can *inter alia* adapt their teaching methods to assist students to adopt a deep approach to learning.

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the head of the Psychology department (see Appendix 2). Alder and Clark (2003:41) define ethics as principles that are used to determine applicable and acceptable social conduct. Similarly, Strydom and Venter (2002:62) state that ethics are normal standards that are set by individuals or groups and offer acknowledged rules to be followed. The informed consent (see Appendix 1) of participants to take part in research was obtained beforehand (Dale, 2004:n.p.). The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any time. Participation was voluntary and there was no financial compensation for participation. The identity of individuals from whom information obtained in the study was kept strictly confidential and the study offered anonymity.

1.7 LAY-OUT OF THE STUDY

The lay-out of the study is as follows:

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and background to the learning experience of first-year Psychology students. Important factors affecting students learning experience will be adequately discussed. Furthermore, issues such as the transition, student's expectations, underprepared and finances will also be deliberated.

Chapter 2 will provide a literature study of learning experience of first-year students. An exploration of other factors that contribute to students not succeeding academically, adjustment, teaching and learning styles and approaches that students adopt and theories of learning will be discussed.

In Chapter 3, the research methodology, design and analysis used will be discussed in depth including ethical considerations of the study.

In Chapter 4 the results of the study will be presented in accordance with the questionnaire and responses from interview questions will also be discussed.

In chapter 5 a summary, conclusions and implications of the study will be provided and discussed. The limitations and future research will also be discussed.

1.8 CONCLUSION

First-year experience of Psychology students is extremely vital for HE as it has become a field of study and research. First-year students go through many complications which seriously affect their career choices, learning experience and academic success. These students need to be fully prepared for HE so that they can be independent learners. They are mostly affected by unexpected as well as expected problems of everyday life. It is very important to understand the learning experiences and challenges they come across during their first year of study.

The study applied qualitative research method and supported by quantitative research method. The purposeful convenience sampling was used to select participants to conduct research. Data was collected through an interview from one

first year Psychology lecturer and open-ended questionnaires from Psychology students. The data collected was analysed by means of themes that developed from responses of participants. Ethical protocol was followed strictly during the course of this study to ensure reliability and validity. It was important to notify participants of the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality/anonymity of their identity and their rights to participate. Participants completed an informed letter of consent (see Appendix 1) which explained that all the information obtained in the study was kept strictly confidential and their identity was anonymous.

The next chapter will focus on the theoretical framework of the study which will cover theories of learning, transition into HE, students teaching and learning. This chapter will also look at the factors affecting students' academic success.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 2 the orientation and background of the study were discussed. This chapter reports on literature study based on learning experience of first-year students. A university is an institution of HE which offers a place for students' future academic success, sharpens students' minds, equips them with the necessary knowledge, skills and competences for lifelong learning. It also grants students' academic degrees in order to prepare them for their different communal activities (Vawda, 2005:1-2). Most first-year students who enrol at an institution of HE are underprepared and struggle to become independent learners and independent thinkers (Groves *et al.* 2010; Brinkworth *et al.* 2009:158; Johnston, 2010). These students further experience problems such as a lack of contact with academic staff, the capacity to handle workload and feelings of isolation and they become excessively stressed about almost relating to their first-year experiences (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh and Wilss, 2008:109; Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001:186; De Beer, 2006:32; Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011:226).

According to Rowley *et al.* (2008:400) students experience failure, success, adjustment to the university and inability to complete their studies. Hultberg *et al.* (2008:49) and Fisher *et al.* (2011:226) are in agreement that factors that have an impact on the learning experiences of first-year students are the ability to cope with the academic work load, the appearance of the learning environment, ability to receive financial advice, having stability between social and personal life, independence, accessibility of learning facilities, different assessment techniques, perceptions of university life and views of society and students. Hultberg *et al.* (2008:48) further indicate factors that have an influence on the dropout rate of students are debt (financial problems), lecturers' lack of teaching skills and inability to cope with academic workload. Rowley *et al.* (2008:400) state that students slowly familiarise themselves with existing study skills which in turn makes it difficult for their transition to a new environment. In addition, the learning experience of all first-

year students may not be the same and theories of learning will explain how students learn.

2.2 THEORIES OF LEARNING

Learning is a process of acquiring knowledge through studying (Byrne *et al.* 2002:28). Learning also changes student behaviour which may results from maturity (Costa, 2009:3). The following theories of learning are selected for the reason that they are applied in teaching and learning, they demonstrate how students learn new behaviour, construct own meaning to accommodate new learning experience and how students understand the process of learning.

2.2.1 Skinner's Operant Conditioning learning theory

According to Skinner's operant conditioning theory (in Sigelman and Rider 2006:34) learning is the gaining of new knowledge, conceptual change through intellectual or critical thinking; this includes methods of study or learning, student perceptions, learning styles and approaches. Byrne *et al.* (2002:28) and Thompson and Thornton (2002:792) reiterate that learning can be defined as a way in which students acquire knowledge through studying that can be motivating, rewarding, exciting and which can also be of assistance to students depending on how they learn.

2.2.2 Kolb's experiential learning theory

Kolb and Kolb (2005:195) state that the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) defines learning as a process "whereby knowledge is gained through the experience of transformation". They further add that the outcome of knowledge is within the blending of the experience of transformation and grasping. Similarly, Lord and Robertson (2006:42) define learning as "primarily an instrumental, quantitative process, which just happens, or is 'done' to you by teachers".

The ELT constructs learning through the students' preposition that learning has been considered as a process of creating knowledge, adjusting to the new environment, a transition between a person and environment. Learning can be facilitated by lecturers to make smooth progress by exploiting students' ideas on the subject

matter so that they can be integrated with new skills and ideas. Vawda (2005:14) as well as Kolb and Kolb (2005:194) explain that the learning process is driven by the conflict, differences and disagreements that people have. In addition, through understanding the learning process, this allows lecturers to improve their teaching styles to develop the students' capacity to learn. As a result learning happens everywhere not only in class; it does not have to be as structured, people learn from experiences whether good or bad; what matters is that learning takes place.

2.2.3 Social learning theory

According to the social learning theory perspectives of Bandura (in Sigelman and Rider 2006:36 and Bandura, 1971:3-4) people learn from imitating or observing, direct experience and interacting with people to perform. These imitators should be provided with a desired example which will motivate them to act; behaviour should be reinforced positively and copy the same responses of behaviour for learning to take place. Bandura further states that people also learn through the influence of modelling by rewarding and punishing consequences. The behaviour that most people display is either deliberately or unintentionally learned by means of an example (Bandura, 1971:5). Kolb and Kolb (2005:194) are of the opinion that learning entails the individuals' process of thinking, perceiving, behaving and feeling. Thus it involves the individual's emotions in the process of learning and progress to change behaviour.

2.2.4 Cognitive learning theory

The cognitive learning theory agrees that learning involves a change in behaviour and understanding of a learner. The way that learners think, reflect, remember, know and perceive knowledge influences learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2005:194). Piaget (in Costa, 2009:9) proposed two cognitive stages which are based on receiving information; assimilation and accommodation. With assimilation, students are capable of getting information from the environment without changing it- as opposed to accommodation, where students are required to develop new behaviour to accommodate new information. This cognitive learning theory denotes achieving learning (Costa, 2009:9).

2.2.5 Constructivist learning theory

Piaget's constructivist learning theory (in Sigelman and Rider 2006:39) and Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Dochy (2010:245) state that learners reflect and build new coherent knowledge from previous experiences to structure new meaning. The fundamental aspects of learning are based on students' experience and implementation of assessment, that they receive feedback in the form of reports of success in a specific subject. Moreover, Vygotsky's (1978) (in Costa, 2009:7) theory of social development plays a major role in students' learning because students construct knowledge from the feedback that they receive from the lecturer. This social development theory focuses on action and interaction that people share based on their past experiences (Costa, 2009:7).

2.2.6 Behaviourists learning theory

Behaviourists view learning as an aspect of conditioning that constitutes two conditioning principles; classical and behavioural or operant. The principle of classical conditioning of Watson (1913) (in Sigelman and Rider 2006:34) refers to an individual's reflex learning which responds to stimulus. Through learning, students respond positively when they are encouraged and motivated. Through classical conditioning emotions and attitude are learned. The principle of operant conditioning of Skinner (1905-1990) (in Sigelman and Rider 2006:33-34), states that students learn new behaviour, skills and habit whether good or bad as a result of lecturers' behaviour. Through this operant conditioning students tend to repeat behaviour which produces positive or good results. Some students benefit from repetition of academic work. Students who receive positive reinforcement (feedback) from lecturers, which strengthens behaviour, become motivated and tend to perform better.

Based on the above mentioned theories, the capabilities of learning are merely controlled by student and a teacher. The background experience of students influences the interests of sharing information and learning new one. Kolb's experiential learning theory and skinner operant conditioning learning theory

demonstrates how students gain new knowledge through intellectual methods of studying and learning. The constructivist, cognitive and social learning theories are complementing the behaviorist learning theory in the sense that they allow students to construct their own understanding to build/learn new behavior which in turn influences their learning. All the above theories denote the psychological aspects such as student's motivation and emotions. The next section will provide students learning experience regarding transition into HE.

2.3 STUDENTS' TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Transitions from secondary school to HE are stressful events for first-year students. Johnston (2010:4) describes transition as "a double-sided concept" which consists of the university programmes that support first-year students and the adjustment of students' experience enrolling in HE. Most first-year students experience difficulty in managing autonomy, academic choice to be made, an unknown academic environment, leaving their loved ones behind, forming relationships, feelings of isolation, confusion, feeling lost and scared at the same time (Fisher *et al.* 2011:227; Mazzoni and Iannone, 2014:303; Wilson-Strydom, 2015:85). Wilson-Strydom (2015:56) adds that part of students becoming confused and fearful and leaving their family behind has a lot to do with learning to become an autonomous student. Support from lecturers or academic staff members are crucial aids for students during this transition phase (Fisher *et al.* 2011:227).

During the transition phase, students experience difficulties adjusting to the higher/post-school environment for reasons that will be discussed in sections 2.3.1 to 2.3.3.

2.3.1 Adjustment to the higher education environment

The quality of adjustment of first-year students appears to be optimistically associated with the perceived social support from friends, family and academic staff.. Without the support from family and friends some students may have a sense of loneliness. Some students are slow to adapt and adjust to academic strictness and a completely new lifestyle. Yet, they are expected to adjust to a social and academic

environment which affects their approaches to study. Various teaching and learning styles are the ingredients of the transition from school to university (Johnston, 2010:6); Heaton-Shrestha *et al.* (2009:83). Harvey *et al.* (2006:18) advocate that first-year students need assistance in adapting to university life. If students can learn the institutional discourse, they can adjust quickly and have a sense of belonging. Students can adapt well through the support and communication with lecturers to enable successful transition while improving learning environments through student-centred learning (Fisher *et al.* 2011:225). Students' social interaction with others is not only a factor that adds to students' enjoyment but also the support they receive during their difficult times. Students who adjust better and become satisfied with their adjustment in HE appear to indicate a high emotional intelligence (Harvey *et al.* 2006:18).

Students' adjustment in HE is a problem and males and females adjust differently (Harvey *et al.* 2006:11). Brinkworth *et al.* (2009:159-168) argue that successful transition is not only because of academic aptitude but it also depends on students' accountability and a necessary skill to adjust quickly into the learning environment where students need to become independent. The first-year can be a critical year for students especially those of low socio-economic status and some of them are not strong in making the transition to HE (Petersen, Louw and Dumon, 2009:100). Enrolling at the university involves the change in student experience and includes activities, academic programmes, learning approaches, motivation, expectations and establishment of attitude (Fisher *et al.* 2011:226). Hultberg *et al.* (2008:50) assert that students' personal life and learning environment are an important part of their transition process.

2.3.2 Student's withdrawal

First-year students are at greater risk of withdrawing from university during the time of transition. Withdrawal can be an outcome of combinations of students' characteristics, institution related factors and external pressures. Issues such as homesickness and financial constraints, the culture of the university and students changing career goals are associated with student withdrawal (Rowley *et al.* 2008:399; De Beer, 2006:32). The personal change, social change, insufficient

information and orientation, cultural and community, economic development and academic changes are associated with transition issues that affect students' access to HE (Johnston, 2010:5). Burton and Rapolo (2008:Online) add other factors that are perceived to have an impact on students' transition to HE which include students' approaches to learning, self-confidence, personality, students' perceptions and attitudes towards the course.

These accumulating factors that affect students are often the reasons why they choose to withdraw from the institution (Harvey *et al.* 2006:16). It is indeed a hard time of dramatic change when students leave their loved ones behind, change of place and making new friends (Shankland, Genolini, Franca, Guelfi and Ionescu, 2009:354). Students may see withdrawal as a failure because they could not accomplish what they wanted. Each first-year student experiences situations differently and lecturers should have an understanding and awareness of students' experiences (Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001:186; Brinkworth *et al.* 2009:158). However, the main reason for students' withdrawal from university is due to their dissatisfaction with the course (Rowley *et al.* 2008:399).

To enhance the growth of independent learners and the development of underprepared students the university should make the effort to meet the expectations of students and to promote achievement, develop skills and empower students (Johnston, 2010). According to Vawda's study (2005:7) at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), the high drop-out and failure rates are regarded as one of the biggest challenges educators have to face in South Africa (S.A) and the graduation (retention) rate is also lower than in other countries (Vawda, 2005:7). Johnston, (2010:5) emphasises that institutions should be acquainted with the manner in which students experience transition and the effect that the transition has on retention, students' success and persistence.

2.3.3 Student retention

Student retention simply stated means a process that occurs over a time until a student successfully completes through persistence his/her degree at an institution of higher learning/education (Hagedorn, 2006:2; Wild and Ebbers, 2002:505-506).

Jama, Mapesela and Beylefeld (2008:994-99) identified three theories related to students' retention namely Spady's sociological theory (1970), Tinto's integration theory (1975) and Bean's psychological theory (1980). According to Spady's sociological theory, the demand of the university and expectations are influenced by students attributes such as skills, interest and attitude. Hence, the interaction between the academic environment and a student is crucial to explaining students drop-out. Spady further declares that students' family background, intellectual development, academic interest, and peer support are in relation to determining students' university environment satisfaction and commitment. Similarly, Tinto asserts that there is an existence of drop-out due to a lack of integration in the diverse social system of the university. The social and academic integration of students at the university are affected by the adjustment, isolation, difficulties, finances and external obligations. Students who stay on campus are presumed to have a power to control social integration, but there is not enough evidence that this is the case (Harvey *et al.* 2006:16). Bean's psychological theory posits that family responsibilities, finances and outside encouragements affect the retention of students and he adds coping behaviour to the theory that the ability of students to cope at an institution reflects the capacity to adjust to the university (Jama *et al.* 2008:994-998).

Tinto's revised theory of individual departure in 1993 includes three stages of students' movement from one place to the other. The first stage is separation which explains that students are being physically disconnected from their community. During the second stage, which is transition, students change environment from one to another. Transition itself is stressful and academic support can assist aiding the transition process for first-year students (Fisher *et al.* 2011:7). First-year students are at a greater risk of failure during the first and second stage. Most HE institutions have introduced orientation weeks and support programmes in relation to separation and transition challenges faced by students (Fisher *et al.* 2011:226). The third stage is incorporation where students are able to interact with other members of a new environment. Tinto reviewed this theory by putting much attention on class experience which determines the communication between a combination of social and academic integration. Tinto and Spady argue that student retention is influenced by academic capability and social skills. The institutional changes such as

curriculum, teaching and learning and students' satisfaction has an influence on student learning (Jama *et al.* 2008:996).

2.4 STUDENT LEARNING

The learning styles and methods used at university are different from secondary school; hence students find it difficult to adjust quickly in the HE learning environment. Students' disorganised study methods are shaped by their learning behaviour and an approach to learning which is not productive. If these students and their learning styles can be identified at an early stage, this could assist in enhancing their academic achievement (Vawda, 2005:3).

Students use specific learning styles that work best for them, depending on the type of work they need to study. Vawda (2005:25) defines active learning as a learner being positively, enthusiastically engaged in the process of learning, not passively engaged. The learning styles are found to be determining the students' academic performance and can be changed and adjusted by learners. Lecturers often teach according to their particular learning styles and should provide an opportunity for learners to learn. The type of teaching styles has an influence on students' learning styles and lecturers should accommodate these by applying different teaching strategies (Brown, 2003:n.p.). Students have a preferred learning style that they use to study. Gardner's multiple intelligences (1983 in Booth and O'Brien, 2008:81) explain how students prefer to use them in their learning.

2.4.1 Deep and surface approaches to learning

The learning approaches that students use in the learning of a task are essential to determine their outcome and achievement (Burton and Ropolo, 2008; Mayya, Rao and Ramnarayan, 2004:1). Hultberg *et al.* (2008:50) state that the fundamental components of students' learning approaches are learning environment, quality teaching and methods of assessments. There are three learning approaches that are mostly used by students namely, a deep learning approach, a surface learning approach and a strategic approach to learning.

Students who adopt a deep approach to learning engage with the learning task meaningfully and they focus on understanding a task for a longer period (Biggs and Tang, 2007:27; Byrne *et al.* 2002:28; Webster, Chan, Prosser and Watkins, 2009:376; Baeten *et al.* 2010:244). Lord and Robertson, (2006:43) assert that students are interested in understanding and giving detailed information in a task so as to maximise their understanding. Students generate new topics based on the knowledge gained and experience.

Students who use a surface approach to learning, learn to pass and mostly memorise factual content which permits them to pass for the purpose of meeting the course requirements; their attention is for a short term memory only (Biggs and Tang, 2007:24; Byrne *et al.* 2002:28; Gijbels and Dochy, 2006:400; Webster *et al.* 2009:376). Baeten *et al.* (2010:244) explain surface learning as the “reproduction of learning material”. Students spend little time learning a task and they do not generate new topics based on what they already know (Burton and Ropolo, 2008; Lord and Robertson, 2006:43).

Mayya *et al.* (2004:1) highlight factors that drive a surface learning approach such as poor teaching, lack of opportunity for self-management and a poor relationship between student and a lecturer. Other factors that encourage students to adopt a surface approach to learning are workload, learning activities, teaching context, social activities overweighing academic activities, assessment processes requiring and rewarding reproduction of the content, high anxiety and the relevance of the content at a deep level in relation to students' perception. Students who use a surface learning approach predict a low achievement in quality learning outcomes and are driven by fear of failure (Baeten, *et al.* 2010:244). Mayya *et al.* (2004:1); Biggs and Tang, (2011:25) and Baeten *et al.* (2010:247) state characteristics of student-centred teaching methods which are students' independence, knowledge and role of the teacher.

The aim of the students' centre teaching methods is to enforce deep learning than surface learning approach. Furthermore, lecturers can contribute to encourage student to adopt a surface approach to learning by providing inadequate time for students to complete the task, assessing independent facts such as multiple-choice

questions and covering too much work at the expense of finishing a chapter or chapters (Biggs and Tang, 2011:26).

According to Burton and Rapolo (2008) and Gijbels, Van der Watering, Dochy and Van der Bossche (2005:328) students who combine a deep approach with a surface approach to learning predict a high achievement in quality learning outcomes. The students' perception of the learning environment, the teaching method, teacher enthusiasm and commitment and level on which the information is presented certainly influence students' learning approaches (Mayya, *et al.* 2004:1). A third approach identified by Byrne *et al.* 2002:28; Gijbels, *et al.* 2005:328) is called a strategic approach (or achieving approach) where students make use of both deep and surface learning approaches. Students who use this approach are motivated and competitive, enhancing self-esteem and focus on achieving the highest marks. In both surface and deep learning approaches students apply the approach which works best for them. Biggs and Tang (2011:27) affirm that a good teaching approach such as emphasising depth of learning, assessing the structure of the course, enhancing students' knowledge, using assessment methods for intended learning outcomes and eliminating students' misconceptions about the course will encourage a deep approach to learning than only a surface approach to learning. Tight (2012:104) and Biggs and Tang (2011:27) reiterate that a deep learning approach should be encouraged in teaching and learning and lecturers should improve teaching to put emphasis on factors that enhance deep approach to learning. .

2.4.2 Learning styles

Learning styles are defined as the way in which students' approach different learning tasks (Rassool and Rawaf, 2007:36). In contrast, Ramayah, Sivanandan, Nasrijal, Letchumanan and Leong (2009:66) define learning styles as a manner in which learners acquire, store and retrieve information, socialise with peers as preferred by their personal qualities. Gardner (in Booth and O'Brien, 2008:81) identified multiple intelligences that encourage different ways in which students reflect intelligently on learning. The multiple intelligences of Gardner (1983 in Booth and O'Brien, 2008:81) are a tool that assists students to achieve learning goals efficiently and effectively. These intelligences (different learning styles) are linguistic, logical, spatial, musical,

bodily, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner, (in Booth and O'Brien, 2008:81) asserts that multiple intelligences disclose an individual's inner personal preferences in learning. These styles allow students to improve and develop their intellectual abilities, thus to enhance their learning.

Wooldridge (in Sims and Sims, n.d.) similarly identifies three learning styles (VAK) namely: Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic learning styles. Visual students learn from observing because they can recall what they have learned. Students' with auditory learning preferences learn through verbal instruction and discussion. Students with a kinaesthetic learning style learn best when they use relevant experiences to take in information and they are actively involved in a group. Students use these learning styles to learn and receive new information. For example, in grades pre-schools, teachers' present information kinaesthetically. From Grades 4 to 8, information is presented visually and lastly in college lecturers' present information in an auditory manner (Wooldridge (in Sims and Sims, n.d). Lecturers may take cognisance of students' learning styles in order to enable students to get involved regardless of their preferred learning styles (VAK, 2008:2). Kolb indicates different learning styles to understand students' learning preferences and explain it according to the experiential learning cycle.

2.4.3 Kolb's Experiential Learning theory

In Kolb's experiential learning cycle (2006) students take a decision and approach a task whether thinking, feeling or doing and observing. Kolb's model of the experiential learning cycle is as follows:

1. Concrete Experience (CE) (feeling).
2. Reflective Observation (RO) (watching)
3. Abstract Conceptualization (AC) (thinking).
4. Active Experimentation (AE) (doing)

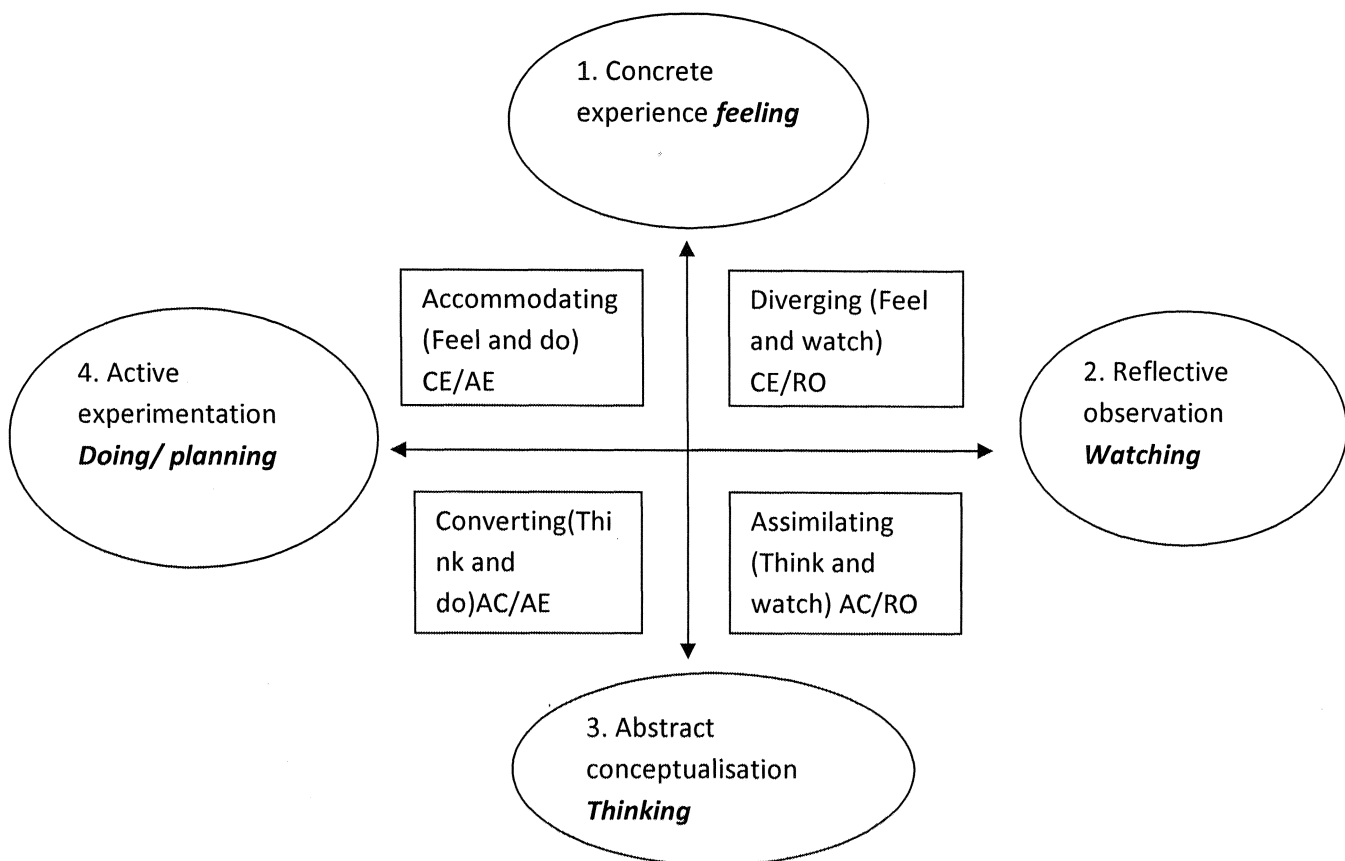


Figure 2.1 Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle demonstrated in Figure 2.1 ranges from concrete experience, to reflective observation, to abstract conceptualisation and finally to active experimentation. A diverging style (CE/RO- feel and think) is the combination of concrete experience and reflection observation of which people are open and work in teams. People have different perspectives, a variety of ideas; they watch rather than do, interact with people and are emotional. Assimilating (AC/RO- watch and think) makes for reflection observation and abstract conceptualisation, people prefer to analyse ideas, they are good at organising information and pay attention to ideas and abstract concepts. Converging (AC/AE-do and think) is made up of abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Converging is the stimulation of ideas, exploring new things, dealing with and solving problems, being interested in technical tasks, paying less attention to people, using knowledge gained to resolve issues (Kolb and Kolb, 2005:194). The above styles show that students are very different in the ways they approach learning which may lie in their strength to attend a task. Some students prefer to observe rather than action and applying ideas.

Accommodating (CE/AE- do and feel) is the combination of concrete experience and active experimentation. People love a new challenge, experimenting, become independent and liking group work to do the task. Groves *et al.* (2010:15) use four elements of Kolb's experiential learning cycle to encourage students' learning experience, applying experiential learning styles to study skills. These elements can be adopted and be used effectively and efficiently for a better development of students learning experiences. Groves *et al.* (2010:17) provided supporting evidence in their study that Kolb's cycle could work and links students life experiences with knowledge that they have gained through study skills which enable them to apply knowledge to other modules. Kolb explains how the Experiential Learning theory recognises an individual's knowledge, skills of learning and understanding of a task.

Kolb's Experiential Learning is defined as the ability to gain knowledge and acquire skills to achieve learning through observing, thinking, stimulating and participating (Vawda, 2005:24-25). Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (see 2.2.2) highlights how people's experiences play a pivotal part in their process of learning.

Experiential Learning is characterised by the following:

- People learn best from past experiences, perception and own perspectives.
- It generates a learning experience, in time and space
- It understands that learning is a process which is durable in changing behaviour , motivating and rewarding
- It respects the individual's opinion, beliefs, ideas and preferences
- It provides opportunity to gain knowledge and skills through learning experience and transformation
- It cultivates a realisation of adapting new behaviour
- It produces an awareness of effective learning through information (Vawda, 2005:25).

Based on Experiential Learning, students prefer a particular learning style according to their personality, knowledge and experience gained. It may change over time and be different from one subject to the other (Wirz, 2004:2). The discussion on Experiential Learning style demonstrated students learning processes and how

important it is that lecturers apply different teaching and learning methods and strategies to link with students' different learning styles.

2.5 TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Teaching learning and assessment in HE institutions seems to be one of the crucial pillars to enhance students' learning. Biggs and Tang (2011) in Wang, Su, Cheung, Wong and Kwong (2013:478) propose three P's as models (presage, process and product) in order to explain the teaching and learning process in the classroom. The Presage stage refers to existing personal factors such as age, ability and situational factors (for example teaching and learning environment) that affect learning. Process refers to the stage where students are actively participating during and in the teaching and learning environment. The last model, Product focuses on the learning outcome of the course, approaches to learning and changes in students' attributes. These three models influence the students' learning process which may manifest in the attainment of the required learning outcomes.

Biggs and Tang (2007:64; 2011:100) and Wang *et al.* (2013:477) explain that Intended Learning Outcome (ILO) describes the expectations of students after the teaching and learning. ILO is used at institutional level, programme level and course level as a statement of what the graduates are supposed to do and their attributes. ILO requires students to reflect, give in-depth details of the task, construct knowledge and understand the whole content of the course in teaching and learning. According to Oz-TeacherNeta (n.d); Smythe and Halonen, (2005), Bloom's revised taxonomy of cognitive levels of understanding are applied to match the need of a classroom situation by adding workable objectives and changing verbs.

The revised taxonomy is universal and easy to apply at secondary and tertiary level. Another form of intended learning mentioned by Biggs and Tang (2007) is the SOLO taxonomy (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome). The SOLO explains development of learners' performance from learning simple to difficult tasks. Learners learn through five levels namely: pre-structural, unistructural, multi-structural, rational and extended abstract (Chan, 2010:n.p.). At the first level which is the pre-structural, students have a sense of understanding the subject at word level but generally "miss the point". On the second level, students pay attention on one

aspect of the subject. On the third level, students develop a sense of understanding and are able to pay attention to more than one aspect. On the fourth level, students understand different aspects of learning such as to compare, analyse, explain, contrast and are able to put them into a coherent body of knowledge. Students understand different aspects of the subject and are able to explain, compare and analyse. Finally, on the last level, students are able to transform knowledge, reflect and generate a new topic and they also take the initiative further than what is expected (TEDI, n.d; Chan, 2010:n.p.). Learning outcomes are more likely to influence academic success and affect student's perceptions of the opportunity to learn (Abbott, Townsend, Johnston-Wilder and Reynolds, 2009:7).

2.5.1 Teaching strategies

First-year students may not understand their lecturers' teaching methods and it is possible that students fail because of different or unusual teaching methods. Lecturers may also teach according to their own learning style and not take into account that they need to adapt their teaching styles to accommodate the learning styles of all learners. According to Lord and Robertson (2006:52-53) lecturers provide information to students in a way of assisting students learning process by using media such as a projector, hand-outs or slides. These hand-outs guide students and study material provides information on guidelines for assessments and examinations. A combination of student's notes and lecturers slides or notes has a solid base to pass the course.

Brown (2003:n.p.) advises the lecturer to use different teaching styles in order to identify their teaching approaches. Lecturers can improve students' learning styles by nurturing their interpersonal element, developing students' knowledge, increasing reasoning and logical problem solving skills. In social reform, lecturers have a tendency to share dynamic ideas openly to students. These ideas relate to students' lives and using activities that are connected to everyday life. Baeten *et al.* (2010:245) add characteristics of student-centred teaching methods which are student's independence, knowledge and role of the lecturer. The aim of these teaching methods is to enforce deep learning rather than surface learning approach. Brown

(2003, n.p.) states that lecturers should assist students to develop their learning skills by understanding their learning styles.

2.5.2 Assessment of student learning

Assessment on students learning is an integral part of teaching and learning in HE and should be constructively planned (Geysler, 2004:90). Assessment of all activities of students' achievement can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning. Similarly, assessment promotes students' competences, enhances educational practice and consequently improves the direction of teaching and learning methods (Halonen, Bosack, Clay and McCarthy, 2003:196). Geysler (2004:100) emphasises that assessment can also signify the empowerment of culture and is constructively planned.

According to Geysler (2004:100) assessment refers to a new process and attitude of obtaining information about students' progress. In contrast, South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) (2001:15) defines assessment as a "structured process for gathering evidence and making judgments about an individual's performance in relation to registered national standards and qualifications". Assessment is therefore, used to obtain information for the purpose of improving learning, making alterations, thus to enhance teaching and learning in HE. Rust (2002:145) states that assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and as graduates. The purpose of students being assessed is that the educational purposes should be very clear, determined before the assessment and to monitor and evaluate students' progress and performance, to determine student's learning difficulties and to have a record of student's overall progress (Geysler, 2004:103-106).

2.5.2.1 Self- assessment

Self-assessment refers to students assessing their own performance after receiving feedback from lecturers. Students need to make sense of feedback and alter their work performance (Nicol 2009:339). The advantage of using this assessment is that it is easy for students to score and construct on their own. The disadvantage of self-

assessment is that students are unable to score or assess their abilities correctly (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett and Norman, 2010:225).

2.5.2.2 Formative assessment

Formative assessment is basically designed to assist students to explain the criteria and meaning of goals in relation to the task (Nicol, 2009:336). This assessment requires students and lecturer engagement on feedback and for student academic success. This kind of assessment assists students to go through the process of achieving goals, establishing desired standards, develop a sense of personal control and enhancing overall learning (Fisher *et al.* 2011:233; Nicol, 2009:336). Tools such as rubrics with the assessment criteria are important to use in feedback to students so that they fully understand where they did not attain or meet the outcomes. It helps to support the efforts of students learning and students are able to monitor and assess their own academic progress (Ambrose *et al.* 2010:87, 231-232).

2.5.2.3 Summative assessment

Summative assessment is used to grade student's work at the end of the programme/course. The students are graded on what they have learned or what they were supposed to have learned (Nicol 2009:336; Biggs and Tang, 2011:196).

2.5.2.4 Continuous assessment

The main source of encouraging student engagement comes from continuous assessment. Continuous assessment refers to assessing students' performance throughout the year. The continuous assessment was developed to sustain, promote and support students' engagement (Cole and Spence, 2008:512).

2.5.3 Constructive Alignment

Race, Brown and Smith (2005:12) describe Constructive Alignment (CA) as making sure that feedback, assessment and learning are in the same agreement and that

feedback links well with students' evidence demonstrating their achievement of the ILO. Informed decision making has to be made in CA regarding teaching and learning processes in order to permit students to move towards achieving learning outcomes. Biggs and Tang (2007:54-55) and Wang *et al.* (2013:477) indicate that CA can be designed to describe learning outcome in a form of learning activity for students to achieve at the end of the course, using teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks to direct students to meet the ILO. Constructive Alignment is adopted as a tool and fundamental approach in the course to improve teaching and learning. Students' learning experience can be improved to achieve the ILO. From the ILO of the module, feedback should be provided to students to improve their learning skills. However, CA is designed to enhance teacher-centred teaching to a student-centred learning approach. Courses with CA are said to encourage a deep approach to learning rather than a surface approach to learning (Wang *et al.* 2013:478).

2.5.4 Constructive feedback to students

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2004:n.p.) has developed seven principles of good feedback practice which are to encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning; provide an opportunity to close the gap between current and desired performance; encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem; facilitate the development of self-assessment in learning; provide information to teachers that can be useful to assist and shape the teaching; and deliver high-quality information to student learning.

Both the lecturer and the learner should have a common understanding and feedback should be such as comments that encourage a learner to develop skills and motivation and also foster further learning. Furthermore, it is necessary for a lecturer to take note of the learning process that is taking place (Abbott *et al.* 2009:9). Moskal, Ellis and Keon (2008:272) state that student assessment provides significant proof of the development and serves as a quality assurance on student learning. First-year students encounter many challenges that affect their learning success.

2.5.5 Tutorial classes

Lord and Robertson (2006:52-53) state that students at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, find tutorials beneficiary because they offer an opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the lecturer's class. Therefore, interactions between students who are helping one another and sharing or exchanging ideas improve their learning. During tutorial classes students discuss vague topics or themes and chapters, to go in detail or depth and also provide a greater participation. Thus tutorials assist students to gain appropriate experiential learning skills and seem to be crucial in first-year students. In addition, a tutor's assistance has a positive effect on first-year students and can influence students to have their own self study group. Tutors have a propensity to say they are helping students to become independent but students are on learning to complete the task (Rowley *et al.* 2008:410). According to literature, first-year undergraduate Psychology students did not access the support from lecturers although it was provided to them. However, students are not used to seeking it and view it as a failure (Rowley *et al.* 2008:410).

The UFS has developed programmes such as the New Academic Tutorial Programme (NATP) and the Residence Tutorial programme (RTP) (UFS, 2012). This NATP programme was introduced to the UFS in July 2007 to assist, support and encourage students' achievement (UFS, 2012). Groves *et al.* (2010:14) highlight that tutorials are developed to provide feedback and reflection on students' experiences. Students are helped by tutors who are trained to support and assist students with the content of the module and to motivate students (Ertl and Wright 2008:206; Ramsay, Jones and Barker 2006:261). Biggs and Tang (2011:28) emphasise that lecturers should encourage students to adopt a deep approach to learning and discourage a surface approach to learning.

Students enrolling in South African institutions for the first time are faced with many challenges some of which affect their academic success and may also lead to retention. In developing student's progress and achievement, factors that affect their academic success should be taken into consideration.

2.6 FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS

HE institutions should create and provide environment where it will be possible for students to learn and be successful. According to Coates in Krause and Coates (2008:495) students' engagement in their first-year is characterised by constructive teaching, active learning, collaborative/group work, students and lecturer interaction, supportive learning environment, out-of-class contact with lecturers and peers, complementary activities and active learning. Coates in Krause and Coates (2008:495) continue to say that student engagement also involves on-line engagement, active learning and collaboration, on-line teaching, social interaction with peers and contact with lecturers.

Researchers affirm that information for a first-year student especially during the transition phase is of the utmost importance to further academic success. The effective academic support of students is recognised by Stellenbosch University (US) who launched an initiative to enhance first-year students' academic performance on life skills overall academic issues or challenges. A number of challenges associated with academic success have been identified. Research was conducted to investigate possible student-centred factors that affect student academic success in Financial Accounting (Steenkamp, Baard and Frick, 2009:113-119). Among other factors that influence students' success are motivation, self-discipline, skill to apply time management, effort, approaches to studying, extroversion versus introversion, students repeating the module and teaching and learning styles. Furthermore, improper goal setting, lack of study and poor time management are associated with academic failure (Fraser and Killen, 2003:256).

2.6.1 Approach to learning

Lecturers should help students to develop their learning approaches to studying and advance their problem-solving skills and attempt to understand students' from a student's perspective. Students' have choices and motivations that drive them to their academic success despite challenges such as finances (Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley and Pearce, 2009:600). Factors that influence successful learning and development can be either positive or negative. As stated by Hultberg *et al.*

(2008:48) and Matoti (2010:138) personal problems such as finance, academic work load, lecturer's support and learning styles can be contributing factors to students learning challenges. However, lack of self-efficacy, approach to studying, lecturers teaching/approach, attitude towards the course, curricular design and motivation can also have an influence on student's academic success (Anthony, 2000:3; Hultberg *et al.* 2008:48 and Matoti, 2010:138).

Attitude is one of the factors that influence student learning, academic success and development. The manner in which students behave influences their learning in such a way that negative attitudes affect the intellectual ability of performing well and not being enthusiastic to do a task. For example, if a student has a negative attitude towards a subject or a lecturer, the student will not be motivated to attend classes or complete a task due to the value of the outcomes. He/she may also adopt a surface learning approach their learning (Anthony, 2000:4; Biggs and Tang, 2011:35). In addition, Biggs and Tang (2011:35) are of the opinion that students who adopt a surface approach to their learning are extrinsically motivated. Extrinsic motivation is linked to a surface approach because students complete the task to get a reward. Each person has a particular preferred leaning style. The maturity of the student, mental capacity and study methods that works for a student does have an impact on their learning. Boring lecturers and non-attendance also contribute towards students' failure (Anthony, 2000:4).

2.6.2 Students' motivation

Self-confidence and self-discipline are said to have an influence on students' success (Fraser and Killen, 2003:257). Self-motivation plays an important role in a student's academic success because the encouragement, effort and hard work enhance the success of accomplishing a goal and go together with the support from friends and family. Biggs and Tang (2011:36) state that students who are intrinsically motivated move towards adopting a deep approach to learning which enhances successful engagement with learning. Self-motivation is indicated by lecturers and students as the most influential factor to success (Anthony, 2000:5-7). Biggs and Tang (2011:37) emphasise that motivation is the key element to ensure that students' academic activities are meaningful.

2.6.3 Learning environment

The stimulation of the learning environment such as a classroom and the availability of quality learning resources can have an influence on learning. Biggs and Tang (2011:39) point out that through formal and informal interactions with students, lecturers can create a learning climate conducive to students learning. In addition, the emotions of students such as feelings, motivation, encouragement from lecturers, family and friends, the ability to cope or manage stress and having a balance between academic commitments and social life influence successful learning and development. The emotional support from friends or peer groups enhances academic achievement (Fraser and Killen, 2003:255-257; Wintre, Dilouya, Pancer, Pratt, Birnie-Lefcovitch, Polivy and Adams, 2011:469).

The effectiveness of a particular teaching and learning style influences academic performance. Students have different personality types which correlate with their preferred learning styles because students learn in different ways (Vawda, 2005:16). The positive and negative reinforcement influence learning either by motivating and encouraging a student to learn. Some students need encouragement and support from lecturers to succeed. Reinforcement changes a student's attitude and behaviour and builds on a better career goal which influences learning. Positive continuous assessment and lecturer's feedback steer the development of successful learning and students' expectations of academic success (Biggs and Tang, 2011:39; Fraser and Killen, 2003:257).

2.7 CHALLENGES FACING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

First-year students experience various challenges in HE. Practical challenges that first-year students have to deal with are access to a HE institution, the registration process, and difficulties in obtaining funds such as a loan or bursary, transport and a place to stay.

2.7.1 Access to success

There have been many changes and challenges in accomplishing access to HE in the past decade. The challenge faced by South African institutions is students' access and retention (Wilson-Strydom, 2015:3-4). HE has recently focused on increasing access and enhancing students' success. There are some influencing factors which affect access in HE such as pre-university preparation and social class or socio-economic context. Students from wealthier socio-economic backgrounds perform better and are less expected to drop out than students from poorer socio-economic background (Wilson-Strydom, 2015:4-5). Increasing access and students' retention, the cultural setup of the university such as open days or road shows should be in place. The course content changes the structure of institution and widens the academic entry level. The provision of an extended curriculum programme may increase access in the scene that students who did not meet the required entry points will be able to enrol at institution with additional one academic year (Lubben, Davidowitz, Buffer, Allie and Scott, 2010:352).

The US has developed a battery access test which is an English and Afrikaans academic proficiency test that is compulsory for all first year students to write (Bothma, Botha and Le Roux, 2004:74). The test is aimed at determining the competence and knowledge of first-year students and whether they are prepared to study at an institution of HE. But recently the debate around English as tuition language has also received wide attention at the US and students' activists group Open Stellenbosch protested against the use of Afrikaans because they feel that the policy neglects those who cannot understand Afrikaans and also that the interpretation services are poor. Most university stakeholders agree that English should be the main medium of tuition while extensive support must be provided for Afrikaans and isiXhosa (Business Day, 2016). The US language policy is presently under review and should be implemented in January 2017 (Stellenbosch University, n.d).

With regard to language in terms of teaching and learning at the university, the UFS is also currently in the process of reviewing the language policy together with its stakeholders. This process started in September 2015. The approved language policy (2013) allowed students to study in English and Afrikaans, where students could choose their language of preference. The institution reached a consensus of

interpreting English to Afrikaans and Afrikaans to English. Other languages such as Sesotho and sign language in teaching and learning are arranged in terms of the objectives and values of the language policy of the institution (UFS, Language Policy, 2013:3).

A new language policy was approved by the UFS during its meeting on 11 March 2016 on the QwaQwa campus where it was decided that English will be the primary language of instruction on all three campuses. It was also stated that language should not be used as a tool for social exclusion of staff and students at any of the campuses, to continue to develop Afrikaans as an academic language, to provide academic literacy especially for undergraduate students, that language should not be a barrier to access, success and opportunity, continue to develop isiZulu and Sesotho as HE languages and promoting South African Braille and sign language (News24,2016b and Online; Express, 2016:17).

2.7.2 Financial challenges

The debate around funding South African Higher Education institutions has been a challenge. The debate is simply about getting free education for students. Recently most students are demanding free education even though there are financial aid schemes such as Edu-loan to support poor students. After 1996 when National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was introduced, South African Higher education institutions significantly increased students' enrolment over that of the past two decades (Gerald, 2012:831-832). However, when students apply for a loan or bursary it is not a guaranteed that it will be granted (Salmi, 2002:9).

According to Atuahene (2007:411) a student's loan involves four major stakeholders; namely the students, parents, institution and government. Institutions of HE offer loans to assist students who come from a low socio-economic background to provide them with an opportunity for further study. Finances will constantly be a challenge to students coming from poor background families (Atuahene (2007:411). Research suggests that most first-year students with low incomes do not prepare prior enrolling in HE to pay for tuition because they think it is expensive and not affordable (Tierney and Venegas, 2009:363). The huge saga that has recently featured in the news is the student's campaign "#feesmustfall". This was because the Minister of Higher

Education said that tuition fees would increase by 6% for the 2016 academic year. Students' practically fight to get free education due to an increase of tuition fees which will affect students who are disadvantaged (News24, 2016a:Online).

This #FeesMustFall campaign is a student protest movement that started in October 2015. The campaign began at the University of Witwatersrand and spread around the country to other universities. As the protest continued, one of the Student Representative Council (SRC) members from Wits University said that 4.4 million was raised to assist students with tuition fees despite the announcement that "*no amount of fundraising can solve the higher education crisis*" (News24,2016b:Online). As the protest goes down to other institutions, the UFS students started disrupting classes, physically and verbally abusing other students and also intimidating staff members. At Witwatersrand University, the registration process was also disrupted by the #FeesMustFall protest. Thereafter, classes and examinations stopped for a while in order to resolve the #FeesMustFall issue. All three UFS campuses were closed based on the protest in response to the #FeesMustFall protest at UFS. Professor Jonathan Jansen expressed his disapproval of violence, intimidation from students but focusing on having a mutual understanding of students' demands for creating a better future for all. In doing this, he negotiated with student's leadership to resolve the issue. He further stated that the institution depended on government subsidy to assist students (News24, 2015:Online). According to the Minister of Higher Education and Training "NSFAS students will not necessarily pay upfront registration fees. It was decided that an inquiry on the accessibility of tertiary education will look into the issue of students who don't qualify for NSFAS but who still can't afford their fees" will be looked into to. Finally President Jacob Zuma announced that there would be no fee increase in the year 2016 (Mail and Guardian, 2016:Online).

2.7.3 Learning challenges

Most of the aspects such as learning environment, teaching styles can be contributing factors to learning challenges that students experience during their first-year and Rickinson and Lundholm (2008:345) asserted that learning challenges can also be difficulties that students experience during their learning activities. They

identified three student learning challenges. Students have different views of the content of the subject being studied, which means that their emotions and perceptions influence their attitude towards learning a task. Opinions of students may differ from the opinions of lecturers on the content of the subject. Some students differ in views on the content of the subject where they express their personal evaluation. Matoti (2010:138) reiterates that dissatisfaction with the academic course is one of the factors that hinders under prepared students' academic success.

2.8 CONCLUSION

Enrolling at the university is a time of great stress for some first-year students. The transition and adjustment seems to be difficult for first-year students' learning experience. Students are affected by many social issues such as financial stress and poverty, access to an institution of HE, experiencing problems during the registration process, accommodation, leaving their loved ones behind and academic environment to name a few. First-year students need assistance in adapting to university life because for them transition is a passport from high school to HE. From the perspective of a researcher transition is very important for first-year students. This is where most first-year students develop a sense of belonging.

The teaching methods of lecturers may have an influence on the way that students learn and hence it is necessary for lecturers to accommodate students' learning styles. There should be a balance between lecturers' teaching style and students' approaches to learning in order to enhance academic achievement and of achieving learning outcomes. Among first-year students some adopt a deep learning approach to fully understand the content of the module to be used for future purposes while other students apply surface learning to pass their modules. It is important to understand that students use a specific learning style to learn a specific module. Research shows that students use a specific learning approach which suits their personality or preference.

The variety of learning styles can be revealed in the different teaching approaches of lecturers. Learning is a process of change based on students' experience. The

learning theorists have explored the learning process of how students obtain information through previous experience, knowledge gained and skills acquired. Tutorial classes play a role in aiding student's academic success. Lecturers and tutors should establish better understanding of how first-year students learn and how learning practice may be enhanced. In addition, the feedback lecturers and tutors provide to students on their work will assist them to improve academically and at the process of learning takes place. The next chapter will present the research methodology, data collection as well as analysis of the study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 2 the literature review of the study was explained. This chapter reports on how the study was conducted. The focus of the study was based on the learning challenges of first-year students at an institution of HE. Students face various challenges during their first-year of study. Transitioning from high-school to university can be difficult, and students are often ill-prepared for the change (Brinkworth *et al.* 2009:158). To investigate this, first-year Psychology students were surveyed based on their learning experiences during Psychology tutorial class. Psychology lecturer was interviewed to gain diverse perspectives of students learning challenges.

The proposed research followed a qualitative approach supported by quantitative approach to explore and describe the learning experience of first year Psychology students. With regard to the research strategy, the researcher intended to present student learning experience in order to understand challenges and factors that affect their academic success. 59 participants and one lecturer responded. An open-ended questionnaire with qualitative and quantitative questions and structured interview questions were implemented.

3.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

First-year students experience many learning challenges such as study skills, managing their academic work load and other constraints such as finances, a lack of contact with academic staff and find it complex to summarise notes for themselves, which may adversely contribute to their challenges (Rowley *et al.* 2008:400; Heirdsfield *et al.* 2008:109).

The purpose of the study was to identify the learning challenges that Psychology student's experience during their first-year of study at the UFS. The above raises the following research questions:

- What are the learning challenges that first-year Psychology students' experience at institution of HE?
- What factors contribute to first-year Psychology students not succeeding academically at the University of the Free State (UFS)?
- What strategies can the UFS implement to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning challenges?

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative and quantitative research approach was applied in this study to achieve the above stated research questions. It is an exploratory-descriptive study of the perceptions of first-year Psychology students regarding their learning experiences. Data for the study was collected through an interview and open-ended questionnaire especially designed to obtain data from Psychology students and those who repeated their first-year. Qualitative research is a naturalistic methods that seeks to understand the life-worlds of participants (Niewenhuis and Smit, 2012:126; Niewenhuis, 2007:78). Quantitative research approach is a systematic process of using numerical data in which findings can be generalised (Maree and Pietersen 2007:145). The purpose of using both research approaches was to achieve the stated aims of the study and to understand the bigger picture of the research questions. All participants were requested to complete a biographical information form for establishing a demographic basis. The participants received an informed letter of consent (see Appendix 1) that explains the purpose of the study and the rights of the respondents.

The data analysis was done by means of themes that develop from the data obtained from the questionnaires and interview. Information from the biographical sheet was displayed graphically using descriptive statistics. The term Descriptive Statistics is "used to make sense of large amounts of data in a clear, manageable and understandable way". It also assists to summarise and describe information gathered (Salkind, 2008:8; Pietersen and Maree, 2007:11; Mentz and Botha, 2012:177).

3.3.1 Paradigm

An interpretivist paradigm for this study was used, where students' views and interpretations were obtained. Interpretivism is based on the gathering of the meaning of experiences of participants and the understanding of human behaviour (Jansen, 2007:21). The study aimed to gather data on students learning challenges and experiences. Paradigms address fundamental assumptions for example:

- **Ontology** - realities are constructed by student's experiences as well as the interaction between a student and a researcher. Students' learning challenges are influenced by the context of their situation and personal realities (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012:56).
- **Epistemology** - interpretivists believe that students' knowledge is subjective and lies within the student's experience are culture bound and context specific. Students' learning challenges would be taken as justifiable knowledge (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012:56).
- **Axiology** – interpretivists state that “scientific inquiry is value-bound and value-laden and the researcher reports personal values and biases related to the topic that may interfere with neutrality and thus objectivity” (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012:56).
- **Methodology** – According to interpretivists the purpose of research is to understand students' learning challenges and experiences (explore) and creating of meaning in a natural environment. To achieve this, research questions included open-ended questions, descriptive and non-directional. On this study a qualitative approach was used and designs included case study, phenomenology and biography (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012:56).

3.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING METHOD

The target population for the study was 59 second year Psychology students who were enrolled for the Psychology course. Two of the 59 students who participated in the study repeated their first-year Psychology module at the UFS. One first year Psychology lecturer was interviewed to obtain his/her perceptions based on new challenges that may affect the learning experience of first-year Psychology students and teaching/facilitation strategies that they apply during their lecturing sessions.

First-year Psychology students and those who were repeating their first-year were selected by means of purposeful convenience sampling which is a non-probability sampling method. The convenience sampling method refers to the population that can be easily selected and available (Maree and Pietersen, 2007:177). The study included both males and females. The UFS offers education in both English and Afrikaans and participants from both classes were invited. A comfortable and accessible environment was arranged for all students (including those with disabilities) who expressed an interest to participate in the study. Therefore the study anticipated offering a diverse group of participants.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the head of the Psychology department at the UFS (see Appendix 2). Participants were from second-year Psychology students' tutorial classes. During students' tutorial class in Psychology building, they were asked to complete the questionnaire.

Data for the study were collected through an open-ended and closed questionnaire with 'yes' or 'no' options (see Appendix 3). A Face-to-face interview was conducted with one lecturer where a digital voice recorder was used to gain their personal point of view on students learning challenges and other problems students face during their first-year of study (see Appendix 4). The participants received a letter of informed consent (see Appendix 1) that explained the purpose of the study and the rights of the respondents, which were attached to the biographical information sheet in the questionnaire. Content analysis is an inductive process to determine themes that emerges most frequently and dominantly from the media (Nieuwenhuis,

2007b:101). Similarly, Adler and Clark (2003:394) describe content analysis as the systematic study in a form of communication and further elaborate that this is an unobtrusive and flexible method of data collection. The data analysis was conducted by means of themes that developed or were identified from the questionnaires and interview.

3.5.1 Questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix 3) was applied in the study. The aim of the questionnaire was to gain students' personal learning challenges they experienced during their first-year of study and also those students who repeated their first-year. Open-ended and closed questions with 'yes' or 'no' options were included in the self-administered questionnaire in which students answered by themselves (Katzenellenbogen and Joubert, 2007:107).

3.5.2 Interview

According to Nieuwenhuis (2007a:87) interviews take place when the interviewer asks participants questions to gather rich data regarding their personal perspective, beliefs and views. The data from the qualitative interview provided rich data from the participant. A face-to-face interview was conducted (see Appendix 4) with one lecturer where a digital voice recorder was used. The researcher asked permission from the lecturer to record the interview and she was also requested to sign the informed consent form (see Appendix 1). The structured interview questions were prepared in a detailed form and probing was also used for clarity. As Nieuwenhuis (2007a:87) suggests, the researcher also developed the semi-structured interview questions well in advance. The purpose of the interview was to obtain perceptions from the lecturer on what he/she perceived as challenges that Psychology students experience during their learning.

3.5.3 Coding categorising

The open-ended questionnaire mostly contained questions related to first-year Psychology student's learning experiences and also those students who repeated

their first-year. The common answers from the questionnaire were selected as the categorising data. Coding is a process of identifying common answers or transcript and assigning them as a code to indicate a segment. This method makes things easier for a researcher to obtain quickly collected data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007b:105).

3.6 ROLE OF RESEARCHER

The researcher took full responsibility of administering the questionnaire and assisted with any unclear questions or problems that may arise during the completion of the questionnaire. The researcher analysed the data with the guidance of the supervisor. The data were analysed by means of content analysis and the use of coding and categorising student responses.

The face-to-face interview with the lecturer was also conducted to gather their opinions, views and experience concerning first-year Psychology student's learning experiences and challenges. The researcher observed, monitored and evaluated the interview responses and analysed by means of themes that developed from the questionnaire.

It is important for the researcher to remain objective and detached from his/her research to avoid bias. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:16) are of the opinion that the researcher should apply discipline subjectivity throughout the study.

3.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA AND DATA VERIFICATION STRATEGIES

Only the researcher and her supervisor had access to the data collected. The informed consent and biographical forms were packed away safely after the data were collected and captured. The data analysis and final report were accessible to the supervisor and internal/ external moderator involved in the evaluation of the task. Trustworthiness is the fundamental value of qualitative study and consistency and credibility of the study must be checked (Nieuwenhuis, 2007b:113). The study was ethically conducted with the permission of the head of Psychology department, students and lecturers consent. The researcher ensured that the place was safe and students were at ease and not threatened to ask any questions and assured confidentiality (Nieuwenhuis and Smit, 2012:137). In an attempt to enhance the

trustworthiness of the study the researcher applied the following criteria of trustworthiness:

- Credibility

Credibility is the “*assurance that the researcher’s conclusions stem from the data*” (Maree, 2007:299). The questionnaire of the study was assessed by the supervisor to ensure content validity. According to Babbie and Mouton (2010:277); Kawulich and Holland (2012:243) the researcher must accomplish credibility through prolonged engagement, resistant observation, peer debriefing, referential adequacy, triangulation and the findings of the study should originate from data collected. Data in this study were collected based on a literature study, questionnaires and an interview. The findings from students were compared with responses from the lecturer on challenges that first-year Psychology students experienced.

- Transferability

Transferability “*refers to the extent to which one set of findings can be applied to another context with other respondents*” (Laher and Botha, 2012:94; Babbie and Mouton, 2001:277). The researcher did not generalise the findings to the other population but only to UFS first-year Psychology students. The data collected were directed by themes which developed from the questionnaire and interview.

- Dependability

According to De Vos (2005:346), the researcher takes responsibility for changing the condition and selected design to investigate the study. The researcher took full responsibility in explaining the open-ended questionnaire thoroughly and interview questions with lecturer. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001:278) “*the inquiry auditor examines the data, interpretations, findings and recommendations*”. The researcher strived to produce accurate findings and recommendations of the study ensuring dependability and examined by external moderator.

- Confirmability

De Vos (2005:347) explains confirmability as that it “*captures the traditional concepts of objectivity*”. The researcher was not biased and captured data as it only appears from the answered questionnaire. The themes that developed from questionnaires and transcripts from interview were provided to ensure confirmability of the study (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:278; Kawulich and Holland, 2012:243). The data was processed through a formal report and results. The researcher was neutral, objective and detached as she was writing a final report.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The application for ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education at the UFS (see Appendix 5). The research was conducted in the Psychology building and participants were not exposed to any physical or environmental harm. Students were notified of the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality/anonymity of their identity and their rights to participate. Participants were requested to complete a letter of informed consent (see Appendix 1) which explained that all the information obtained in the study was kept strictly confidential and their identity anonymous.

Students who were repeating their first-year were not embarrassed because there was no breach of confidentiality. No pressure of financial compensation of any kind was used that could serve as an encouragement for respondents and participants to participate in the study. Participants were expected to interact and to participate fully during the interview. Student’s involvement took 50 minutes during their tutorial class and interviews of lecturers took approximately 45 minutes. There were not any follow-up activities and no hazards or risks that occurred during their participation in the study.

3.10 CONCLUSION

The researcher applied qualitative and qualitative research methods for the purpose of understanding and present learning experiences of Psychology first-year students. An interpretivist paradigm was also applied in the study to address challenges and how Psychology students experienced their first year. The study targeted

Psychology students to explain their learning experience during their first-year of study.

An interview with the first-year lecturer was aimed to gain more information on challenges faced by first-year Psychology students and how they can assist them to succeed academically. To conduct the study, purposeful convenience sampling was used because the participants were available during the tutorial classes and included males and females. All participants received informed letter of consent (see Appendix 1) which explained the purpose of the study and information was kept strictly confidential. Data was collected by means of open-ended questionnaire and face to face interview. To analyse data, the researcher used content analysis where themes developed from responses of participants. The study was ethically conducted with permission from Psychology department and students were not forced to participate in the study. To ensure validity and reliability, the researcher remained objective not being biased. The learning experiences of first year Psychology student was explored using the above mentioned research methodology. The next chapter will be about the discussion of the results based on the aims and objectives of the study.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3 the research design and methodology were explained. This chapter reports on the findings of the data that was collected from one interview with a lecturer and 59 questionnaires completed by Psychology students who were registered for the Psychology 232 module in April 2014 at the UFS. Only one interview was conducted and therefore the researcher integrated the results from the interview with the results from the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and no incentive was offered.

The purpose of the study was to obtain data from students on their experiences during their first-year at the UFS. The chapter aims to answer the secondary research questions namely; learning challenges that first-year Psychology students' experience at institution of HE, factors that contribute to first-year Psychology students not succeeding academically at the University of the Free State (UFS) and strategies that UFS can implement to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning challenges. The questionnaire consisted of sub-sections which included biographical information, students' personal experience and academic environment.

4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The biographical information was added to the questionnaire for the purpose of demographic basis. The following section will present the age of Psychology students who participated in the study.

4.2.1 Age and Gender of second year Psychology students

Students who completed the questionnaire were in the beginning of their second academic year and Figure 4.1 reflects the age of participants who successfully completed their first year, with two of them who repeated their first year. However, these contributed to providing data on factors that contributed to first year Psychology students not succeeding academically at UFS. The sample of

respondents comprised 51 (86.4%) females and eight (13.6%) males. The male students were under-represented in this sample.

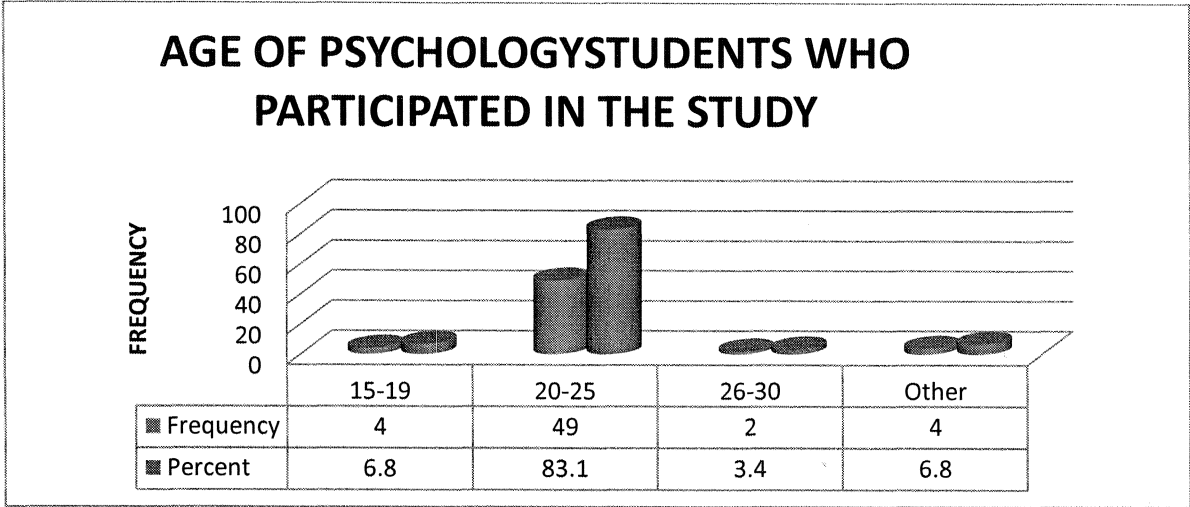


Figure 4.1: Age of Psychology students who participated in the study

The graph above shows the number of Psychology students who participated in the study according to their age. Forty-nine (83.1%) participants were between the ages of 20 and 25 years. This distribution is to be expected because on average, a Grade 12 learner is 18 years old; it appears that a number of students start university within the age of 20-25 years of age. The greater number of students is thus expected to be in this category in their second year of study.

4.2.2 Language-related aspects

The respondents were asked to respond to questions about their home language and secondary school. The language policy of UFS offers tuition in English and Afrikaans but currently is being reviewed (see 2.7.1). Figure 4.2 shows the distribution of respondents by home language. The three major language groups indicated were English 23 (39%), Sesotho 11 (18.6%) and Afrikaans nine (15%). This is likely because these are the primary languages of interaction/ communication in the Free State Province.

4.2.2.1 Home language of Psychology students (Question 3)

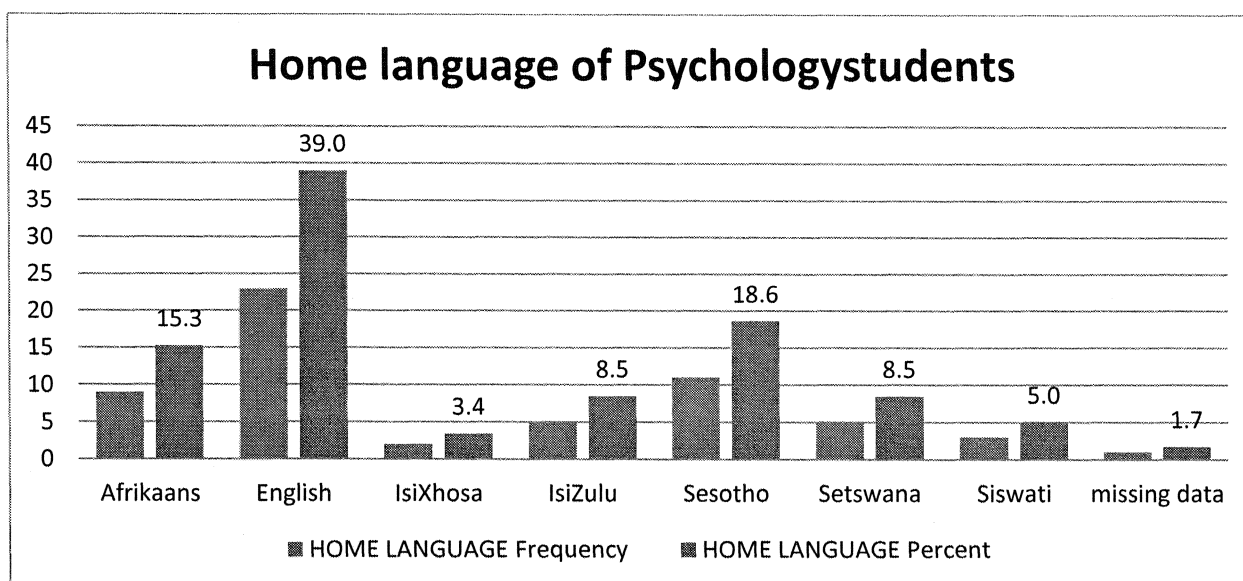


Figure 4.2: Home language of Psychology students

4.2.2.2 High school language of instruction

Table 4.1 shows that eight (13.6%) students were taught in Afrikaans at school, five (62.5%) also have Afrikaans as their home language; whereas 20 (39.2%) of the 51 students had English as a school medium of instruction also three (37.5%) indicated English as a home language. Eleven (21.6%) students who had English as a school medium of instruction have Sesotho as home language. Most of the students who completed the English questionnaire had done so in a language other than their home language, although (90%) of the respondents indicated that they understand their language of tuition (see 4.4.19.1).

Table 4.1: High School language of instruction of Psychology students

		HIGH SCHOOL LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION		Total
		Afrikaans	English	
HOMELANGUAGE	Afrikaans	5 (62.5%)	4 (7.8%)	9 (15.3%)
	English	3 (37.5%)	20 (39.2%)	23 (39%)
	IsiXhosa	0	2 (3.9%)	2 (3.4%)
	IsiZulu	0	5 (9.8%)	5 (8.4%)
	Sesotho	0	11 (21.6%)	11 (18.6%)
	Setswana	0	5 (9.8%)	5 (8.4%)
	Siswati	0	3 (5.8%)	3 (5.0%)
	Missing data	0	1 (2.0%)	1 (1.7%)
Total		8 (100%)	51 (100%)	59 (100%)

The questionnaire further includes questions with “yes/no” option followed with open-ended questions starting from Question six (6) to Question forty-six (46). Students could select or tick options from a list of options followed with a motivation of their selected choice. These questions consisted of sections and sub-section of students’ experiences as first-year Psychology students.

4.2.3 Students who chose Psychology as a career choice (Question 6)

With Question six, 32 (54.2%) respondents indicated that they have chosen Psychology as a career choice, whereas 27 (45.8%) have not chosen Psychology as a career choice but as an elective. This section will report on respondents who have chosen Psychology as a career path. Some respondents provided more than one response.

Thirty-two students (54.2%) indicated that one of the reasons why they had chosen Psychology as a career path was because they liked helping people (12 instances). Second to this was because they found it interesting (11 instances) and lastly because they liked working with people (5 instances): *"I like to work with people, more especially listening and solving their problems"*.

Some of the unique responses included the love for psycho-analysing people, interest in research psychology, passion, counselling, and critical thinking; one respondent mentioned that his/her admission points were not sufficient to get him/her into their course of choice. Some of the responses showed that a number of students may have had some background knowledge of Psychology prior to choosing it as a field of study as stated by one student: *"I want to do research about Psychology in developmental psychology"*.

4.2.4 Students who did not choose Psychology as a career choice (Question 6)

Twenty-seven (45.8%) of the students did not choose Psychology as a career choice because *"Psychology is part of the curriculum for my degree and a compulsory module for my degree. Also I intend to apply for medicine as a final career choice and Psychology plays a major role in that field"*, either because they were studying a Humanities-related course such as Social Work, Occupational Therapy and *"Education is my career choice and Psychology is an extra to enhance my teaching and understanding of children"*. Other respondents were not interested in Psychology as a field for reasons such as years of study, because they were not suited to do office work; whereas for some students it merely remained as an interest.

Other students had similar reasons such as they prefer to work in a social environment and one student stated that *"I have not chosen it as a career choice as I am interested in the rehab and sport side. Enjoy helping people look good and feel healthy"*. One of the students said he/she did not like Psychology but yet he/she is doing second year Psychology modules which could mean that Psychology was only an additional/extra module. Another student responded was he/she did not study Psychology as a career choice but chose Psychology because he/she is enrolled in Education and *" Psychology is an extra to enhance my teaching and understanding of children"*.

4.3 The social and physical (Environment) experience

Section B of the questionnaire explored students' learning experiences as first-years enrolled in the subject Psychology. Question seven inquired about their physical environment at the university and how they experienced it. Some students only discussed one of the mentioned venues such as hostel, student house, student centre, lecturer halls, and library.

4.3.1 Physical environment (Question 7)

Respondents were expected to select options from the list to explain their experience of physical environment during their first-year and then provide explanations for the options that they had selected. Table 4.2 shows the number of occurrences based on the physical experience of their environment at the university.

Table 4.2 Students experience of their physical environment at the University of the Free State

Category	Number of participants	Percentage
Hostel	16	13.6%
Student house	12	10.2%
Student centre	24	20.5%
Lecture halls	35	29.9%
Library	23	19.6%
Other	8	6.8%

In Table 4.2 respondents selected more than one option. It clearly shows that 35 (29.9%) selected lecture halls more than any of the categories. The following section will explain the responses of students' experiences of the selected options in Table 4.2.

4.3.1.1 *Hostel experience*

Sixteen students (13.6%) responded that they lived in a hostel during their first-year. Respondents reported different experiences of living in a hostel during their first-

year. These students shared a combination of negative and positive responses; hardships included *“hostel was overwhelming and I didn’t enjoy my first-year”*, not feeling welcomed, not fitting in, *“daunting”*, difficult and challenging were also some of the responses on their hostel experiences.

Some students seemed to have had negative experiences and complained about the hostels for example: *“It was hard for me to conform with rules and regulations of the hostel”*. *The rules at the hostels are very strict and do not suit all of us*. Another student indicated that *“Hostel was not good as there were a lot of race issues”*. Some experiences included positive experience, for example that it was a *“great experience”*, *were pleasantly welcomed* and that *“hostel life was challenging and had many rules but it was very welcoming and I felt at home eventually”*. Some of the respondents explained that they had adjusted well to hostel, that they have met a lot of new people and also experienced the hostels as clean.

4.3.1.2 Student houses

Twelve students (10.2%) responded that they lived at a student house during their first-year. They responded that they had good and bad experiences. Although the UFS does not have an influence on the renting or leasing of the student houses, the option of student houses was added to the questionnaire. The terminology used in the questionnaire may have influenced the students’ interpretation of the questions, for example, residences were also referred to as hostels; students also confused city residences to be denoted by the term ‘student houses’. Possible positive experiences of students included that it was good, fun, *“it was cool, women a whole lot of them”*. One student mentioned that it was a *“great student environment even though you are not on campus”* and another explained that *“they welcomed all first-year students with warm hands”*. The possible negative experiences of students who lived at student houses were not that many as one student indicated that *“I met lot of people with different characters; it was very difficult to get used to”*. Three students indicated that they did not reside in student houses but stayed at home during their first-year. Experiences of other physical facilities apart from living spaces are also discussed below.

4.3.1.3 Student centre

Twenty-four (20.5%) respondents explained how they experienced the student centre during their first-year. The respondent's experiences of the student centre varied. Some responses could be viewed as positive because they explained "*great experience, met new friends, that there was social interaction*" and another student mentioned that "*the students centre was very viby, saw many people, much food, shops, it was a very great experience and music too was good*". It appears as if others considered it more of a challenge such as being away from family and "*felt lost on island*". What cannot be overlooked here are the responses of how overwhelming, small, crowded, and expensive the Student Centre is, as well as the comment on the limitation in availability of the healthy food options.

4.3.1.4 Lecture halls

Thirty-five (29.9%) students responded on how they experienced the lecture halls. Based on the responses of students, lecture halls were viewed as interesting, intimidating; scary, weird and different from what they were used to in high school. Some student explained that "*lecture halls were clean*" and "*I actually thought we would be lectured in small rooms like high school*". Other responses from students indicated that the lecture halls were overcrowded where they found themselves sitting on the floor which shows that the particular venue was not big enough to accommodate everyone. As opposed to another respondent who mentioned that the lecture halls were "*big, cool and filled with remnants of lecturers' (materials) given over the years*".

4.3.1.5 Library

Twenty-three (19.6%) students indicated their experiences of the library. Students responded that they viewed the library as a resource centre and a place where they are able to find aids to their studies and expansion of their interests, as well as a resource on its own for studying. It seems that for some students this stereotype/ideal held with regards to the Sasol Library of the UFS, as some students quote it to be a great, safe and quiet place that it aided with resources, and thus the hub of

knowledge and information. Some students mentioned that they never used the library, while others referred to the cold temperatures in the library. Some respondents seemed to have been overwhelmed by the size or the physical structure of the library.

4.3.1.6 *Other experiences of physical environments on campus*

Although eight (6.8%) students selected the “other” option only one student responded why he/she selected the “other” option namely that a study log is a good place where students can study. A study log is also place where students study and is open for 24 hours.

The above mention physical environment may impact negatively and positively on student learning. Students who had a pleasant welcome at hostel or students’ house may feel comfortable even to study at hostel/students house unlike those who had challenges such as dealing with race issues and adapting to several activities at hostel. The more the comfortable place is, the more students become enthusiastic to learn and y staying at hostel/students house. Students centre doesn’t have much of an impact on student learning but lecturer hall and library have a huge impact on student learning. With regards to lecture halls, overcrowded is one of the factors that may influence students not to attend classes, listen attentively, decreases the interest of attending and learning. When library is not conducive enough to stimulate learning, students might not see the need to study there.

4.3.2 Social environment (Question 8)

With Question eight students were required to explain how they have adjusted to the social environment as a first-year Psychology student in terms of fellow students, making friends, hostel activities, rag and any other. The next sections will report on students experience regarding their social environment.

4.3.2.1 Fellow students

The Psychology students indicated that they had a positive relationship with other students which made them open up, *“quiet cooperative and interesting. It is sometimes good as we see good familiar faces”*, some become friendly and for other students it was not hard to make friends. Group work appeared to be very helpful in meeting people. Some students adjusted well even though others took some time to adjust because *“Bloemfontein was a great shift from where I was previously (Gauteng)”*, while another student mentioned that it *“was hard to work in groups with other students cause I’m not used to working with people”*, Some students responded that they formed groups, made lots of friends in and out of class rooms. One of the students mentioned that *“it was difficult to adjust to other people behaviour that are different from me and my culture; while another respondent said “I accept everyone, I understand we are all different”*. Some improved socially rather than being alone and one student responded that he/she never really had interaction with other students.

4.3.2.2 Making friends

In describing their social environment, many students had unique experiences; such as those who described it as *“it took a while to adjust”* and *“learned to work in groups”*. Rather than providing an explanation, some students used phrases to describe these: such as *“made friends fast”*.

Although, the obvious goal of the university is to provide education, rather than a social environment, some students seem to have no difficulty to making friends, form study groups, or adjusting to the environment; while, others simply keep to themselves or those friends that they knew. Some respondents (24 instances) indicated that *“Making friends in my first-year was nice and easy, because we were all confused and lost so we had common struggle”*, and *“It was easy making friends as I am a talkative person and outgoing. I ended up making friends, I didn’t struggle making friends”*. While it seemed that some students made friends easier than other, there were eight instances where respondents mentioned that *“It was very difficult because I didn’t know anyone most of my high school friends were not there so I had to start fresh and introduce myself to some and “I had to learn to communicate with*

classmates and residence mates and that is how I get to make friends". Respondents also indicated that campus activities made it simple to make friends because students *"get involved participating in sports/residence activities"*; *"being involved in social activities where I meet more people and make new friends"*. Other students did not see the need to make new friends as they still had friends.

4.3.2.3 Hostel activities

The residences at the UFS are not generally referred to as hostels: however, the instrument referred to these facilities as hostels for the purposes of the study. As with responses to other items, some students merely stated short phrases rather than providing a complete sentence of their experience(s).

Twelve respondents indicated that they did not live on campus such as in city residences. City residences at the UFS are a facility available to those students living in the city to afford them an opportunity to belong to a residence, and to participate in the formal/ organised activities of the UFS. Those who lived in the residence shared experiences such as *"not breaking the rules, performing all their required residence duties as well as enjoying the hostel activities although it was hectic"* and *"it was exciting and were for fun and a memorable event that we can laugh and tell stories about"*. Not all activities were evaluated positively though, some students refer to strong negative emotions to describe their experiences such as *"hated it, it was an awful res"*. Some appeared to have had negative experience because of the following responses: hostel activities *"were time consuming"*; *overwhelming* and *"a lot to adjust to and manage particularly with the workload that some students had to handle"*. In contrast, other students *"enjoyed most of the hostel activities and I made many friends by participating in these activities"*.

4.3.2.4 Students experiences of RAG

RAG is an abbreviation for Receive and Give and it is a community service (fund-raising) initiative. Here, students spend a number of weeks building floats on vehicles after which they drive around Bloemfontein showcasing these. From the responses it seemed as if some of students did not attend RAG at all, while others

indicated that they had bad experiences such as *“I did not like my first-year Rag experience. The long days and short nights, with very little sleep and a lot of manual labour did not appeal to me”, “waste of time”; “Didn’t enjoy rag but tried to get through it” and “enjoyed girls”*. Other respondents acknowledged that it was an opportunity to interact with others, or to participate in activities, and to others it was fun. While other students felt that it is *“not my thing, it’s for whites”, “there were some race challenges”*. Another student indicated that it was *“super cool to watch how the floats were built and listen to the bands”*.

4.3.2.5 Other responses by first-year students

The “other” response category yielded some unique responses ranging from social interaction to random information about their friends who live close to the University. One student stated that *“the girls on campus are very very friendly”*; other students were of the opinion that *“the independence here is amazing but it needs someone with responsibility and discipline”* and the *“dynamics are different and need time to adjust to”*.

4.3.2.6 Social influence on student learning

With this question students had to respond “Yes/No” to whether any of the questions asked in Question 8.1-8.5 had any influence on their learning during their first-year. Thirty-eight (64 %) students responded “Yes” to this question on whether having to adapt to the social environment or other circumstances had any influence on their learning. An array of responses was offered; of which friends were indicated as the greatest influence. This was followed by *“residence obligations”* and *“residential activities took a great amount of time out of my studying time resulting in me doing quite poorly in the first semester”*. These responses seem to give the impression that the residence activities of the institution have a great influence on students’ learning. The social environment is further supported as a contributor to students learning through responses about *“study buddies”* and *“support systems”*. Other social environment challenges would be that of university life and *“learning about the culture of varsity”*, academic language, bigger classes than in high school, forming study groups which in turn *“helped me understand some of the work I did”*. Other

responses were about finding their own identity, poverty (including transport to attend evening classes) which was all integrated into social, academic and personal challenges as pointed out by a lecturer.

Eighteen (30.5 %) students responded “No” to social environments influencing their learning and three did not respond to this question at all. The most frequent responses indicated personal drive or autonomy and the ability to prioritise school work than to allow external environment factors influence their learning. Some students indicated that they balance school work and social life because “*I kept my social life and school work separate*”, focused and prefer to work independently for the reason that “*I have always been a driven, goal orientated individual and was able to keep my work up to date*”. It seems as if some of them were determined to study since one student mentioned that “*My first was a very good year. Obtained good marks*”, “*I don’t get influenced easily*” hence none of other social environments hinder their learning.

With the above being said, social environment one way or another does affect students learning. For instance, students with or without getting along with other students and having friends may still succeed academically. But it only depends on students who have high self-esteem, determined and focused on their studies. Hostel and RAG activities have an impact on student’s academic success, students spend most of their time on activities than studies and some of the activities are compulsory. Instead of putting more effort on studies, activities are taking place. Other students may see hostel and Rag activities as an opportunity to socialise, to give their brain a breather from studies and to have fun. Some students can balance the demand of social and academic life.

4.3.3 Expectations of first-year students

Question 9 enquired into the expectations of first-year students lives at university prior to enrolling at the UFS. Some of these relate to the institution as a system while others speak to individual meanings attached/ attributed to being a student.

4.3.3.1 Students' expectations of their first-year at university

Some respondents indicated that they may have an expectation dictated by what is reflected on television (or in the media). Most responses indicated the transition which was expected between high school and university; some students mentioned that they expected the university to be difficult, the workload and the hard work (see 2.3). Some students expected to be faced with the challenge of racism as one student said "*very boere like Afrikaans*". The responses generally indicated towards a positive expectation of the Institution – "*Good leadership, good participation and good communication with one another*", an expectation of professionalism, to get the best education of a high standard. To others, the UFS simply was not a study option "*I never wanted to study at UFS*" and thus no expectations were relayed. Surprisingly, the lecturer thought that most first-year students do not have any expectations; they are just grateful for the opportunity of studying and to wait and see what happens. One of the reasons mentioned by a lecturer was that students do not plan ahead and they cannot ask critical questions or challenge a lecturer in class "*They are just like sponge; they just want to know what they have learned about to pass a test, which is sad, because studying is much more than just that*".

4.3.4 Transition from high school to university

According to Johnston (2010:4) enrolling at the university for the first time encompassed so many challenges and brought a change in students' personal life experience (see 2.3). Students shared their experiences on transition from high school to university. Similar to what the students expressed in the previous question on expectations about university. Students found the university workload had an influence affecting their transition into the university environment as challenging and complicated at times because "the amount of work from school to varsity was extremely overwhelming", and "did not prepare us according to work load". Nineteen respondents mentioned specifically the difficulty that they experienced with this adjustment as "hard" or "hectic", "Difficult, nerve wrecking, scary", "stressing, depressing and challenging but I made it" and "I learnt how to be independent and rely on my abilities". Harvey *et al.* (2006:18) affirm that students need assistance with transition (see 2.3).

Thirteen responses indicated a positive transition from school to university such as “Positive change” and “I felt more independent and responsible”. Students with necessary skills thus adjust; become responsible and accountable (see 2.3). However, students explained that the lecturers do not seem to care much whether students attend classes or not, whereas in school “we were given much attention”. The Psychology lecturer indicated that there are programmes in place to assist Psychology students with transition such as VBL and AFS (Skills and competences for lifelong learning modules). Moreover, lecturers should at least know the reading and language level of students. Through support and communication with lecturers, students can acclimatise to transition (see 2.3).

The first-year students had expectations of the university, they thought it will be difficult, too much workload, different from high school, good leadership and communication. Workload seems to be a challenge to first-year students and some students are unable to handle workload hence it makes it difficult, stressful for them to adjust. Transition into new environment may not be easy for all students. Most students found it very difficult to adjust and some had an easy transition.

4.3.5 Challenges of first-year students (Question 11)

Students were expected to explain in detail whether they have experienced challenges either about transport, finances, a place to stay and to mention any other challenge that might have experienced during their first-year of study.

4.3.5.1 *Transport challenges*

The Psychology students experience various challenges with regard to transport, finances, and accommodation. An additional item was included for the expression of other challenges that the students may have faced during their first-year of study. Thirty-one respondents indicated that they did not have any transportation problems; second to this category of responses was those who indicated that “*I lived far from campus so I needed transport*” and “*walked a long way to come to campus*”. Some students experienced difficulties commuting between their places of residence and the university while others used the public transport services to get to campus such

as *“In my first-year had to use a taxi- which I have never had to do before, was little unnerving”*. Some respondents only indicated difficulties during certain circumstances such as *“This was difficult for me as I lived at the township and sometimes I had late classes. I used to struggle a lot”* and *“Only at night when it rained”*. Other students mentioned difficulties with finances *“I don’t have a car and money for transport”* and this will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

4.3.5.2 Finances

Twenty-nine of the respondents mentioned that they had no financial problems; some merely responded *“none”* while others gave explanations such as the ease that their bursaries/ loans provided, or the remission fees provided by the UFS. Some responded that *“I coped with what I have”* or *“I spent too much and didn’t follow a budget well”*; while others realised what their parents have to go through in order to educate them or to pay their fees. Finances are said to be one of the common challenges first-year students experience to access HE institution (see 2.6). Other challenges that seem to be experienced by Psychology students are those that form part of South Africans’ daily discourse – these are related to *“unemployed, so I struggled a lot”* and it *“causes more finance stress”*. On the other hand *“university is much more expensive”* (see 2.7.2). Some students experience the difficulty of attaining a bursary whereas others indicated *“Magashule provide”* and *“I was helped by NSFAS and a scholarship which made things easier”*. Other students were privileged because *“my mom works at UFS, so I study for free”*. In addition, the lecturer pointed out that language, bigger classes and forming groups are among challenges experienced by Psychology students including poverty and transport to attend evening classes. One response spoke particularly to the Human Project of the UFS and the No Student Hungry campaign; a student who mentioned sleeping without food at times.

4.3.5.3 A place to stay (accommodation)

Twenty-six responses of students reported not experiencing challenges of a place to stay because *“I got accepted at a residence, “I have a flat which my mom helps to pay”, “I lived at home”* and *“Unilofts is affordable”*. Unilofts is a student’s place of

residence outside the university campus. Students experienced challenges with a place to stay such as having sorted out all accommodation related logistics prior to the commencing of classes because it was *“hard to find and settle in”*. Secondary to this is that students are placed in residences and thus experience no problems regarding accommodation; although one respondent indicated *“hatred”* towards the residence environment. In response to Question 11.3, the challenges for these students seem to be with finding a place to live or *“lived far from the school and “I had to move closer to campus”*. Some students *“had to stay with my cousin in town because it was closer and cost effective”*. One respondent shared his/her concerns about their safety and surprisingly, one is a resident student and the residence may be a safe place for students.

4.3.5.4 Other challenges

Question 11.4 probed for other challenges, which yielded only two responses, one was related to house mates and the other was *“I always knew there will be too much partying”*. It seems from the responses that first-year Psychology students largely do not have problems with accommodation for myriad reasons. Question 12 required of students to respond to the question on how they overcome challenges they experienced with transport, finances, a place to stay and other challenges.

Psychology students experienced various challenges during their first year such as transport, finances and a place to stay. All the above aspects have a great influence on students learning and affect student’s academic success. Students who struggled to have one of three aspects experience stress; they end up looking for a job to pay for studies. High level of stress causes destruction and unable to focus on studies. Without taxi fare, students find it difficult to attend late classes more especially for those who are staying far. Thus affects their academic success because they are losing so much information from not attending classes. Finances do indeed play a major role in student learning (see 2.7.2).

4.3.6 Overcoming challenges (Question 12)

Most students' responses cannot be clearly attributed to specific problems/issues from Question 11. These were collated into the categories labelled transport, a place to stay, finances and any other.

4.3.6.1 Transport

There is also mention of solutions to transport problems raised by the students. Some students had to be accompanied by their friends to attend late classes and one stated "*I had a good friend who offered to fetch/drop me off when it rained*" and "*had a friend who walked with me at night*".

4.3.6.2 A place to stay

Two respondents indicated that they had overcome the challenges of finding accommodation through Kovsie accommodation. It could be that most students did not experience many challenges with a place to stay as this correlated with responses from 4.3.5.3.

4.3.6.3 Finances

Second to the responses of students were those related to finances. Solutions included financial aid (bursaries and loans) going around to get money. To other students finances are still a problem (see 2.7.2). Other responses were "*Honestly, prayer but I had to go around a lot to see where I can get money to pay for my fees*". "*Got a loan from an uncle*" and "*I got a part-time job*". One student managed his/her finances by "*differentiating between needs and wants*".

4.3.6.4 Other ways to overcome challenges

This category was the largest with twenty-two responses. Students mentioned abusing substances; others requested "*help from tutors and lecturers*" to overcome

their challenges. First-year students found a way to deal with their challenges be it finding a job (see 4.3.6.3), communication with other people or “*pray and hope that I will perform a miracle and look for a job*”. Some of the responses from students also indicated that they “*made peace with it and focused on the fact that I’m here to study*”, work hard, stay positive and “*my parents took care of everything*”. Students managed to overcome the challenges of finding a place to stay by staying with a friend who stays closer to campus and they also find a job, applied for bursary and a loan in order to pay for tuition fees. The next theme will be based on how Psychology students experienced their academic environment during their first-year of study.

4.4 ADJUSTING TO THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Question 13 required of students to explain how they adjusted academically during their first-year at university in terms of academic workload (see 4.4.1); learning; assignments (see 4.4.2), tests, examination (see 4.4.3); attending of classes (see 4.4.4); the lecturer (see 4.4.5) and any other aspects related to adjusting academically as a first-year student in the subject of Psychology.

4.4.1 Academic workload

Twenty-one (36%) responses stated that they adjusted to the first-year academic workload through time management. Some of the responses were contrary to managing time well and indicated “*too many tests in one week and never enough time to study all the work*”. Some explained that the workload was “*ok*”, “*bearable*”, because of a timetable, managing time correctly and attending tutorial classes helped to manage workload. Other students felt that their workload was manageable during their first-year because “*I was in the extended programme, so the work load was not that bad*”. Contrary to this were responses that indicated more difficult adjustment to the workload, followed by those who described the challenges and difficulty thereof. This challenge supports one of the factors that influence academic success as mentioned in 2.1 and 2.6.1.

Some unique responses included “*It was and seemed a lot at first but the work was interesting for me and I enjoyed it*”, “*It was very overwhelming*”, “*Timetable worked, disciplining myself*”, “*I was helped by the programme for academic student success*”

and *"I worked as hard as I could. I tried to keep up"*. One of the respondents indicated that self-discipline is the motive behind coping with academic work load which influences student success (see 2.6.2).

4.4.2 Learning

Most students have adjusted to learning through receiving assistance from other people and group work which in a way helped them to cope. Some students prepare before they go to class and use extra materials to study hard but one student decided to use drugs probably as a means of coping with work. For example *"I had to dedicate most of my time to my studies and use a whole lot of drugs of course"*.

Another student said that *"It was a bit difficult at first trying to adjust to learning so much"*; *"it was difficult at first, but as time went by I got used to it with the help from friends"*. One of the students responded that he/she was aware of the tutorials. Students were lost because two of the students explained that they were not used to speaking English. He/she might have experienced a language barrier in first-year.

4.4.3 Assignments, tests and examinations

In this section students were asked how they adjusted academically in terms of assignments, tests and examinations. The results showed that most students used time management well as they had prepared in time, using a time table to plan their tests, assignments and examinations. Assistance from senior students was also helpful but other students indicated that *"It was difficult to approach assignments and write a good one according to the university standard of learning"*. Other students managed the work load and did not experience any difficulties. One student complained about the work that *"Assignments of some sort- all with so many pages to type, examinations are even worse"* and others learned new strategies to cope with the work by using a mind map.

4.4.4 Attending classes

In this section students were requested to respond to how they have adjusted to attending classes. The majority of students attended most of their classes because it was important to take notes, receiving information (for example *“Information given in class is important in contributing to a student’s comprehension of the work”*) and it was compulsory even though some did not attend all through their first-year. In addition, some students enjoyed attending classes and did not have challenges. Other students had difficulty with attending classes because the classes were full as compared to high school with a limited number of learners in a class. Students also had to adjust to not sitting in one class the entire day as one student stated that *“moving from class to class was new, so made an effort to know all the venues”* and another *“do not attend those that are unnecessary but keep up to date with that work”*.

Currently, the Psychology department does not have a compulsory class attendance policy and thus all of Psychology undergraduate classes are voluntary/ optional. Marks are not allocated for undergraduate students to attend class either. Question 13.4 thus asked students about among others their first-year adjustment in terms of class attendance. The most popular theme in terms of responses was that of students relaying that they attended most or all of their classes. This was followed by respondents who highlighted that they did not need any adjustment as he/she *“enjoyed attending classes”*. When quoted directly, some explained that *“attending classes wasn’t an issue where anything needed to be adjusted”*. The least common responses related to the time table of the module time with regards to time slots and venues. Some students still continued to give a response but did not answer the question posed. Such responses included *“never thought we would attend in such big lecture halls”*. This example (and others) reflected very little about the adjustment to attending classes but opens a window to the complexity of the first-year experience.

4.4.5 The lecturers

Students experienced lecturers were “*forever prepared and knowledgeable*”, straight forward, helpful and that they “*did not spoon feed*”. In contrast to these responses other students experienced lecturers as “*some of the lecturers were not great/good at what they did*”. “*They would read slides and not explain what it is that they are reading*” and “*lecturers were less helpful*”. The responses largely described the lecturers as “*they were good and tried their best to accommodate our needs*” and their relationship to the students. Others took initiative in terms of contacting lecturers or making use of their consultation hours or “*read through slides which I could do at home, and at the end of the day did really well*”, “*I really listened in class and sometimes interacted with the lecturers*”.

Active participation in class, recording classes and asking questions are some examples of the behaviour that the respondents reported to aid in their adjustment in this regards. Transition is a difficult time for students to adjust to the institution (see 2.3 and 2.3.1), but some students mentioned that they did not need to adjust as the university was similar to their prior school experience, thus claiming that transition was rather easy. The response category listed as “*good*” corroborates this, although one student found the second semester challenging due to inadequate prior learning experience with the subject matter.

From Question 14 onwards, most questions had three components. The first being a closed question where students had to respond to a “*yes/no*” option, students were probed to substantiate the option that they selected.

4.4.6 Academic challenges

In terms of Question 14, 31 (53%) respondents confirmed that they have experienced academic challenges in their first-year as Psychology students while 26 indicated contrary to this and two students did not respond. This section reflects that the greatest academic challenges that were experienced by these students are in relation to workload or the transition between school and university. Here

respondents stated that *“there was just a lot of work, it was as if Psychology ought to be the only module on campus”* and that test weeks were stressful.

Further than this, it is clear that student’s academic challenges are not limited to the study material or the module only. Students responded about financial difficulty (see 4.3.5.2), family responsibility, receiving inadequate support (though one student reports receiving support) and taking part in time-consuming campus activities (see 4.3.2.4). Additionally, the lecturer emphasised that among the academic challenges experienced by students would be that of adaptation to university, being away from home, financial implications, being uncertain about themselves, the big lecture classes (including tutorials), the content of the work which differs from high school and background knowledge which are all new to some first-year Psychology students.

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, not all students reported experiencing academic challenges. In explaining this, respondents were of the opinion that the work load was manageable, contrary to the motivation in the first previous paragraph. It also seemed that academic support from lecturers and tutors played a facilitative role and one student reported that *“sometimes I did not understand work and needed help and understanding which I received from lecturers and friends”*. Other students reported taking personal responsibility of *“coping with a lot of work, as well as family life”* and *“being driven by goals”*. These responses indicated that all systems (tutorial classes, support from academic staff members) in HE may play a facilitative role in influencing student’s responses to academic challenges.

4.4.6.1 *Factors that contributed to academic success of first-year Psychology students*

Question 14.3 asked students to respond to factors that contributed to their academic success. Competing ideas were about students support offered by the *“Academic support and assistance, lecturers and tutors”*, other received *“social supports friends and family”* and students taking the responsibility of *“studying earlier, time management, not leaving assignments to the last minutes”*, adopting *“positive attitude”* and opting to *“study hard, study in groups and don’t forget to do drugs... they help trust me”*.

In explaining the factors contributing to their academic success, students mentioned aspects such as Blackboard facilities (aids) study groups, tutorials, not only that these AFS classes be availed but also that students make use of the various sources of support on campus. Taking personal responsibility for one's academic success includes preparing for class, managing one's time well, making use of "*my own resilience and courage for success*", building motivation to study, attending all lectures and tutorial classes; being "*diligent, have clear goals and confidence in self*" to name but a few. These indicated that students were generally informed about the resources that were at their disposal at the institution, as well as their personal affective, behavioural and cognitive traits, and thus these influenced their success.

4.4.7 Support from lecturers (Question 15)

Many students mentioned receiving academic support from the lecturers also contributing to their success. In the previous discussion (see 4.4.6.1), views were polarised with regards to the notion of whether lecturers provide support to students. Responses to Question 15.1 entrenched this, where 35 (59%) respondents affirmed that they received support from lecturers during their first-year (see 4.4.5), while 22 (37%) responded that they did not and two students did not respond. Contrary to those who said they did not receive support from lecturers, the lecturer stated that most of the Psychology lecturers have consultation hours plus the tutorial classes to support students to succeed academically. Furthermore, some lecturers do lend students textbooks and send notes through emails. Some responses of students attested to lecturer response that "*they would explain every detail and kept an open door policy for students*" and students "*could ask questions during consultation hours or via email and receive an answer or response each time*".

The essence of the responses to Question 15.1 is that students reflected the facilitating results that lecturers being available to explain the work had on their learning. Other responses expressed the idea that in time of uncertainty/ confusion/ demonstration, that the lecturers responded "*by giving us slides and making the work easier and giving us time to talk to you if you have a problem*", also "*through motivation and giving out tips on how to be able to handle the pressure of each*

module”, provided additional support, advice, explaining the material/contact giving open door policies responding promptly to emails and reflected passion for their field of work. The notion of students taking personal responsibility is being highlighted. Students who did not receive academic support from lecturers often prepared to work alone or felt that they did not need it. Also relating that they received no support from the lecturers because they felt that the lecturers do not care about them due to a lack of interest and *“because they didn’t focus on specific individuals they focus on the whole class I think”*. The lack of tutorials, for another student illustrated their response. Students also do not seem to communicate with their Psychology lecturers.

4.4.8 Students working on their own (Question 16)

In this section students were asked whether they preferred to work alone or not. Forty-six (78%) students indicated a preference to work alone; while only 12 (20%) do not prefer to work on their own. Two students did not respond to this question. In Question 16.1 students explained that *“It was easier and I did my work at the time I preferred”*, they understand, are able to focus, felt that *“working with others gets me easily distracted”* and work better alone. Others claimed that they are able to complete assignment in time; get better marks and in group work they are easily distracted and *“feel inferior”*. Resources such as time are also explained here for example: *“no wasting time and work at own pace”*. Some explained that it is an outcome of personality *“I am an introvert. I hate group work”* and *“I don’t like group work”*, sometimes *“other students make you feel inferior in a group”*.

In response to Question 16.2 students explained why they did not work on their own. Students responded that *“It was easier to work with my friends”* and further stated the benefits of working with others such as *“a group is better than working alone because maybe someone in the group will explain everything better or you get motivated when you work with people”* and another student said *“I need some group activities that will enhance me to read and do some activities together”*. Students expressed their opinions as: *“I believe learning from other people and interaction better one’s understanding”*, *“I believe in synergy, working alone is not a problem though”*. It seems that these students have reflected on the academically facilitative influence of working with others.

4.4.9 Students' working in a group (Question 17)

Based on the responses to Question 16 and the reasons for preferring individual work, 34 (58%) students indicated that they did not have a preference towards working in a group whereas only 11 (19%) preferred working in a group in Question 17. Fourteen (23%) students did not respond to this question. Those who are in favour of group work explained the benefit to learning "*Because working in groups helps or enables a person to have or build social relationship with other and to understand different personalities*", that group work simplifies the work: "*It makes things simpler*" and "*in order for me to understand more and see how others think*". Other students expressed that group work offers social support relative to the transition as a first-year student. Others merely mentioned conditions which are for group work, which largely depended on "*only if its trust worthy people*", reliable and knowledgeable. In addition, the lecturer stated that tutorial classes assist with group activities and are worthy to first-year students more especially to aid those who are shy to participate in class.

Students who responded that they preferred not to work in a group (Question 17.2) mentioned that they are independent. Responses to this question compare well with response in Question 16.1 namely personal traits and preference for independence and group dynamics. Some of students' reasons for not preferring group work were "*groups sucked at the time, until I started studying with friends which kind of helped*", "*I don't see any need to working in groups if you are studying theory unless if its calculations*". Some negative features of group work expressed through the nature of "*group dynamics*" also fits the motivation for responses against group work where students explained the effects of social loafing, the lack of organisation, "*some people in groups do not want to participate so it's a bit frustrating*", delayed productively and others serve as support/motivation.

4.4.10 Study methods

Question 18 was aimed at understanding which study/learning methods students preferred when learning for tests or examinations and why. A list with the following learning methods was given and students had to indicate the method(s) that they used, and explain why. These study methods were summaries, tables, mind maps

and memorising from the text. An option was also given for students to state other study strategies. The study methods respondents selected and why they used these methods are explained as follows:

4.4.10.1 Summaries

In response to this study method, 32 (54%) students indicated that they used summaries. The reasons why they used summaries are that *"It helps me to memorise and be able to use my own words"*, *"it made the work easy to remember"* and *"photographic memory-seeing and writing out notes helped me remember"*. It also helped other students to study the context and to understand the work better.

4.4.10.2 Tables

For this study method, only two (3%) respondents selected using tables. Their reasons for using tables are *"they make work to be more easy and straight forward"* and *"it helps to organise information"*.

4.4.10.3 Mind maps

Twelve (20%) respondents preferred using mind maps because *"it is easy to remember from my drawing that I made for each chapter"*, to group the work together, to take note of important words, conceptualise logical thinking and easy to study. One student indicated that *"it encompasses everything and they are colourful"* and *"I think in colours"*.

4.4.10.4 Memorising from the text

Eleven (19%) respondents selected memorising from the text because it helped them to understand the work better, to study and to remember the context. Some students used this study method *"because it's easier than the rest"*.

4.4.10.5 Other study methods

The other methods indicated by students were paraphrasing, writing notes and reading notes out loud, using *"mnemonics and abbreviations"* as well as using a

“voice recording”. It appears that the common reasons students mentioned using a specific method to study are that it is easy to remember and to understand better.

The lecturer who was interviewed stated that, first-year students were taught how to summarise in extended programmes which assisted students to write down main points of the chapter, to do mind maps and to focus on the outcomes of the module. In conjunction with the above, students used different methods to study and thus require time to do study for different modules. Table 4.3 shows the responses of students on the amount of time first-year students spent per week on Psychology modules.

Table 4.3 Responses of students on how much they spent per week on Psychology modules

Number of hours	N	Responses
1. 1- 3 hours	10 (16.9%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “For the Psychology module two hours per day, four days a week” • “Three hours a day” • “I planned for an hour per day, which didn’t quite happen like I planned though”
2. 4-6 hours	8 (13.5%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Very little 3-4 hours a week’ • “Six hours every week” • “Three to four hours a day. Close to test week and during test week the hours would increase”
3. 7-9	4 (6.7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Eight to nine hours per week” • “About eight hours per week” • “Nine hours per week”
4. 10-12 hours	5 (8.4%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Ten hours per week” • “Nine to ten hours a week” • “About plus or minus ten hours per week”
5. 13 hour and more	7 (11.8%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “14 hours per week” • “About 36 hours per week” • Plus or minus eight hours with more time spent on it two weeks before the test”
6. Not sure	14 (23.7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I can’t remember” • “A week before a class. I study every day before and in between classes” • “Never really kept record”

4.4.11 Time spent on learning outside of class time (Question 19)

Table 4.3 illustrates the number of hours students spent outside scheduled class on Psychology modules during their first-year. According to the Psychology module, the recommended study hours vary per module based on the NQF level and numbers of

credits. For example, the current Psy124 study guide specifies/recommends the following to the students: eight hours per week for self-study (Psy 124 module guide, 2015). Some students noted the percentage of time spent on these activities, although the question did not specify the unit of time that has to be in hours. One is uncertain about how many hours this percentage indicates because the codes were in classes/clusters of three hours, starting with one to three hours.

Other students were not certain about how much time they spent per week as they said “do not know”, *twice per week*, “every day I would summarise” while others “do not know”. The lecturer stated that spending two hours per week it could possibly help to summarise, to do extra reading which could be sufficient for first-year students. The Psychology self-study material recommended eight hours, five respondents indicated eight hours (as the medium of the cluster of seven hours to nine hours), 18 respondents study/learn notionally below eight hours while 12 respondents indicated studying ten or more hours per week on Psychology modules.

4.4.12 Place of study (Question 20)

Question 20 sought to understand where students preferred to study. Most students indicated that they studied in their place of residence (flat, home, residence, student house) although a few mentioned two or more places of study; students used the library to study which was also mostly mentioned with the place of residence.

In explaining why they prefer the mentioned place of study (Question 20.1), students' responses were initially coded in line with where they mentioned places of study such as home or student residences. Students who indicated that they preferred to study at a student's house did not indicate why he/she preferred to study there. Those who do so indicated that they do so due to the convenience, safety and comfort that these places (home, flat, library) provide, while others preferred a quiet place to study without disturbance; none the less students studied at the places of study which suited their preferences. Some mentioned additional reasons such as that the library “*is more quiet and has resources*” which motivate a student to learn. It seems that the commonality of students responses was that the place of study where they preferred was quiet, comfortable and without disturbances.

4.4.13 Lecturers' feedback on assignments and tests (Question 21)

Question 21 requested whether students understood the feedback they received from the lecturers on their assignments and tests; to which 39 (66.1 %) respondents indicated "Yes" and five (8.4%) responded "No".

4.4.13.1 *Understanding of the feedback provided from lecturers on assignments and tests*

The probe to Question 21.1 why some answered "Yes" sparked responses which touched on the relevance of the feedback provided by the lecturer. Students responded that *"feedback showed me what I did right and what I did not do right"*. Respondents were further of the opinion that rubrics and memorandums provided them with criteria for assignments. Feedback from lecturers was *"definite"*, *"fair"*, *"relevant"*, *"clear"*, *"honest"* and always *"helped me understand my modules"*. Nineteen (32.2%) students indicated that they understood the lecturer's feedback because their lecturers explained thoroughly and took time to explain the work in detail (see 2.5.3). Feedback probably provided quality assurance on the improvement of student's academic performance (Moskal, *et al.* 2008:272). Other students responded that they were uncertain to say the very least; such as lecturers were *"definite and others were open to interpretations but not really helpful to the exercise"*. This may be precise as the lecturer who was interviewed emphasised that, it is important to provide feedback to students. There are specific classes scheduled for discussing the memorandum of the tests. Lecturers also invite students to discuss their performance on assignments and tests and mostly point out common mistakes made by students to assist them to answer questions better. This contact session on feedback also provides an opportunity for lecturers to have one on one session with students and get to know them better.

Five (8.4%) students responded "No" to Question 21. These respondents were of the opinion that the feedback was confusing as the lecturers *"spoke in circles and a confusing accent"*; that the lecturers did not accommodate alternative answers that the class is too big, and another student simply responded by saying *"what feedback?"*. The last response does not indicate an answer to the question and probably meant that they deserved the marks that they got in the assessment. The lecturer who was interviewed stated that lecturers do write/comments on student's

papers, and that if marks are less than the expected percentage, they invite students to discuss the marks but not all of them would come. She further indicated that one of the reasons that students may not perform well was that the students might be experiencing some personal challenges or did not study at all. The lecturers usually group those who failed together to be assisted by trained tutors (2.5.6). Fortunately, there is writing and reading facility on campus which students can attend to enhance their reading and writing skills. Students who did not perform well were referred to second-year and third-year Psychology students who could assist them with the challenges that they experienced according to the interviewed lecturer. The next section will continue on the subject of the feedback from lecturers and more so whether feedback has assisted students to improve academically.

4.4.14. Feedback from lecturers on assignments and tests assisted/ did not assist students to improve academically (Question 22)

In response to Question 22, 33 (55.9%) students indicated that feedback has assisted them to improve academically while seven (11.8%) indicated the opposite that feedback did not assist them to improve academically. Nineteen (32.2%) students did not respond to this question. Twenty-four (40.6%) students indicated that feedback allowed them to learn from their mistakes, *"understand what was required of me, therefore I was able to improve in the next work given"* and that they had a better sense of the academic performance expectations and therefore prepared better for the assessment activity that would follow. Two students responded that *"I don't like falling behind"* and *"I was able to consider the theories and their work individually"*. It seems that lecturer's feedback helped other students to be up to date with studies and learn from mistakes to improve academically.

Two respondents were of the opinion that feedback from lecturers did not help because it was *"too straight forward"*. Other students asked *"what feedback?"* or *"no tips were given as to how one could improve their marks"*, which makes one think that feedback was perhaps not provided. One of the students reported that they were not assisted by their lecturer's feedback because *"they spoke in circles and (in a) confusing accent"*. Another response had a completely different locus of control and believed that their academic performance depended on their own actions, thereby implying that the lecturer *"had no impact"* on their academic performance, nor any

other impact for that matter. The next section explained whether students understood the lecturer in class or not.

4.4.15. Understanding the lecturer in class (Question 23)

Thirty-four (57.6%) respondents indicated that they followed/understood their lecturer(s) in class, while eight (13.5%) reported the contrary to understanding the lecturer in class. Seventeen (28.8%) of the students did not respond to this question. Eleven (18.6%) responses of students explained that the teaching methods that the lecturers used in class such as video's, elaborating and using relevant examples assisted the students in following and understanding what the lecturer does in class. Students believed that the way in which the lecturers "*explained concepts in depth*", were "*clear*" and the teaching aids that they used were executed well "*easy to understand*". The lecturer's preparations, use of resources such as slides and summaries were set out properly and efficiently which made it easier for students to follow and understand learning material in class (see 2.5.1). Undoubtedly, the lecturer pointed out that they orientate students in each class, to understand what the module is aiming at and to explain the module outcomes so that it will make sense to students. Additionally, repeating things many times really helped students with non-verbal, verbal and language skills.

The lecturer who was interviewed indicated that lecturers sometimes experience technical challenges in class such as a microphone not working and that it is not fair to judge students when they do not hear or understand the lecturer. On the contrary, students who indicated that they did not understand the lecturer(s) in class were because of an "*unclear accent*", "*sometimes jumped the work*", "*reading from slides*" and overcrowded classes. This implies that students were not satisfied with some lecturers teaching styles because they could not understand.

4.4.16. Coping with the amount of assignments (Question 24)

Thirty-one (52.5%) students responded that they coped with the number of assignments given, while only eleven (18.6%) indicated that they did not cope with the amount of assignments. Seventeen (28.8%) students did not respond to this question. Some students explained that they prepared in time, worked hard and "*did*

not procrastinate” while other students (7 instances) indicated that they did not have too many assignments or “*had one assignment*”. Students also mentioned “*doing well*” as a probable indicator of their enthusiasm. Students were further of the opinion that “*I tried my best not to fall behind and most importantly to submit even if I was not entirely satisfied*” and “*it was different and a lot of work*”. “*Mind maps made work lighter and it didn’t overwhelm me*”. Students mentioned further that their workload was the reason for not coping with the number of assignments that they had to complete during the semester. A lack of time-management, no assignments being given, too much workload and “*because I have to pay attention to all my module assignments made it difficult*” and were all contributors to non-academic success (see 2.6).

4.4.17 Teaching and learning methods

Students use different learning methods to learn best in class. With Question 25, students were provided categories of different teaching and learning methods and they were requested to tick options that were for their specific learning. Students could select more than one option for example watching videos in class, listening to the lecturer, doing practical tasks in class and taking notes. An option was also given for other teaching and learning methods not listed. The number of responses may be more than the actual number of respondents who completed the questionnaire due to respondents selecting more than one option.

Twenty-seven students indicated that listening to their lecturers was helpful, “*made it easier and I understood better*” because “*lecturers were very knowledgeable, practical tasks made understanding easier*”. Second to this was watching videos and taking notes (21 (35.5%)) while other students (16 (27.1%)) students preferred participating in practical tasks in class. It seems then that active learning (listening, participating, taking notes and watching videos) are the preferred facilitative mode of teaching and learning methods for first-year Psychology students. The interviewed lecturer responded that videos would be an idea and practical activities to assist student to understand the work better.

4.4.17.1 Watching videos in class

Twenty one (35.5%) respondents stated that they learned best from watching videos because videos are *“helpful to understand the work better”*, explain everything and help to apply the work. Some of the respondents mentioned that *“watching videos stimulates the visual sense, so it is easy to remember what you watched”* and *“as a visual learner, the “visuals aids me”*. Students are visual and because videos aid with memory. Another student responded that *“I don’t know why but I like that way”*. It seems that students who preferred to watch videos in class applied reflection observation according to Kolb’s experiential learning and watching videos aids students to organise information and intellectually focus on ideas (see 2.4.3).

4.4.17.2 Listening to the lecturers

Those students who learn best when listening to their lecturers explained that attentiveness helps them understand the work and to simplify it. It was further stated that the lecturers make (s) use of examples that further clarify the work; helped to memorise the work covered; also because *“lecturers use spoken words which is a powerful tool”* and *“explain the work”*. One student stated that *“listening to her (lecturer) made it easier and I understood better”* and another student indicated that *“lecturers were very knowledgeable”*.

One respondent showed understanding of various spheres of learning by mentioning, that he/she is *“an auditory learner”*- while to another student listening assists with other study methods such as note taking (see 2.4.2).

4.4.17.3 Did practical task in class

Respondents who claim to learn best from practical tasks were because *“practical tasks helped me with understanding and the application of the work”*, to remember, and *“to memorise a lot”*, *“I learn best and “doing practical tasks put the work in context”* was also a response from one of the students on what the practical tasks means for him/her. These students preferred active experimentation which is in line with Kolb’s experiential learning and it helps to explore ideas and solving problems in class (see 2.4.3).

4.4.17.4 Note taking

Consistently, students also reported that taking notes helped them to remember, capture important information and understand the material. In addition to this, students expressed that taking notes helped to “*highlight what the lecturer sees as important*” and was as useful as a tool for repetition. One student however seemed not informed about note taking because he/she was of the opinion that “*taking notes*” is just copying and grasping the concepts”.

4.4.17.5 Other responses to teaching and learning methods

Only one student responded and explained that he/she learn best “*when I make my own notes*” which is practically taking notes. This brings concern regarding the application of study methods and the use of study aids by students’ notes. One would assume that a student would have expressed this under note taking, as the learning tool implies that the student is the one taking down the notes.

The lecturer suggested the following to be the best methods to assist first-year students with their learning: coming to class, taking notes, listening in class, engaging in discussions about the work, good summarising skills and application skills. The lecturer stated that first-year students memorise well and need to apply theory into a case study, put in practice and also to explain in their own understanding. The lecturer further emphasised that videos would be an ideal to aid students learning but concerned about technical challenges occurring on campus (UFS) such as videos which takes up to 20 minutes to upload when teaching. Besides videos, lecturers use case studies or practical class activities and group discussions for students to understand.

The lecturer stated that taking notes assists students to write the most important parts of the chapter, know where to focus but at times it is not enough for students to learn due to lack of background knowledge, not understanding the content of the module and not making an extra effort to read extra sources. This brings another point that students memorise what they have been provided in class by the lecturer just to pass which could also support the notion of surface learning (2.4.1 and

4.4.18.2). The lecturer encourages students to apply their knowledge when studying which will help to develop into deep learners (2.4.1 and 4.4.18.1). The next section confirms why students memorise the task.

4.4.18 Deep or surface approach to learning

In this section of the questionnaire the concepts of deep and surface learning were explained to the respondents prior to asking the next questions on memorisation and meaningful learning.

4.4.18.1 Memorisation of task (Question 26)

With this Question 26, students had to respond to a “yes/ no” option to whether they memorise tasks when they study only to pass the examination or tests. Twenty-one (35.5%) respondents indicated “yes” to memorising the task while 18 (30.5%) responded “no” and 20 (33.8%) did not respond to this question. It seems that the students memorise tasks and learn only to pass and do so primarily because it is a means to an end (passing). Other students do memorise tasks because “*I have a lot of other modules to study*” and “*because we have so much work and remembering everything is impossible for some of us*” are also contributors to this phenomenon. Mayya *et al.* (2004:1) affirm that pressure and workload drive students to apply surface leaning (see 2.4.1). The passive nature of memorising does not seem to be understood by students who claimed that it helped them to apply their work in different contexts. Another student asserts as, once again to the multi-faceted nature of a student’s life and thus the complexity thereof by reminding the reader of competing interests which happen/take place concurrently in their studies. Time during test weeks also seems to be a problem using other, more active forms of studying.

Students who do not memorise the work generally explained that they aimed to understand the content/work, others noted that they learned in order to use the knowledge in future while yet others state that memorising does not help. Their future aims at distinctions for example “*I want to get distinctions but also do not want to be disappointed*” and being knowledgeable also prevent students from

memorising the work. Another student applied deep learning methods when he/she indicated that he/she memorise the tasks *“Because it is important for me as a learner to have a deep understanding of what I am studying to be able to apply it in the future”* and *“to be more insightful in terms of the topic of the module”* (see 2.4.1). These students envisaged a high achievement performance and understanding the depth content for future reference as also explained by Burton and Ropolo (2008) and Gijbels *et al.* (2005:328).

4.4.18.2 Students learn just enough to pass tests (Question 27)

When asked whether they learn just to pass their tasks in Question 27. Fifteen (25.4%) students responded “Yes” while 27 (45.7%) students responded “No” and 17 (28.8%) did not respond to this question. In response to this question, one student indicated that his/her primary aim was just to learn to pass because *“I have a fear of failing”*. Other students reported that *“I want to finish my course”*. From these two codes passing and completing the course, it does not seem important to the students whether their passing of the course, module or obtaining qualification is meaningful in terms of content learned. These students are concerned with the end results and nor the means nor the quality of the course/module. Four students mentioned that *“it’s time consuming when you learn more than what is to be asked in the test”*, pressure and workload are not providing an opportunity for students to learn work beyond just for passing. It seems that lack of time management and workload maybe factors that enhance surface learning approach according to Mayya *et al.* (2004:1). Two respondents responded contrary to learning just to pass *“I make sure that I understand and never forget about it”* and *“I learn everything”*. Both of the statements could be referring to a deep approach to learning (see 2.4.1). The common responses to Question 26 and 27, were that students learn just to pass and memorise the tasks when *“I’m under a lot pressure”* and to obtain their qualifications.

Students who responded that they did not learn just to pass mentioned that their intentions was to experience learning in depth to enrich their knowledge, acknowledging the defeated purpose to studying (see 2.2.4) and *“empower myself so that I can engage in informed conversation and the knowledge I have acquired helps me do just that”*. Other students reflected more on themselves here with

reference to character (*"I am a hard worker"*), to future plans/aspirations and to their love for studies.

One student was motivated by class tests that he/she often have write. The most popular responses appeared to be students who not only wanted to pass, but who would like to pass with good marks. Therefore, learning just to pass was not sufficient, and not challenging enough for these aspirations. Another student indicated that he/she learn *"those that I need to pursue my career I have to learn them in depth"*. Byrne *et al.* (2002:28); Gijbels *et al.* (2005:328) asserted that this kind of learning or approach is referred to as a strategic learning approach or the achieving approach (see 2.4.1).

4.4.18.3 Applying knowledge meaningfully (Question 28)

First-year Psychology students use different learning methods to study their work and applying their knowledge will determine their academic success (see 2.4.1). Thirty-six (61%) students responded "Yes" to this question and only six (10.1%) answered "No". Seventeen students (28.8%) did not respond to this question. Most students who answered "Yes" indicated that applying knowledge meaningfully helped them understand the work because *"I recall everything we did in classes and in tutorials"* and *"it makes sense when you apply knowledge"* or *"that is the only way I can remember"*. Others apply knowledge meaningfully because of the impact on applying their knowledge, and yet others because learning meaningful aids their memory (see 2.4.1). Another student stated that he/she has to apply knowledge meaningfully but do not offer any reasons for this, while other expressed that they apply knowledge meaningfully because of ease, interests and for clarity. Similarly, the lecturer emphasised that students should apply their knowledge meaningfully especially in Psychology modules because the modules itself deals with case studies.

Six (10.1%) students responded why they do not apply their knowledge meaningfully. These are *"If it's a module I do not like, I do not apply knowledge"*; *"No relevance"*; *"Because I learn to pass"*, this responses seems to relate to a surface learning approach (see 2.4.4); *"Sometimes I struggle applying it"* and *"I don't really know how to apply the knowledge"*.

4.4.19 The UFS offers tuition in both Afrikaans and English

The UFS offers tuition in both English and Afrikaans, although they are currently reviewing the institution's language policy. Students are allowed to choose language of tuition and attend preferred classes even though other languages such as Sesotho and sign language are still supported in terms of the UFS language policy (see 2.7.1).

4.4.19.1 Language of tuition (Question 29)

Forty (67.7%) respondents replied "Yes", while three (5.0%) replied "No" and 12 (20.3%) did not respond to understanding the language of tuition to this question. Table 4.1 displayed a crossing between home language and secondary school language of instruction. From this, nine students who have Afrikaans as a home language, five also had the same school language of tuition. Twenty out of 23 of the students had English as medium of instruction. All of the remaining students were studying in a language other than their mother tongue such as Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Siswati and Setswana.

Students' responses were often difficult to analyse as they often did not answer the question directly; and at other times, they did not answer the question at all. Perhaps one could argue that understanding a language and expressing oneself in it are two different processes. In explaining why they understood the language of instruction, the student's responses were coded into three core codes namely; understanding language, prior learning and incompetence. Understanding language was also expressed in mentioning that the language was taught in school or spoken at home, while others only expressed their understanding of the language. Fifteen students responded that they were "*Bilingual and can speak it*," because "*I understand English and I express myself better in English than my other language*" and "*I speak it fluently*". It does seem however, that student's generally struggled to write full comprehensible sentences and the common errors in providing information that is not related to or does not answer the question indicates the contrary.

Question 29.2 further probed why students do not understand their language of tuition and the responses showed a probable lack of understanding in relation to the question asked. For example one student responded that *“it’s not fair for students who are taught in English because for most of them it’s not their home language”*, *“I think we should all be taught in English”*. Another responded that he/she *“does not pay tuition”*. This student was responding to class fees and not to the language in which they are lectured. Another student clearly responded that he/she does not know what it is, the assumption is that *“it”* refers to the language of tuition.

4.4.20 Consultation with lecturers

Lecturers at an institution of HE provide consultation hours for the purpose of allowing students to visit their offices when they need assistance, clarity on assignments or anything related to their studies. The next section will discuss whether students make appointment with their lecturers or not.

4.4.20.1 Appointments with lecturers (Question 30)

Students were asked whether they made appointments with their lecturers (Question 30). Thirty-five (59.3%) students indicated that they did not make an appointment with their lecturer to discuss problems they experienced with their studies during their first-year; while eight (13.5%) students indicated that they did make appointments with lecturers. Sixteen (27.1%) students did not respond to this question. Question 30.1 requested that the students who made these appointments with their lecturers to explain their reasons. Responses were that they *“did not understand part of the work”*, when there is *“a test online”* and that they received academic advice. Students further responded that they consulted lecturers *“to clarify uncertain topics”* and also *“to seek advice on how to improve my marks”*. It is concerning that such a small number of students made appointments to see their lecturers. The interviewed lecturer confirmed that students do consult them for a number of reasons such as when they do not understand the work and after a specific test that they did not do well in and when they missed classes. There would always be one or two students who come to the office very often but for some reason students seemed scared of the lecturers and would rather consult Psychology tutors.

Thirty-two (54.2%) students explained that they did not make appointments with their lecturers because they did not experience any problems and *“never felt the need to”*. Concerning are the responses that expressed fear to approach academic staff or shyness and a *“lack of motivation”* from lecturers. Two (3.3%) students did not feel that their lecturers were helpful, accommodating, *“they give us attitude when we go talk to them”* and *“I was intimidated”*. Others preferred to *“discuss with fellow class mates”* or friends and one student said that *“I usually talk to tutors”* about the work. Some students were of the opinion that it is easier to approach lecturers before or after lecture classes because *“sometimes it’s easy to talk to them in class”*. Other responses were *“I don’t like failing”*, *“I pretend to see the tutor”* and *“it was a new experience and I do not easily adopt those kinds of changes that involve me talking”*.

4.4.21 Academic assistance from lecturers, peers and other forms of students succeed academically

4.4.21.1 Seeking academic help from lecturers (Question 31)

Some students responded that they do seek academic help from lecturers for a number of reasons. With this question, 18 (30.5%) responded *“Yes”* while 25 (42.3%) responded *“No”*. Sixteen (27.1%) did not respond to this question. Students who sought academic help from lecturers explained that they *“needed more clarity”*, *“did not understand the readings”* and also to improve their academic performance. Some students also sought academic help from lecturers for a variety of other reasons such as the lecturer *“knows best”*, *“very good at what she does very patient with a person”* or to ensure that they are on the right track and *“I don’t like failing”*. The lecturer who was interviewed indicated that lecturers provide support to students during consultation hours and sometimes even lend students a text book and also email them notes to study. Some students did not explain why they sought academic help from their lecturers but mentioned other sources of help at their disposal such as *“attending AFS classes”* and seeking *“academic advising”*.

When explaining why they did not seek academic help from lecturers, students’ responded that they received help from others such as peers, mentors and tutors. Responses also indicated that it would not be helpful because there is a *“lack of motivation”*. Another response indicated that this student did not know that he/she

can ask for academic assistance from lecturers. It could be that consultation hours were probably not clearly announced or that the student did not know what academic help from lecturers was.

4.4.22.2 Seeking academic help from peers (Question 32)

When asked “did you seek academic help from your peers?”. Nineteen (32.2%) responses were “Yes” while 18 (30.5%) indicated “No”. Twenty-two (37.2%) did not respond to this question. Students expressed that they sought academic help from peers in order “to gain broader understanding”, “they explain better sometimes”, “peers have different understanding so asking help assisted me” and those “who were excelling in a particular module”. Others explained this in terms of the formulation of study groups “because they always had time for group studies”. These peers were further reported as being “supportive” and students are “not shy to ask them anything”.

Responses of students who indicated that seeking academic help from peers is unnecessary (eight instances) explained that “peers are under-qualified”, they lack information, are inexperienced, “they are clueless too”, “not as insightful as the lecturers” and “I felt like they were just confused as I was”. Contrary to this group of students are those who indicated that they seek help from others such as tutors, academic advisors, or their lecturers (see 2.5.6 and 4.4.21.1). Students who felt that it is unnecessary to seek help from their peers due to lack of expertise, are those who preferred “to work on their own and rather speak to the lecturer”, tutor, or “understood the work”.

4.4.22.3 Other assistance to help students to succeed academically (Question 33)

This section reported responses from students seeking academic help from other source. Most responses to Question 31 and 32 compared well with responses to Question 33. Students mentioned peers, lecturers and tutors as other person they would ask for help because they know the content, explain better, are insightful about the module and are available to assist. Family members such as brother, sister, grandmother, mother and father were also of help because they “trust their opinion”, “parents have more experience”, “my mother because she studied

Psychology” and “*are academics, I can freely talk to them*”. Another student mentioned his/her “*shrink*” (Psychologist) while another student mentioned a “*programme facilitator because she is insightful about the programme at large*”. Two students reported that they had no other person from whom they asked help.

4.4.22.4 Tutorial classes (Question 34)

Thirty-seven (62.7%) students reported that they attended tutorial classes, while six (10.1%) did not attend tutorial classes and 16 (27.1%) did not respond to this question. Students indicated primarily that they attended tutorials “*because tutorials were helpful and informative*”, and “*to get more clarity on my work*”. Secondary to this were students who indicated that they attended because “*it was compulsory and it bettered my understanding*”. Students also found that “*tutorials made learning the work much easier*” and that guidelines are shared in these classes and thus assisted to enhance their learning (see 2.5.6).

The bulk of the tutorials at the UFS are offered through the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) which offers generic training for tutors, although module specific information remains the responsibility of academic departments. Not all Psychology modules make use of the CTL services; these generally use “*in-house tutors*”.

Six students in response to question 34.2 responded “*No*” and indicated that “*there were no tutorial classes*”. Others did not know the logistical details thereof, while another mentioned that “*I did not find tutorial classes helpful*”. Finally, another student mentioned that tutorials “*did not seem necessary*”.

4.4.22.5 Making use of study plan (Question 35)

Twenty-two (37.2%) students indicated that they used a study plan, while 20 (33.8%) did not use one. Twenty (33.8%) did not respond to this question. Students used a study plan because “*it helped to manage their time and work load*”; “*it helped me prioritise properly and I got most out of my work*” and “*it also helped being academically responsible*”. Additionally, students used a study plan to “*decrease pressure and stress levels*” and “*I used a study plan because I had too many activities happening, so I had to manage my time effectively*”. Other students responded that they “*studied twice a week*” or “*everyday*” but did not actually explain why they used study plan.

Question 36 inquired whether a study plan contributed to students' academic success. Twenty-one (35.5%) students stated the study plan contributed to their academic success, while 18 (30.5%) students indicated "No". Twenty (33.8%) students did not respond to this question.

Those who indicated "No" explained that a study plan did not contribute to their success because they experience difficulties with a study plan, "*do not know how to stick to a schedule*" and "*did not yet understand how things work*". Some students felt that it is not necessary to have one and others managed without one because they "*never plan*". One student responded that "*It helped to be prepared for tests and tasks*" and was in fact responding to how a study plan helped him/her to succeed academically. It seemed as if those who used a study plan did not work/study according to the plan or could not stick to it.

4.4.23 Motivation to succeed academically (Question 37)

In Question 37 students responded to the question on what motivated them to succeed academically. Respondents mentioned that their family members and friends motivated them because they wanted to make them proud, to change the situation at home and have financial freedom. Others students elaborated on being eager to pass by "*getting good marks, wanting to get into golden key*" because they "*know where they want to be one day*", while other students expressed their dreams/vision of becoming professionals such an Industrial Psychologist, Psychologist and or a Social Worker. Some of these students mentioned the "*passion my lecturers and tutors had for the subject*", "*attending Dr Tadi's Psy 152 class was very enjoyable*" and easy to understand the concepts of the module as possible motivational factors.

4.4.24 Student repeating their first-year (Question 38)

Only students who failed their first-year were requested to complete Questions 38 to 43. Of the 59 students, only two students indicated that they repeated their first-year in response to Question 38.

Question 38 expected student to indicate whether they repeated their first-year. Only two (3.3%) students responded “Yes” and 42 (71.1%) students indicated “No” to repeating first-year while 13 (22 %) did not respond to this question. Students who repeated their first-year were requested to answer Questions 39 to 43. Tables 4.4 to 4.8 show the responses of students who repeated their first-year.

Table 4.4 Reasons for students repeating their first-year

Respondents	Question 39. In your opinion what was the main reasons for you repeating your first-year?
Respondent 1	<i>“Did not understand the work, not used to science modules because I was doing commercial subject at school”</i>
Respondent 2	<i>“I was not focused enough”</i>

Question 39 requested students to state the main reason was for repeating their first-year. The responses were that the student was not paying attention to the studies and the other student did not understand the work.

Table 4.5 Responses of students who struggled with Psychology

Respondents	Question 40. Did you struggle with subject psychology?
Respondent 1	<i>“Yes, I was doing commercial subjects at science school, so science related module was a new thing to me”</i>
Respondent 2	Did not respond to this question

Responded one indicated that he/she struggled with Psychology subject due to a lack of prior exposure and because Psychology was new to him/her. Responded two did not respond to this question. The latter struggles are also used to explain the response to Question 40.1 (if Yes, in what way did you struggle with Psychology). This response is perhaps inadequate because the question probed that the students inform of ways in which he/she struggled.

Table 4.6 Responses of students who struggled with other modules

Respondents	Question 41. Did you struggle with any modules academically during your first-year?
Respondent 1	<i>“Yes, BRS 111, I’m not used to computer and didn’t have a computer at my school”</i>
Respondent 2	<i>“Sociology, It was difficult for me to u understand”</i>

Both students responded that they struggled with other modules such as BRS (computer course) and with the Sociology module.

Table 4.7 Responses of students who did not understand the content of the module

Respondents	Question 42. Did you understand the content of the above mentioned modules?
Respondent 1	<i>"No, I didn't know how to use a computer"</i>
Respondent 2	<i>"It is because the readings from the book I could not explain in my own words"</i>

Table 4.7 students indicated that he/she was computer-illiterate (Responded 1) and respondent 2 mentioned that he/she struggled to explain what he/she read in his/her own words. This could be an indication that this student may experience challenges with the understanding and interpreting of the reading material. It seems that this student might have struggled to type his/her assignments.

Table 4.8 Responses of students to factors which contributed to repeating of their first-year

Respondents	Question 43. -43.7 What factors contributed to student repeating his/her first-year?
Respondent 1	<i>"Did not understand the content, because I was doing commercial related subjects at school, Psychology was very new to me"</i>
Respondent 2	<i>"Did not understand the content, too much content to learn, the language, social environment, did not attend classes and experienced financial problems because I was not focused enough"</i>

The factors that contributed to respondents repeating their first-year was that they both claimed not to have understood the content of the module. It seemed that respondent 2 experienced more challenges than respondent one. This showed that the respondent was admitting his/her failure and perhaps he/she could have done better if he/she was paying attention to studies.

The next section will explain students suggestions on what they believe or think can be done to assist first-year Psychology students to succeed academically. In Question 11 students reported challenges they faced during their first-year and few students experienced financial problems (see 4.3.5.2) struggling to find a place to stay (see 4.3.5.3) and transport challenges (see 4.3.5.1) adversely affected academic success because *"I travel with a bus from home to the university"*. *"We*

struggle with the transportation due to the workers strike or maybe the transport does not arrive on time and you become late for your classes” and “It was tough especially night classes if one is not staying in student house or res”. The analysis returns to all students for the last three questions (44-46) of the study.

4.4.25 How first-year students can be assisted to succeed academically (Question 44)

Thirty-four (57.6%) students responded to what can be done to assist first year students, while 25 (42.3%) students did not respond to this question. Twenty-one (35.5%) responses of students showed that academic support is at the top of the list, explaining that support be given through additional tutorials, AFS classes, preparations of tests, competent lecturing staff members and mentor system. Other students emphasised the improvement of existing system such as to *“introduce a mentor system, where students who have done modules before can help them cope”*. Furthermore, students stated that they need to be provided with *“one on one session with tutors, “one facilitator for students who struggle academically” and “more tutor classes, not just one session a week”, and “I also think making students watch video about the topics help a lot”*.

Twelve (20.3%) respondents emphasised factors that are related to the students taking responsibility for their academic success such as students should *“study hard, prepare ahead of time”, “attend all lectures attend feedback session” and “go to lectures, never fell shy to ask questions, study to understand work”*. While five (8.4%) respondents felt that nothing more can be done in this regard, because said *“I honestly think the lecturers and tutors do everything. Most people do not fail because the work is hard, they fail because they try to learn the dynamics of the university and tend to neglect their work” and “I think the University should have workshops twice a month were we can learn about what to expect in Psychology”*.

One student was of the opinion that most people do not fail because the work is hard, *“they fail because they try to learn the dynamics of the university and tend to neglect their work”*. Further responses were related to the lecturing staff, support staff, management and have small lecture classes. The lecturer suggested strategies such as *“to orientate all the extended programmes” and “extra tutorial classes”* could

be implemented at the university to ensure that students are on “*cognitive academic level*”.

4.4.26 Psychology student’s best experience during their first-year of study (Question 45)

In this section, 36 (61.0%) students responded while 23 (38.9%) students did not respond to this question. Students were requested to report on their best experience during their first-year of study by writing one paragraph. Responses of students generally focused on academic achievement and one student said “*I had received a high average in a particular module and was going to receive a certificate for that achievement*”. Others responded: “*Wow! It was the proudest moment of my life and I was definitely encouraged to do better in all my modules*” and “*My best experience was when I passed my second semester Psychology in my first-year with flying colours*”. Some of these descriptions include passing modules, the pride that came with this and the confidence with which some wrote their exams.

The students also reflected on enjoying/liking their learning experiences in their first-year of study such as “*I liked Psy 124 and Psy 112*”. One student conveyed that “*I don’t really remember much*”. Some reflected on the socialisation factors regarding the best experience of their first-year. There are also other students who reflected as far as their personal growth is concerned, expressing that their best experience was in gaining independence for example “*As a first-year I gained independence and structure. I learned how to be successful and hardworking, enjoyed the social life and meeting new people, liked living alone*” and another student stated that “*I overcome my fears. I finally became an independent young woman. I stopped worrying what people thought of me and university helped me realise that I do not have to walk around wondering what people thought of me or their opinions about me*”. The next section will signify the worst experiences of Psychology students during their first-year.

4.4.27 Psychology student’s worst experience during their first-year of study (Question 46)

In this section, 31 (52.5%) students reported their worst experience while 28 (47.4%) did not respond to this question. Most students (17 (28.8%) responses) indicated

experiencing academic challenges which ranged from stress, subject-related stress and not performing as expected. Some students responded that *"I really felt like quitting, it was not easy for me to study Psychology. I struggled a lot"*, *"my worst experience was when I realised I had to repeat my first semester Psychology that sucked, I developed a drug habit because of that"*. The writing experience was also more so *"when I had to write two tests in one day and had to study the entire night, I felt like death warmed over. I did not like it at all. The fatigue got me during the day and I was out by 6:30pm. Worst day of my life. (I passed though)"*. Contrary to the one student who mentioned residence activities as his/her best experience, students indicated their worst experience, as some social experience and financial challenges. Another student mentioned a challenge of *"having to go through registration process without my mother, many times I felt like giving up because there always seems to be a problem"*. Other students seemed not to be satisfied about *"terrible lecturers who do not know how to do their job"* and *"Psychology152 was the worst experience as the lecturer was not very helpful during lectures but tutorials were helpful"*.

4.5 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The study confirmed that first-year Psychology students experienced challenges and also highlighted various complicating factors affecting their academic success, be it, financial, academic, social and/or the physical environment of the university. This chapter has provided consideration to the factors that first-year Psychology students experienced at the UFS. Most students have set their career path in studying Psychology and others have chosen Psychology as an additional module to complete the degree. Some of the students know the methods behind studying Psychology whereas others wanted to improve their learning.

Psychology students had positive and negative experiences about their physical environment. Some students indicated that hostel activities were time consuming with all the activities such as RAG at the same time they had to study. Not all students enjoyed staying at the hostel during their first-year due to annoying hostel rules. It was mentioned that racism took place at the hostel and it seems that the university has a long way to go to combat race issues. Other students who stayed at

a student house felt welcomed, had fun and enjoyed even though they were not staying on campus.

The experience of students centre was the second highest responses to this question. The student centre helped other students to meet new people, to socialise and felt that they belong to this environment (institution). Finances are still a challenge to some students as one mentioned that the food at the Student Centre is costly. The lecture halls were found to be tidy, big compared to high school class rooms and overcrowded at times. Overcrowding of lecture halls could hinder students' success and concentration in class. Students did not only spend their time in lectures but also at the library to study or to research. It is not surprising that students found the library (big, physical structure) as a resource that enhanced their learning and comfortable to study in because it is quiet and resources are available.

Adjusting to the social environment of the university students took an opportunity to make friends and for some it was not easy although other students adjusted well and making friends was not difficult as they met new people through the social activities on campus. Some of these activities took place at hostels and many students did not enjoy hostel activities because they thought "*it was terrible*" and time consuming. Not all students participated at RAG and some found it very interesting, saw it as an opportunity to socialise but others had negative experiences. It gives the impression that most students had a good social life during their first-year, although one student cited that it is for whites, and it is probably for this reason why he /she did not attend RAG at all. The study buddy and support system were reported as the contributors to social learning. Self-motivation and self-determination were among the factors that showed that students were focused by balancing the demand of school work and social life because none of the above mentioned that the social environment hinders their learning.

Most first-year students who enrol at the university come from different social and cultural backgrounds which instil great expectations and provide various career opportunities (Fraser and Killen, 2003:254). The study reflected that most students were not sure what to expect of the university. It also confirmed that transition from high school to university could be challenging. Furthermore, responses of students indicated that their expectations are not solely about school work but about adjusting

to the learning environment. Again, the race issue was raised and it shows that to some students the UFS is still painted as a racial institution. The Psychology students reported studying at the university was different from high school but others took it as being responsible, although the workload brought a negative impact on learning. The responses revealed students had expectations but the lecturer never thought students would have expectations.

Most Psychology students did not experience challenges with transport and a place to stay. Finances seemed to be the main challenge for some students because of lack of finances without bursaries, financial aid and employment remains a burning issue in SA. Students went through various channels to overcome their challenges during their first-year by looking for a job in order to provide financial security. One student chose to use drugs to face the challenges. Students are taking a huge responsibility of ensuring that they study to have a better future.

With reference to adjusting to the academic environment, the results of the study confirm that Psychology students struggled to adjust to the academic environment more especially on managing their time and workload but less on tutorials and group work. In turn, students learned to plan, prepare and use a time table to study but few were faced with challenges and were assisted by the student's academic success. Other students adjusted to learning through friends, senior students and group work as they prepare their work in time. Students were taking their studies seriously and emphasised on behaviour (attending classes regularly, contacting lecturers, taking notes in class and active listening) and organisation of lectures (well prepared). The university made an effort to avail the resources such as blackboard, tutorials, AFS classes to assist first-year students to succeed academically including the support students received from lecturers. In addition, the lecturer teaching strategies, more support and student centred approach could be implemented to improve the first-year experience at UFS.

Most students preferred to do their work alone because it helps to complete the work in time but the least preferred to work in groups for the reason that it assists to share ideas and help each other. Students used different methods when studying, listening in class, watching videos and summarising notes seemed to be the easiest method for students to remember and understand the work better than any other methods such

as using tables, mind maps and memorising from the text. In writing notes and studying, students spent extra hours apart from the class even though some students were not certain but it's only the effort that counts. Furthermore, these students studied mostly at the place where it was comfortable, quiet and relaxing at the same time.

To see the progress of students, receiving feedback on assignment, tests are vital and also a technique to assist students to improve their marks and to do better thus contributing to student personal/academic development. In a way, it also helped lectures to know whether students understand their work and lecturers provide consultation hours for further enquiries. Some students consulted lecturers for clarity, to understand the content of the module and to improve their academic performance. Moreover, other students also attended tutorial classes to understand better and improve their learning. Those who did not do well were further referred for assistance. Other students preferred to consult tutors and peers to assist than lecturers. Students coped well with the amount of work provided as they prepare in time, using planned schedules. Time management and hard work were the keys to cope with the work. The greatest number of students learned to know the work meaningfully for future purposes, understanding the content of the work and to pass with distinctions. It has been proven by the responses of students that they understood the language of institution of the institution and they taught in English or Afrikaans since they started schooling or in primary/high school.

Out of all the challenges first-year students had, the majority of students had a good experience to share. They enjoyed some Psychology modules, becoming independent and passing examinations and tests. Other students had bad experience of struggling to manage time to study, dealing with too much work load and repeating of some Psychology modules which may lead to retention. In some way, lecturers and academic support is important to the first-year student experience.

4.6 CONCLUSION

The results of the study provided many challenges that first-year students go through. First-year students should be assisted with transition because enrolling at an institution of HE for the first time is challenging and participating students had some expectations. They obviously expected the university to be different from secondary school, starting with work load, professionalism and getting quality education. Some expected to experience racism but it turned out differently and enjoyed residence activities. The HE is not hard as other students expected it to be because they are able to adjust and adopt the university culture, teaching and learning, social and academic environment to name but a few. During the transition period students experienced a lot such as, attending classes at different venues, using the library, the registration process which includes finances to pay tuition fees.

Students experienced myriad challenges of physical environment and some students were overwhelmed by hostel/residence activities. Staying at residence created an exposure for students to make lots of friends and student centre also helped other students to meet new people. Lecture halls were viewed as big as compared to secondary school classrooms and it was a new experience to attend a class with lots of students in it. Another physical environment students experienced were a library where most students studied used other resources to study that aided their learning.

Most students did not struggle to adjust to their social environment. It was easy for them to form relationships, meet new people through group work, social activities such as RAG. Most students did not RAG because it was time consuming even though few students enjoyed it. Making friends on campus was not a struggle to most students even though some had difficulties because they felt alone and were introverts. Furthermore, RAG and hostel activities influenced student learning because of being time-consuming, students spent more time on activities than academic work. This resulted in some students' academic failure.

First-year students struggled to cope with the amount of work such as tests, assignments and examination. To deal with academic work load students should be equipped with skills to manage their studies by planning in time, preparing before and after class, studying hard, seeking assistance, consulting lecturers, peers or

tutors and attending tutorial classes. Lack of support is also one of the factors that affect students' academic success. With the assistance from lecturer's feedback on assignment students are able to learn, understand, to know what is expected of them, and enhance their learning.

First-year experience learning differently, they use study methods based on their preference and depending on the content of the module/ course. The lecturer's teaching style influences student learning such as using videos, mind maps, practical examples and providing slides to students. It is understandable that first-year students would adopt surface approach to learning due to work load and pressure but they should be encouraged to adopt both approaches to learning or deep approach to learning to aid memory and for future purposes.

Throughout the experiences whether good or bad students learn something, they have grown out of it and become better students with vision and ambition to achieve their goals. Having a bad experience can demotivate students to learn, hence there is need for a student centre approach and support from academic staff and tutors.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides discussions on the conclusions and implications of the findings, limitations of the study and possible future research. The study investigated about the learning experiences of Psychology students during their first-year. Psychology students were unaware of the demands of HE in terms of academic workload, independent learning, learning environment and access to resources. The results showed that the personal environment fit is an important aspect in terms of student retention, as the incompatibility between student expectation and university experience is a primary cause of attrition (2.3.3). The results of the study will be used to inform Psychology lecturers about the learning experience of first-year students.

This comprehensive mini-dissertation is divided into five chapters namely the background of the study, the literature review, research design and methodology, research findings as well as the conclusions, implications and limitations.

Chapter one presented the problem statement and the background to the study. The main aim of research question and the secondary questions were stated (see 1.2.1). The research design and methodology were outlined (see 1.4) and the value of the study was clearly stated (see 1.5). Ethical clearance matters were also discussed such as anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of all data collected (see 1.6) The permission to conduct the study was obtained from the head of Psychology department at the UFS (see appendix 2) and students signed informed consent forms (see Appendix 1).

The literature review was presented in Chapter 2 to explore the first-year students' learning experiences. The theories of learning (see 2.2), students' transition into HE institutions (see 2.3), learning styles and learning approaches (see 2.4), were also investigated. Various factors affecting students' academic success (see 2.6) as well as challenges that first-year students experience during their first-year were also discussed (see 2.7).

The qualitative research methodology were applied in this study supported by quantitative research and was explained in Chapter 3 (see 3.3). Data was collected from Psychology students by means of an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix 3, 3.3 and 3.5.1). An interview was conducted with one of the Psychology lecturers (see 3.3. and 3.5.2). Data was analysed through content analysis and themes that developed from the questionnaires and the interview (see 3.5). A purposeful convenience sampling method was used to select the diverse population regarding ethnicity, age and gender (see 3.4).

In Chapter 4 research findings were reported on learning experiences of 59 first-year Psychology students at the UFS. The finding from the interview which was conducted with one lecturer of first-year Psychology students was also reported. It was concluded that students experience learning with some difficulty and they become disorientated especially during the first semester. The lecturer suggested that all first-year programmes should be orientated to assist students with transition and to overcome academic challenges such understanding teaching context and managing time. Applying different teaching styles would be ideal to assist student's with their learning styles to study a specific module or course.

5.2. PURPOSE STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the study was to identify the learning experiences that Psychology student's experience during their first-year of study at the UFS. The following secondary research questions guided the researcher in answering the overarching questions as stated in 1.2.1:

- What are the learning challenges that first-year Psychology students' experience at institutions of HE?
- What factors contribute to first-year Psychology students not succeeding academically at the UFS?
- What strategies can the UFS implement to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning challenges?

The first secondary research question focused to explore the various learning challenges student's experience during their first-year. The second secondary research question guided the researcher to examine what factors contribute to students' failure. The last secondary research question allowed the researcher to investigate what strategies can be implemented to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning problems.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the findings from the literature review, the questionnaire and the interview this section presents the conclusion and implications of the study within the framework of the research questions. The researcher will draw conclusions from the empirical study and substantiate findings from the literature review.

5.3.1 What are the learning challenges that first-year Psychology students experience at an institution of HE

The first secondary research question sought to investigate what learning challenges first-year Psychology students experience during their first-year at an institution of higher education. In the literature review learning challenges were integrated with other experiences of first-year students which often give rise to learning challenges.

5.3.1.1 *Transition*

Students experience transition from secondary school to HE in many ways and students mentioned that it was not easy. Transition is the process of movement from secondary school to HE (Hultberg *et al.* 2008:48). This was the process where expectations of some students were achieved or not achieved in terms of learning, teaching style and workload as students mentioned that it was challenging, complicated at times and that they were unprepared which means that students are not adequately prepared to begin university studies (see 2.1). The implication of this is that they could fail or drop out of the course because they did not know how to study effectively on this (university) level (see 2.3.3, 2.4.1, 4.4.18.1 and 4.4.18.2). One of the most difficult transition challenges is that students must learn how to learn with understanding (see 2.4.1, 4.4.18.3). Students who drop out or fail are often also

left with study debt and have to find employment to repay their debt. Other students had a good transition as they become independent and felt that it was a positive change (see 2.3.1 and 4.3.4). Fortunately, there are extended programmes for first-year students such as life skills modules (VBL and AFS) to assist students with transition through the support of lecturers. Harvey *et al.* (2006:18) agree that students really need assistance with transition and Fisher *et al.* (2011:225) confirm that students adapt well through support and communication from lecturers (see 2.3.1).

The expectations of first-year students regarding the institution varied from one student to the other. The possible expectations were workload compared to secondary school. Others mentioned good leadership, professionalism and hard work. It is worrying that some students expected to be faced with racism (see 4.3.3.1). The institution still has a long way to go to deal with transformation and language of instruction was an issue at the UFS. However, the newly approved language policy will be phased in as from January 2017 according to an implementation plan (see 2.7.1) which will benefit students who struggled with the understanding of the language of tuition. The new language policy will, among other decisions, “contribute to the development of Sesotho and isiZulu as HE language within the context of the needs of the university’s different campuses”. This implies that in the near future students will be assisted in their mother tongue which will have far-reaching effects on their understanding of the subject content.

Although the empirical study did not investigate how many students withdrew from the subject or course, literature review clearly states that many students withdraw from university during the time of transition. Personal change, social change, insufficient information and orientation, cultural and community, economic development and academic changes are associated with transition issues. Other factors perceived to have an impact on students’ transition to HE, such as students’ approaches to learning, self-confidence, personality, students’ perception and attitude towards the course were addressed earlier (see 2.3.2). Students repeated their first-year due to unfamiliarity with the subject Psychology, using a computer, being unable to deal with workload, not understanding the content of the module, language itself and not paying attention to studies (see 4.4.24).

5.3.1.2 Financial challenges

Finances will constantly be a challenge to some students as they struggle with transport, and finding a place to stay and this all leads to stress. Students' financial challenges often deny them access to HE and to furthering their studies (see 2.6.2 and 4.3.5.2). These students took the responsibility of looking for a job to pay for their studies and did not give up easily. Although some students indicated that they learned to manage their finances others had hope and faith as they kept on praying and eventually got a loan from their family members to pay tuition fees (see 4.3.6.3). This showed eagerness that students really wanted to study with or without any obstacles (see 4.3.6.3 and 4.3.6.4). Some students even resort to taking drugs in order to cope with among other obstacles, financial problems which ultimately have an impact on their learning. It is even worse when students have to study on an empty stomach. Students are afraid to talk about their challenges and often do not know whom to talk to. Fortunately, the UFS has established the No student's hungry campaign to assist such students (see 4.3.5.2).

It was also concluded from the results that some students had no financial problems due to the fact that they had bursaries, loans, National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) financial support and parents who paid for their tuition fees. A few students indicated their appreciation for their parents for what they had to go through to pay for their children's tuition fees. This made these students study even harder in order not to disappoint their parents (see 4.3.5.2).

5.3.1.3 Transport challenges

It was concluded that transport challenges such as the time to travel to class, late classes and lack of funds to travel were also factors that had an influence on the learning of students. Many of the students had to use public transport such as taxis and often did not have money to pay for it.

The majority of first year Psychology students however did not struggle with transport as they either lived on the campus or within walking distance from the

campus. Other students were fortunate enough to have cars to travel to campus while others experienced difficulties such as staying far from campus and had to attend late classes (see 4.3.5.1).

5.3.1.4 *Place of residence*

Most students experienced no challenges in finding a place to stay as some mentioned that they stayed at home, in student accommodation and campus residences such as hostels. Some students moved in with a relative such as cousin and other students decided to move closer to campus to reduce financial costs (see 4.3.5.3). These students are taking the responsibility of “thinking out of the box” in order to manage their financial situation (see 4.3.6.3).

It is clear that most of the students who faced difficulties do not give up easily and would come up with plans to overcome challenges on finances, transport, and finding a place to stay. Students also asked for assistance from other students or a friend to accompany them to campus when they have to attend late classes at night. Forming relationships /friendships with other students is important during first-year of study.

5.3.1.5 *Student learning experience*

- **Social challenges**

Learning does not take place only in the classroom but also socially. The possible social challenges that were noted included adapting to a new environment and forming groups, finding own identity, making friends, balancing the demand of campus activities and workload, coping with the exposure of diverse cultures and duties of residence (4.3.2.6). In light of the above, these factors contributed to inhibit some first-year students learning and ultimately being academically unsuccessful.

Psychology students adjusted well with fellow students and it was also not hard to make friends. The interaction between students during group work sessions assisted some students to talk about their problems. Contrary to this notion it was difficult for other students to adjust to diverse cultures (see 4.3.2.1). This was bound to happen

because first-year students come from different backgrounds and cultures. To some students it was merely a learning process to communicate with other students. Campus/hostel/residence activities such as sports made it easy for students to meet new people (see 4.3.2.2). With hostel activities including RAG (Receive and Give) activities, it was concluded that most students did not enjoy these activities because they were time consuming, caused sleepless nights and long days. These activities adversely affected their studies. The struggle to manage workload often resulted in failure or poor performance (see 4.3.2.6). Adversely there were those students who enjoyed the social activities, had fun and made unforgettable memories (see 4.3.2.3-4.3.2.4).

- **Deep and surface learning**

Students who adopt a surface approach to learning learn mostly to pass a test or an examination. They aim to get the task out of the way as soon as possible. These students mostly memorise factual content which permits them to pass only for the purpose of meeting the course requirements (see 2.4.1).

Students who adopt a deep approach to learning engage with the learning task meaningfully, apply knowledge and focus on understanding a task (see 2.4.1). It is clear that some students apply a surface learning approach because they want to pass, get done with a module and complete their course. Others explained that they lack time management and there are too many modules to study (see 2.4.1 and 4.4.18.2). Mayya *et al.* (2004:1) assert that one of the reasons why students apply a surface learning approach is because of work load. Some students could not cope with the work load hence they applied a surface learning approach. The findings are congruent with literature that students do apply a surface learning approach in those circumstances (see 2.4.1). Most of the students, however, coped with the amount of work because they prepared on time, worked hard (see 4.4.16) and even learned best when they listened and paid attention to lecturers in class.

Most students applied a deep learning approach to use it for future purposes such as careers and transforming previous knowledge and unfolding it into new knowledge through their experience (Abbott *et al.* 2009:45 and 2.2.1.2). Students who applied a deep learning approach, wanted to study the depth of the module, to understand the

content and apply their knowledge meaningfully (see 4.4.20 and 2.4.4). The lecturer affirmed that students should apply a deep learning approach in Psychology modules because of application of theories (4.4.20). Furthermore, Biggs and Tang (2011:36) state that intrinsic motivation drives students to apply a deep learning approach (see 2.4.1). The implication is that lecturers should motivate students and teach in such a way that students become intrinsically motivated to understand and apply the content meaningfully.

- **Learning styles**

First-year students apply different learning styles. Learning styles refers to the way in which students learn best and acquire and recall information (Rassool *and* Rawaf, 2007:36; Ramayah *et al.* 2009:66, and 2.4.1). Some students simply applied an auditory learning style according to Wooldridge (in Sims and Sims, n.d.) (see 2.4.1; 4.4.17.1 and 5.3.1.4).

Learning styles are defined as a manner in which learners acquire, store and retrieve information and socialise with peers as preferred by their personal qualities (see 2.4.1 par 4). It was established that most Psychology students preferred to listen to a lecturer because they provided relevant examples, simplified the work and made it easy to follow and understand (see 2.4 and 4.4.15). Other students preferred to watch videos, do practical tasks and take notes in class because it helped them to remember over a long period of time, to understand the work and because it aids their memory. These different learning styles of students' complement Gardner's multiple intelligences which provides students with an opportunity to develop intellectual ability (see 2.4.1) and experiential learning characteristics of Kolb (see 2.4.3). It is a true reflection of what was found in the literature review that students use a specific learning style which suits their personal learning preference as explained in Kolb's experiential learning theory (see 2.4.3).

5.3.1.6 Teaching and learning

The results showed that some Psychology students acknowledged the principle of being independent learners but they still need assistance of becoming autonomous learners. In terms of learning students adjusted well by means of receiving help from

other students and through group work. It was difficult for other students at first but as time progressed they managed to get used to it. Students took the initiative of preparing in and before class and also used extra resources to make it easy to understand the work. However, it is disconcerting to have learned that students also use drugs to cope with the work (see 4.4.2 and 5.3.1.2). Other students participated in class, recorded lecturers and asked questions in class to help with adjustment to teaching environment. Not all students affirmed that lecturers met their needs at being helpful (see 4.4.5), but the majority of students understood lecturers in class, because the content of the module was explained thoroughly and lecturers used slides to summarise the work (see 2.5.1 and 4.4.15). The literature attests that; the combination of students' notes and the lecturer's slides forms a strong foundation for students to pass the course (see 2.5.1).

Psychology students differ from one another and it was not expected that they will apply the same learning methods during their first-year of study. According to Gardner (in Booth and O'Brien, 2008:81) multiple intelligence illustrates how students learn differently (see 2.4.1). Most students preferred to listen to the lecturer in class because they understood the work better and lecturers made use of relevant examples to simplify the work (see 2.4.1 and 4.4.17.1). Others students clearly preferred to take notes because it helped them to remember and to understand the work (see 4.4.17.4). Videos and practical activities in class were ideal to aid students' learning and also to apply theories (2.4.2; 4.1.17.1 and 4.4.17.3). These students applied visual and auditory learning styles and also reflective observation and active experimentation according to Kolb's experiential learning cycle (see 2.4.3 and 4.4.17).

- **Language of tuition**

During the teaching and learning process language is a fundamental key for students to understand what is being taught in class. Some students experienced a problem with the language of tuition because they are not English first language speakers and this could be indicated as a language barrier (see 4.4.19.1 and 5.3.1.1 par 3). Other students were satisfied with how the lecturer was teaching in class but referred to "unclear accent" (see 4.4.2 and 4.4.15) meaning that they did not understand the lecturer due to his/her accent. Students come from secondary schools where

languages other than English are their first language (see Table 4.1). The majority of students confirmed understanding the language of tuition because they were bilingual, could speak English and it is their mother tongue. Although other students did not understand the language of tuition they did affirm that all students should be taught in English (see 4.4.19.1). The UFS has an approved language policy and it was concluded that English will be the primary academic language for all undergraduate and post-graduate studies. Other parallel medium languages such as Afrikaans, Sesotho or Zulu will continue and be supported (see 2.7.1 and 5.3.1.1 par 3).

- **Tutorial classes**

Psychology students made use of tutorial classes as they claimed that these classes helped them to understand the work, to share their learning experiences with their peers and other academic staff members. Other students were of the opinion that tutorials did not help them because they understood the work (see 4.4.22.4). According to the literature, tutorials are important to assist students to apply knowledge gained in class, to share ideas, for discussions purposes and also to provide an opportunity for students to interact with one another (see 2.5.5). The findings of the study clearly showed that tutorial classes are important to Psychology students. Although tutorials are offered, it was also concluded that some students prefer not to attend tutorials because they do not regard them as an important factor that can assist them with the improvement of their learning. Tutorial classes are featured as a central theme to assist students who lacked the necessary foundation for a module, to share ideas and support students (see 2.5).

- **Class attendance**

First-year Psychology students attended first-year lectures because it was important to take notes during classes. Class attendance is every student's responsibility but some students did not attend classes due to classes being full (see 4.4.4). Initially moving from one class to the other which was very far apart in comparison to classes in secondary school made it difficult for some students to attend because in secondary school they were used to sitting in one class for the whole day, where teachers were the ones moved from class to class (see 4.4.4). The class timetable

structure was also mentioned as some students were happy to choose the times they want to attend classes and enjoyed attending classes. Other students adjusted well since attending classes was not an issue.

Some students confirmed that lecturers were always prepared to teach, offer assistance, and accommodate student's needs (see 4.4.5). Students took a responsibility to contact lecturers during consultation hours and asked questions in class (see 4.4.5). Lecturers do have an open door policy to assist students who are struggling with the content of the module (see 4.4.7). However, other students were of the opinion that lecturers did not offer support, were uncaring in meeting students' needs. The implication of this is that lecturers should support students intensively and motivate students to study hard and perform well. This could enhance students learning and academic success.

- **Constructive feedback**

Psychology students claimed that they did receive feedback from lecturers during their first-year of study (see 4.4.13). Constructive feedback is implemented to develop students' skills and enhance learning (see 2.5.3). Students understood lecturers' feedback on assignments and tests because it helped them to understand the work. Lecturers explained thoroughly and students knew their mistakes (see 4.4.13.1). It was concluded that feedback was provided on students' work and it really helped students to pass as lecturers offered support and invited students for one-on-one sessions (see 4.4.13.1). Other Psychology students contacted tutors or attended tutorial classes for further clarity (see 4.4.13.1), although others did not understand lecturers feedback which did not help them to improve academically (see 4.4.15).

The next section provides conclusions obtained from the results of the empirical investigation and aims to answer the second secondary research question.

5.3.2 What factors contribute to first-year Psychology students not succeeding academically?

The learning challenges that first-year Psychology students experienced at the UFS were academic work load (see 4.1.1, 5.3.1.1 and 5.3.1.5) such as assignments, tests, and examinations. Other challenges were transport (see 4.3.5.1 and 5.3.1.3), finances (see 2.7.2, 4.3.5.2, 4.4.6 and 5.3.1.2) and finding a place to stay (see 4.3.5.3 and 5.3.1.4). Psychology students could not cope with work load which was unbearable and nerve-wracking and test week was even worse (see 4.4.6). As a result these students could not to keep up with their studies even those who repeated their first-year because they did not understand the content of the Psychology module which was new to them because of, the language, some also had difficulties to explain the work in their own words: others struggled to use a computer and sometimes it was simply because students were not focused (see table 4.4 to 4.8). It is expected that this will continue to be the case for first-year students because of the work load presented to them at a much faster pace than they are used to in secondary school. To manage the workload other students used time-tables, prepared in time, asked help from senior students, practised self-discipline and attended tutorial classes (see 4.4.1 and 4.4.4). It is important that students are trained during induction/orientation week on the management of their time, finances and workload.

With regard to learning experience of students, most students showed that the lecture hall is one of the main challenges they experienced, bearing in mind that high school classrooms are smaller than HE lecture halls with large numbers of students attending. Due to the announcement of the Minister of HE that tuition fees will be increased in 2016 students started participation in protest marches throughout the country at institutions of higher education in the #feesmustfall# campaign protesting for a zero-percent increase which ultimately led to the announcement by the minister that study fees would not increase in 2016 (see 2.7.2).

Apart from this other widespread actions were launched by students on campuses. The devastating consequences were that buildings were burnt and classes had to be suspended. This also had been and still is, a challenge that first-year students and

other students experienced throughout the country and which could have an impact on the academic progression of students.

Other factors contributing to first-year Psychology students not succeeding academically are a lack of academic support from lecturers and tutors (see 4.4.6 and 4.4.7), unpreparedness (see 4.3.4) and lack of time management (see 4.4.16). Students had explicitly expressed that receiving motivation, support and advice from lecturers had assisted them to understand the content of the module better, to apply different study methods and improve academically. It is also a student responsibility to use consultation hours offered by lecturers (see 4.4.20.1). Biggs and Tang (2011:37) highlighted that motivation is a significant factor to student's academic activities (see 2.5.2). Students expressed that motivation and support from friends and especially family members assisted them to succeed academically because they did not want to disappoint their parents but wanted to make them proud and to realise their dreams of becoming a professional such as Psychologist (see 4.4.27).

Further interesting results from the study were that the majority of students had the best experience during their first-year. This was due to academic achievements such as passing with distinctions and enjoying particular modules of Psychology (see 4.4.26). Most academic achievements motivate students to study hard, build confidence and boost self-confidence. In turn, some bad experiences de-motivate students to study further, such as failing, heavy workload which causes stress, lack of support from parents, the registration process and financial constraints which may lead to retention (4.4.27).

5.3.3 Strategies to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning challenges

The aim of this research question was to obtain possible strategies (as suggested by the students) that the UFS can implement to assist first-year Psychology students with their learning challenges. Extra tutorial classes, extra support from lecturers and tutors and taking responsibility as a student to study hard were suggestions that students came up with in the results (see 4.4.6.1).

In terms of study methods, Psychology students preferred to summarise the learning content when they are studying because it was easier to read and understand their own hand writing (see 4.4.10.1). Other students used mind maps because it is also easy for them to use. The mutual responses in all study methods students used to study were that they found it easy to remember, understood the work better and helped to study the content of the module. Students used a specific study method that suited their preference and always attempted to find an easy way to study and understand the content of the module (see 4.4.10). While students applied different study methods, they also knew how much time they spent per week. However, the bulk of students could not remember or were not sure of how much time they spent outside their scheduled class during the first-year. Nonetheless, students acknowledged the significance of time to study before and after classes (see Table 4.3; 4.4.11).

Libraries are not the only places where students prefer to study. Fortunately, the UFS arrange for the library to remain open 24hours a day for students to study during examinations. Students also preferred to study at their place of residence. Therefore, Psychology students mainly studied at a place of residence due to comfort, convenience, safety and because it is a familiar place. It is common for students to select the place of study where they feel more relaxed, where it is quiet and comfortable (see 4.4.12).

When it comes to working in groups or alone, most students prefer to work alone because it is simple, they manage to finish work in time, are able to concentrate and perform better, but when working in groups they are afraid of being frustrated, and because of group dynamics such as being disorganised, and others not participating fully in the group (see 4.4.8; 4.4.9). Strategies that can be recommended for students to participate in group work are to encourage active learning, and interdependence; lecturers should explain why certain work is done in groups; explain the responsibilities of each student need to play in the group, use class activities to build cohesive groups and use peer assessment to rate each student who participates in the group. This will enforce students to contribute in the group. Most students who did not participate in the group know how to function effectively in the group.

Despite certain challenges that students encountered they chose Psychology as a career because they find it interesting and like to work with people (see 4.2.3). Some students merely chose it as an additional module to complete the degree or to follow other career paths such as Occupational Therapy, Criminology, Social Work and Teaching (see 4.2.4).

Although students found the Student Centre was always full of students, they experienced it as a place where they could relax, buy food and meet new people. Students have indicated the library as a challenge due to space, sometimes crowded, being big and scary at the same time as compared to secondary school class rooms. The library is mostly regarded as a good place for students to study (see Table 4.2 and 4.3.1.1- 4.3.1.6).

Many students felt ignored by lecturers and subdued about contacting them even about academic issues. Students also described lecturers as uncaring; not being good and not explaining the work (see 4.4.5 and 4.4.7). There is an emphasis on the need for higher education to create connections with first-year students. Students anticipate an environment significantly different to what they experienced in high school and this gap may lead to feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction, and displeasure resulting in the student withdrawing from university (see 2.3.3). These problems can be avoided by orientating the first-year students very early in the year, with tours of the campus to familiarise them with the physical spaces, introducing them to their lecturers and training them in how to manage their safety, finances, workload and social life, among others.

Some lecturers took an initiative of providing consultation hours for students. Although some students did experience support from lecturers, most first-year Psychology students did not access the support from lecturers or make an appointment although it was provided to them (see 2.4.4 and 4.4.7). However, students did not seek help from lecturers because they are shy, lack courage, fear to approach and view it as a failure (see 4.4.22). Besides seeking academic help from lecturers, some students preferred to ask their peers because they are supportive, and understanding while others were of the opinion that they lack knowledge, and that they are not qualified or insightful (see 4.4.23). Furthermore, other students preferred to ask their parents, friends and family members or professionals such as

Psychologists whom they regarded as more experienced than their tutors and programme facilitators (see 4.4.24).

5.3.4 Implications of the research findings of the study

There is a huge gap between secondary school and HE. The student's transition is far more than focusing on academic learning as the HE environment is where students shape their own identities and develop personal attributes. To start with, the orientation week should be extended to focus on students' respective degree study where courses students are psychologically prepared, to know in depth what their degree entails, their expectations and what to do to achieve their success. Students should be fully orientated on how to choose a course or degree before they enrol at an institution of HE. This could be beneficial to assist first-year students to obtain clarity about their degree of study or program and course goals and exposing them to careers they are studying. In this way, students will be fully equipped with knowledge regarding the degree they want to pursue.

Some first-year students lack knowledge regarding the content of the module, a self-directed learning orientation, how assessment criteria are being used, the ability to effectively handle work load and time management. Students are not well equipped in terms of skills such as critical and creative thinking, problem-solving skills. First-year students struggle to prepare for tests and examinations, apply theories, work co-operatively in groups, understanding teaching and learning methods and having a holistic perspective on how learning areas fit cohesively. The implications of the aforementioned is that students should attend orientation or inductions programmes at the beginning of the year to prepare them for strategies to organise themselves through teaching and learning as a whole.

It terms of classroom environment, it is important for lecturers to establish instructional approaches that foster engaged learning during lecture classes. For first year students to be successful, lecturers should provide opportunities for students to be an active participant in purposeful learning experiences during lectures or tutorial classes. The aim is to ensure that first-year programmes provide adequate

intellectual stimulation in terms of using practical examples that applies to their field of study.

When it comes to RAG or any other residence activities during the first term, the institution should reduce the number of activities for first-year because too many activities make it difficult for students to manage time, balance social activities and academic workload. These activities should be performed before commencement of classes. This will help students to have more time to study instead of spending too much on social activities. There are strategies that may assist first-year students to gain a better understanding of how much work is required for specific courses or subjects. Students should be clearly informed on how to manage their time effectively, where lecturers assist first year students to develop groups and research skills. This may assist students to understand what activities are worth more time and should be valued.

The literature of the study has revealed that students are encouraged to adopt a deep learning approach rather than to adopt surface learning approach. Both lecturers and tutors should provide a student-centred learning environment in which students, especially those who do not adopt a deep learning approach due to workload should participate in constructive learning activities. This will ultimately assist first-year students to apply critical thinking skills.

5.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The questionnaire was distributed among Psychology students in the beginning of their second year during their tutorial classes. Although the questionnaire was not piloted, the time aspect was not taken into consideration and some of the students could not answer the whole questionnaire in time and left out some sections. It may be that the questionnaire was too long to be completed during the one-hour tutorial class. Three lecturers were requested to do the interview but only one was interviewed because the other two lecturers were not available for the interview at that time. This could mean that one lecturer's views may not be representative of all the lecturers who teach first-year Psychology students.

5.5 POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was intended to explore the learning challenges of Psychology students experience during their first-year of study. The learning experience is affected by many spectrums which could impact the success of students. First-year programmes should be the driving force to avoid students being confused, frustrated and overwhelmed by various challenges such as finances.

The HE institutions need to take a look into changing students learning experience by orientating and preparing students in secondary school for HE environment. Teachers should be trained thoroughly on how to prepare their Grade 12 learners for university so that when the students get to university they do not experience such a culture shock. Perhaps, this will change the pre-higher education first-year students learning experience.

More research could be done on how to develop first-year students' critical, creative, application and problem solving skills because they struggle to apply theory into practice, understanding the content of the module meaningfully and explaining in their own words. Further research is needed to explore what possessions of tutorial interaction are most likely used to stimulate a deep learning approach than a surface learning approach. Studies showed that first-year students apply different learning methods and lecturers also use different teaching methods. Most students used study methods that suit their preference or worked best but need to establish what study methods are best suited to study Psychology especially during first-year. Lecturers and tutors should look into considering what study methods aid student learning.

5.6 CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to explore learning challenges that first-year Psychology students experience at an institution of HE. From the results of the study, a successful transition from high school to university is not merely due to academic ability, but depends on the ability to make a quick adjustment to the academic learning environment, social integration, peer group interaction and extracurricular activities that involve greater independence and individual responsibility than students' expectations from the beginning of the year. These interactions with the HE environment lead to review goals and intentions that affect students' decision making and also help to shape the students' progression through the university experience (Harvey *et al.* 2006).

In addition to transition to university other issues for students were generally identified such as the complexity of the university and classes, developing an independent learning style, adjusting to various social environments, and also still developing skills in assignments, tests and examination writing. Critical thinking, problem solving and using a computer are prominent academic issues during the first-year of study.

It is evident that students need more support by being thoroughly orientated in terms of what they should expect of the HE environment for their specific modules or degree they are studying. This will hopefully provide them with the basis to develop into successful university students who will enter the world of work as confident and competent young adults.

In closing I would like to adapt this statement from the Carnegie Mellon University (Eberly Centre for Teaching Excellence, 2002:2) that it was not expected that first-year Psychology students will not experience learning challenges, be it social or academic to name but few. At the same time these first-year students are building personal relationships, establishing careers, maintaining their lifestyle and developing their identity.

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APPENDIX 1: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Researcher:

Motaung N.F
Die Wilgers 25
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Tel: 073 7888 513

Supervisor:

Rika van Schoor
PO Box 339
Bloemfontein
9300
Tel:051 401 3799

Date:

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear participant

I would like to invite you to take part in this research project titled:

Learning experiences of first year Psychology students at an institution of Higher Education.

This study is about the learning experience of first-year Psychology students. The reason we are doing this study is to identify learning challenges that Psychology student's experience during their first year of study at the University of the Free State.

The possible risk to you in taking part in this study is your identity and we have taken the following steps to protect you from these risks: your identity remains anonymous and information obtained in the study will be kept strictly confidential.

I am sure you will benefit from this study as a first-year Psychology lecturer. While I greatly appreciate your participation in this important study and valuable contribution you can make, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part in this study. If you do choose to take part, and an issue arises which makes you uncomfortable, you may at any time stop your participation with no further repercussions.

If you experience any discomfort or unhappiness with the way the research is being conducted, please feel free to contact me directly to discuss it, and also note that you are free to contact my study supervisor (indicated above).

Should any difficult personal issue arise during the course of this research; I will endeavour to see that a qualified expert is contacted and able to assist you.

Yours sincerely

Date:.....

.....
Motaung N.F

Please fill in and return this page. Keep the above page for future reference

Study: Learning challenges that first-year Psychology students experience at the University of the Free State.

Researcher: (enter researcher's name here)

Name and surname: _____

Age: _____

Enter inclusion criteria type here: First year Psychology lecturer

Contact no: _____

I hereby give free informed consent to participate in the above mentioned research study. I understand what the study is about, why I am participating and what the risks and benefits are. I was also informed by the researcher that my identity will remain anonymous.

I give the researcher permission to make use of the data gathered from my participation, subject to the stipulations she has indicated in the above letter that all the data collected from me will remain confidential.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY AT UFS

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA



UFS·UV
HUMANITIES
GEESTESWETENSKAPPE

25 January 2012

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I herewith grant permission to Nthabiseng Motaung to conduct focus groups with first and second year Psychology students as well as interviews with Dr Tadi, Dr George and Ms Nel who are lecturers in the Department of Psychology.

Please contact the lecturers before you proceed with the focus groups.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'KGF Esterhuysen'.

Prof KGF Esterhuysen

Departmental Chair

**APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONNAIRE OF FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENT'S
LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

<p>QUESTIONNAIRE: FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES</p>

SECTION A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The purpose of this section is to gather biographical information of the 2013 first year students who participate in the study. Please mark the appropriate answer with a cross (X).

Date: DD/MM/2014

1. Age

15-19		20-25		26-30		Other	
-------	--	-------	--	-------	--	-------	--

2. Gender

Male	Female
------	--------

3. Home language

Mark your preferred language with a cross (X)

a) Afrikaans	
b) English	
c) IsiZulu	
d) Sesotho	
e) Setswana	
e) Other please specify.....	

4. Race

Black		Coloured		Indian		White		Asian	
-------	--	----------	--	--------	--	-------	--	-------	--

5. High school language of instruction/ medium of instruction

Afrikaans	
English	
Other	

6. Have you chosen Psychology as a career choice?

Yes	No
-----	----

6.1. If yes, explain why you have chosen Psychology as a career choice?

--

6.2. If no, explain why Psychology is not a career choice?

--

SECTION B: LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

A) STUDENT'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

7. Explain how you experienced the University of the Free State's physical environment when you arrived at the beginning of your first year in terms of the following: (You can mark more than one option with a cross (X) and provide an explanation(s) of your marked option(s) in the space provided below

- 7.1 Hostel
- 7.2 Student house
- 7.3 Student centre
- 7.4 Lecture halls
- 7.5 Library
- 7.6 Other

--

8. Explain how you adjusted to the social environment of the university as a first-year Psychology student in terms of:

8.1 Fellow students

8.2 Making friends:

8.3 Hostel activities

8.4 Rag

8.5 Any other

8.6 Did any of the above mentioned (8.1-8.5) have an influence on your learning during your first year?

Yes	No
-----	----

8.6.1 If yes, please explain why the above mentioned influenced your learning.

8.6.2 If no, explain why the above mentioned did not influence your learning.

9. Before you enrolled at the UFS, what expectations did you have of the university?

10. In your opinion how did you experience your transition from school to university?

11. What other challenges have you experienced as a first-year Psychology student with the following:

11.1 Transport

11.2 Finances

11.3 A place to stay

11.4 Any other

12. How did you overcome these challenges?

B) ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

13. Explain how you adjusted academically as a first-year Psychology student in terms of the following:

13.1 Academic workload

13.2 Learning

13.3 Assignments, tests and examinations

13.4 Attending of classes

13.5 The lecturer

13.6 Any other

14. Did you experience any academic challenges as a first-year Psychology student?

Yes	No
-----	----

14.1 If yes, please explain what academic challenges you experienced.

14.2 If no, please explain your response.

14.3 What factors do you think can contribute to the academic success of first-year Psychology students?

15. Did you receive support from your lecturers during your first year?

Yes	No
-----	----

15.1 If yes, how did your lecturer(s) support you?

15.2 If no, why do you think you did not receive support from your lecturers?

16. Did you prefer to work on your own as a first-year Psychology student?

Yes	No
-----	----

16.1 If yes, explain why did you prefer to work on your own?

16.2 If no, explain why you preferred not to work on your own?

17. Did you prefer to work in a group as a first-year Psychology student?

Yes	No
-----	----

17.1 If yes, explain why you preferred to work in a group.

17.2 If no, please explain why you did not prefer to work in a group.

18. What study/learning methods do you prefer to apply when you learn for tests or examinations? Please mark your preferences with a cross (X).

18.1 Summaries

18.2 Tables

18.3 Mind maps

18.4 Memorising from text

18.5 Other

18.6 Please explain why you use the selected study method(s).

19. How much time per week did you spend on your studies/learning outside of scheduled class during your first year?

20. Where did you study as a first-year Psychology student? (e.g library, place of residence, any other place)?

20.1 Please explain why you preferred to study at the place that you mentioned.

21. Did you understand the feedback you received from your lecturers on your assignments and tests?

Yes	No
-----	----

21.1 If yes, explain why you understood the lecturer's feedback on your assignments and tests.

21.2 If no, explain why you did not understand the lecturer's feedback on your assignments and tests.

22. Did feedback from lecturers on your assignments and tests assist you to improve academically?

Yes No

22.1 If yes, please explain how it assisted you.

22.2 If no, explain why lecturer's feedback did not assist you to improve academically.

23. Did you follow/understand the lecturer(s) in class?

Yes No

23.1 If yes, what is it that the lecturer(s) did to help you to follow/understand his/her lecture?

23.2 If no please explain why you did not follow/understand the lecturer in class?

24. Did you cope with the amount of assignments that you had to complete during a semester?

Yes	No
-----	----

24.1 If yes, explain how you managed to cope with the amount of assignments.

24.2 If no, explain why you did not cope with the amount of assignments.

25. Did you learn best when you:(Please mark options with a cross (X)).

- 25.1 Watch video's in class
- 25.2 Listen to the lecturer
- 25.3 Did practical tasks in class
- 25.4 Take notes
- 25.5 Other

25.6 Please explain your selected options that you marked in the above question.

The following definitions apply to questions 26 to question 28.

Students who adopt a **surface approach to learning** learn only to pass a test or an examination. They aim to get the task out of the way as soon as possible. These students mostly memorise factual content which permit them to pass only for the purpose of meeting the course requirements. Surface learners do not take their learning as serious as deep learners and are mostly extrinsically motivated.

Students who adopt a **deep approach to learning** engage with the learning task meaningfully, apply knowledge and focus on understanding a task. Deep learners take a serious interest in what they have to learn and are mostly intrinsically motivated.

26. Do you memorise tasks when you study only to pass?

Yes	No
-----	----

26.1 If yes, why do you memorise tasks and learn only to pass?

26.2 If no, please explain.

27. Do you learn just enough to pass your tests?

Yes	No
-----	----

27.1 If yes, explain why you learn enough to pass your test.

27.2 If no, please explain.

28. Do you apply the knowledge meaningfully when you study?

Yes No

28.1 If yes, why do you apply knowledge meaningfully?

28.2 If no, explain why you do not apply knowledge meaningfully.

The University of the Free State offers tuition in both English and Afrikaans.

29. Do you understand the language of tuition?

Yes No

29.1 If yes, explain why you do understand the language of tuition.

29.2 If no, explain why you do not understand the language of tuition?

30. As a first-year Psychology student did you ever make an appointment with your lecturer to discuss a problem you experienced with your studies? Yes No

30.1 If yes, for what reasons did you make appointments with your lecturers?

30.2 If no, explain why you did not make appointments with your lecturers?

31. Did you seek academic help from the lecturers? Yes No

31.1 If yes, why did you seek academic help from lecturers?

31.2 If no, please explain why you did not seek academic help from your lecturers.

32. Did you seek academic help from your peers?

Yes	No
-----	----

32.1 If yes, please explain why did you seek academic help from your peers?

32.2 If no, why did you not seek academic help from your peers?

33. Name any other persons that you may have asked for academic help and explain why.

34. Did you attend the tutorial classes for first-year students?

Yes	No
-----	----

34.1 If yes, why did you attend tutorial classes?

34.2 If no, explain why you did not attend tutorial classes?

35. Did you have a study plan during your first-year?

Yes	No
-----	----

35.1 If yes, explain why you used a study plan.

36. Did the study plan contribute to your academic success?

Yes	No
-----	----

36.1 If no, why did you not use a study plan?

37. What motivated you the most as a first-year Psychology student?

38. Did you repeat your first year?

Yes	No
-----	----

If you responded Yes to question 38, please answer question 39 to 43.

39. In your opinion what was the main reason for you repeating your first year?

40. Did you struggle with the subject Psychology?

Yes	No
-----	----

40.1 If yes, in what way did you struggle with Psychology?

41. Did you struggle with any of the other modules academically during your first year?

Yes	No
-----	----

41.1 If yes, what other modules did you struggle with academically and why?

42. Did you understand the content of the above mentioned modules?

Yes	No
-----	----

42.1 If no, explain why you did not understand the content of the modules?

43. What factors contributed to you repeating your first year? Please mark your options with a cross (X) and provide an explanation of your marked option in the space provided below.

- 43.1 Did not understand the content
- 43.2 Too much content to learn
- 43.3 Did not understand the language
- 43.4 Social environment
- 43.5 Did not attend the classes
- 43.6 Financial problems

43.7 Provide any other reason(s) why you repeated your first year.

44. In your opinion, what can be done to assist first year Psychology students to succeed academically?

45. Write down a brief story (one paragraph) about your best experience as a first-year Psychology student.

46. Write down a brief story (one paragraph) about your worst experience as a first-year Psychology student.

END OF QUESTIONNAIRE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY LECTURER

1. What academic challenges do you think students encounter during their first year of study?
2. What social challenges do you think students encounter during their first year of study?
3. In your opinion do you think the social challenges that students experience have an effect on their academic performance? If your answer is yes, in what way do their social challenges have an effect on their academic performance?
4. In your opinion what expectations do first year students have of the university?
5. What factors can contribute to students succeeding academically in their first year?
6. In your opinion what study methods are best suited for first year Psychology students?
7. Do handouts/notes help students with their learning? Explain your response.
8. What teaching style do you prefer to use? (e.g using videos, hand-outs notes, students being interactive, teacher-centred approach, group work in class, any other style/methods) and why do you think it's effective/not effective? How do students respond to the different teaching/facilitation style/methods?
9. Do you reflect on your teaching/facilitation style/method? If yes, why do you reflect on your teaching/facilitation, how often do you reflect and can you provide an example of how you reflected on your teaching/facilitation and perhaps decided to adapt or change your teaching/facilitation approach? If you responded no, why don't you reflect on your teaching/facilitation?
10. Do you expect first year students to only memorise content or apply knowledge meaningfully in tests and examinations on a higher cognitive level. Yes/No, please explain.
11. What was it about the way that you facilitated/taught that helped your students with their learning?
12. Do you have a scheduled time available for students to make appointments with you?
13. Are first year students making appointment(s) with you? Yes/No. If no, what do you think could be the reason for students not making appointments with you?
14. As a lecturer, what do you do when students are not performing well in their tests, assignments and examinations?
15. What is the one thing that you as a lecturer/facilitator would like the first year Psychology students to start doing to help them to be more successful in their learning/studies? How can you assist them in this regard?
16. Do you encourage group work? Yes/No, motivate your answer.
17. How much time in learning the subject Psychology do you think students should spend per week outside the scheduled class?
18. What kind of academic support do you provide your students with?
19. Is it important to provide constructive feedback to students on their tests, assignments and examinations? Yes/No. Please substantiate your answer.

20. What strategies can be implemented to assist first year Psychology students with their learning?
21. If you had an opportunity to really make a difference to a first year student's learning experience(s), what is the one exceptional thing that you will do?
22. What can you do as a lecturer to reach the quiet and shy students in your class?
23. Please tell me briefly when you felt that you really helped students learn during your teaching/facilitation.

END OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for your participation in this interview

APPENDIX 5: ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPLICATION



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Ethics Office

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20 August 2012

ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPLICATION:

LEARNING CHALLENGES THAT FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS EXPERIENCE AT AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Dear Ms N Motaung

With reference to your application for ethical clearance with the Faculty of Education, I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Ethics Board of the faculty that you have been granted ethical clearance for your research, with the following stipulations:

- The letter of consent appears to be aimed at heads of departments and deans, but refers to these as participants. Participants are in fact those directly taking part in the research, ie: the students. This should be clarified in the letter.
- The participants also need to be clearly informed about various details of the research, such as what will happen with their marks, how data will be collected, the nature of this research being a 'UFS research project'.

Your ethical clearance number, to be used in all correspondence, is:

UFS-EDU-2012-0040

This ethical clearance number is valid for research conducted for one year from issuance. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension in writing.

We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your research project be submitted in writing to the ethics office to ensure we are kept up to date with your progress and any ethical implications that may arise. At the conclusion of your research project, please submit a project report stating how the research progressed and confirming any changes to methodology or practice that arose during the project itself. This report should be under 500 words long and should contain only a brief summary focusing primarily on ethical considerations, issues that may have arisen and steps taken to deal with them during the course of the research.

Thank you for submitting this proposal for ethical clearance and we wish you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Barclay
Faculty Ethics Officer

