

**Capabilities, Resilience and Success of UFS Access Students: Confronting Deficit
Discourses**

by

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement in respect of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy with specialisation in Africa Studies

Centre for Gender and Africa Studies

Faculty of the Humanities

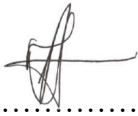
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July 2023

Declaration

I, **Tshegofatso Setilo**, declare that the thesis, *Capabilities, Resilience and Success of UFS Access Students: Confronting Deficit Discourses*, submitted for the Doctoral Degree in the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and have not previously been submitted for a qualification at another institution of higher education. I hereby also cede copyright to the University of the Free State.



Signed:

Date: **28 July 2023**

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my dearest mother, Motshegwa Joyce Elizabeth Setilo (nee Maitse). You have taught me to trust in God, be disciplined, work hard, and never give up, no matter how hard the situation may be. You always remind me that '*Modimo o teng ebile O a tshepagala, wena bereka ka thata ngwanake. Ha o bereka ka thata O tla bona matla a Modimo.*' You have always reminded me that it is only through education that I can achieve anything I set my mind to it.

Abstract

University access in South Africa has been and continues to be a highly contested space overwhelmed by many levels of complexity rooted in the educational, social, and political past and present. Many institutions have adopted several interventions to increase enrolment numbers and academic development. However, these have not translated into equal participation and success in higher education. In an attempt to understand the complex field of access dilemmas in higher education, I explored the capabilities, resilience, and success of students who do not follow traditional access routes in accessing university, with a particular focus on the University Preparation Programme (UPP). The UPP is specifically designed to provide academic preparation and support to students who have the potential but lack the necessary admission requirements for university studies. Furthermore, these students, who do not follow traditional admission entry, often face challenges beyond their control due to disadvantageous circumstances. However, the prevailing deficit discourses often stigmatise these students, depicting them as lacking essential admission requirements, skills, or abilities. Drawing on the capabilities approach, this thesis aimed to confront these deficit discourses by examining the capabilities and resilience of such students and exploring factors that contribute to their success. The capabilities approach provided a framework that sought to understand what a student entering university can be and do. It also highlighted what limits their being and doing. The capabilities approach challenges one to move beyond measurable access statistics into a more nuanced understanding of the agency and well-being of students admitted to a university.

A qualitative study was conducted at the University of the Free State. Fifteen interviews were conducted with students who began their studies in the UPP in the Faculties of the Humanities, Economic and Management Sciences and Natural and Agricultural Sciences. The participants were asked about their experiences of getting into university, their

experiences during and after university. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed. Preliminary findings indicated that UFS-access students possess various capabilities, including self-determination, agency, and resilience. These students demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of challenges and were motivated to succeed. The study also identified various factors contributing to their success, such as environmental support. By shedding light on the capabilities and resilience of UFS access students, the contribution of this study challenged the deficit discourses that perpetuate negative stereotypes and limited expectations of students who do not follow traditional access routes. The study also shared insights on recognising students' potential and advocating for transformative educational practices that promote equity and success. Lastly, the study revealed the importance of recognising and valuing the capabilities of students who do not follow traditional access routes by emphasising the need for institutions of higher learning to adopt a strengths-based approach, creating an environment that fosters resilience and success. By reframing the narrative around access students and celebrating their achievements, this study contributed to literature that advances the argument for a more equitable and inclusive educational outcomes. The findings will inform educational institutions and policymakers about the importance of adopting a strengths-based approach to support marginalised students and create inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: access, success, transition, capabilities approach, resilience, higher education

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, to God, my omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, for giving me the strength and wisdom to produce such academic excellence, and to my Ancestors for always guiding and protecting me. Ke ngwana wa Modimo le Badimo!

Secondly, my supervisor, Dr Sonja Loots. Thank you for your expertise, invaluable guidance, support, and patience throughout this PhD. I would not have done even half of this work if it were not for your guidance. Thank you for always being available, believing in me, motivating me to do better, and encouraging me to finish.

The following people have played a crucial role in my well-being, and their support has made an enormous difference in my academic journey and personal life:

- Dr Merridy Wilson-Strydom for her expertise and knowledge when I first started this project. She added considerably to my research experience.
- My mother, Motshegwa J.E Setilo (nee Maitse): the wind beneath my wings. Her prayers, love, support, encouragement, and belief in me mean the world to me. I could not have done this without her tremendous support and love. She is my biggest cheerleader.
- My precious son, Ontlotlile O.A Kalima, for dealing with a sometimes absent-minded mother but reminding me to take it easy with his boundless kisses, hugs, and infectious smile and laughter. When he started talking, and I was on my laptop, he would ask me, ‘*mama, what you doing?*’ I hope one day he will understand what *mama* was doing. Again, he constantly reminds me what is most important in life, and this is also for you, my boy.
- My sister, Lerato Setilo, for always encouraging me to push and finish. She was always available to listen and step in to take care of ‘*boyza*’ when it was getting

challenging, and she'd always say '*just push, ma se kind, re tlo nna le Doctor mo gae.*'

- Nthabiseng Motaung, for her friendship over the years. Her words of encouragement, support, laughter, dinner dates, and listening kept me sane. Ke a leboga, and I appreciate it more than you can ever know.
- My dear mentor Dr Fumane Khanare, for her constant support, asking about my progress and telling me that '*PhD yona e tlameha ho fela. Push, my dear.*' I appreciate our friendship and mentorship.
- Dr Stephanie Cawood for her support during this entire process. The role she played in this PhD journey cannot go unnoticed. Thank you.
- Dr André van Zyl, my line manager, and Prof Thea de Wet. Thank you for allowing me some time off to finish this thesis. I joined the Academic Development Centre in the last stages of this thesis, and they encouraged and gave me time to complete the PhD.
- Lianda Coetzee and Dina Mashiyane, the two UFS librarians, went out of their way to find articles and books for me when I needed them and for their swift and quick response to my requests.
- Anneke-Jean Diesel for language editing and proofreading.
- Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to the 15 participants for their willingness to participate in this study and share their experiences with me. This study would not have been possible without you.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AP: Admission Points

APS: Admission Point Score

CAPS: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement

CHE: Council on Higher Education

CUT: Central University of Technology

DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training

ILO: International Labour Organisation

LGBTQI: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex community

NBT: National Benchmark Tests

NSFAS: National Student Financial Aid Scheme

StatsSA: Statistics South Africa

TVET: Technical Vocational Education and Training

UFS: University of the Free State

UG: Undergraduate

UK: United Kingdom

UKZN: University of KwaZulu-Natal

UNISA: University South Africa

UP: University of Pretoria

UPP: University Preparation Programme

USA: United States of America

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Contextual background in higher education

South African higher education has low levels of involvement, particularly among Black students. From 2009 to 2014, student enrolments increased by about 23 % (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2016). Despite this increase, only 15 % of the African population between the ages of 15 and 24 attended university in 2014, compared to 54% of the White population of the same ages (CHE, 2016). According to Wilson-Strydom (2015), these participatory inconsistencies can be linked to the nation's history of racism and socioeconomic injustice, institutional discrimination, and overall disparities, all originating from colonisation. Although there are differences across various regions, Ngugi (2011) contends that national and regional goals as well as colonial and postcolonial periods, have all contributed to the development of universities and educational institutions (Ngugi, 2011).

According to Bawa (2012), the South African institution of higher learning system still faces many of the same problems as it did during the Apartheid era, explaining that higher education has and continues to play different roles over time due to diverse histories and describing institutions of higher learning as places where both social reproduction and reinvention occurs. This argument is supported by Ngugi (2011), who describes institutions of higher learning as social entities that play a role in how societies are shaped. According to her assertion, universities in Africa and higher education, in general, continue to play an essential function in shaping the financial, cultural, and social constitutions of societies and nations as a whole. In the past decade, examining institutions of higher learning, particularly for South African universities, taking into account the 2015 *Fees Must Fall* movement

(#FeesMustFall)¹, the concept of attaining free and high-quality higher education has undergone a transformative shift (Hodes, 2015). Higher education has become extremely expensive, and students can no longer afford to pay for tuition (see Bozolli, 2015; eNCA, 2015; Kekana et al., 2015). Also, the lack of funding at universities has become extremely competitive and too expensive, especially for people experiencing poverty.

Furthermore, globalisation and the increasing marketisation of universities play a significant role in how universities place themselves globally on a competitive scale. As university rankings gain increasing importance, institutions compete for recognition and ranking, and one of the ways in which the competition plays out is in the domain of access and admissions (Bawa, 2012). Universities compete to attract the best students to their institutions, with annual funding subsidies decreasing (CHE, 2016). This resulted in students' protests for free and high-quality education at a few South African universities. Again, universities have experienced significant changes in recent years, such as the expansion of students' profiles, which has led to significant changes in university access. For those students not meeting entrance requirements, some universities have access or bridging programmes designed to enhance and support students' access to university (Dunell et al., 2007).

Since the 1980s, access programmes have been integral to South Africa's national higher education system. The objective was to tackle the matter of achieving transformation in higher education. Over the last decade, the South African higher education sector has dedicated significant efforts to cater to the needs of students who do not meet entry requirements. The implementation of the bridging or access programmes was one of the adapted approaches to address this issue. In the past, universities did not earn subsidies for

¹ A student-organised demonstration campaign called #FeesmustFall started in the Republic of South Africa in October 2015 in response to the steep rise in tuition fees. The movement's objectives were to limit student fee increases and enhance government support for higher education (Hodes, 2015).

offering access programmes; however, the funding is now earmarked to support universities in offering access programmes (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020a; 2020b). One of the few ways to tackle the issue of widening participation is through the access programme offered by the University of the Free State (UFS), which is available at one of its three campuses. The access programme provides for many students who do not meet degree or mainstream entry requirements but have the potential to attend a university. Regardless of the challenges they face in accessing higher education, many of these students graduate successfully.

Notwithstanding these notable accomplishments, students are often labelled as 'disadvantaged'² – although limited knowledge exists of the aspects that lead to their accomplishments. Thus, my aim was to understand the enablers of success and how these typically disadvantage-labelled students achieve success against the odds. I used the capabilities method, which suggests a framework for understanding the prospects and talents of students entering university, embracing what they can do and become (Wilson-Strydom, 2015), and using the Theory of Resilience, which argues that students have the potential to adjust successfully amid challenging circumstances (Masten, 2001, 2006), as a complementary lens.

This chapter starts with a summary of relevant literature, followed by the problem statement, methodology, research design and the ethical considerations that frame the thesis. Lastly, I share my personal positionality as a researcher and the thesis outline.

² For this study, 'disadvantaged' students refer to those from historically disadvantaged schools in townships, farms, etc. Although I do not believe in ethnic categorisations, it is vital to continue using the word "disadvantaged" in light of South Africa's history and the reality that it is stratified by race.

1.2 Widening access in institutions of higher learning

Educational institutions face issues worldwide due to a global trend known as the massification of higher education, and South Africa is no exception. In the United Kingdom (UK), massification and diversification have resulted in using the term ‘non-traditional’ when referring to students. Similarly, in South Africa, the term is associated with ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘underprepared’ students (Boughey, 2012). Boughey (2012) added that these terms serve as a convenient way to refer to a person’s educational background. Essentially, students enrolling at institutions of higher learning bring diverse academic experiences, some of which might not be deemed adequately prepared for the challenges of tertiary education. This necessitates universities to be more adaptable and offer increased support to students. The widespread institutions of higher learning and equitable participation are two distinct concepts explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.2.1 Opportunities to pursue higher education

There has been a rise in curiosity in comprehending access-related challenges in academic institutions during the past ten years in South Africa (Badat, 2011; CHE, 2016; Cloete et al., 2002; DHET, 2011; Jappie, 2020; Smit, 2012; Wangenge-Ouma, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Additionally, disadvantage and under-preparedness were for a very long time considered to be issues of the poor-quality schooling system most Black students came from. The primary reason can largely be attributed to the country’s historical circumstances. At the end of Apartheid, the attention in higher education shifted towards exploring how access could be expanded to students whom predominantly White universities previously marginalised, and the focus then shifted to determining the necessary support systems needed for those students (Boughey, 2012; Smit, 2012). Many authors contend that these students face challenges that relate to language proficiency, social skills, and a lack of intangible context to take on institutions of higher learning. As a result, educational assistant initiatives

were designed to address the deficits of the legacy of Apartheid. These support initiatives are often implemented as supplementary courses outside the mainstream offering (Boughey, 2010; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; CHE, 2013; Vilakazi & Tema, 1985; Van Wyk, 2014). The primary objective was to assist Black students with the potential to become integrated as part of this dominant education culture.

Additionally, these support programmes aimed to provide Black students a fair opportunity to succeed in higher education. Tema and Vilakazi's paper was written in 1985 and they wrote about issues of access under the Apartheid regime. However, some of these issues are still relevant today, almost 30 years after the dawn of democracy. The Department of Education's 1997 White Paper on higher education had the objective of addressing South Africa's development requirements by promoting increased access and the expansion of higher education to a large number of students (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Department of Education [DoE], 1997, Ministry of Education, 2001). In a revised version of the White Paper, the echo is much on what was in the first White Paper, outlining a vision of the desired systems of institutions of higher learning that the country intends to accomplish in the next few years (DHET, 2013). In order to satisfy the demands of South Africa, this White Paper outlines methods for expanding the post-school education and training system. The policy outline direction is "to guide the DHET and the institutions for which it is responsible in order to contribute to building a developmental state with a vibrant democracy and a flourishing economy" (DHET, 2013, p. xi). It also includes a focus on social justice in higher education. I define social justice as expanding opportunities for historically marginalized Black students to not only enter but also engage in and excel within universities. This is aimed at enhancing their life prospects and enabling them to make valuable contributions to their communities.

1.2.2 Educational opportunities

Bahr (2010) uses socioeconomic status when writing about class and inequalities. For instance, in the United States of America (USA) context, Bahr acknowledges the significance of educational achievement as an indicator of socioeconomic progress. He posited that remedial coursework serves as a crucial opportunity for individuals who lack foundational knowledge in subjects such as Mathematics, offering them a lifeline towards achieving financial and social stability in the long term (Bahr, 2010). He elucidates that educational qualifications serve as a primary criterion for determining occupational achievement, which is the main factor influencing income, social status, and other attributes within the specific division of the socioeconomic hierarchy. He further contends that historically disadvantaged racial groups such as Blacks and Hispanics are disproportionately represented in the lower socioeconomic hierarchy in the USA. Education plays a crucial role for these groups as a primary avenue for upward mobility and status advancement (Bahr, 2010). The core of Bahr's work proposes that if universities give people educational opportunities, they can escape poverty. In the subsequent chapters, I emphasise the importance of providing deserving students equitable access to higher education. In support of this, I explore why universities should not only consider the Admission Point Scores (APS) when admitting a student but also consider the other capabilities students bring.

It is suggested that when considering broadening admission in the UK, there are rising concerns about the escalation of class-based disparities in the many higher education alternatives available, notwithstanding successful programmes aimed at boosting access to higher education. On the other hand, in South Africa, the focus is primarily on race rather than class when addressing the issue of access to higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). According to Wilson-Strydom, in South Africa, the distinction between increased and widened participation reflects opposing social justice concerns within the entrance setting.

The term increased participation and widened participation are used in discussions about policies and execution, and the argument is made that it is possible to increase enrolments without necessarily expanding access to previously underrepresented groups (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

A brief summary of increasing involvement at the UFS, where the study is located, is provided in the following section. Chapter 5 will explore this aspect in more depth.

1.3 Widening access at the University of the Free State

Based on the literature presented above, I make an argument that students typically labelled disadvantaged often face numerous challenges when pursuing higher education. They face challenges, such as having little or no funding to pursue their studies, which burdens them more. Many are told there is no funding available to assist them, and they often have to pay for their own studies (CHE, 2014). On the other hand, these students arguably bring unique capabilities to universities that universities fail to recognise. As an illustration, for a learner from a rural or a farm school to enter an institution of higher learning, they need to defeat several challenges. These challenges include gathering information about a university, understanding the enrolment process, arranging transportation, securing enough funds for at least registration costs, and acquiring enough knowledge about the National Student Financial Aid Scheme³ (NSFAS) and housing. Since most of these students are the first in their families to pursue higher education and come from under-resourced schools, they often lack the support and guidance necessary to navigate this path effectively (Calitz, 2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2012). Just arriving at university has demanded a series of capabilities. Often, students have demonstrated significant resilience in getting into university against the odds. Due to their inadequate final year of schooling results, a sizable portion of these

³ According to the NSFAS Act (Act 56 of 1999), a government organisation under the Department of Higher Education and Training called NSFAS was created to help financially disadvantaged students who want to continue their education at public universities or TVET colleges (NSFAS, 2023); accessed via www.nsfas.org.za.

students are notified after arriving at the university that they do not meet the requirements to be placed in the degree of their choice or mainstream studies. These poor results can be attributed to various disruptions that learners encounter, including financial constraints, insufficient access to essential resources, food insecurity, power outages (e.g., loadshedding), the psychological toll of losing loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic and being the first cohort of learners to navigate the new curriculum⁴ (Umalusi, 2022). Their performance on the National Benchmark Tests⁵ (NBT) may also not accurately reflect their potential or abilities.

Students who apply for degree studies at the UFS and do not meet the required entry admission points are advised to apply to the access programme situated at the South Campus⁶. The access programme is completed in one academic year⁷. After successful completion, a student forms part of the Extended Programme⁸ or mainstream degree studies. Students who started in this programme with APS as low as 14 (compared to 30 required for entry to most degree programmes) have moved into mainstream studies. Although students often labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ have achieved notable accomplishments, the details surrounding the factors contributing to their success remain very limited. Gaining insights into the factors that facilitate success for students who do not follow traditional access routes would offer valuable guidance for universities to enhance their readiness and adaptability to cater to diverse students’ needs. It is therefore important, in line with the literature, that for

⁴ The class of 2021 learners were the first cohort to be presented with the amendments to Section 4 of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which impacted 20 of the 67 subjects taken for the final year of schooling (Umalusi, 2022); accessed on (<https://www.umalusi.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Report-on-the-Qaulity-Assurance-of-the-DBE-November-2021-Senior-Certificate-examinations-and-assessment.pdf>).

⁵ The University of the Free State uses the NBT results in two ways: One is that it is used in the Faculty of Health Sciences (School of Medicine and School of Allied Health Professions) selection process. In addition, they use it if a student wishes to apply to any of their other faculties, including nursing; NBT scores are used for registration purposes and not for admissions decisions (University of the Free State [UFS], 2019b).

⁶ Three campuses make up the University of the Free State: Bloemfontein, South, and QwaQwa.

⁷ The academic year in South African universities usually starts in February annually.

⁸ The national Department of Higher Education and Training supports the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP), a mechanism designed to increase student throughput and graduation rates at South African universities (CHE, 2014). They are an academic intervention created to help students who enrol in university to develop their academic skills. The traditional degree programme now includes a third year.

transformation to emerge at institutions of higher learning, factors such as these mentioned above should be considered before denying a student with potential access to the institution. This is in line with Boughey's call for the educational transformation of universities to accommodate the needs of disadvantaged first-year students (Boughey, 2010), suggesting that universities should transform to meet the different needs of students better. She also suggested that the same disadvantaged students should be given further support when considering their APS because the APS should not be the only factor determining students' enrolments at a university. It is important to acknowledge that university admission involves difficult decisions in resource-scarce contexts and is not about admitting every student. It is also about recruiting the best students and giving them a fair chance, especially those from historically disadvantaged schools. Arguably, broadening access without meaningfully providing conditions for success is one way injustice manifests beyond the schooling system within universities (Wilson-Strydom, 2014).

1.4 Problem statement

According to Tema and Vilakazi (1985), students from low-income families who could enrol in higher education frequently saw themselves as winners who overcame the subpar educational system. Tema and Vilakazi (1985) also highlighted that these students view themselves as resilient, accomplished individuals who have triumphed over systematic barriers. They often carry the aspirations of their families, attempting to end the vicious cycle of poor living in their households and leaving behind the aspirations and visions of a brighter future. This is supported by the literature on the capabilities approach and resilience theories (see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion). Smit (2012) and Bawa (2012) added that when students who are labelled disadvantaged enter a university, they are informed that their chances of success are minimal or non-existent due to the perceived deficiencies in various aspects such as their APS, academic literacy skills, and reading and writing abilities. This

kind of message can undermine their confidence and reinforce stereotypes about their capabilities, potentially hindering their academic success and progress. Mathebula (2019) highlighted that students from under-resourced schools and rural and poor communities are also vulnerable to being victims of epistemic injustice (Mathebula, 2019). Furthermore, she elucidated that due to this injustice, these students are perceived as under-appreciated knowledge bearers with limited proficiency in the language and academic literacy skills (Mathebula, 2019).

Moreover, these students are subject to further labelling and segregation from their peers in the mainstream or degree programmes based on their perceived deficiency, reinforcing their sense of ‘otherness’ and marginalisation. In line with Tema and Vilakazi (1985) and Mathebula (2019), I argue that these learners are fundamentally excluded from the very same structure they have exerted considerable effort to become part of. In addressing this deficit view that students are underprepared, academic development policies often construct a view that students lack language skills and the ability to think critically and conceptually (Boughey, 2005). Wilson-Strydom emphasised the importance of universities recognising the disparities related to access to resources or structural limitations (Wilson-Strydom, 2015b). Universities must acknowledge and address these differences to create institutions of higher learning environments that are fairer and more equal.

Universities increasingly emphasise their APS because of the need to attract the best students. It can be argued that this practice discriminates against and alienates students who might have the intellectual ability to flourish at higher education institutions but do not meet the fixed-defined admission criteria. Students with low APS are typically labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘at risk’. However, some researchers are questioning this. For instance, Smit (2012) argued that language contributes to the inadequate narrative, asserting that those students are often labelled in terms of what they lack or what they are not: not traditional, not

ready for intuitions of higher learning, not privileged or fortunate (Smit, 2012). The negative connotations associated with the term 'at risk students' have been utilised since the 1980s. This practice persists, especially when describing students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

She added that challenges faced by underprepared students cannot be disregarded, and higher education institutions face a dilemma in addressing these issues. The crux of the matter is to problematise the deficit discourse by acknowledging that if a university aims to generate graduates with exceptional abilities and enrolls students to address fairness profiles, it must confront the deficit issues. Smit (2012) also argued that addressing this challenge requires a multifaceted approach, recognising that the issue is complex and requires a comprehensive set of strategies to move forward (Smit, 2012). This argument is supported by Boughey (2012), stating that universities themselves need to be better prepared and teach the type of students they get, not the type of students they want. Some colleges and universities in the USA have implemented measures to support underprepared students. These initiatives include retention coordinators and specialists and expanding academic support services beyond the traditional tutoring and academic writing centres (Gabriel, 2008). These efforts aim to provide under-prepared students additional assistance and resources by helping them overcome challenges and improve their academic performance.

Building on this literature, the starting assumption of this study is that the key to addressing the problems of so-called disadvantaged students is a change of perspective and the approaches of universities from a deficit- to an asset-based approach. In this regard, Tema and Vilakazi (1985) highlighted that at the core of these perceptions (e.g., not well prepared, disadvantaged) lies the concept of the university as an institutional structure that has historically favoured a particular sector of a community. He emphasised that, as Smit (2012) also alluded to, even the usage of a phrase such as "non-traditional student" presupposes the presence of an ideal student typology of attending the institution. This strategy of preferring

particular types of prospective students has kept society stratified. In addition, other factors such as social background and a legacy of poor education also influence how well young people may satisfy the requirements for university entrance scores.

Nonetheless, particularly in developing country contexts, universities also recognise that widening participation is needed, and various access programmes and other forms of support should be put in place (CHE, 2013). While these interventions provide opportunities, they also arguably have unintended consequences, such as potential alienation and negative labelling of students based on their admission points. Nonetheless, many students from marginalised backgrounds, who initially did not meet the admissions criteria and then accommodated in bridging programmes, achieve success in their studies, despite the odds against them.

1.5 Aim and research questions

This research aimed to confront deficit thinking (viewing students through a lens that focuses on their inadequacies rather than their strengths), by understanding the resiliency and capabilities typically labelled ‘disadvantaged’ students bring to higher education. This is important because if higher education institutions are to adopt an asset based perspective they would achieve a social just higher education system. Capabilities are developed and put into action within particular institutional contexts. Thus, this study also aimed to understand how the university influences (positively and negatively) students’ capability formation, influencing their educational achievements and employment outcomes.

In order to achieve this aim, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What capabilities do typically labelled ‘disadvantaged’ students bring to higher education (i.e., pre-university capabilities)?
 - a. How did these capabilities develop in the context of students’ lives?

2. How, if at all, does the university experience recognise and build on these capabilities?
 - a. During UPP
 - b. During broader university experience post UPP
3. What additional capabilities are developed during university?
 - a. UPP specifically
 - b. Broader university experience
4. How do these capabilities and university experiences influence students' educational outcomes?
5. How do the capabilities approach and the resilience framework theory help change the thinking regarding students commonly labelled as 'disadvantaged'?
6. What are the implications for more just university policy and practice?

This research focused on a sample of 15 students who have completed the UPP at the UFS. This programme was specifically developed for students from previously disadvantaged schools with an opportunity to access higher education institutions. The programme focuses on enhancing the quality of access and success in education, particularly on improving outcomes for students who face barriers or disadvantages. The target students are mostly historically disadvantaged learners. The progress made by the UPP over the last 20 years is commendable; for example, over 6000 degrees have been awarded to students that entered the UFS via the UPP, including postgraduate degrees (370 Honours and 41 Masters) and nine M.B.Ch.B degrees (Access Report, 2017, 2018). Based on their schooling performance, these students did not meet the mainstream entry requirements for admission to the university. Understanding the capabilities successful students who entered via this programme brought

to the university and developed during their studies provided the means for questioning the prominent deficit discourse.

In the next section, I examine the capabilities approach and the theory of resilience to support this research.

1.6 Theoretical framework

It is important to briefly introduce the key ideas of the capabilities approach and human development, as this guided the research in attempting to answer the research questions. The capabilities approach is rooted in the work of Amartya Sen (1979, 1985a, 1985b, 1993, 1999). It serves as a means to advance the human development approach. Sen described the capabilities approach as ‘a framework of thought, a manner of thinking about normative issues’ (Sen, 1993, p. 30), stating that because it concentrates on the data, one needs to make judgements about social policies and how well people are doing. Also, the technique to evaluate inequality or poverty may be utilised for various objectives. Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2003, 2011) extended the capabilities approach by employing the notion of capabilities in a slightly distinct manner. She distinguished between internal capabilities, which refer to a person’s flexible and dynamic traits, and combined capabilities, which indicate the variety of options open to an individual.

Moreover, Sen emphasised the opportunity or freedom dimensions, while Nussbaum defined it differently. She viewed abilities as possessing personal powers that include talents, capacities, and openings (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Later, scholars such as Walker, Unterhalter, Alkire and Robeyns followed. The capacities framework in education enables two different approaches to educational difficulties. One might start by considering one’s “ability to participate in education” (Vaughan, 2007, p. 116). Second, education is crucial for the growth of other capacities, such as obtaining and maintaining work (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999; Vaughan, 2007). This has influenced how people view disadvantages.

In the next section, I briefly explain the key concepts related to this study, which are useful to support this research.

1.7 Key concepts in the capabilities approach

In order to provide an overview of the capabilities approach, a brief explanation of the key concepts of the capabilities approach on which the framework was built (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) is provided, as I will apply these to the study. These concepts will be explored in detail in Chapter 3.

1.7.1 *Well-being*

The concept is described as “a notion that is in assessing how well a person is doing; the focus needs to be on the wellness of a person’s state of being. The exercise is that of assessing the constituent elements of the person’s being seen from the perspective of her own personal welfare” (Sen, 1993, p. 36).

1.7.2 *Agency*

This concept refers to “the ability of a person to realise the goals they value and have reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 19).

1.7.3 *Functionings and capabilities*

Sen defined functionings as achievements or outcomes and capabilities as opportunities available to a person (Sen, 1999).

1.7.4 *Conversion factors*

Conversion factors are “factors which allow, or do not allow, people to convert the resources and income they have into functionings and capabilities” (Deneulin, 2014, p. 29). Furthermore, Robeyns (2005) identified three groups of conversion factors: personal, social, and environmental.

1.7.5 Aspirations

“The capacity to aspire is the ability to navigate the complex steps between...norms and specific wants and wishes” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 64).

1.8 Theory of Resilience: Understanding resilience

A large majority of the study on resilience has focused on personality factors, coping mechanisms, and support networks (Breinbauer & Maddaleno, 2005; Sadler, 2017). These factors have been explored to better understand how individuals navigate and overcome adversity. Schoon and Bynner’s (2003) analysis of the research proposes that resilience is a method of positive adaptation regardless of hardships rather than a personality attribute. For a person to completely grow and thrive, they need the help of other people. In the literature about resilience, it is evident that different researchers define resilience differently. However, one constant aspect emerging in the literature is “the ability of an individual to overcome adversity” (Schoon & Bynner, 2003, p. 21).

For Ungar, resilience is more inclined to emerge when people and communities successfully access resources that offer emotional and tangible resources. Furthermore, he emphasised the importance of bargaining to provide these resources in an ethnically relevant manner. Arguably resilience is a developed trait (internal capability in Nussbaum’s terms) of a person but can be enabled or constrained by the social ecology in which a person is located (Ungar, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Thus, resilience is not something a person is born with but rather related to the social risk factors in a given social ecology (see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion, including how I linked resilience and the capabilities approach).

1.9 Methodology

This section describes the research methodology, detailed more in Chapter 4. The study drew on the constructivist paradigm and concepts crucial for comprehending an individual’s

deeds and manners (e.g., agency, being and doing). The constructivist paradigm was highly suitable for this study since it recognises that information is a human concept; thus, it is subjective and inseparable from the subject and should be understood in its relation to time, values and social context (Brymann, 2008; Crotty, 2003; Wellington, 2000). According to Deetz (1996), the interpretive paradigm seeks to comprehend phenomena by exploring meanings people assign to them, while Reeves and Hedberg (2003) opined that this paradigm emphasises the importance of contextualising analysis in context. Resultantly, qualitative methodologies are most appropriate (Strauss, 1990). It is critical to understand the universe as it is from the personal perceptions of individuals.

The research design for this study was narrative, highlighting the principle that people create their own understanding and knowledge of the world by facing certain things and then reflecting on those encounters (Honebein, 1996). It is, therefore, appropriate for describing their lives and experiences. The participants in this study were not representative of all the UPP students. However, my aim was to determine what can be learned from them.

For the data collection, I conducted in-depth life history interviews with 15 students who were enrolled in the UPP and had successfully graduated with a bachelor's degree or postgraduate qualification.

1.10 Ethical considerations

From the onset, I maintained a policy of transparency and honesty with the participants regarding the purpose of the research. This approach was adopted to ensure no harm or unforeseen risk was posed to the participants throughout this study. I requested permission before asking for participants' personal details. Throughout the whole data-collecting procedure, information on the research was often presented, and participants were invited to express any questions they might have had about it. Participants were also required to sign consent forms (see Appendix D). They were also informed that they might withdraw from the

research at any time. I acknowledged that each person's unique stories make them who they are. This understanding helped me to respect the individuals during the study process and while interpreting the experiences. The use of pseudonyms helped safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the participants' information as well as their identities (Babbie, 2010). The research committee of the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of the Free State granted ethical approval in September 2018; ethics number UFS-HSD2018/0504 (see Appendix A).

1.11 Positionality

I was privileged to conduct this doctoral study as it aligns closely with my daily work. Being a former student of the same programme has proven to be a significant source of support throughout the study. However, it has also presented some challenges in completing this study. It has been a challenge in that working with the practical challenges and difficulties of students wanting and needing to gain access to university, how the university systems respond to the needs of those students and how supporting those students succeed has frequently raised new questions and issues that are worthy of research. Unfortunately, these could not be accommodated within this thesis. However, it gave me cognitive clarity. It also facilitated the process of data-gathering by keeping me focused on the area of access and achievement for underprivileged students attending universities and their transition. As a former student in the programme, I was reminded of my own personal challenges such as being from a single-parent household, a poor schooling system, and not performing well enough for university entrance. I was adamant about changing my family circumstances and saw attending university as the only outcome. Unfortunately, after passing my access year, I was immediately confronted with the reality most South African youth face, no funding.

NSFAS bursaries are awarded to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, at that time (2006) I did not meet the requirements for a NSFAS bursary, as

my mother's salary as a teacher was above the income scales set out in the bursary requirements. I persevered, but the financial constraints negatively impacted my studies. I could not afford accommodation and had to commute daily from Thaba Nchu to Bloemfontein, covering a distance of 140 kilometres daily for five days a week during the semester. This posed a challenge in terms of transportation and the availability of funds for meals.

Nonetheless, I worked with students who enrolled for the access programme during their tenure. Some of the challenges these students faced were leaving their homes, not having enough food, sharing their bursary money with their families back home, and lacking family support systems for social and financial support. These challenges and experiences led me to explore why these students displayed resilience and what drove them to continue their studies despite lacking the needed resources. I also wanted to understand the ways in which universities tap into these capabilities to address the social justice issue in the South African context.

1.12 Chapter outline

Table 1:

Chapter summary

The table below presents an outline of the eight chapters of this study.

Chapter number	Summary
Chapter 1	Chapter 1 briefly summarises higher education in South Africa, including the subject of the study and research issues. Also included is a glossary of key terms and my personal perspective as a researcher.
Chapter 2	Chapter 2 examines the appropriate studies I consulted to construct and hone the research topic, focusing on massification and participation in higher education. The chapter also discusses participation and equity issues, including challenges with transitioning and success.
Chapter 3	Chapter 3 presents the conceptual framework for this study by introducing the capabilities approach and an understanding of the theories of resilience. I also present the fundamental ideas of the capabilities framework and how it was used in this research. This chapter highlights that the capabilities approach is based on social justice principles and may be implemented using a human development strategy that prioritises people's welfare while exploring disadvantages.
Chapter 4	Chapter 4 comprises the methodology for this study, specifically focusing on the qualitative research technique.
Chapters 5, 6 & 7	Chapter 5 presents the study's empirical findings obtained from a varied group of students about their participation, access, and achievement at university. Chapter 5 also introduces the research participants, provides a background summary for each participant, and discusses the significance of the capabilities approach viewpoint, highlighting the need to consider each person's life rather than just the lives of groups. Furthermore, this chapter includes information about the context of the participants' lives, why they went to university (aspirations and agency), and transitioning into the access programme (conversion factors and resiliency). Chapter 6 explains the experiences of students transitioning from the UPP into mainstream studies. Chapter 7 presents reflections about life after university focusing on personal and professional opportunities and achievements. It also discusses resiliency through students' experiences and in an educational setting.
Chapter 8	The research concludes in Chapter 8 with lessons gained, suggestions for interventions and policy changes, and a reflection on how the research topics were addressed.

Chapter 2: Massification and widening participation in higher education

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines massification and participation in higher educational access from the North to the global South by drawing on academic, popular, and political sources. The comparative distinction between these two is critical in positioning the foundations of this chapter. The global South has long-standing colonial narratives that also percolate into the higher education terrain. Moreover, reflecting on these two gives impetus to how various historical epochs shape access to higher education. The fundamental interrogation to understand revolve around whether higher education is about growing the economy or serving society. Furthermore, does increasing massification without equitable access assist in solving problems in the higher education sector, or does higher education confront the deficit discourse associated with social justice through widening participation? Doing so effectively illustrates how massification and participation are conceptualised while engaging with relevant literature on the subject matter. An extensive literature review demonstrated the complexity of multiple influences on academic outcomes (Case et al., 2018).

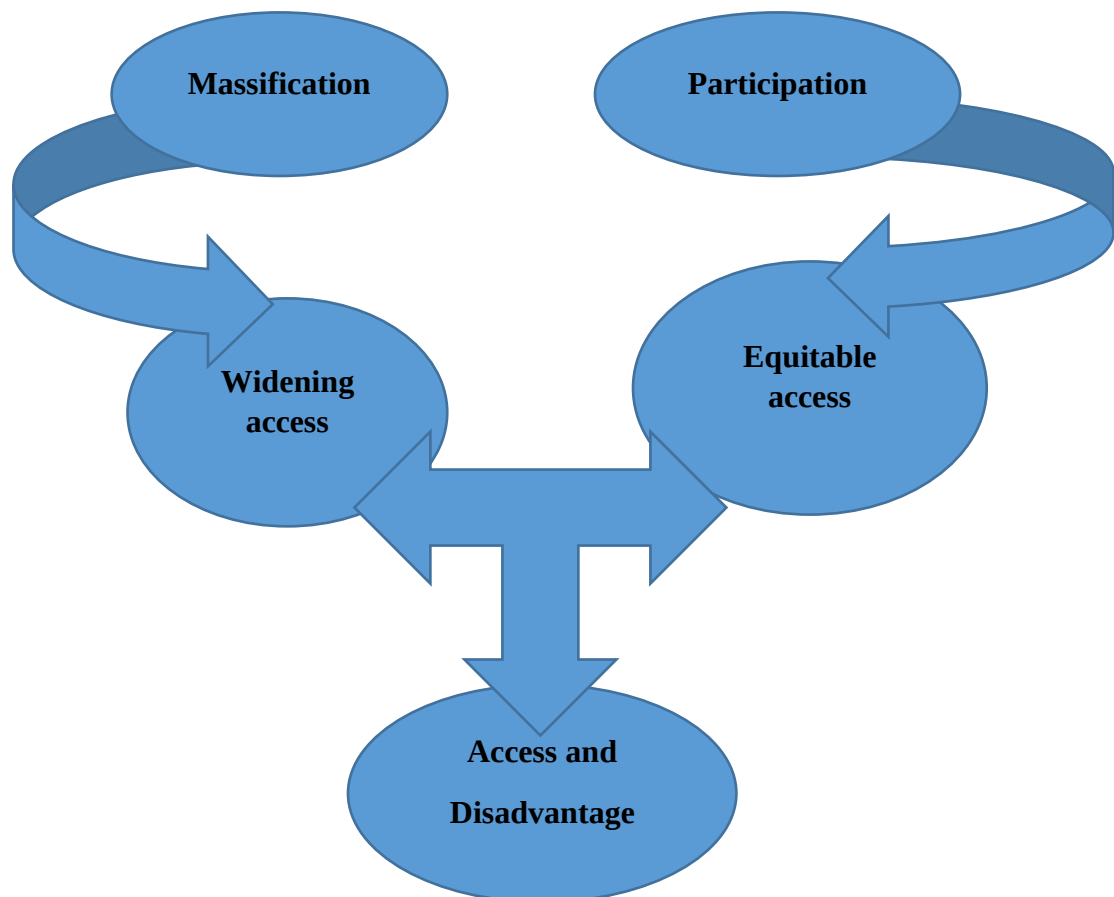
This section is organised into three main parts. The first section explores international literature on massification and equitable participation from the global North and South perspectives, followed by a discussion on the difference between the two concepts and how they have charted the course of accessing higher education. The last section discusses how widening access and equitable participation influence access and disadvantage in higher education. It is important to include the literature on widening access and equitable participation because there is much literature on why typically labelled students fail, but only a few studies that study how and why many of those students succeed. The main view is of deficits and seldomly recognises the difficulties of situations in which these students persevere. I aimed to gain insight into how those students persevere with their studies despite

their difficult circumstances. I also aimed to shift the lens through which disadvantaged students are typically viewed and perceived by institutions of higher learning.

Figure 1 provides a brief outline of the literature reviewed in this chapter, elucidating that massification implies widening access, while participation has a stronger emphasis on whether widened access is also equitable access. Thus, with massification implying widening access, it does not necessarily suggest equitable participation. Nonetheless, both of these concepts influence access and disadvantage. The core of this chapter is to explore the literature about each of these concepts and reflect on the relevance of equitable participation in relation to success, particularly in the South African context.

Figure 1

Summary of the literature review



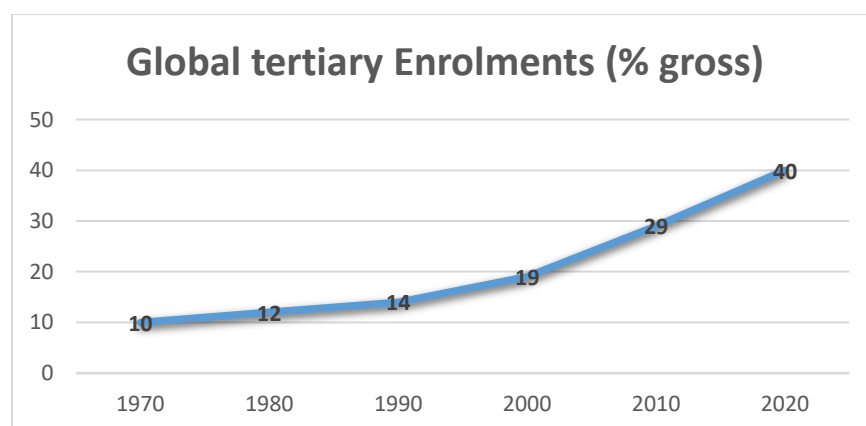
2.2 Massification and widening access

This section presents massification and participation from both international and national viewpoints. The first part explores massification, followed by participation and a distinction between the two concepts. Massification refers to widening access, and participation refers to equitable access. I focused on countries in the global North, specifically the UK and the USA, as these are amongst those that have experienced massification and implemented efforts to increase participation. I also focused on the global South, particularly Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa. I found similarities between the countries in the global North and South to represent a typical case study example.

It is imperative to understand how higher education has massified over the years by looking at statistics on enrolment numbers. Figure 2 shows enrolment numbers globally from 1970 to 2014. In 1970, the enrolment numbers were around 10.10% (32.6 million). Massification grew from 10.10% in 1970 to 14.06 (68.3 million) in 1990 and a further 34.35 (214.1 mil) in 2014 (World Bank, 2021).

Figure 2

Global tertiary enrolment numbers from 1970 to 2020



Source: UNESCO (uis.unesco.org)

The reasons for this steep increase are discussed in the next section.

2.2.1 Global North Perspective

In the past, higher education was only recognised as education for the elite or meritocracy, but this has dramatically shifted to mass education or massification (Scott, 1997; Clancy, 2007; Hussey, 2010). Hussey and Smith stated:

There was a time, not so long ago, when the way into the secret garden of higher education was known to very few. Over the last four decades in Britain, successive governments have striven to change things: from being the privilege of a middle-class elite to being accessible to a huge section of society. (Hussey, 2010, p. 1)

The statement above highlights a recent transformation in higher education that has taken place in many nations, one that economic and technical requirements, globalisation, and international rivalry have driven (Leach, 2013). In most global North countries, especially after World War II, enrolment numbers increased rapidly. For instance, American higher education expanded (widening access) in the USA after World War II. Before this, only a small minority, mainly White males, went further than high school to continue/further their education (Gumport et al., 1997). The motivation for this was that most men who went to further their education were the ones who fought in World War II and the Korean War. They received financial assistance from the federal government under the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights - *it extended access to higher education to the veterans and their families*) (Gumport et al., 1997). This resulted in an increase in enrolled students in the 1960s because of the children of veterans, who had acquired middle-class status because of having an education, thus resulting in better living standards. With better living standards for veterans, they could send their children to higher education institutions (Gumport et al., 1997). For example, in 1965, there were 5,92 million

(3,97 for public and 1,95 for private) students enrolled in higher education, and the number grew to 19,65 million (14,53 public and 5,12) in 2018 (Duffin, 2020). During this time, changes in institutional and national policies allowed females, minorities, and students from diverse populations to access higher education in the USA. This change happened because colleges and universities expanded their financial aid programmes to support as many students as possible.

Similar to the USA, the UK higher education system focused more on widening access after World War II. Before World War II, only a few students entered higher education (Bolton, 2012). In the 1950s, only around 3.4% of the youth population were students who participated in higher education, and the number grew to 8.4% in the 1970s and further to 33% in the 2000s (Teaching and Learning Research Programme [TLRP], 2008). One of the reasons for the mass increase after World War II was that the government boosted schemes to support those who served in the armed forces, like in the USA, as mentioned earlier. However, later on, the focus moved from massification to widening access for under-represented students (TLRP, 2008). The UK's higher education policies had different classifications for underrepresented people. In the 1980s, the focus shifted towards offering alternative access courses for students who could have never gained access to higher education by assisting them in gaining admission and increasing massification. According to Leach (2013), there has been a shift in the emphasis of widening participation efforts towards addressing the social gaps, and targets have been established to ensure that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are given an equal opportunity for university access.

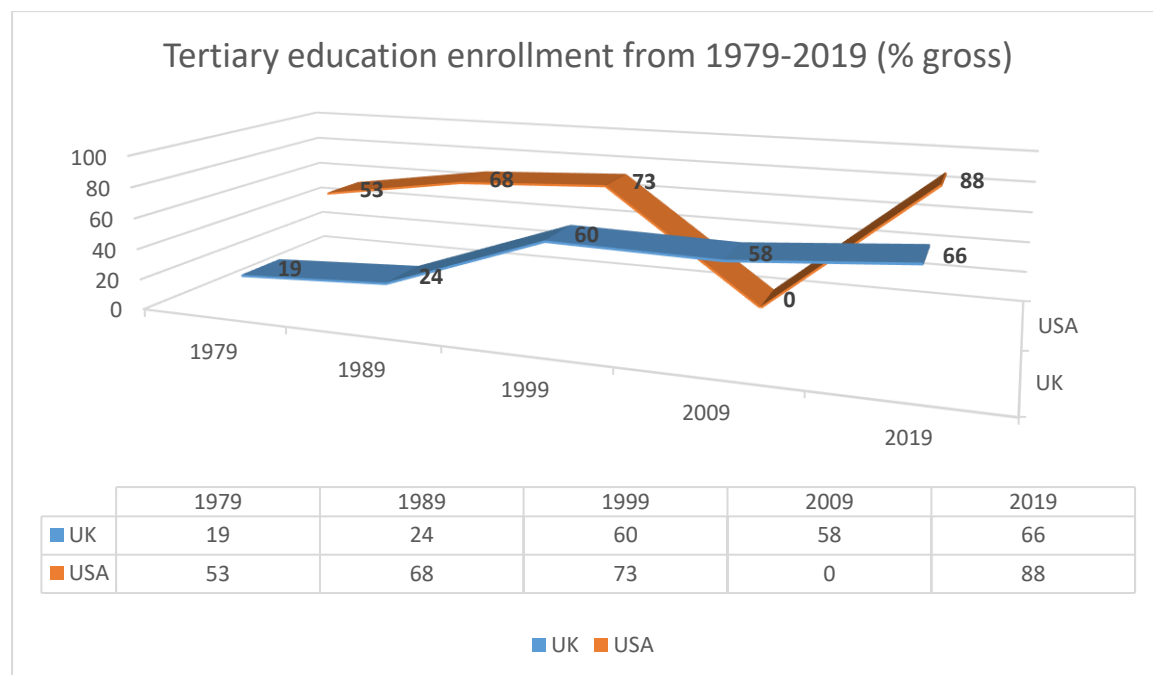
In 1992 in the UK, the enrolment numbers of young people entering higher education doubled. However, this massification had an impact on funding from the UK government. Ryan (2005) noted that Treasury cut funding for higher education by nearly the amounts raised by the tuition fees. This put universities under pressure to find new sources of funding.

He emphasised that for universities to survive, they had to strategically evaluate and find possible ways to secure their future. Universities then established new branch campuses, franchising programmes, increasing international enrollment numbers, and collaborations with other alliances, enhancing access to limited resources (Robertson, 2010).

Figure 3 demonstrates how massification increased in the UK and USA from 1974 to 2014.

Figure 3

Enrolment numbers in the USA and UK



Source: The World Bank (World Bank, 2021)

The above figure shows a steady massification of gross enrolment numbers in both the USA and the UK over a period of ten-year intervals at the tertiary level. For instance, in 1979, about 72% of students were enrolled in tertiary education, and the number increased to 154% in 2019. Figure 3 also illustrates the proportion of overall student enrolment, irrespective of gender and age, in relation to the population within the age group that

officially corresponds to the level of education indicated. It should be noted that there is no data available for the period of 2009 in the USA. However, it does not mean no students were enrolled in tertiary education. Figure 3 does not indicate student dropout and success rates.

However, accompanying massification, there have been concerns regarding the ability of students to persist and achieve success in universities. Williamson and Goldsmith (2013) asserted that universities' strategies to enrol more students are not addressing students changing demographics. Higher education systems have also faced challenges to accommodate student number growth in existing higher education systems, with income and wealth inequalities noted as the biggest challenges in access and completion in most higher education systems (Beerkens-Soo, 2009; The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017). The efforts to expand higher education systems by not risking widening these gaps can be dealt with by policies and programmes to support qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds (UNESCO, 2017). Theborn (2012) highlighted the challenges of inequalities, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, emphasising that the life chances of those students are seriously diminished because they were born in and come from poor communities. He further argued that those students compete for scarce resources which are unequally distributed, resulting in these students not receiving equal recognition and respect, dignity, autonomy and representativity in higher education. The global North approached massification by widening access, which meant that higher education was available to all and not only to the selected groups, as higher education was massified after World War II because of opportunities that were now afforded to veterans. For example, there was an increase from 32.6 million in 1970 to 214.1 million in 2015 (UNESCO, 2020). However, it did not mean that widening participation meant equitable access.

2.2.2 Global South Perspective

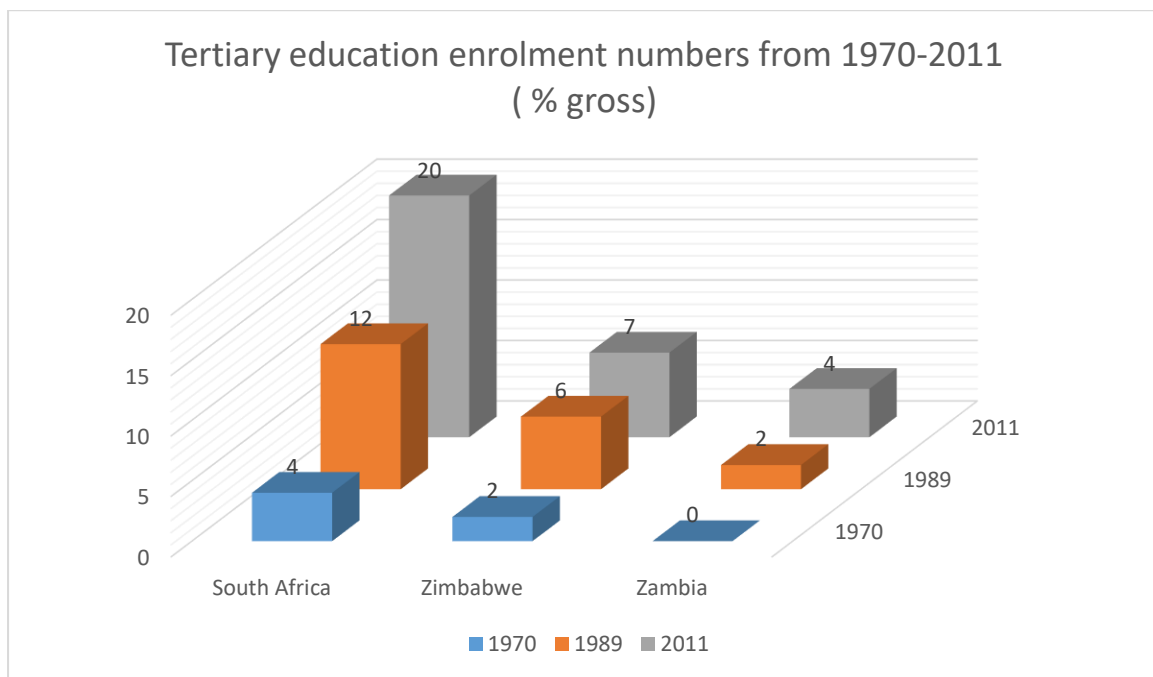
The higher education system in the global North has moved from providing to the elite to a state of massification. Similarly, the global South has also witnessed extraordinary higher education growth. However, massification in the global South, specifically in Africa, did not have the same pattern as the global North (as an aftereffect of World War II). The probable reason is that individual countries started massification after independence from the colonising countries (Assié-Lumumba, 2006). After independence, many African countries tried to build their own higher education system. For example, the enrolment number of students entering higher education sub-Saharan Africa in 1970 was 0.9% compared to 29.9% in central and Eastern Europe (UNESCO, 2020). Despite this increase over the years, progress is still slow compared to the global North. For example, in the year 2000, there was a student increase of 4.4 million who entered higher education in Africa, with the number significantly higher in the global North (about 50 million) (UNESCO, 2020). Most African countries struggle to build an equitable higher education system. For instance, in Zambia in 1957, the total student enrolment was 68; out of that number, only eight students were Africans (Lungu, 1993). This increased to 330 in 1962. However, the number of African students remained low at 74, regardless of Africans representing 96.5% of the entire population. Ajayi (1996) found that Africa's higher education systems were reproduced from the Western higher education systems because of its colonial influence on Africa. During the beginning of the 20th century and the 1950s, most African institutions' programmes displayed leftovers of colonial powers. They reflected mostly philosophical discourse trends and policy debates of major Western powers (Assié-Lumumba, 2006). To support this point, Obanya (2004) highlighted that universities in the colonies were essentially extensions of specific universities in the colonising nations. For instance, the University of London had a special

relationship with the University of Ghana, the University College of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), University of Ibadan, to mention a few.

Figure 4 depicts enrolment numbers in the global South caused by massification.

Figure 4

Gross enrolment ratios, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe



Source: World Bank (2021)

The above graph shows a steady massification of gross enrolment numbers in the global South. It should be noted that no data was available before 1970 for the countries selected above. According to the data above, in 1970, only 6% of students were enrolled in tertiary education. However, by 2011, about 31% of students were enrolled in higher education. The graph also indicates the ratio of total student enrolment, regardless of gender and age, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown.

Figure 4 does not indicate student dropout and success rates. Although there was a significant massification increase in the global South, it is evident that massification was not the same as

the global North, which was about 133%. The difference of approximately 102% between the two emphasises that massification was much more prominent in the global North compared to the global South. The main reason is that countries in the global South suffered the after effects of colonialism and struggled to find their own identity.

A steady improvement in enrolment numbers in the global South can be linked to the improvements in the schooling system at primary and secondary schooling levels, which brought about an immense number of students wanting to gain access to higher education (Mohamedbhai, 2008). For example, between 1994 and 2004, there was a secondary enrolment increase of about 43%, with around 31 million students enrolled across the African region (UNESCO, 2007). Mohamedbahi found that students appreciated that higher education is vital for economic advancement and a better life out of poverty. In 1999, the enrolment numbers for some African countries were 12%; in 2005, it was around 60%. The gross enrolment ratio rarely exceeded 5% because whilst the enrolment numbers increased, there was a lack of resources (e.g., infrastructure, quality of teaching and learning, research) to support higher learning institutions (Mohamedbhai, 2008). Even so, institutions had to find innovative ways to survive these challenges. According to Mohamedbhai (2008), some universities, such as Kenyatta University in Kenya, the University of Nairobi in Nairobi, and the National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, developed several approaches such as diversification of higher education institutions, use of ICT, innovative ways to generate more funding, and staff development to assist in coping with massification (Makondo, 2012). In South Africa specifically, most universities deliberately chose to enhance their curriculum interventions, such as universal and combined programmes, bridging courses, and semi-integrated and foundational programmes to improve their success rates (CHE, 2016). This will be discussed later in this chapter.

During post-independence in many African countries, the higher education sector played a vital role in providing high-level labour in social and economic development areas, as well as strengthening promising research (Assié-Lumumba, 2006). At the beginning of postcolonialism, colonising countries provided funding to universities in Africa, but this became a problem during the 1990s because of political encounters in many African countries, causing universities to struggle financially to accommodate the mass increase in enrolment numbers (Mohamedbhai, 2008). The World Bank made things even more challenging in countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia, and others when they reduced the amount of funding assigned to higher education from 17% between 1985 and 1989 to 7% between 1995 and 1999 (Bloom & Canning, 2005). The lack of funding resulted in the quality of higher education rapidly worsening because of macro-level crises at the state level, such as corruption and maladministration due to the political bureaucracy in the early stage of independence (Woldegiorgis, 2013). Even though enrolment numbers rose, it was not at the same speed as in the global North due to unequal access to higher education. This was because higher education institutions were experiencing resource challenges such as physical space, finances and human capacity to cope with the influx of students (Mohamedbhai, 2008).

Although massification happened globally and has evolved over time and for different reasons, there is currently a change in more diverse groups entering higher education. However, that does not necessarily mean that participation in higher education is equitable. Thus, widening access is only adequate if it is also equitable.

2.3 Participation and equitable access

Massification is about widening access; participation refers to equitable access, a social justice matter. Again, widening participation extends beyond just simply gaining access to higher education. With participation, it is also important to know what happens to a student

when they enrol at a university and the outcomes the student achieves (e.g., graduating). Participation can be explained in terms of justice and fairness (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). These two concepts are common in the field of university access or participation. Also, there are many debates around social justice in higher education (Cunningham, 2007; Deneulin, 2009; Nussbaum, 2006; Crocker & Robeyns, 2009; Sen, 1992; Wilson-Strydom, 2014). These debates about social justice centre around the different perspectives regarding the role and objective of higher education, especially considering the growing neoliberal impact on higher education both internationally and in South Africa. According to Brennan and Naidoo (2008), public universities work to guarantee that higher education is accessible to all members of society and maintain their exclusivity by limiting admission to a small number of people, giving graduates a privileged position (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). However, Archer et al. (2003) contend that it is crucial to acknowledge the long tradition of speculation about the numerous, complex ways that education both grows and strengthens disparities between classes. They also argue that higher education symbolises individual success and competition; therefore, this emphasises the order of social advantage (Archer et al., 2003). In the context of my work, this argument emphasises the significance of examining how social, economic and educational inequalities affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their transition to university. Despite higher education's efforts and dedication to promoting fairness and justice, the limited availability of resources associated with socioeconomic inequalities filters down into universities (Vally & Motala, 2014). Also, all students and staff are somehow affected by institutional resource constraints. However, most of the time, students vulnerable to exclusion are those who enter an institution with less academic preparedness, have resource scarcity, are under pressure to work and study, and have the potential to succeed together with cultural resources devalued within embedded institutional cultures (Calitz, 2015).

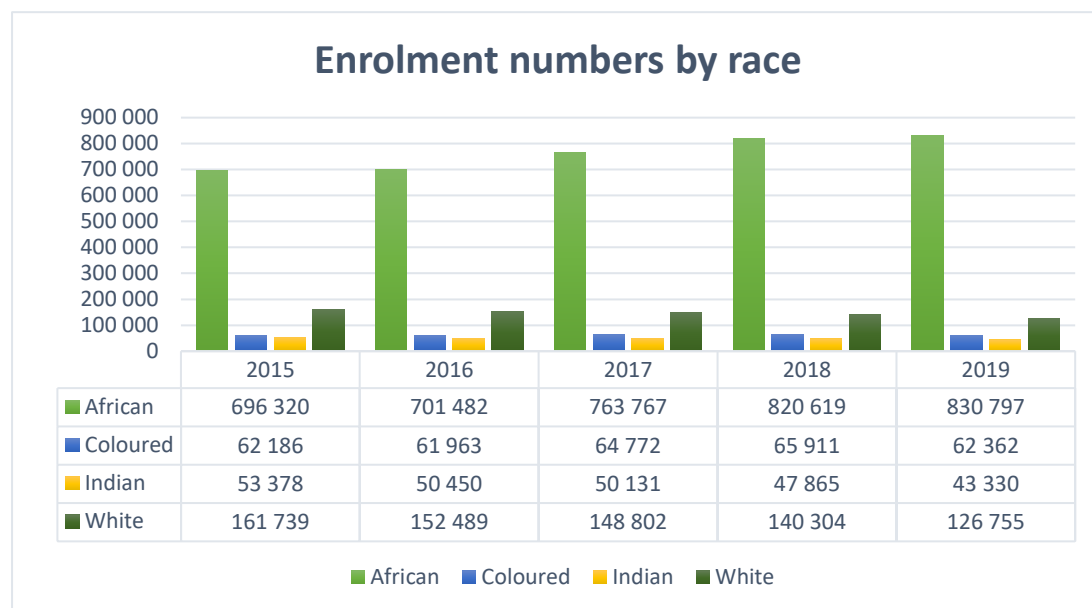
The difference between increased participation (also referred to as massification) and expanded participation in terms of how these terms are employed in policy discourse and implementation serves as an example of how conflicting claims of social justice manifest in the access landscape. For instance, it is possible to increase participation by having more enrolment numbers without widening participation (having more enrolments from previously under-represented groups) (Archer et al., 2003; James, 2007). With equity, several issues link to participation, such as social class, minorities, and gender (Archer et al., 2003, James, 2007; Marginson, 2011; Walker, 2009; Wilson-Strydom, 2014). The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) communities are also disadvantaged. Another issue of disadvantage has always been race, extending to minorities, cultural groups, religion, and indigenous groups. Even though higher education has changed from highly exclusive institutions into mass education systems, the equity of educational opportunities has become a desirable goal across societies (Goastellec, 2019). This is because some places such as Australia, the UK, and the USA have recognised that increasing enrolment numbers is not enough when students from low socioeconomic status and minorities are not graduating and finding employment. In the South African context, most students entering higher education are from disadvantaged backgrounds. The biggest challenge is that, while around two-thirds of students complete their studies, it takes the majority of them up to ten years to do so, and many of them exit the system with a considerable amount of debt and no qualification (DHET, 2011, 2020; Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Despite the efforts made through widening participation initiatives to enhance the inclusion of diverse groups, the participation rates of different social groups have not experienced significant changes. This indicates that equitable access and fair participation have not yet been fully reached because systems cannot provide equal opportunities for students to gain access to university, succeed and find employment. Research indicates that

participation in higher education has significantly improved, especially for African students. For example, in South Africa, after the dawn of democracy in 1994, student enrolments have nearly doubled, from a headcount of 495 396 in 1994 to 953 373 in 2012 (CHE, 2014). To demonstrate the increase, Figure 5 reflects the significant growth by race from 2015 to 2019.

Figure 5

Enrolment numbers by race from 2015-2019



Source: CHE (2019)

Figure 5 illustrates that many students, especially African students, have been entering higher education. For instance, in 2015, the higher education enrolment numbers were 696 320 students, growing to 830 797 in 2019 (CHE, 2019). This demonstrates a significant increase in students entering higher education. Most are African, followed by White, Coloured and then Indian students. However, despite the majority of students being African, the graduation rates depict a different story. The data from the national cohort studies disclosed that while 44 % of White students completed a three-year bachelor's degree in the minimum time, only 16% of African students completed their degrees in the minimum time (David, 2010; Gore, 2018; Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Despite the vast massification efforts,

data shows that participation is not yet equitable, and one of the biggest challenges is the throughput rate, especially for African students. For example, in 2016, the graduation rate of African students was 25% compared to 46% of White students in a three-year degree with the first year of enrolment (CHE, 2019). Although access has significantly widened, less than 20% of Africans between the age of 15-24 attend university compared to 49% of White students (CHE, 2019).

For Smit (2012), one of the issues of why the throughput rates might be so low is that institutions unintentionally blame the students for their lack of preparedness. She highlighted that in the late-1980s, the term *at-risk students* was commonly used to classify students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This term emerged to challenge the deficit thinking associated with categorising disadvantaged students as culturally deprived (Smit, 2012). There is often an association with risk factors, such as poverty, poor schooling, and limited English language proficiency in education. Their effect has been described as multiplicative rather than additive. In the South African context, there is a greater need to focus on researching disadvantage more than class. Much of the literature focuses on students' under-preparedness and possible answers to student problems. There is also literature on unequal structures within which students navigate higher education (Boughey, 2010; Calitz, 2015; Pym & Paxton, 2013; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The literature focuses much more on the deficit discourse of access to higher education, especially for historically disadvantaged students who do not follow traditional ways of gaining access at universities.

Since the dawn of the South African democracy, the higher education system has significantly transformed. For instance, structural modifications include the merging of existing public higher education institutions, the emergence of private higher education institutions, the expansion of comprehensive higher education institutions and substantial growth in enrolments in higher education institutions. However, widening participation does

not address the issue of equal participation. The following section will reflect on issues of participation, focusing on social class, minorities, and gender.

2.3.1 Issues of participation in higher education

This section highlights the important issues of participation. As seen in the previous section, massification brought about challenges to equitable participation. Most universities had to develop strategies for fair access due to the low throughput rates. Most literature focuses on the social and academic needs of the under-preparedness of students, which is important for policy and practice. However, this study focused on the misrecognition of the potential of disadvantaged students and downplaying the systemic injustices (Leibowitz, 2011). This section identifies major debates within interdisciplinary research that respond to the complexity of unequal participation. The second section focuses on the literature which unpacks what disadvantage means and how it manifests differently in different contexts. The last section will focus on access, transitioning, and success, concluding with my reflection on the literature.

2.3.1.1 Access and Social class

Since the 1960s, the UK has worked on policies that seek to widen participation in higher education for excluded groups and minorities (Her Majesty's Stationery Office [HMSO], 1997; Leathwood & Archer, 2004). The White Paper on higher education (HMSO, 1987) addressed the situation for widening access to more vocational higher education; the Education Reform Act of 1988 recognised access courses as an alternative way into higher education to academic and vocational qualifications (TLRP, 2008). This was designed for students from poor social backgrounds. This led to a massive increase in widening participation in higher education (Dearing, 1997). Mettler (2014) described a particular aspect of the US education system as follows:

Many needy students are sequestered into separate and inferior institutions, including the for-profits, from which they are likely to emerge without degrees and too often with crushing debt levels. In short, our higher education system contributes increasingly to rising inequality, as it stratifies Americans by income group rather than providing them with ladders of opportunity (Mettler, 2014, p. 8).

Higher education shifted focus to assisting underprepared students with various interventions in response to equitable participation. Webb et al. (2017) argued that there had been an unwelcome (and frequently unacknowledged) element of stasis despite the undeniable progress. They further argued that even after more than five decades of pro-HE policies, there is an observation that disaggregated socio-economic groups' relative participation remains remarkably stable. They emphasised that the higher social-economic groups still lead, and intergenerational social mobility remains inadequate. Unfairness, after all the well-intentioned efforts of the past half-century, persists. Gorard et al. (2006); Gorard, (2008) have stated that in so far as possible for there to be facts in social policies, they argue that these inequalities are a fact. Although the country's interventions managed to increase

participation, equity and fair participation have not yet been reached because the system seems not to provide equal opportunities for all students to succeed at university and in the job market (David, 2010). Haveman and Wolfe (1995) have also illustrated how parental education and household income influence university entry; parents that can afford to pay for their children's tuition fees due to their household income provide their children with opportunities the less fortunate cannot provide.

In addition, social class in India is also a major issue in access to higher education. For example, India has 1.5 million lakh⁹ schools (government and private). Only 15% are in urban areas, and 71% of enrolment in the country is concentrated in rural locations (Sheikh, 2017). This creates an extra burden because most learners from rural areas cannot further their studies (Gupta, 2012). In addition, the country has the third-largest student population (after China and the USA), and about 60% of the higher education sector is marketed by the private sector (Gupta, 2012; Sheikh, 2017). The higher education sector has increased 34 times from 20 universities in 1950 to 677 in 2014 (Sheikh, 2017). However, some of their universities are not regarded as world-class universities. The funds dedicated to supporting students are inadequate and funding has significantly declined in the last two decades. This also adds to why the majority of students from low social backgrounds drop out or cannot attend higher education because they cannot afford higher education (Sharma, 2019).

Similar to India, in South Africa, most students in higher education struggle to fund their studies (DHET, 2010). This challenge stems from the Apartheid legacy, where the higher education system was designed along racial and ethnic lines, with an explicitly ideological approach to the curriculum (Wilson-Strydom, 2014). In 1994, the education system changed to cater for all students. Even though higher education was massified, the majority of students

⁹ Lakh is a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to one hundred thousand (100,000; scientific notation). It is a commonly used term in Indian English to express large numbers in the system (Rowlett, 2018).

are still too poor to attend higher education. This led to the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests. Despite the efforts made by the government and the #Fees Must Fall movement to get as many students as possible to gain access to higher education, access is still not equitable. The challenge of inequitable higher education is that students from low social classes drop out of universities or take a long time to obtain qualifications (Calitz, 2015; CHE, 2010; DHET, 2013; Gore, 2018; Wilson-Strydom, 2014).

Studies on economically disadvantaged students' university experiences revealed that some students think they will fail (Perry & Francis 2010; Reay 2001) and feel alienated (Archer et al. 2003a, 2003b; Perry & Francis 2010; Reay 2001). In addition, funding pressures are always an issue, with many governments no longer providing adequate funding (Bekhradnia, 2003; Boughey, 2010; Gumport et al., 1997; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Therefore, institutions are forced to look at innovative ways to source funding, resulting in many institutions increasing tuition fees, unintentionally placing those from under-represented societies at a disadvantage because they cannot afford higher education. Again, the gap between those from poorer societies and those from more affluent societies has widened rather than decreased (Bekhradnia, 2003). In the next section, the issues of access and minorities will be discussed, and statistics of the enrolment numbers and the impact thereof will be presented.

2.3.1.2 Access and Minorities

Another big equity challenge in higher education is that systems are not up to standard to cater for minority groups, and most systems are not ready for so-called ‘non-traditional’ students. While class appears to be the foremost factor disadvantaging non-traditional students in the UK, the literature indicates that race could be the main factor marginalising ethnic and low-income groups in higher education in the USA and South Africa. In the USA, it is because the system is racially stratified (Mettler, 2014; Piketty, 2014). In addition, in the USA, each university and college sets its admission standards and decides which applicants meet them. They also base their admissions decisions on a student’s academic record and applicable test scores, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT) (Alon, 2009). The substantial gap in university attendance based on parental income can largely be explained by differences in the prior academic achievement of rich and poor young people in high school (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015).

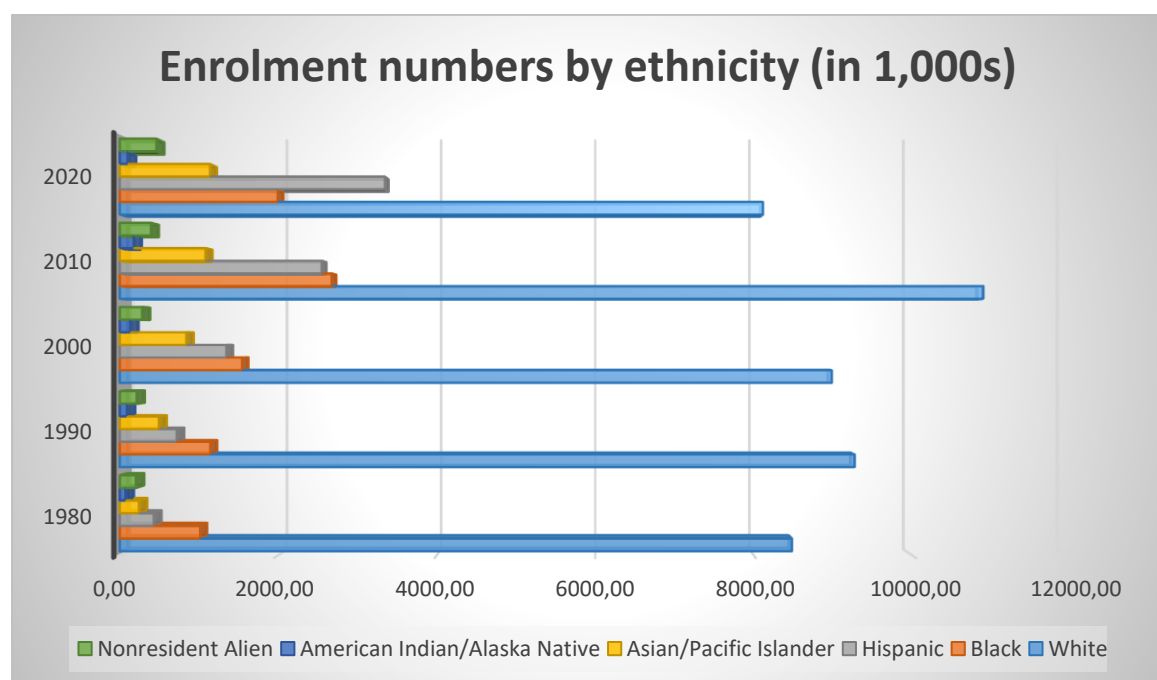
Minority groups in the USA, including African Americans, Latinos and Asians, are underrepresented and have lower attainment in higher education institutions than traditional White middle-class students (Piketty, 2014). These minority groups access poor public schools, while the White middle class are more likely to access prestigious private colleges and high schools (Tierney, 2015). The universities and colleges are less centralised, have different admission requirements, and even charge tuition fees differently. Due to the hierarchical educational system in the USA, in which race is a central form of disadvantage, Piketty (2014) argues that it reflects a stratified society. Ethnic minorities fall under low-income groups and thus access poor public schools and two-year university programmes (Tierney, 2015). In understanding why widening participation did not reach the expected outcomes on social mobility, the study revealed that Black students were disadvantaged

through poverty and a history of discrimination (Berliner, 2009; Milner, 2012; Murray et al., 2007; Wilson, 2008).

Figure 6 presents the enrolment numbers, highlighting the increase of different ethnic groups in the USA higher education system for undergraduate studies.

Figure 6

Number of Undergraduate students enrolled in the USA from 1980-2020



Source: Statista (2019)

Figure 6 shows a minor increase in Black, Hispanic and other races except for White students. In 1980, the number of White students (8 480,70) in undergraduate studies was much higher than students of any other race; for Black students, it was only 1 018,80 (Statista, 2019). This number has not changed much over the years, as illustrated in Figure 6. Furthermore, in 2010 the number of Black students increased to 2677,10. However, the numbers decreased in 2020. This might be due to various reasons, such as students from minority groups not gaining access or struggling because of the intersection between race and

socioeconomic status (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015; Piketty, 2014). This is in line with the findings of Piketty, as highlighted earlier in the literature.

When exploring the global South, specifically Africa, after some countries gained independence, the challenge of some institutions funded by their colonising countries having to withdraw their partnerships brought about a hefty fine for students. For instance, in Zimbabwe, introducing fee-paying policies in universities brought challenges and suffering to students as they could not afford higher education (Hwami, 2013, Kariwo, 2007). When the government adopted the multi-currencies, especially the US dollar and the South African Rand, it became even more difficult for students to afford university (Mukwambo, 2016). In South Africa, the impact of increasing tuition fees on students experiencing poverty lead to these students protesting, resulting in the #FeesMustFall movement. Race is again highlighted as an important issue in the South African context, including the issue of minorities. Australia and New Zealand deem indigenous people as minorities. In the USA, all races are minorities. Thus, does widening participation refer to the quality of education or the number of students? Even though it is slightly more difficult to measure (compared to 'race' differences commonly noted in South African higher education literature and data), access and success are greatly influenced by class or socioeconomic context divisions (Archer et al., 2003; CHE, 2010).

In many cases, the majority of those who are unsuccessful within South African universities are those from poorer backgrounds. Therefore, the government decided through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to support those students whose parents or guardians cannot afford the tuition fees of an institution of higher learning. NSFAS has been successfully established, and it has been able to promote redress for poor and middle-class students; the overall amounts allocated for NSFAS fell short of providing adequate support for all eligible students in need (Badat, 2010). Subsequently, the government changed

the NSFAS funding model to support access to, and success in, higher education and training for students from poor and working-class families who would otherwise not be able to afford to study (NSFAS, 2023).

However, the challenge is still that it cannot assist all students. This challenge highlights the reality of the interconnection of race and class: equity of access for students (largely Black) from working class and disadvantaged social backgrounds will continue to be severely compromised. Thus, even though the increase in student numbers of ethnic minorities has, to some extent, transformed the institutional demographic only in absolute numbers because the proportional demographic representation has improved for the better, it remains unequal. This failure to address growing disparities within structural arrangements replicates the socioeconomic injustices extended access seeks to address. While higher education might have opened the doors of learning to more students, the issue has now shifted to students not being able to afford higher education as those who are given the opportunity to gain access cannot afford it.

2.3.1.3 Access and gender

Most countries have tried to bridge the gender inequality gap by providing access to female students in historically male-dominated spaces. The World Bank (2021) maintained that internationally, promoting gender justice and empowering is positioned as an essential strategy to reduce poverty and boost economic and social development. For example, in the 1960s, an exception was made to access higher education for those who belonged to a particular socio-economical group in France. Exceptions were made for some aristocrats (Green, 1992). Therefore, a student from local aristocracies could get an education (Gonzalez, 2014). The British model of education in Ghana, like in many other African colonies, was primarily designed to serve the interests of the colonial administration and train

a limited elite group for administrative roles. However, after independence, Ghana made efforts to reform its educational system to better meet the needs of its population and promote national development. (Education, 2008; Okrah, 2010; Kuyini, 2013). Despite inequality developments in the higher education system, the challenge remains that access has not been widened to include all social groups. Some of the available data from the Ministry of Education (2008) and academic research suggests that there is still unequal distribution of higher education among women, minorities, and individuals from low socio-economic status (Atuahene, 2013; Mama, 2003; Quinn, 2003).

In South Africa post 1994, the higher education sector set targets for transformation, especially gender equality. One of the higher education's targets was "increased and broadened participation", including greater "access for Black, women, disabled and mature students" and "equity of access and fair chances of success to all... while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities" (DoE, 1997, 1.13). This is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 which aims to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls (United Nation, 2023). There has been good progress in gender equity, as female students make up the majority of students in higher education. However, Coetzee (2001) highlighted that although educational institutions overcame some gender inequalities, they bear the blame for embedding gender discrimination in their structures. According to the DHET report (2021), the 2019 data revealed that women dominate all undergraduate qualifications nationally, but men dominate in doctoral degrees. Between 2011 and 2019, more than half of beneficiaries of NSFAS were female (61,5%) compared to males (38,5%). Although many higher education policies promote inclusivity, Akala (2018) argued that Black women still face more nuanced alienations in terms of social class, race, epistemological access, language and sexual abuse and harassment.

Even though access to higher education has increased, the challenge is that higher education is grappling with many challenges, including gender equity (Badat, 2010, 2011; CHE, 2010). The United Nations' 2022 report on SDG5 revealed that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030 as initially set (United Nations[UN], 2023). The report also revealed that this is due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the backlash against women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, which the report highlighted to reduce the viewpoint for gender equality further. Even though women outperform men in higher education, it is clear that there are still many challenges to address because women do not occupy positions of power in the workplace (UN, 2023).

2.3.1.4 Access and disadvantage in higher education

In this section, access and disadvantage in higher education for the youth are explored; I will argue that the core concepts of access and disadvantage should revolve around ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals to pursue and succeed in higher education, irrespective of their social background or circumstances. I will discuss how the term equity is used in different countries, how it is applied to higher education, and what it means for those countries. The previous sections provided evidence of how some countries struggle with equitable access to higher education, and there seem to be different views of what equitable access means.

In some countries, equity refers to social class or indigenous groups; in others, it is more about gender, race, and ethnicity. In South Africa, equity is rooted in its historical context based on its Apartheid system, which was profoundly discriminatory and socially unjust. Unfortunately, the issue of equity significantly impacts the youth. Global data revealed that young people or youth comprise the greatest unemployed proportion. According to the International Labour Organisation [ILO] (2022), the population count of youth has increased by 139 million people worldwide. However, youth labour has declined by 35% between 1997

and 2017 (ILO, 2022). The youth are often excluded in the economy and face other forms of marginalisation (e.g., employment) to take care of their well-being. Despite the critical role young people can play in South Africa in national development, they constitute the most disadvantaged group. For example, they are often excluded from participating meaningfully in political spheres that are a prerogative of older people (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2015). In 2020, the ILO report stated that youth unemployment rose to 23.3 % globally. It should be noted that this is a particular group of the youth who are not employed. According to the report, the increase was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and in 2021, the unemployment youth stood at 75 million globally (ILO, 2022). Thus, even though there is an increase in graduation rates among the youth, unemployment is still a considerable challenge for them, adding to their challenge of accessing higher education.

According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), the first quarter of 2022 showed the unemployment rate in South Africa at 63,9% for those aged 15-24 and 42,1% for those aged 25-34 years. The official national rate stood at 34,5% (StatsSA, 2022b). In the second quarter of 2022, the unemployment rate in South Africa was 33,9% (Trading Economist, 2022). This number is higher than the national average. Furthermore, 37,0% of this group were not in employment, education, or training (NEET) (StatsSA, 2022a). Therefore, widening participation in higher education could improve the youth's lives. However, increasing student enrolment numbers does not automatically imply equal opportunities for students to be successful because inequality in higher education shape students' chances of success differently. Policies often use the term disadvantage to have meaningful interventions. Unfortunately, this has not translated into equal participation because Black students continue to achieve lower success rates than White students.

Furthermore, one cannot discuss disadvantage in South African higher education without looking at the issue of race¹⁰. From a South African perspective, increasing access to higher education and improving students' chances of success in their university studies has been, and continues to be, a necessary research focus within higher education studies and higher education policy (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Also, the challenge of the under-preparedness of students entering higher education has become increasingly important as universities struggle to improve their throughput rates (Jansen, 2003; Scott, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The challenge of disadvantaged students has been gaining standing in higher education literature (see Tinto, 1993; McNair et.al., 2020). This stems from the country's racial and class discrimination, political exclusion, and inequality patterns emanating from colonialism (CHE, 2004). A focus on race is essential because of South Africa's history of Apartheid and how this has resulted in the country being among the countries with the highest inequalities in the world¹¹ (Featherman, 2010). In both the USA and South Africa, race is the main factor disadvantaging Black students in accessing and thriving in higher education (Bozalek & Boyhey, 2012; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014; Leibowitz & Bozakek, 2015; Mettler, 2014; Pikkety, 2014).

Based on the literature above, it is evident that disadvantage is perceived in different ways. The concept is defined in relative and absolute terms. Relatively speaking, disadvantage focuses on a person in relation to others. In absolute terms, the concept refers to people who are in difficult scarcity situations, which may encounter different challenges such as financial constraints, limited educational resources and lack of support systems. I assert that the term

¹⁰ In South Africa, the Apartheid system used racism as an economic project to allot privileges to Whites whilst depriving other races such as Africans, Coloureds and Indians. Through the ideology and the legal framework of the Apartheid era, Whites used racism to separate, exclude and exploit other races (Mekao, 2011). Although Apartheid was dismantled in the early 1990s, many of the social trends persist today, and the effects of racial exclusion remain marked.

¹¹ South Africa is one of the countries with the highest inequalities in the world. Using the Gini coefficient, the country ranges between 0,660 and 0,696, which is high considering that a society with the highest inequalities society would have a value of 1,0.

disadvantage should rather be multi-dimensional because it includes different characteristics of a person that constitute personal well-being (Sen, 1999). Again, inclusion is also important as it creates an educational environment that embraces diversity and supports the participation and success of individuals from all backgrounds (Salmi, 2021). Students who cannot afford to pay for tuition face significant challenges. For instance, they cannot afford textbooks or do not have the means to fund their living expenses, thus becoming a significant barrier to access.

Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) added two new important concepts to the capabilities approach: fertile functioning and corrosive disadvantage. The authors refer to fertile functionings as capabilities and or functionings that tend to promote well-being or assist in securing other functionings or capabilities. For instance, being educated can lead to employment and better nutrition. A fertile functioning is determined by “the interaction of your internal resources with the social and material structures within which you find yourself, [which] determines your genuine opportunities for secure functionings” (Wolf & De-Shalit 2007, p. 173). They refer to corrosive disadvantages as those that tend to yield further disadvantage (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007). Corrosive disadvantage can also refer to areas that require intervention and transformation. Those most disadvantaged tend to be in a situation where multiple disadvantages cluster together; subsequently, unique attention should be given to “the way patterns of disadvantage form and persist, and take steps to break up such clusters” (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007, p. 10). In identifying fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages, they provide the means for identifying these clusters of disadvantages as well as possible steps to remedy them. The corrosive disadvantage for students from poor social backgrounds or families is that lack of financial and educational resources compromises the freedom for participation (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007). The following section briefly explains the programmes that enhance equitable access at different institutions of higher learning.

2.4 Programmes that enhance equitable access

Internationally, bridging or access programmes are designed to serve as a bridge or a perceived gap between students' existing English language proficiency and/or academic level and the level deemed necessary for undergraduate study through the medium of English (McGrath, 2009). On a systemic level, efforts have been made to address the issue of equitable access. Community colleges in the USA are higher education institutions that primarily serve the surrounding community. The colleges also serve as an access point to universities for students who plan on continuing their education or want to enter the workforce. In around the 1990s, policymakers and the government developed strategies to effect equity improvements at universities (Southgate & Bennett, 2014). They included special admission arrangements, bridging and support programmes and units, and strategies to make teaching materials and processes more relevant to the needs of disadvantaged students (Pitman, 2017). The acknowledgement of indigenous people that need to be included in higher education was also highlighted. It was labelled '*A Fair Chance for All*', targeting six specific groups from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with disabilities, and people from rural and isolated areas (Department of Employment, Education and Training [DEET], 1990). Griffith University appointed Student Success Advisors (SSAs) to focus on retention. The advisors track students by contacting them, interviewing them, referring them to extra support services, and tracking their progress throughout the semester. SSAs also monitor early attendance and assessment and intervene to help students struggling with these early indicators. Furthermore, they provide ongoing skills support and mentoring throughout the semester (Halvorson, 2016). In the UK, universities widened access by establishing the Office for Fair Access (OFA). Its mandate was to promote fair access to higher education for students from lower-income and other underrepresented groups. The

office collaborated with universities to assist students at universities to succeed. After the adaption of the higher education Act in 2004, universities were granted permission to charge flexible top-up fees, which were payable after a student graduates. This resulted in the launch of an Office for Fair Access (OFFA) established in 2005. The sole mandate of the office was to “safeguard and promote fair access to higher education for lower-income and other under-represented groups following the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006–07” (Office for Fair Access [OFFA], 2011, par. 1).

There is a difference between pre-sessional and foundation programmes in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Universities offer four- to twelve-week pre-sessional courses, primarily intended for students who have been granted access on condition that they achieve a certain level of English. However, many of these will have applied for postgraduate (PG) entry rather than Undergraduate(UG) courses. Such courses focus on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and study skills. The foundation programmes typically last two to three terms and are designed for students whose academic qualifications do not meet university entry requirements (McGrath, 2009). In the USA, they have Intensive English programmes (IEP) and other courses which provide an exemption from the first two years of a university degree. These courses can be taken at a community college, and this is a popular entry route to UG study. One of the most difficult challenges is the issue of language. Most universities use English as a medium of instruction. Thus, language is an object of study as it is a means of access to information and a medium of communication. Unfortunately, most disadvantaged students’ language of instruction in schools is not English (Calitz, 2015; Gore, 2018; Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Another issue is that students struggle to cope with the vast amount of reading and how to refer to sources. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not always ready to cope with the academic demands of higher education. However, bridging programmes can enable students to adjust socially and culturally to a new environment,

forming new friendships that provide struggling students with the necessary support. Also, the course content and resource materials of bridging programmes must be at the appropriate level for students.

Victoria University in New Zealand offers a Certificate of Proficiency in English, and Canterbury University offers a Certificate of English for Tertiary Studies. In Qatar, they use an academic bridge programme (Education City, Qatar); in Turkey, they offer a preparatory English programme for students. In South Africa, numerous institutions offer bridging programmes to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds gain access to universities. Bridging programmes in South Africa are intended for students who passed their end-of-year matric/Grade 12 exams but did not obtain the required marks for university entrance. The programmes allow students to take foundational subjects/modules to improve their marks and potentially obtain a pre-degree/diploma, as in the Anglophone, the medium of instruction at these institutions is English. Institutions such as the University of Zululand, the first to have a bridging programme in 1961, were aimed at academic development. Other institutions followed suit (e.g., the University of Pretoria, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of the Free State). In the past, bridging programmes helped students transition into university; however, nowadays, it assists students in improving their Grade 12 results.

The University of Pretoria has BSc Extended Programmes explicitly designed for students who have or show potential to succeed but are not well prepared. These programmes have a lower APS and an additional year focusing on assisting students with basic knowledge (University of Pretoria, 2019). At the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 'extended learning is committed to enrichment through lifelong learning by providing high-quality credit and non-credit bearing short courses and academic programmes in collaboration with the schools and colleges of the University of KwaZulu-Natal' (University of KwaZulu Natal, 2019). At the University of the Free State, bridging/access programmes are argued for as follows: 'The

necessity for this programme arose due to imbalances in the schooling system, which resulted in many deserving students not being able to meet the entrance requirements of universities, universities of technology (then called technikons), and vocational colleges (University of the Free State, 2019). There were academic language and numeracy support courses when bridging programmes started in South Africa because students from disadvantaged backgrounds were perceived as not having the required academic writing and numeracy skills. These bridging programmes were designed to support them. The bridging programmes became academic development support for students with potential but did not meet mainstream or degree study programmes. These became foundation programmes that were part of the extended programmes in an attempt to remediate some of the school system's failures. Students included in the extended programme are those who meet the university entry requirements but not necessarily the faculty-specific requirements. Thus, students may extend their studies by one year to complete their qualifications. Initially, the bridging programmes focused on struggling Black students from the Bantu education system, focusing on how to help these students transition into university. It is evident that the mentioned bridging programmes were designed to assist with equitable access to higher education. These might, to some extent, have achieved the desired outcome. However, the next section will discuss the UFS's bridging programme, highlighting enhanced equitable access.

2.5 Equitable access at the University of the Free State

As with several other South African universities, the focus on equitable access at the UFS started in the mid-1980s. The University of the Free State introduced the University Preparation Programme (UPP) on the Bloemfontein campus in January 1993 as the NEED Programme (Need for Education and Elevation). The necessity for this programme arose due to imbalances in the schooling system, which resulted in many deserving students not meeting the entrance requirements of universities, universities of technology (then called

Technikons), and vocational colleges. The UPP provided prospective students with UFS admission point scores of 18 to 24 with the opportunity to perform themselves into higher education. This admission point score is considered very low because it does not give access entry to a student to study in mainstream degree programmes. Successful UPP students gain access, with credit recognition, to appropriate further degree studies (Access, 2018).

On the other hand, for extended degree programmes, the primary purpose of foundation provision is to improve students' academic performance who are at risk due to their educational backgrounds. HE performance patterns show that many students at risk because of disadvantaged educational backgrounds are admitted to mainstream programmes. However, significant numbers of students who meet minimum admissions criteria are considered underprepared or unprepared for regular programmes and drop out (Boughey, 2012; Scott, 2010). Therefore, foundation provision was developed to support educationally disadvantaged students who are underprepared despite meeting minimum admission criteria by enabling them to be placed on an extended curriculum¹² that will give them the academic foundations for completing their studies. The foundation provision at the UFS focuses particularly on first-time university students. In cohort studies, students of a cohort or group enrolled in a specific year are tracked throughout their studies until they graduate or drop out. At the UFS, some of the interventions to support these students are in areas such as selection, curriculum designing, teaching and learning, and student monitoring and support services, including peer mentoring, academic advising and student wellness services.

Concerning institutional conditions, some of the other issues arising are the large classes students are taught in, which can create discomfort for a student who has never been in a big class. Students in the Access programme are taught in classes of not more than fifty students

¹² An extended curriculum programme is a formal undergraduate degree or diploma programme, the minimum duration of which is lengthened by half a year to a full year in order to incorporate substantial academic provision, which is of a developmental nature and is additional to the coursework prescribed for the regular curriculum (DHET, 2011).

per class. The access programme is taught in small groups, and the teaching methodology differs from the mainstream studies, which is resource-based learning (Access Report, 2017; 2018). After completing their access year, they move to extended degree programmes or mainstream studies. They have to adapt to being taught in big classes without the additional support provided in the access programme. Despite these challenges, a relatively large number of students demonstrate capabilities of adapting from moving to a small intimate learning environment of the access programme to a significantly larger campus. Despite these and other challenges, many students continue to complete their degrees (Access, 2017). The students' results (including students from sub-regions¹³) are compared to the 2006-2013 UFS Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) intake cohorts to develop a perspective on the relative academic success of University Preparation Programmes (UPP) students, who enter the UFS with typically lower UFS Admission Point Score (APS) than the ECP students. The data investigation only applied to UPP students who decided to continue their studies at the UFS after completing their UPP year. As such, it excluded students who, for whatever reasons, did not return to the UFS after their UPP year. Below is a comparative statistic: UPP students versus Extended Curriculum Programme students (summary of the research report); average graduation rate results across all faculties in a four-year timeframe:

Table 2:

Pass rates comparison between UPP and ECP

Average across all cohorts and Faculties – UPP	41.04%	Average across all cohorts and Faculties – Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP)	42.52%
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The following observations can be deduced from the statistical analysis:

¹³ Subregions are TVET colleges in the Free State Province, with which the University of the Free State has partnerships.

- a) Overall, the UPP students achieved a somewhat lower graduation rate than the ECP students (i.e., a 1.48% lower average across all faculties).
- b) Overall, the most significant average gap in graduation rate between the UPP and ECP students was in the EMS Faculty. The UPP students achieved a graduation rate of 8.12% lower than their ECP counterparts.

Notably, UPP students in both the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of NAS achieved a higher graduation rate than the ECP students, with the most significant gap being 2.34% among students in the Faculty of Education. Overall, the UPP students with the highest graduation rate enrolled for studies in the Faculty of Education after completing their UPP year.

2.6 Beyond access, challenges with transitioning and success

Literature indicates that access to university is not enough. There are challenges with transitioning into university and student success. Transitioning into an institution of higher learning, whether from high school to university or one programme to the next, is very important in any student's life. However, for some students, transitioning into higher education can be a stressful and frightening experience, even more so for disadvantaged students. That transitioning process can either set the foundation for success or failure. Some of the literature (Calitz, 2015; Thompson & Pawson, 2021; Wilson-Strydom, 2015) highlighted several issues students struggle with when transitioning to university. Most students struggle with transitioning from high school to a university setup (teaching and self-study), others struggle with being away from home for the first time, and many struggle with finances as the university is expensive. Unfortunately, these and other challenges ultimately affect their mental well-being; transitioning adds an extra burden for disadvantaged students because of their socio-economic backgrounds and environment. Some or most of them are

more likely to be first-generation¹⁴ students going to university, with no point of reference regarding the world they are embarking on, the language, and terminologies used in higher education. They do not have anyone to ask for assistance; if they do, they might not know what questions to ask when they need help.

Upon arriving at university, they are confronted with multiple challenges. For instance, some lecturers are not always motivating first-year students (Coertjens et al., 2016). Some of the participants in this study stated that they hear statements such as 'look to the left, look to the right. One of you three will continue onto the second year.' For first-year students, these statements add to their stress and challenges (Michaela & Pascoe, 2020). Supporting first-year students' transition into university is crucial as this will determine their success. Tinto (2005) highlighted that the positive transition into higher education is vital for the individual student and the institution. Again, a positive and successful transition will ultimately assist a student to succeed. However, most students, especially the first generation, disadvantaged, and minorities, have different experiences and outcomes based on sociocultural and economic differences. Regrettably, most of them then drop out in their first year. Multiple factors lead to first-year dropouts, often at a higher than anticipated rate (Wingate, 2007).

2.7 Understanding the dilemmas and successes of transitioning

Numerous factors negatively and positively affect students transitioning into higher education. Unfortunately, students cannot be admitted into programmes they want because of not meeting the minimum admission points. This is even more challenging for disadvantaged students because many often have to start in a preparatory programme before joining mainstream studies (Lisciandro et al., 2016; Thompson & Pawson, 2021; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). What has become even more evident is that, in addition to the lack of academic skills,

¹⁴ A first-generation student refers to a student whose parents or guardian does not have a formal university qualification.

disadvantaged students also need to be equipped with social and emotional skills that support their transition to university. This creates tension in the faculties when students move to mainstream studies as these students are seen not completing their degrees in the minimum time allocated to do so, which, at a glance, might negatively impact throughput rates. Low throughput rates also negatively impact subsidies. Another anecdotal critique has been that these students are ‘spoon-fed’ during the UPP with more individual attention and smaller classes than those in mainstream studies on the Bloemfontein Campus.

On the positive side, based on international literature, those enabling programmes have become an essential pathway to university for those students (Lisciandro & Jones, 2016). Bridging programmes aim to widen participation by increasing enrolments of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, minorities, and low socioeconomic statuses; the bridging programme at the UFS is one such case. The UFS UPP has created an enabling pathway for students to acquire academic skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging (see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion). They also potentially influence students, family circumstances, and the communities they come from (see Chapter 7 for a detailed discussion) (Crawford, 2014).

Psychologists also associate transitioning with mental and physical disorders (Dodge, 1970; Fisher, 1986). According to Fisher and Hood (1987), a person who moves from a familiar place to a new environment is instantly exposed to several things, namely the structures of a new environment, the stresses of moving, and being separated from the standard and specific features of the previous environment. These aspects may influence an individual’s mental and physical ill-health (Fisher & Hood, 1987). This is also true for all students who leave their families and communities to study at a university. The transition to university can be positive for some students. It creates new opportunities. Parents who have studied at a university can support their children and help them with decision-making. However, this transition process can be very stressful for those from disadvantaged

backgrounds, as they are generally first-generation students. Nevertheless, the transition involves change for all students because multiple things are needed to break old routines and adjust to the demands of a new environment.

On the other hand, institutions of higher learning have also made efforts to facilitate the transition by setting up different initiatives to support students. Initiatives include developmental/introductory courses on approaches to learning activities that engage students to collaborate with peers and staff (Coertjens et al., 2017; Michaela, & Pascoe, 2020) and setting up mentoring programmes. During the orientation week, students are also made aware of multiple factors that can hinder or foster their success (Buote et al., 2007). One of those factors is peer group pressure. Suppose a student does not have the right friends to assist with succeeding at university. In that case, this can place additional stress on students, and they may discontinue their studies. That is why for some universities, they emphasise choosing the ‘right friends’. Finances are another stressful factor for students as universities constantly increase their fees to help maintain the university. The 2015 #FeesMustFall campaign highlighted persistent inequality in educational access within South African society because of the high cost of university education. However, this is not unique to South Africa and also features in many other developing as well as developed countries, such as Britain and America (Perna et al., 2008). This becomes an extra burden for disadvantaged students because fees are too high, and students cannot afford university. The majority of disadvantaged students then have to rely on government financial aid for support. Unfortunately, with this support that is aimed at assisting students, often at times, those students have to share the little money they get with their families at home, which puts pressure on the student (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Massification and widening participation in higher education are critical topics, but there are several gaps in the literature. The gaps that I have identified include:

- Inclusion and intersectionality: The majority of current research focuses on racial and socioeconomic diversity; intersectional identities and their effects on success and access to higher education are not as well explored.
- Long term outcome: Even though there is substantial research on access to higher education, there is a lack of thorough studies on what happens to those who have benefited from widening participation programs in the long term. This includes their job or career trajectories and social mobility.
- Retention and completion rates: As mentioned earlier in this chapter a lot of research on widening participation tends to focus on access to higher education. However, there is a great need for more studies on retention and completion rates as they are crucial in understanding why some students, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are/may struggle to complete their studies.
- Evaluating access/bridging programmes: There is a need to evaluate the success of access programmes which are aimed at increasing participation. The focus of the research should be to evaluate what works and what doesn't in terms of policies and programmes aimed at increasing access and success in higher education.

Addressing these gaps in the literature will contribute to a more inclusive understanding of massification and widening participation in higher education and inform more effective policies and practices in this area. It is also important to acknowledge that sometimes, the implementation of asset-based models leads to the idealization and broadening of the successes of disadvantaged students, irrespective of the particular conditions that made these achievements possible. This unexpected outcome may pave the way for decision- and policy-makers to see these remarkable achievements as the norm. Using the achievements of a small percentage of students to inform decisions may set a precedent for allocating more funds and assistance while potentially ignoring the complex demands and difficulties faced by the larger

group of disadvantaged students. By acknowledging and addressing these issues is essential in promoting the use of asset-based models.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed how the massification of higher education occurred in the past few decades in both the global North and South. It also showed that an increase in the number of students sparked a recognition of the need to make access to higher education more equitable. Many countries have introduced policies to cater for inequities, such as socioeconomic, gender or racial inequities. Furthermore, the concept of a disadvantaged students and how such students are affected by challenges in accessing higher education, particularly in the South African context, were addressed. Like many other South African institutions, the UFS introduced an access programme to enhance access to higher education for disadvantaged students. The UPP has produced graduates at the UFS through this programme; some were successful, others not. Although times have changed and circumstances are difficult, financially speaking, an access programme is not seen as part of the core business of a traditional university such as the UFS.

The chapter concluded by taking a step back from access to reflect on other experiences in higher education, such as transitioning and successfully navigating institutions of higher learning, impacting disadvantaged students. More research is needed to understand the challenges disadvantaged students face, considering that most Black students in higher education come from marginalised communities, receive poor schooling, and are usually alienated and labelled by their university environments. The next chapter will focus on the capabilities approach and theories of resilience.

Chapter 3: The capabilities approach and theories of resilience

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 outlined the complexities around issues of access and disadvantage in higher education. In reviewing the literature, I highlighted challenges students and institutions of higher learning face due to massification and equal participation. This includes the challenge of pursuing social justice accompanying students' widened participation. Conceptually, a theoretical approach that can adequately address this is needed. The capabilities approach is a good fit for a conceptual framework because it rigorously links structural injustice and individual vulnerability while remaining mindful of individual agency and freedom. Complementing the capabilities approach is the concept of resilience, which is referred to as the strength and speed of one's response to adversity or patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity (Masten & Powell, 2003). This approach was most suited to a combination of agency and social justice within the analysis of student experiences. The capabilities approach makes a strong case for equal opportunities rather than educational research that separates the individual experience of education from broader questions of just institutional arrangements (Boni & Walker, 2013; Vaughan, 2012; Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The capabilities approach also prioritises well-being outcomes for the public good. It combines concepts of freedom, agency, and human development into a robust justice normative framework that offers the space to make life-quality comparisons (Nussbaum, 2011).

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of what access and disadvantage look like within the capabilities approach framework, discussing the capabilities approach in detail, its concepts (well-being, agency, functionings and capabilities, conversion factors, and aspirations), and how they were used in this study in understanding access and disadvantage in higher education. This chapter will also critique the capabilities approach and the theories

of resilience highlighting social ecologies of resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The chapter will conclude by highlighting how the capabilities framework and theories of resilience have been framed in understanding disadvantaged students in higher education.

3.2 Conceptualising capabilities and resilience in the UPP

I argue that various structures, processes, and conditions underpin higher education access. This can be understood by positioning the analytical contrast of using a capabilities framework and resilience theories. By utilising analytical differentiation, both structures and agency are given separate consideration as independent and irreducible but related entities in understanding the capabilities and resilience of UPP students. This study aimed to explore the capabilities of typically labelled ‘disadvantaged’ students and how these contribute towards success in higher education. Despite these students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, a deficit approach to what they can do and be needs to be avoided. Relatively little is known about how students commonly labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ are able to succeed against the odds. Understanding the enablers of success for students who do not follow traditional access routes would provide important pointers for how universities can become more ready and equipped for the diverse students they now enrol (Mathebula, 2019; Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Thus, I used the capabilities approach and the theories of resilience as theoretical frameworks as a point of reference. The next section discusses key concepts related to this study.

3.3 The human development approach

The capabilities approach is grounded on the principles of the human development approach and embraces the value of participation, equity, and productivity (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; 2009b; Ul Haq, 2003). Human development is described as the process that enlarges people’s choices, such as living a long and healthy life, being educated, and having a decent standard of living; additional choices include political freedom, human rights, and self-respect. The human development paradigm focuses on enhancing people’s freedom to

achieve things they regard as important. The main focus is widening people's freedom and choices. Alkire (2010, p. 4) defined the concept of human development as "a process of enlarging people's choices." Key choices, referred to as "dimensions" of human development, are 'the process of widening people's choices and the level of their achieved well-being' (Alkire, 2010, p. 4). The focus is on development and concerns both process and the levels of achieved well-being (outcomes). The values of participation, sustainability, equity, and productivity consider the economic, political, environmental, and social consequences for human development (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; 2009b).

Furthermore, this explanation distinguishes between the formation of human capabilities that enable people to act and how people actually act. Some reports argue that development's real objective is to increase or expand people's choices (Alkire, 2010; Alkire & Deneulin, 2009b). Earlier on, the focus was not only on people's choices but also on people having access to decision-making and power and expanding their capabilities to lead the lives they value and to have the freedom to do so. Thus, an outcome of development must be human well-being.

Human development also aims to expand people's freedom (i.e., the worthwhile capabilities people value) and to empower people to engage actively in development processes (Nussbaum, 2003). It seeks to do so in ways that appropriately advance equity, efficiency, sustainability, and other key principles (Alkire, 2010). It links very well with higher education because an educated person's living conditions will improve, resulting in a lifestyle change and enabling them to make informed decisions and enjoy relationships with others. Walker (2010) highlighted that an important feature of a human development approach to education is that quality of life is the central concern, in direct contrast to a human capital concern with economic growth as development. For Sen (1992, 1999, 2009), income and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are insufficient indicators of development

because of growing economic disparities within nations and groups. An individual's educational background also positively influences their level of confidence (see Chapters 5 and 6), leading to them living a better life. A human development model, therefore, reframes success as the freedom an individual needs to follow a meaningful life, including but not limited to economic resources (Boni & Walker, 2013; Walker & McLean, 2010).

In contrast, the human capital approach “prioritises education as skills and knowledge as an investment in the productivity of the human being as an economic production factor” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 72). This is very limiting because it narrows the function of education to an instrumental good. Furthermore, it is also an unreliable measure of development because it downplays how education often fails to benefit people in the same way (Hart, 2011; Tickly & Barrett, 2011; Unterhalter, 2013; Walker, 2008). The key point is that in a postmodern world, people tend to avoid voicing how things should be, whereas the capabilities approach claims there are some principles people agree on that are important. Equity and sustainability can make people feel powerful, enabling them to identify better conditions and possible injustices. Within the educational sphere, people can thus identify what changes could positively impact the university and what not.

In the next section, I describe key ideas in the capabilities approach and their importance and interconnectedness within this approach. I acknowledge that the terminology in the capabilities approach is rooted in economics and philosophy. However, specific examples relating to higher education will be provided to ground the concepts in a practical educational setting.

3.4 Introducing key ideas in the capabilities approach

In order to provide an overview of the capabilities approach, a brief explanation of the key concepts of the capabilities approach is introduced. Firstly, the capabilities approach

operationalises human development using concepts that provide an alternative theoretical framework for theorising well-being and disadvantage. The capabilities approach is defined as “a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals for social change in society” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94). In addition, the capabilities approach centres on capabilities, functionings, agency, and conversion factors. The focus is on what people can effectively do and be. Capabilities can be used to evaluate several aspects of people’s well-being, including poverty and inequality. It is also used as a tool for social costs benefit analysis (Robeyns, 2005). The capabilities approach has also been used to identify social constraints that influence and restrict both well-being and evaluation exercises (Robeyns, 2005). Therefore, the need to know more about a person and the circumstances in which they live. Walker (2006) highlighted that capabilities are opportunities and capacities that can be nurtured if an individual is given a supportive environment. As already mentioned, the capabilities approach terminology was rooted in economics and philosophy. Wilson-Strydom (2015) gave specific examples (i.e., practical reasoning, educational resilience, knowledge and imagination) relating to education and higher education.

Walker and Unterhalter (2007, p. 1) defined capabilities as “the ability of a person to do or be”. Robeyns articulated that the capabilities approach is “a broad normative framework for evaluating and assessing individual well-being and social arrangements and designing policies and proposals about social change in society” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 5). Robeyns added that the capability approach is a framework that centralises people’s well-being (e.g., the freedom to have a good life), explaining that capabilities require people to focus on what individuals can do and be and what they value (e.g., having a job and a family and practising religion). Robeyns highlighted that capabilities are normative frameworks that can be used to guide understandings of individual well-being and social arrangements in a way that supports

just outcomes, thus, the value of the approach for this study. Sen also argued that the approach focuses on what people can effectively do and be (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1993), which links well with the research. Therefore, the question is what disadvantaged students can do and be while at university to succeed.

Moreover, Sen emphasised the opportunity or freedom dimensions, while Nussbaum defined it differently. For them, capabilities are personal powers which incorporate skills, capacities, and opportunities (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). The capabilities approach focuses on ‘well-being, agency, functionings and capabilities, conversion factors and aspirations’, presented below.

3.4.1 Well-being

Well-being implies “assessing the constituent elements of the person’s being, as seen from the perspective of her own personal welfare” (Sen, 1993, p. 36). The well-being concept also involves several aspects, such as “agency achievement, personal well-being and the standard of living” (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009, p. 65). These authors also argued that the capabilities approach differs from quality of life measures that focus on outcomes such as generating wealth or achievements but say little about personal welfare or human flourishing. Well-being is thus concerned with different magnitudes that enable a person to have a noble life. Well-being as a guiding criterion focuses on the ‘end’ that matters most for people to have thriving lives, not the resources that reflect the ‘means.’ For Robeyns (2017, p. 48), “(m)ean can only work as fully reliable alternatives of people’s opportunities to achieve those ends if all people have *the same* capacities or powers to convert those means into equal capability sets” [*Italics in the original*]. It is, therefore, important to understand that students are diverse, which suggests the need to access their achievements and opportunities to participate and succeed in their studies. Wolff and De-Shalit (2007, p. 8) refer to such opportunities and achievements as “dimensions of well-being” because they are indicative of one being

advantaged or disadvantaged (i.e., income, mental health, social networks). This study identified the well-being dimensions from students' experiences. I used them to assess advantages among individual students (see Chapters 5 and 6). I believe that students might be considered disadvantaged when they lack the capabilities to achieve valued functionings. Subsequently, this study focused on students' well-being.

3.4.2 *Functionings and capabilities*

Capabilities are opportunities available to a person, while functionings refer to achievements or outcomes (Sen, 1999). Robeyns argued that capabilities are a person's real freedom or opportunities to achieve functioning. In terms of high education, completing a university qualification can be seen as a functioning/outcome. This functioning (a qualification), in turn, provides opportunities. For example, employment might not be available to someone who did not successfully complete their studies. The key distinction here is that functionings are what someone has achieved and can be and do, and capabilities are about opportunities. This implies the different effective opportunities students might have to achieve functioning even when they are at the same university. For a student to pass their modules (functionings), they must have the opportunity to develop certain skills (capabilities) that will assist them in graduating and getting a job. It is, therefore, evident that if universities deprive students of their capabilities, they are likely to be disadvantaged because they do not have enough opportunities to achieve their 'beings' and 'doings' they have reason to value.

3.4.3 *Conversion factors*

Each person has a different ability to convert resources into functionings, called conversion factors (Robeyns, 2017). For Walker and Unterhalter (2007), conversion factors play a noteworthy role in bringing together agency and social contexts. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) maintained that the concept explains that people differ in many ways and that these differences affect how much they can convert resources into opportunities and

achievements (functionings). They argued that paying attention to conversion factors is important because it provides an instrument for understanding what is needed in a given context to realise potential outcomes (functionings). Conversion factors ultimately are the “factors which allow, or do not allow, people to convert the resources and income they have into functionings and capabilities” (Deneulin, 2014, p. 29).

Robeyns identified three groups of conversion factors: personal conversion factors (i.e., metabolism, physical condition, reading ability, intelligence, and health); social conversion factors such as policies, social norms, family relations, practices of discrimination, gender roles, and power relations; and environmental conversion factors such as geographical locations, rural versus urban, climate and so on (Robeyns, 2005). These conversion factors impact the extent to which a person can make use of the resources available to them to create capabilities or opportunities and convert these capabilities into functionings. Thus, various conversion factors are not fixed but can be changed by policies and choices that one makes (Robeyns, 2017).

Conversion factors themselves are neutral, for instance, peers are considered neutral; it is the nature and outcome of one’s interaction with peers that can be judged as positive or negative. Nevertheless, this depends on each student’s experience. It is important to highlight those differences in personal traits and institutional elements. How they relate to each other will determine the individual’s ability to turn these into achieved functionings (Sen, 1999). Gore (2018) emphasised that determining disadvantage of diverse students requires assessing individual students’ characteristics, including the socioeconomic and policy environments that affect them.

3.4.4 Agency

This concept can be described as “the ability of a person to realise the goals they value and have reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 19). It is central to the capabilities approach. According to Sen (1999, p. 19), an agent is “someone who acts and brings about change, whose achievements can be evaluated in terms of their own values and goals”. He went on to explain that the work is especially focused on the agency role of the person as a participant in social, political, and economic activities as well as a member of the public. (Sen, 1999, p. 19). Furthermore, agency depends on a person’s ability to choose the functionings one values, a choice that may not necessarily associate with personal well-being (Sen, 2009). Robeyns (2017) argued that agency can be explained in many ways. In higher education, when students enrol at a university, they exercise their ability to pursue a goal they value. Also, social norms and opportunities can expand or diminish one’s agency because they construct advantages and disadvantages, even where public resources are equally distributed. This can be seen when people have different capability sets because of individual functionings that are influenced by one’s relative advantages or disadvantages in society (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a). Alkire and Deneulin (2009b) added that agency goes together with the expansion of value freedoms; that is, if an individual wants to be an agent in their lives, they need the freedom to be educated or speak in public, for example. Therefore, agency is crucial in assessing one’s capabilities and any economic, social, or political barriers to achieving substantive freedoms. The concept is important in assessing what a person can do with their conception of the good. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) highlighted that lacking the ability to exercise one’s agency is a form of disadvantage.

A great example could be associated with the 2015 #FeesMustFall campaign, where university students demonstrated their agency by engaging in activism in South Africa. Students decided to raise their concerns to the university administration through protests on

matters concerning their lives. This example illustrates the relationship between individual and collective agency.

Sen (1992, p. 57) also referred to “agency freedom” and “agency achievements” as important factors to consider in measuring relative advantage. “Agency freedom” describes the effective freedom an individual has to turn their will into action; “agency achievement” is the accomplishment of that action. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will discuss if students have the necessary agency freedoms to pursue their educational goals as an indicator of advantage. Therefore, students’ inability to exercise agency and realise educational achievements can be equated to disadvantage.

3.4.5 Aspirations

For Appadurai (2004, p. 67), aspirations encompass “the ability to navigate complex steps between norms and specific wants and wishes”. Ray (2003) elucidated that while development is a process driven by aspiration and the belief in one’s agency, it is the developmental efforts that should focus on the sources of the capacity of individuals and communities to aspire (Ray, 2003). Hart (2016) points out that aspirations can take many different shapes, and they differ greatly in their origins and objectives. She explains that, on a larger societal scale, space exploration, for instance, may be spurred by national objectives for international prestige and recognition, or social movements might be inspired by aspirations to change society in some way in the interest of justice (Hart, 2016). Furthermore, she points out that aspirations are future-focused, motivated by both conscious and unconscious forces, and they show a person's or a group's dedication to a specific course or destination. Additionally, Ray (2003) explained that the capacity to aspire thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation. The goal should be the belief in one’s agency. Therefore, the relationship between aspirations, agency and capabilities is explored, with significance on whether students from poor quality educational

backgrounds can succeed in higher education by deliberate and focused use of agency.

Appadurai argued that the poor have weaker aspiration capacities. In contrast, Bok (2010) and Atkins (2010) argued that poor students might have high motivations but are challenged and constrained from realising their aspirations by the situation.

Wilson-Strydom contributed to the debate by arguing that within a capabilities framework:

“It is possible to approach education issues in two ways; namely, one can consider the capability to participate in education and that being educated plays an important role in the development of other capabilities, such as finding employment, being able to engage in and understand political processes and so on” (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 99).

In the South African context, where there are continuous inequalities, raising students’ aspirations is important for social mobility. The next section discusses the capabilities approach and how it is used in higher education, focusing on access.

3.5 Capabilities approach and how it is used in higher education: Access

Over the last decade, there has been empirical research that applies the capabilities approach to higher education, including undergraduate access and widening participation (Wilson-Strydom, 2012; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Boni & Lozano et al., 2012; Boni & Walker, 2013; Gore, 2018; Walker & Mathebula, 2019; Mathebula, 2019) and curriculum and pedagogy (Walker & McLean, 2010; Walker, 2006, 2010). The capability scholars applied the approach to educational settings to seek answers to everyday educational questions about what knowledge to teach, what pedagogy is used and to whom. According to Walker (2006, p. 90), this is to “express judgements about which aspects of existing forms of social life ought to be reproduced and to be transformed if all [students] are to be prepared for the world of the future”. From the capability analysis regarding educational arrangements, the analysis

has been interpreted as a process that does not equally benefit students. The analysis also notes that ‘some educational practices and policies actually harm students’ freedom (Unterhalter, 2002, p. 7-8).

The capabilities approach also contributes towards a theory of justice which prioritises the involvement of people in their own development to shift the focus from deficit to agency. From this agency lens, higher education must foster first-generation participation in higher education by building on educational capabilities and aspirations (Marginson, 2011). Walker (2008) added that higher education needs to be aware of socioeconomic gaps between students as equality of capability for diverse students and not only those whose family and socioeconomic backgrounds are taken for granted in education. According to many capability scholars, such as Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2011), and Wolff and De-Shalit (2007), the freedom for one to be educated amounts to a basic freedom that should increase an individual’s access to opportunities. For instance, if a person is literate and can read a book, this might develop a crucial voice contributing to important issues. However, being literate is more complex when applied to higher education because post-secondary education is not universally framed as a basic right (Unterhalter, 2013). Walker argued that socially just educational arrangements “would require us not just to evaluate satisfaction with individual learning outcomes, but to question the range of real educational choices that have been available to people while considering “*the details of educational processes and outcomes*” (Walker, 2009, p. 477).

From the perspective of capabilities, access to higher education should aim to increase chances for students to be and do in the spirit of personal growth as well as its effect on and influence on societal enhancement (Wood & Deprez, 2012). Unterhalter (2002) maintained that providing access to and promoting a real set of basic learning outcomes, for example, reading and writing creates opportunities for other beings and doings like being knowledgeable about sustainable development challenges. In support of this, Spaul (2014)

explained that in South Africa, the majority of public schools provide low-quality education for approximately 80% of young people, and unfortunately, most learners from low-income backgrounds will not reach Grade 10 or get into a university. Sulla and Zikhali (2018) elaborated that gaining access to higher levels of education and stable labour market income seems vital to individual households achieving economic security over time. Moses et al. (2017) found that, on average, a tertiary graduate has an employment probability of about 90% compared to 55% of those who obtain only 12 years of schooling. Walker and Mathebula (2019) added that when a student obtains a higher education qualification, that contributes to opening up social mobility, and the qualification has the potential to break the links that bind together low income, inequality and unemployment more than when a student only obtained a matric certificate. They further argued that for a student to achieve a higher education qualification, especially a degree qualification, that potentially is a generative outcome for economic benefits and development, individual well-being, and social change by encouraging civic participation and critical agency.

However, from the capabilities lens, learning that stops at the level of providing only basic reading and writing is inadequate to advance sustainable development to its fullest (Ribeiro do Santos, 2005). Walker (2006) particularly focused on student voices and capability scholars by proposing a theoretical list of educational capabilities that is not over-specified or too prescriptive. She suggested having conversations about what constitutes great teaching and learning in universities and what constitutes genuinely educational (positive) experiences in higher education with practitioners, managers, leaders, and students. She poses the topic of what higher education pedagogies, for instance, may look like if they adopted a capabilities framework for assessing the caliber of teaching and learning, notwithstanding her extensive selection of educational capabilities. (Walker, 2006). Table 3 lists Walker's ideal theoretical capabilities for higher education. She contends that there is a place for lists, but they should

be used for certain purposes, evaluations, or critiques. The lists should not be rigid or canonical, and they should not be arranged in a hierarchy. The lists should include conversation and involvement in some manner (Walker, 2006).

Table 3

Walker's ideal theoretical capabilities list for higher education

Capabilities	Description
Practical Reason	Making well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices. Being able to construct a personal life project in an uncertain world. Having good judgement.
Educational Resilience	Able to navigate study, work and life. Able to negotiate risk, persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints. Self-reliant. Having aspirations and hopes for a good future.
Knowledge and Imagination	Being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject – disciplinary and/or professional – its form of academic inquiry and standards. Being able to use critical thinking and imagination to comprehend the perspectives of multiple others and to form impartial judgements. Being able to debate complex issues. Being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development, career and economic opportunities, political, cultural and social action and participation in the world. Awareness of ethical debates and moral issues. Open-mindedness. Knowledge to understand science and technology in public society.
Learning Disposition	Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.
Social Relations and Social Networks	Participating in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems or tasks. Working with others to form effective or good collaborative and participatory learning groups. Forming good networks of friendship and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.
Respect, Dignity and Recognition	Being able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or race, valuing other languages, other religions and spiritual practices and human diversity. Being able to show empathy, compassion, fairness and generosity, listening to and considering other person's points of view in dialogue and debate. Being able to act inclusively and being able to respond to human needs. Having competence in intercultural communication. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning; a voice to speak out, debate and persuade; and to listen.
Emotional Integrity, Emotions	Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning. Developing emotions for imagination, understanding empathy, awareness and discernment.
Bodily Integrity	Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the higher education environment.

Source: Walker (2006, p. 128-129)

Walker suggested this list by drawing on her work, in the UK context, with widening participation of students and other groups of students as well as broader research in higher education. There is no consensus amongst capabilities scholars regarding lists for example:

- i. Sen argued against having a list and favoured leaving the formulation of a possible list of capabilities up to the exact group of people in question, taking their unique context into account (Sen, 1985b, 1999, 2006, 2009). He pointed out that the participatory and purposeful process of formulating specific capabilities within a specific context is critical and does not support a broad or universal list of capabilities. His capabilities approach was intentionally incomplete and allowed space for discussion.
- ii. In contrast to Sen, Nussbaum offered a very strong argument for why a list of central human capabilities (based on her work in *Women and Human Development*) grounded on universal values is essential and applicable to all countries and across all contexts. She argued that “certain universal norms of human capability should be central for political purposes in thinking about basic political principles that can provide the underpinning for a set of constitutional guarantees in all nations” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 35).
- iii. Robeyns argued that applying the capabilities approach to a specific applied issue becomes problematic without offering some practical basis from which to “choose the relevant capabilities and indicate how important each will be in an overall judgement” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 69).
- iv. Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) conducted empirical work and public consultation using interview methods to validate Nussbaum’s list. They expanded the list to include the capabilities of (a) doing good to others; (b) living in a law-abiding fashion; (c) understanding the law; and (d) the ability to understand and speak the local language (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007).

Walker proposed an ideal-theoretical list of higher education capabilities – capabilities that should be developed through higher education, noting that in the context of her list, capabilities should be understood as both opportunities (i.e., opportunity freedom) and capacities that can be fostered (Walker, 2006); her understanding of capabilities aligns with Sen’s definition of agency.

Building on Walker’s (2006) list, and using the South African context, Wilson-Strydom (2015) focused on access, readiness and transitioning into higher education. She expanded on Walker’s list and emphasised that the list highlights a multi-dimensional nature and the complexity of students transitioning to university. Furthermore, she showed how students ought to be able to be and do as they come to university. She proposed that during high school and the first year of university, there should be international opportunities for students to develop specific capabilities of university readiness. Table 4 depicts her suggestions for capabilities for university readiness.

Table 4

Wilson-Strydom's capabilities list for transitioning to university

Dimensions of readiness	Description-capabilities for university readiness
Decision-making	Making well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent and reflective choices about post-school study.
Knowledge and imagination	Having the academic grounding for chosen university subjects, being able to develop and apply critical thinking and imagination methods to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives and complex problems.
Approach to learning	Having curiosity and a desire for learning, having the learning skills required for university study, and being an active inquirer (questioning).
Social relations and social networks	Being able to participate in groups for learning, working with diverse others to solve problems or complete tasks. Forming networks of friendships for learning, support, and leisure.
Respect, dignity and recognition	Having respect for oneself and others, and receiving respect from others, being treated with dignity. Not being devalued or devaluing others because of one’s gender, social class, religion, or race. Valuing diversity and showing empathy (understanding and respecting others’ points of view). Having a voice to participate in learning.

Dimensions of readiness	Description-capabilities for university readiness
Emotional health	Not being subject to anxiety or fear that diminishes learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn.
Language competence and confidence	Being able to understand, read, write, and speak confidently in the language of instruction.

Source: Wilson-Strydom (2015, p. 131)

Building on the capabilities approach lens, the Miratho project was developed to explore the difficulties of how higher education opportunities and achievements are distributed among students from low-income and challenging families (Walker et al., 2022, p. 5). The project then resulted in justifying the Miratho Matrix, which was grounded in a capabilitarian approach to higher education justice that looks at what individual students and social groups can be and do in and through their experiences and achievements in higher education. The matrix has a set of eight multi-dimensional capability domains (see Table 5). These domains can guide the discussion and design of a student-centred well-being-focused university system and universities.

Table 5

The Miratho Matrix

Epistemic contribution: Being an epistemic contributor	It is being a respected knower, teller and listener at university and in society. In the context of university education, this domain emerged as what Martha Nussbaum called an 'architectonic' capability; that is, it 'organises and pervades' all the other capability domains. The knowledge of fields and disciplines that students acquire at university is key to this functioning. Ideally, students are transformed by this knowledge which supplies opportunities to reason, understand, apply, examine critically, and so on.
Ubuntu: Being connected to and concerned for the well-being of others	Students brought Ubuntu to university and exercised it throughout, supporting each other through good and bad times. This capability relates to an Africa-centric ontology, cosmovision, and decoloniality.
Practical reason: Planning a good life	At university and throughout life, students and graduates should have the means and dispositions to form ideas about what (at any time) constitutes a good life and make decisions and take steps to achieve such a life. These means and dispositions include having knowledge and information, as well as holding aspirations and developing confidence and a sense of independence – all of which university education can support.

Navigation: Navigating the university/society's culture and systems	For most Miratho students, excitement at coming to university gave way to having to deal with an alien environment. All brought this functioning with them and further strengthened it with little university assistance, describing it as 'adaptation'. For Tara Yosso (2005), who employed critical race theory, navigation is a capital with which to deal with structural barriers. It includes identifying what needs adapting, seeking and giving support, and staying in power.
Narrative: Telling one's own story	Some Miratho students had the opportunity and freedom to tell their own stories in the photovoice element of the project, and by their own accounts, they benefitted significantly. For students from low-income households, narrative capability relates strongly to a decolonising ethic. Most university students do not get such an opportunity.
Emotional balance: Dealing with the stress and worry of challenges	Miratho's students lacked resources. In turn, a lack of preparedness for university meant that they inevitably faced stressful situations.
Inclusion and participation: Being a respected and participating member of the university and society	This refers to whether students felt like legitimate and comfortable university members and could join in wider activities. It also refers to how much they were encouraged to participate when being taught.
Future work or study: Being employable	It is reasonable to expect that university students, especially those from low-income households without networks and connections, would be given preparation to find a graduate-level job in the public or private sector, self-employment or further study.

Source: Walker et al. (2022, p. 13)

Walker stated that in applying this list of capabilities to guide higher education research with social justice:

We might then ask who has the power to develop valued educational capabilities and who has not. We might wish to check (measure) how successful students are in bringing about what they are trying to achieve. Finally, if there is unevenness, patchiness and inequality in learners' well-being freedom and agency freedom, we might wish to raise political and ethical questions about the society in which some adults can promote all their ends while others face barriers, whether of social class, race, gender, culture or disability. (Walker, 2006, p. 130).

Walker's lists aligns with the capabilities approach, which emphasizes the importance of individuals having the freedom and opportunities to develop and exercise these capabilities,

ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and quality of life. Wilson-Strydom's list describes these readiness capabilities as crucial for individuals entering university education as they provide a foundation for academic success, effective social interaction, and personal well-being in the university environment. On the other hand, the Miratho Matrix underscores the multifaceted nature of university education and highlights the diverse capabilities needed to succeed, adapt, and contribute to both the academic environment and society, particularly for students facing unique challenges. With all being pointed out, my thesis refrains from using such lists, because capabilities approach underscores the importance of personal freedom and opportunities. In this context, I have opted not to use predefined lists to allow for a more context-specific and nuanced exploration of the capabilities needed in a particular setting, such as university education. This approach I argue can enable my study to better capture the unique challenges and opportunities faced by the individuals I was studying, without being constrained by predefined lists. The study aligns with the idea that the capabilities approach should be adaptable and context-dependent, allowing for a more comprehensive and relevant analysis of the specific situation. The capabilities participants in this study valued in terms of transitioning will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

3.6 Critique of the capabilities approach

The capabilities approach has been critiqued by some researchers for its methodological and operationalisation limitation because it does not provide empirically verifiable capabilities and functionings (Walby, 2012). Furthermore, the capabilities approach lacks a formula for interpersonal comparison of well-being, thus, has limited practical and operational significance (Comim, 2001; Crocker & Robeyns, 2009; Sugden, 1993). Also, the focus is on the individual rather than the group (Dean, 2009).

However, Walker and Unterhalter (2007) argued in support of the capabilities approach, which viewed a person as a whole and not as a means to economic growth or social stability

(Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). They explained that the approach explores and evaluates freedom for people to make decisions they value, remove obstacles to those freedoms, and expand people's capabilities. They further argued that the approach also covers all dimensions of human well-being, is sensitive to human diversity, and deals with questions of balance.

For Dean (2009), the capabilities approach is essentially a liberal-individualist concept, asserting that the capabilities approach would be too individualistic. In Robeyns's (2005) viewpoint, Dean's critique elucidates that any theory should regard individuals as part of their social environment. Therefore, agents should be recognised as socially embedded and connected to others and not as atomised individuals. She identified three types of individualism: Ethical individualism, ontological individualism, and methodological individualism. Ethical individualism, which the capabilities approach subscribes to and explains, is that the individual's ultimate well-being rests on the individual. For example, in higher education, the goal is for every person to have the chance at a better life, not only for Black or disadvantaged students. In ontological individualism, a person tends to think there are not many broader structures and that everything is about interactions between individuals. For instance, to understand how universities work, one only needs to look at how different individuals interact. Lastly, methodological individualism is when a person only understands phenomena by looking at each individual and how they link to one another (Robeyns, 2005). Thus, a significant contribution of the capabilities approach is the starting assumption that the well-being of every individual is important (and not just groups of people), as ethical individualism provides a means of overcoming the challenge of assuming that all 'disadvantaged' students are the same.

The capabilities approach is grounded in human development, and it was developed by Sen (1985a, 1985b, 1999) to focus on reducing poverty. Later, Nussbaum (2000, 2003, 2010,

2011) explored Sen's ideas by adding a philosophical perspective to the capabilities approach. This resulted in her producing her own set of ten 'universal' capability dimensions. Since then, the approach has been applied in many social fields, including education. When zooming in on the capabilities lens, specifically exploring access and resilience, it can be noted that the capabilities approach has the power to improve both the intended and intentional views of human agency and how inequalities present barriers to students' success, especially those from disadvantaged societies. I employed this approach as it enabled me to understand the fair distribution of what matters to students in the form of capabilities and resilience.

3.7 Theories of resilience

Both the capabilities approach and the theories of resilience have a strong association with social justice and access to opportunities. It is, therefore, imperative to understand why resilience was vital in this study. The following section will briefly discuss how resilience is conceptualised and link resilience and the capabilities approach. It should be noted that resilience is a conversion factor which forms part of the capabilities approach and can be considered to be a potential capability. However, because it is such a significant contributor to this study, it is important to expand on it.

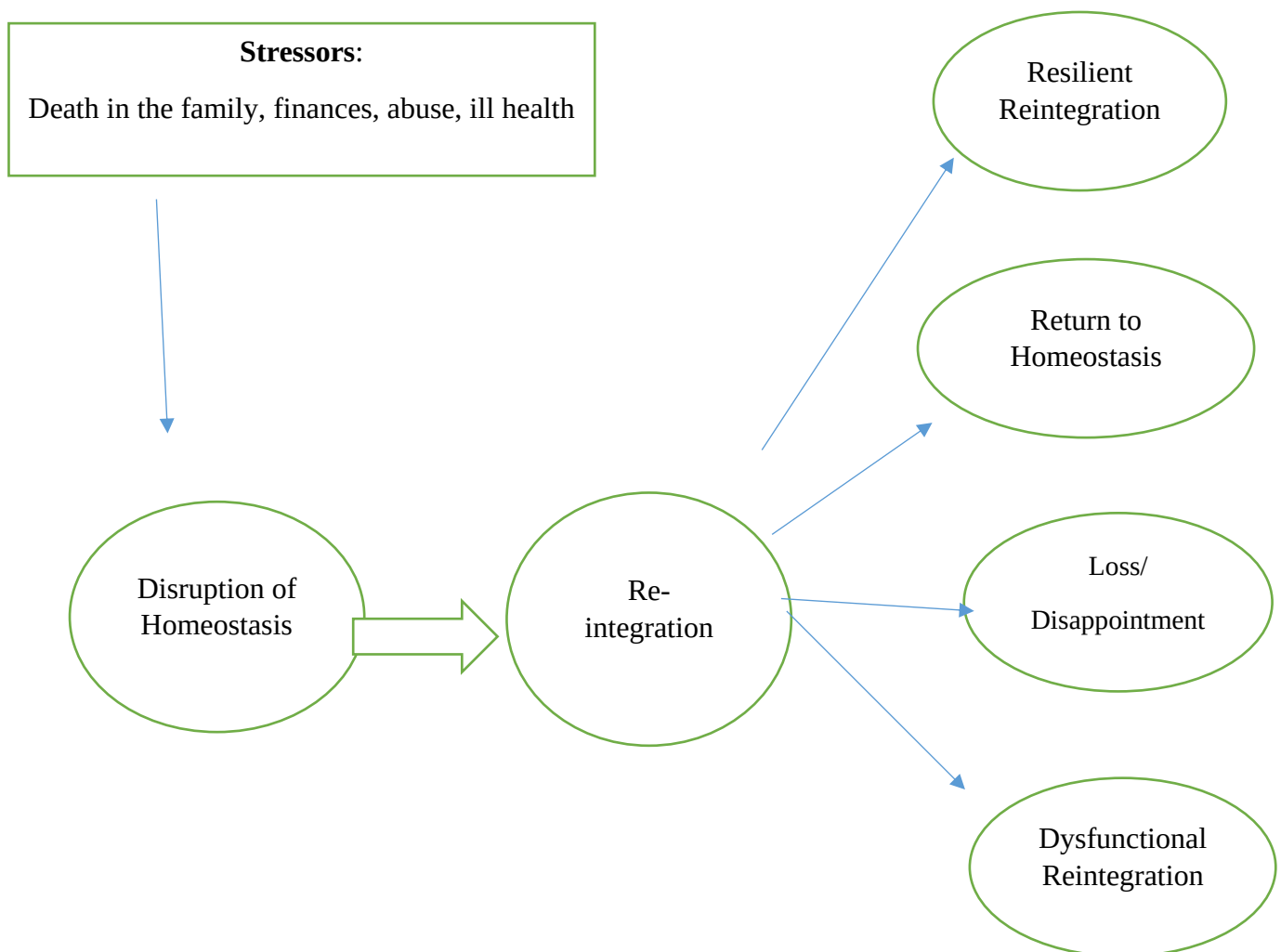
3.7.1 *Understanding resilience*

Each person experiences stress, adversity and hardship at some point in life, forming part of the human experience. In recent years, mental health (Martin, 2010; Pascoe et al., 2020) has been studied at different institutions to better support students and staff with regard to mental health and well-being. For this study, it was also important to understand the experiences of UPP students who endured challenges and succeeded. In my opinion, it is because resilience plays a major role in student well-being and success. The concept of resilience lacks a universally accepted definition (Fullerton & Zhang, 2021). Schoon and

Bynner (2003, p. 22) define resilience as “the ability of an individual to overcome adversity”, whilst the American Psychological Association define resilience as “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands” (American Psychological Association, 2021). Resnick (2020, p. 16) highlighted that “resilience is more than fighting off an acute or a challenging situation, but it requires that an individual recover from the challenge and grow through the experience”. Figure 7 illustrates Richardson’s (2002) Resilience model.

Figure 7

Resilience model



Source: Richardson (2002)

The model above indicates that when a person is confronted by experiences such as loss, unemployment or an illness, the person has a choice to use internal protective factors (e.g., self-reliance, self-efficacy and self-esteem, psychological and physical health) and external protective factors (e.g., social networks) to restore balance to life and grow through the experience (Resnick et al, 2011; 2020). Richardson explained that when a person engages in resilient behaviour and grows from the challenging experience, the process is termed resilient reintegration. The person grows physically and emotionally and does not simply regain homeostasis¹⁵. There are four types of resilience:

- **Psychological resilience** focuses on maintaining a positive affect even if a person is exposed to psychological stresses such as a loss in the family—an individual's capacity to withstand stressors and not manifest psychological dysfunction (Boardman et al., 2008; Ong, et al. 2006).
- **Emotional resilience** relates to the ability to recover in the face of disease, for example, recovering from flu or an accident (Chow et al., 2007).
- **Physiological resilience** is the capacity of an organism to resist and respond to physiologic stressors or challenges. It also relates to an individual's flexibility in his/her neurochemical stress response system and neural circuitry involved in stress responses (e.g., stress which can lead to depression) (LeBrasseur, 2017; Taliaz et al., 2011).
- **Physical resilience** is the ability to recover in the face of age-related losses or disease. The body is able to adapt amid change (e.g., recovering from an accident or flu) (Resnick et al., 2011).

¹⁵ Homeostasis refers to the maintenance of a physiological or psychological state within certain limits (Richardson, 2002).

It is helpful to explore resilient behaviours to understand the concept of resilience. There has been little research on academic resilience in higher education. For instance, previous studies explored coping strategies, focusing predominantly on students who experience severe challenges when it comes to learning. Examples include being from low socio-economic status, having a learning disability (Miller, 2002) or belonging to a minority group. These studies have validated that some learners are academically resilient. This means students perform at higher than expected levels when exposed to hindrances (Morales, 2008). In addition, there can be a variety of personal and environmental factors which can support a student's academic resilience, such as confidence or self-efficacy (Borman & Overman, 2004; Morales, 2008), academic self-control (Borman & Overman, 2004; Miller 2002), motivation or goal setting (Miller 2002), supportive family, peer and school environments (Miller 2002; Perez et al., 2009). Even though it is vital to nurture academic resilience in students who are not performing well academically (high-risk students), it is safe to say all students are likely to experience difficulties along their academic journey which are considered daily disturbances (Ainscough et al., 2018, p. 2195). I maintain that such responses to those interruptions are less well understood.

It is essential to look at how resilience has been applied across disciplines. Bhana and Bachoo (Bhana, 2011) explain that in the 1970s, the research shifted its focus to understanding why some persons succeed despite adverse circumstances. Fullerton and Zhang (2021) also highlighted that mental resilience plays an important role in the well-being and performance of students in higher education. In the higher education context, 'disadvantaged' students have traditionally been labelled by their risk factors instead of their capability to succeed in such circumstances. This neglects the most significant part of their stories: their resilience. VanderPyl et al. (2014) supported the argument by indicating that college students have traditionally been labelled by their risk factors rather than their ability

to cope with such circumstances. On the other hand, Ungar (2012) stated that resilience is more likely to occur when individuals and groups successfully move to resources that support them psychologically and physically and negotiate for these to be provided in culturally relevant ways.

For VanderPyl et al. (2014), it is vital to understand students' challenges and personal philosophies of creative resistance and sources of motivation, perseverance, and support. In many ways, the varied structures of support (social-structural support combined with individual-personal motivating purposes) must function together to create a structure of resilience for students in difficult life and work circumstances. They explained this through their study with community colleges in the USA. They argued that those community colleges students came from serve as a vital access function in the enrollment of higher education. Therefore, understanding students' challenges and personal philosophies of creative resistance and sources of motivation, determination, and support is essential (VanderPyl et al. (2014). They concluded that various structures of support social-structural support combined with individual-personal motivating purposes must operate together to create a system of resilience for students in complex life and work circumstances (VanderPyl et al., 2014).

In the literature, academic achievement studies using a risk and resilience paradigm explain that demographic characteristics such as low socioeconomic societies (SES), minority status, and belonging to a single-parent family have been thought to set children on a negative academic trajectory because of racial discrimination, poor access to resources, low academic expectations, and low cultural capital (Blair, 1999). However, the belief that one has control over his or her own fate has been displayed to positively predict achievement among middle and high school students (Unger, 2013). Cappella and Wenstein (2001) argued that these beliefs might influence achievement through mechanisms such as increased tenacity with

schoolwork, help-seeking behaviours, and motivation to learn (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Harter, 1992).

The next section briefly links resilience to the capabilities approach appropriate for this study.

3.8 The link between resilience and the capabilities approach

When thinking about resilience, the notion of conversion factors helps unpack how resilience works and what conversion factors enable or constrain resilient responses. In addition, if one thinks in terms of the psychological approach to this, on a psychological level, there are many theories in terms of what contributes to well-being. However, many theories focus on the interaction between internal traits, attributes, and resources that a person taps into. I believe these capabilities students develop over time are learned at home and school through their interaction with peers and exposure to difficult life circumstances. Furthermore, in the context of higher education, these challenges ultimately determine whether they will be successful. There is a very strong link between capabilities and resilience because it not only has to do with certain traits but also with specific resources that one has. The resources can be within oneself, or it can be within one's environment. However, the extent to which students learn to use the available resources in higher education often makes a difference between those that are successful and those that are not. I found that the capabilities approach concept of conversion factors provides a fruitful way of understanding resilience and their interaction with internal capabilities in the achievement of resilience.

In addition, the capabilities approach and resilience theory complement each other in a number of ways. The resilience theory can be seen as one of the means through which people can exercise their capabilities. For instance, the ability to adapt to adversity and bounce back

is a capability that contributes to overall human well-being. In addition, the capabilities approach may inform the understanding of what constitutes a resilient and fulfilling life by emphasizing the importance of freedom and individual agency in defining one's well-being. These frameworks can be integrated to offer a more comprehensive perspective on human development, well-being, and adaptation in complex and challenging environments

3.9 Conclusion

The capabilities approach was deemed appropriate in this study as it provides a framework for understanding what young people entering universities can be and do to understand the agency and well-being of students admitted to university (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Furthermore, I aimed to identify ways to assist students with their many challenges when entering university. This chapter also discussed the criticisms of the capabilities approach, arguing that it can be simplistic (e.g., someone with more choices is always better off than someone with fewer choices). It is, therefore, necessary to explore this in more detail, starting by distinguishing between extensive agency freedom and extensive agency achievement.

The following chapters will explore the wealth of attributes students who followed traditional access routes such as the UPP brought into higher education, which is often disregarded by university systems. I maintain that they bring their own capabilities. Thus, the focus should be on the quality of people's lives and overcoming obstacles to have the freedom to live life fully. Nussbaum asserted that the focus should be on people's skills and personality traits (Robeyns, 2005). See Chapters 5 to 7 for a detailed discussion of Nussbaum's viewpoints. The capabilities framework enables one to understand South Africa's extremely divided education system in a way that helps bring together individual agency and choice with the impact of social contexts on this agency. It is important to understand how conversion factors affect the capabilities of students to be successful at university, which have the potential to provide a theoretical and practical foundation for

developing interventions to improve opportunities and freedoms students need to convert those opportunities into actual achievements or functionings that are valued.

Lastly, there is a strong link between the capabilities approach and resilience; both provide a better understanding of and support disadvantaged students in higher education. When combined with resilience, the capabilities approach becomes a critical component in fostering the development of individuals' capabilities and promoting social justice.

Chapter 4: Research design and methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research design and methodology used for this study. Chapter 1 introduced the broad research aim, research methodology, and specific objectives. This chapter discusses the research questions stated in Chapter 1 to justify the methodology chosen for the study. This research aimed to explore the capabilities of typically labelled ‘disadvantaged’ students and how these contribute to success in higher education. This approach fits into the theoretical framework of this study by valuing each student’s life experience and agency as well as providing the student with an opportunity to have their stories heard.

The following key questions guided the study:

1. What capabilities do typically labelled ‘disadvantaged’ students bring to higher education (i.e., pre-university capabilities)?
 - a) How did these capabilities develop in the context of students’ lives?
2. How does the university experience recognise and build on these capabilities?
 - a) During UPP
 - b) During broader university experience post UPP
3. What additional capabilities are developed during university?
 - a) UPP specifically
 - b) Broader university experience
4. How do these capabilities and university experiences influence students’ educational outcomes?
5. How do the capabilities approach and the resilience framework theory help in thinking differently about students commonly labelled as ‘disadvantaged’?
6. What are the implications for more just university policy and practice?

This study was situated in the constructivist paradigm and qualitative in nature. The chapter starts with a brief discussion of why a qualitative research design is appropriate for investigating the challenges of accessing higher education, including why using life history and narrative research was the best option for this study. Furthermore, I explain why and how participants were chosen, discussing the processes and steps taken for data collection used in this study and the ethical considerations. This chapter also includes a section on my personal position as a researcher. I provide context on the study site, explaining the data analysis process, presenting the limitations of the methodology used in this study, and the steps taken to enhance the validity of the findings.

4.2 Research design

This section presents a description of the research design and methodology. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are empirical (Padgett, 2008; 2014). However, a qualitative research design attempts to build complex, holistic pictures, analyses words and reports detailed views of the informants (Creswell, 1998). Creswell viewed qualitative research as the process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in participants' setting, data investigation inductively building from particulars to general themes, and I make interpretations of the sense of the data (Creswell, 2013). It is important to understand the world as it is from the personal experiences of individuals. The qualitative research approach is used to describe and understand the research subject. Its aim is more about in-depth descriptions and understanding of actions and events (Babbie, 2010). A qualitative method was relevant for this study because it allows the construction of meanings from how participants understand their lives with regard to the view of disadvantage. In qualitative methodology paradigms, individuals interpret events instinctively; for example, every person has a different reality and experience. This means their numerous viewpoints are valued (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). This methodology allowed

me to be open-minded to different and numerous meanings instead of limited to only a small range of ideas (Creswell, 1998, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). Thus, qualitative research was most applicable to this study as I attempted to build knowledge from the different realities of students.

Furthermore, qualitative methodology allows a researcher to recognise each individual's history. Qualitative research also contextualises a study within a setting, allowing me to access all possible social variables by connecting students' different backgrounds, university experiences, and institutional culture (Holliday, 2002). This study investigated students' lived experiences within their educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, providing a deeper understanding of the experiences that shape students' pathways.

4.3 Data collection

Different methods can be used in qualitative research studies to collect data. This study used a narrative design because I wanted to understand the experiences of students entering the UPP, transitioning into degree studies, and how their experiences shaped their educational and career pathways and achievement of agency and well-being.

According to Riessman (1993, 2001, 2005, 2008), 'narrative' is defined and used differently across different disciplines. However, she emphasised that all those different definitions work with contingent sequences. For example, in social linguistics, narratives refer "to a discrete unit of discourse, a stretched answer by a research participant to a single question, totally centred and temporally organised" (Riessman, 2008, p. 80). In social history and anthropology, it can refer "to an entire life story, woven from threads of interviews, observations and documents" (Riessman, 2008), and in psychology and sociology, "personal narrative encompasses long sections of talk-extended accounts of lives in a context that develops over the course of single or multiple research interviews or therapeutic

conversations” (Riessman, 2008, p. 82). In sum, narratives are about telling stories about specific past events in a sequence where a researcher can ask about what happened? (Riesmann, 1993).

Consequently, researchers acknowledge a complicated relationship between narrative, time, and memory because individuals can edit the remembered past. I did not intend to claim that the participants represented all the UPP students. The emphasis was on what could be learned from these students, exploring their life history as they journeyed through the UPP. Chapter 5 will present the interpretations of their stories as I attempted to understand lived experiences by examining individuals’ narratives.

The primary focus was on the experiences of the individual as these are entwined into a narrative and how an individual makes sense of his or her experience. I explored their stories, made connections, and attempted to make sense of the meaning. This was done through intensive individual in-depth interviews with the participants. In-depth interviews allowed me to follow different rhythms of directivity (2008, 2015). In addition, in-depth interviews allowed me to derive interpretative power from unbroken narratives in which the participants told their stories. This enabled me to understand capabilities and resilience through the lens of a student who has gone through the UPP. It was important for me to understand the content of what had been said in order for her to interpret the data as best as possible (Padgett, 2008).

In life history, Babbie defined it as ‘a full account of a person’s life in their own words which will be gathered over a couple of years and the guidance is from the researcher about the questions’ (Babbie, 2010, p. 285; Plummer, 2005). Babbie also emphasised biases in life history research (Babbie, 2010, p. 285):

- Respondents may lie, cheat or try to impress the researcher in some way;

- The researcher may hold certain prejudices and assumptions which may influence the structure of questioning, selection of material, analyses and interpretation; and
- The setting may not be conducive to encouraging intimacy.

One way to check for biases in this study was to compare with other informants (participants) by interviewing those who also have gone through the UPP.

4.4 The value of using a narrative analysis

According to Padgett (2008), narrative approaches assume that speaking and writing are forms of meaning-making. In addition, narrative analysis create a multidimensional view of access participation by enabling students to focus on academic, social, and personal factors that influence their freedom and agency within structural arrangements (Salmon & Reissman, 2008). The narrative analysis uses in-depth interviewing to encourage respondents to talk freely about their lives. The analysis involves repeatedly listening to tapes to scrutinise the transcript to identify stories from which structural components are then delineated. Riessman (2001) referred to it as a family of approaches to different kinds of texts having a storied form in common, highlighting that narrative inquiry takes the story as its object of investigation. For Padgett (2008), a narrative analysis of interviews is ‘designed to elicit storytelling’. Riesmann (2001) agreed that narrative analysis takes the story as its object of investigation. In addition, Riessman (2001) explained that analysis in narrative studies opens up forms of telling about an experience, not simply the content to which language refers. Padgett (2008) explained that narrative analysis uses in-depth interviewing to encourage respondents to talk freely about their lives. This method was thus suitable for this study.

By using a narrative analysis for interviews, I intended to understand how the patterns of different life stories can be related. A narrative analysis is one of the approaches used to collect narrative data. Therefore, I used life history to understand the participants’ lived

experiences of what made them successful during the UPP and post UPP years (Adriansen, 2012). A life story is a narrated life (Adriansen, 2012), the starting point, the initial exploration of life as lived, but life history grounds these stories of personal experience in their broader historical, social, environmental, and political context (Bathmaker, 2010). I was interested in how the story was narrated and the relationship between the story and the lived lives of the interviewees. It is not only how the story is told, which is relevant, but also how it relates to what happened in the interviewee's life and how the person reacted to it. Thus, both the story and the lived life are important – bringing the life history (Adriansen, 2012) to understand what capabilities students from disadvantaged backgrounds bring into higher education and understand their resilience in their own successes at university.

Bathmaker (2010, 2015) argued that narrative and life history research face the challenge of opening personal lives and experiences up for scrutiny, adding that they do more than just that because they satisfy the curiosity of a wider audience. She distinguished between life stories and life history by explaining that life stories may be a starting point where a person explores the life lived, and life history grounds these stories of personal experience in the person's wider social and historical context and pays attention to social relations of power (Bathmaker, 2010). She also argued that narrative and life history research provides a means of getting closer to the experience of those whose lives and histories go unheard, unseen, or undocumented (Bathmaker, 2010). In addition, she explained that narratives invite listeners, readers, and viewers to enter the narrator's perspective (Riessman, 2008). They are telling their own stories to me. This was important for this study. Drawing on Bathmaker's assertions, I put this in the context of what was happening in the UPP and South African higher education context to interpret those life stories as narrative analysis. The interviews provided the story and together comprised the life history.

4.5 Sampling of participants

Sampling was initially purposive, targeting students who have gone through the UPP. Brymann (2008) explained purposive sampling as when a researcher samples on the basis of wanting to interview people who are relevant to the research questions. The participants were chosen purposively because I knew some of them by either working with them or having studied with them. I compiled a list of names, requesting them to share the names of other students, as 15 former students had to be interviewed. A snowballing sampling technique was followed through a few selected participants referring me to other participants. The limitation of the snowball technique is that you get a sample of participants who have almost homogeneous characteristics. I then, contacted the referrals and requested them to be part of this study. To ensure a diverse sample, I identified the participants who studied in the UPP across multiple points in the following ways:

- Those who studied in different years;
- Those who studied different degrees;
- A split across gender;
- Those who got at least a first degree; and
- What they are currently doing (working, pursuing postgraduate studies, unemployed).

In Babbie's (2010) explanation, he elucidates that occasionally it is appropriate for a researcher to select their sample on the basis of their own knowledge of the population, its elements, and the nature of their research aims; thus, the decision to use purposive sampling. Table 6 presents the biographical information of the study participants.

The study participants comprised 11 females and four males. Initially, I wanted a 50-50% gender balance. However, getting more males was challenging as they were unavailable during the interview phase. I also wanted a few students who started in the programme in

1997 when it was launched to form part of this study. However, they, too, were not available for the interview. The participants in this study were from different faculties (Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Economic and Management Sciences and The Humanities) who studied in different years. Most of them have at least a first degree and work at the UFS, even though some took longer to obtain their degrees. Two of the participants have gone on to hold high positions in government in the communications area, and the majority of them are part-time employed at the UFS, struggling to find permanent employment.

Table 6

Biographical information of participants

Participants	Year in UPP	Degree awarded	Current position/role
1	2011	• Bachelor of Arts Degree	Part-time employed at the UFS
2	2009	• Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree	Part-time employed at the UFS
3	2011	• Bachelor of Education Degree	Employed at the UFS
4	2008	• Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree • Post Graduate Certificate in Education	Employed at the Department of Education
5	2007	• Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree • PG Diploma Labour Law	Employed at the UFS
6	2009	• Bachelor of Arts Degree; • Bachelor of Arts: Honours Degree in Psychology	Employed at the UFS and registered for a Master's Degree
7	2014	• Bachelor of Sciences Degree	Part-time employed at the UFS and registered for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education: Senior and FET Phase
8	2002	• Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree • Master's Degree: Industrial Psychology	Employed at the UFS
9	2012	• Bachelor of Arts Degree • Bachelor of Arts: Honours Degree in Communication Sciences	Employed at the UFS and registered for a Master's Degree
10	2014	• Bachelor of Sciences Degree in Geology	Part-time employed at the UFS
11	2010	• Bachelor of Arts Degree • Bachelor of Arts: Honours Degree in Criminology	Part-time employed at the UFS, registered for a Master's Degree.
12	2015	• Bachelor of Sciences Degree in Quantity Surveying	Part-time employed at the UFS and registered for a B.Sc Honours Degree
13	2007	• Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree	Employed at the UFS and registered for a Master's Degree

Participants	Year in UPP	Degree awarded	Current position/role
		• Bachelor of Social Sciences: Honours Degree in Criminology	
14	2011	• Bachelor of Arts Degree	Part-time employed at the UFS
15	2011	• Bachelor of Arts Degree	Part-time employed at the UFS

4.6 Data collection process

Data collection took place through in-depth interviews. The reason for choosing interviews was because the interview is a site for telling and producing narratives, and the intersubjective relation between the interviewer and interviewee is an integral part of this process (McLeod & Thomson, 2009). The goal of the interview or ‘conversation’ is to draw out detailed descriptions of lived experiences, as explained by Saldana (2009). I used life history interviews because she had limited time with the participants. According to (Nieuwenhuis, 2012, p. 130), life history is “the study of one person’s life in context”, whilst Babbie (2010, 189) explained life history methodology as “the study of the life history of one or more person or individuals”. In this study, I wanted to understand the participants’ experiences, resulting in using in-depth interviews for data collection. Fifteen interviews, ranging from 40 to 60 minutes per interview, were conducted. Interviews can either be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. I used semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for an interview protocol) because they allow me to interject to seek clarification and probe more into issues that she or he desires to be discussed in detail (Maree, 2007). During the process, I obtained a full detailed description and was able to integrate different perspectives (Weiss, 1994). Semi-structured interviews also provided the participants with ‘a considerable degree of latitude’ to discuss matters under issue (Bell, 1993; Saldana, 2009).

4.7 Data analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process. Data analysis involves organising, breaking the data into chunks, searching for patterns, and discovering what is important (Saldana, 2009). I

wanted to learn and decide what to tell others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). During the analysis, I used inductive and deductive thematic analysis because it “permits the researcher to combine analyses of the frequency of codes with analyses of other meaning in content, thus adding the advantage on the subtlety and complexity of a truly qualitative analysis” (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 57). After transcribing all the interviews, I thoroughly read and examined the interview transcripts to familiarise herself with the data and manually coded interesting features of all the data relevant to the aim and questions. Lastly, I identified common themes, which were further reviewed and refined to develop main themes and sub-themes from the codes generated.

While busy analysing the data, I followed a life-trajectory sequence of experiences before getting into UPP, during UPP and life after UPP. This enabled me to capture and draw together diverse events, actions, or happenings at different times of the participants’ lives that contributed to their aspirations, well-being and agency achievement. In Chapter 5, I revisited their accounts in each phase and identified aspirations, agency, functionings and conversion factors that emerged in each theme, drawing on the capabilities language presented in Chapter 3. I also identified what capabilities and functionings participants valued and how these capabilities were expanded or contracted across the three phases. Descriptive and process coding followed, and I used descriptive coding to code several topics and contents within the text, which helped to position the data into portions (Saldana, 2009). During the data process, I attempted to understand the common and different responses. I reviewed the data multiple times and searched for specifics such as agency, aspirations, conversion factors and resilience. To explain how the chosen theory influenced my data analysis, I looked at how the capabilities approach and resilience would guide my research processs and the framework would shape my research questions and design. By ensuring that the data analysis

is carried out in accordance with the underlying theoretical ideas rather than in isolation, it provides a more comprehensive and reliable viewpoint.

4.8 Ethical conduct of the research

From the onset, I was open and honest with the participants about the research purpose to avoid any harm or unforeseen risk. Ethics are moral principles guiding research with the interest of protecting participants and ensuring the integrity of the study. The study sought approval from The Faculty of the Humanities Ethics Committee at the UFS and was granted permission to interview former students (see Appendix A). I adhered to ethical considerations by obtaining voluntary and informed participation. I explained the consent form and information document to each participant, requesting them to read it and familiarise themselves with the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study before signing the consent form (see Appendix C for the information and consent forms). I requested permission before asking for participants' personal details and also informed them that they had the right to decline to participate or discontinue the interview at any point if they felt uncomfortable. I was also committed to preserving the participants' privacy and confidentiality by storing their information in a safe place that was not accessible to anyone except me. I recorded the interviews with a digital audio-voice recorder. This assisted in minimising data loss because interviews were captured in their entirety. Simons (2009) highlighted the significant strength of recording interviews by explaining that it ensures reporting accuracy. Furthermore, by recording, I could be flexible in capturing nuances of the interview and had the opportunity to probe into vague responses. The audio-recorded interview data was transcribed verbatim to minimise any loss of information. I read the transcripts very carefully to ensure the transcription process's accuracy and completeness.

The findings of the study were not linked to specific participants because I used pseudonyms during analysis and writing. Lastly, the principle of *no harm to participants* was

also adhered to in that no harm was brought to participating students. None of the participants got emotional during the interviews. Instead, they were excited to share their experiences and requested the results to be shared with them.

4.9 Study site

The UFS South Campus was selected as the study site for practical reasons. This was because of my proximity to the institution where I worked, giving me easy access to the study participants. This decision was also influenced by the unique and diverse nature of students who started in the UPP. The UPP began as the Need for Education, Elevation and Development (NEED) programme, then developed into the Career Preparation Programme (CPP) in the early 1990s, after which it was called the University Preparation Programme (UPP) in the 2000s. Initially, the focus of the UPP was to act as a programme to help Black students transition from the neglected Bantu Education system to university and other post-school educational opportunities provided through colleges. It was thus conceptualised as a bridging and channelling programme with the primary goal of creating opportunities for Black students who showed academic potential but for whom chances of success at university were slim because of challenges beyond their control (Strydom, 1990). However, the UPP was refined, and the target was extended to all students without entry into university. The philosophy of the programme is that *my final year school marks are not a true reflection of my potential* (UFS, 2018).

The UPP also collaborates with other Free State Province institutions and has grown over the years. Classes are offered at the following TVET Colleges: Motheo in Bloemfontein, Maluti in Bethlehem and Kwetlison (Phuthaditjhaba), Flavius Mareka in Sasolburg, Goldfields in Welkom, and even Oudtshoorn (until 2020). This programme played a pivotal role in changing the UFS's student profile in the beginning years of democracy. Students in the programme must take two compulsory mainstream modules and four developmental

modules in three directions: Economic and Management Sciences, Human and Social Sciences and Natural and Agricultural Sciences. The teaching pedagogy is presented in a resource-based learning curriculum, and classes must be facilitated and not lectured. Students are encouraged to work in groups, and facilitation is implemented by class activities weekly in small classes of not more than 45 students in one class. Once a student has successfully completed the UPP, they transition into either the second year of the Extended Degree Programme or mainstream studies. The two mainstream modules students take in the UPP are 50% credit bearing at the UFS, meaning when students progress, they have already obtained half of the required first-year credits for the degree programme they enrolled for. It was crucial to understand the enablers of success for these students in order to provide a nuanced definition of student access and success.

Chapter 5: Pathways to University: University Preparation Programme

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the context of the study participants, starting by detailing the demographics of participants, followed by a discussion on why participants went to university (aspirations and agency), and exploring the transition into the access programme and what it meant to be a student. This approach fits into the theoretical framework of this study by presenting each student's life experience and agency and providing the student with an opportunity to have their stories heard.

This chapter focuses on the transition into the access programme guided by the following research questions:

1. What capabilities do typically labelled 'disadvantaged' students bring to higher education (i.e., pre-university capabilities), and how did these capabilities develop in the context of students' lives?
2. How does the university experience recognise and build on these capabilities? During UPP?
3. What additional capabilities are developed during university/during UPP specifically?

I will address these research questions when reflecting on the broader experiences of these participants. The section below introduces the participants for this study.

5.2 Introducing the participants

It is essential to introduce the interviewed participants because they tell their own life stories, including their backgrounds, families, schooling, and university. There were 15 participants in this study, whose biographies are discussed below. The participants' narratives were used to voice their personal experiences in the UPP. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities per the ethical considerations governing social research. All

participants went through the UPP at the UFS and completed their first undergraduate degrees. However, not all participants completed their undergraduate degrees in the minimum required time. Out of 15 participants, eight took longer than the minimum time to complete their first degrees for different reasons. It is also important to note that at the time of the data collection, some participants completed degree studies, while others were busy with postgraduate studies, were temporarily employed, or were in permanent employment.

5.3 Biographies of participants

5.3.1 Michelle

Michelle is currently a temporary staff assistant at a division on the South Campus of the UFS and is responsible for administrative support. She completed the UPP at the South Campus in 2011 and went on to do a degree in the Arts, which she completed in 2017 at the Bloemfontein Campus of the UFS. She wishes to get a permanent job and benefits to support herself and her son. She is from a majority-coloured¹⁶ suburb called Heidedal in the city of Bloemfontein. She lives with her mother and her six siblings. Her father passed away a few years ago. She mentioned that she is the only one who graduated with a degree from a higher education institution in her family and is proud of herself. Michelle grew up poor and went to public schools in the area where she resides. Her parents never went to school and did not have any form of educational qualification. The parents of the father of her child have some sort of formal education. They assisted her with paying her fees whilst she was enrolled in the UPP. Michelle struggles to support her six siblings and their children with her salary. She has one child, a boy in Grade 1 at a school in Bloemfontein. She stated, *“My son doesn't stay with me, and it breaks my heart because I cannot provide for him because I don't have a permanent job.”* She is able to support her family with the part-time jobs she often gets at the South Campus. Her son stays with his paternal grandparents, who provide everything for him.

¹⁶ The term Coloured in South Africa refers to a person of mixed race (European and African ancestry).

Michelle says she works hard to one day obtain full custody of her son so that he can stay with her permanently. When she was still with her previous boyfriend, she had personal issues, explaining that their relationship problems started during her studies in the UPP:

Yes, my boyfriend did help me, but at that point also, things were not actually very right between us because he was too controlling. That also affected my whole concept of being me because at the end, it was... it felt like I was here [in the UPP] because he brought me here, and it's not for me. I'm doing this for him. Another thing is also from my other side of my family, I never got support from them. So, in the end, I felt I was standing alone, so it wasn't easy, it was really difficult, and my mother-in-law was also always in my business. My journey wasn't actually that easy or, say, exciting. There are just times that I felt like, you know, in the end is gonna help me just to finish my degree.

5.3.2 Dineo

Dineo holds a temporary position at a department on the South Campus. She provides administrative support to the department. She started in the UPP in 2009 and graduated with a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree in 2017. She is from a small section of Botshabelo¹⁷ in the Free State Province and completed her schooling in 2007. She fell pregnant during her last year of school and decided to take a gap year after completing school to look after her baby. She is the first-born sibling and a first-generation student. She mentioned, “so, I was very excited, and for me coming here also, we were the first to come to Vista [referring to South Campus]”. Dineo is part of the first cohort of students who moved from Motheo Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College to the South Campus of the UFS after the UFS bought the campus from Vista University¹⁸. The UFS bought the campus to accommodate more access students. It formed part of the three campuses of the UFS. She

¹⁷ It is a large township located 45 kilometres east of Bloemfontein.

¹⁸ The UPP was offered in partnership with the Free State TVET Colleges, which are Motheo, Flavius Mareka, and Goldfields, from 1997 until 2007, when the UFS bought the Vista Campus after the amalgamation with UNISA.

explained that it was also exciting for her because she was “*meeting people from different backgrounds and getting to knowing them*”. Dineo is from a family that does not have any form of higher education. Her mother only had primary schooling, and her father had lower secondary schooling. She has two siblings, one of whom did not complete his schooling. Dineo and her siblings are orphans. Her mother was a factory worker and passed away in 2012 in her second year at university. Her father worked in Johannesburg and passed away when she was in Grade 10. Being an orphan and the eldest, she had to take care of her siblings, which she still does.

5.3.3 Mantwa

Mantwa is working as an Information Technology assistant officer in a South Campus department and is finishing her Bachelor of Education degree, after which she aspires to teach. She started in the UPP in 2011 and is the eldest daughter. She also has a five-year-old son. She grew up in Botshabelo, and when she was four years old, her family moved to Bloemfontein because her grandmother stayed alone. Her parents decided to move in with her grandmother to take care of her. Mantwa’s mother did not complete high school and is a domestic worker. Her father is originally from Lesotho and completed his schooling there. When Mantwa completed her schooling, she applied for mainstream studies at the UFS. However, she did not meet the admission requirements. Her younger brother started in the UPP in 2018 (the year the interview was conducted).

5.3.4 Mabee

Mabee is a teacher at a school in the Free State who graduated with a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree at the UFS in 2012 and did a Postgraduate Diploma in Education at the Central University of Technology (CUT) in 2013. She is from a small town in the Free State called Clocolan and completed her schooling in 2007. She has two step-siblings, one brother and one sister. Her parents were separated, and her father married another woman. Her

biological mother did not have a formal job and was a shebeen queen¹⁹. Both her father and stepmother were teachers. She explained that she does not know where her step-siblings are because after her father passed away in 2010: *“Things didn't work out well between me and my stepmom, so my stepmother and her children had to pack their things, and they went back to their hometown”*. Growing up, Mabee faced some challenges, and although she did well in her primary schooling, she experienced some challenges after her father got married when she was in high school. In her last year of school, things were extremely difficult because when she was in Grade 11, she had to go and live with her father and his wife. She explained:

Things were not easy by that time, and then it got worse when I was doing my last year of school. Hence, I got bad results, and then my father wasn't very supportive even though he was a role model to other people outside but inside the house, I think for me, he was a monster.

However, she had very supportive friends who created their own study group at school. She stated, *“My friends tried to help me and understood my situation at home.”* Despite this, she did not do well, and her results were not good enough for mainstream admission at the UFS. Subsequently, she did the UPP in 2008.

5.3.5 Kagiso

Kagiso is an academic advisor at a division on the South Campus. He started in the UPP in 2007 and graduated with a degree in the Social Sciences in 2012 and a Postgraduate Diploma in Labour Law in 2014; both degrees were done at the UFS. He grew up in Bloemfontein, and when he was about seven years old, he had to relocate to a small town just outside

¹⁹ The term shebeen queen in South Africa refers to a woman who transformed their home into a place where beer came with the option of entertainment, cigarettes and a plate of pap and meat when the sun set (Hlaethwa, 2018).

Bloemfontein due to financial challenges at home because his parents were unemployed at the time. He stayed with his grandparents, who provided everything for him. He stated:

I grew up in a very political orientated family, neighbourhood and community. I was more involved in politics in high school, and I did History as one of my high school subjects, so I fell in love with politics, and I wanted to be a politician. I also wanted to do social work, but the reason I wanted to do social work was not because of my love for it, but it was because of somebody I had a crush on who was a social worker. So, I thought, ah, then I can be a social worker as well.

After finishing school, he moved back to Bloemfontein to live with his parents to go to university. At that stage, his mother was unemployed, and his father worked at the UFS. He added that things changed when his mentor from the community was assassinated by other politicians due to political clashes. His dream of “*becoming a politician completely changed, and it stopped immediately because of the murder.*” He has three children; his mother is still alive, but his father passed away a few years ago.

5.3.6 Kamo

Kamo works at the Dean’s office in a faculty at the UFS as a support staff to the Dean. She enrolled in the UPP in 2009, graduated with a degree in Social Sciences in 2012, and is busy with a Master’s Degree in Education. She is originally from Phalaborwa, a rural town in the Limpopo Province, South Africa, and has a child. She attended high school in Limpopo and is the eldest of three children. There is a significant age gap between her and her siblings, who are still at school. When she was in high school, her family moved from a surrounding village to the suburbs in Phalaborwa. Her parents went to university. Her mother holds qualifications, the latest of which is an Advanced Diploma in Teaching. When she finished her schooling, she wanted to be as far away from home as possible, and her boyfriend at the

time influenced her decision to an extent as well. After high school, she went to Johannesburg for a while and then came to the Free State to study at the UFS. Kamo mentioned that when she was young, her mother taught her to express herself, which she still does.

5.3.7 Bontle

Bontle is currently registered for a postgraduate diploma in Education and a laboratory assistant in the Chemistry department at the UFS. She graduated in 2018 with a Bachelor of Sciences majoring in Chemistry and Biochemistry. She is from a rural coal mining town in Lephalale, Limpopo Province, in South Africa. Bontle started her UPP in 2014 and stated that her boy is her biggest motivator. Growing up, Bontle was raised by different family members. For instance, when she attended preschool, she lived with her aunt until primary school, and when her aunt passed on, she had to go back home to stay with her parents. Bontle's parents do not have any form of higher education. Her father is the only one working. She completed her schooling in 2011, and due to her not performing well in her last year, she went to upgrade her results in 2012 at a private college in Pretoria. She mentioned that things did not go well for her while busy upgrading her results because she was struggling emotionally. However, her mother has always been supportive, even though her mother does not have any formal qualifications. She had never been to the Free State before and came to study at the UFS in 2014, despite not knowing anyone. Her mother had secured a place for her to stay. Unfortunately, on their arrival in Bloemfontein, the lady her mother spoke to did not answer their phone calls. After that, her boyfriend and his uncle brought her back to Bloemfontein, driving around looking for a place to stay, which they eventually found. She explained that when she first arrived in Bloemfontein, she was scared and did not know if she would make it because she took a gap year for two years to figure out what she

could do with her life. Because her parents do not have any form of tertiary education, they greatly value education and encouraged her to further her studies.

5.3.8 Modise

Modise is a lecturer at the UFS. He began his studies in the UPP in 2002. He went on to obtain a degree in Social Sciences in 2005, an Honours degree in Industrial Psychology in 2009 and, at the time of the study, was registered for a Master's degree in Industrial Psychology. He is from Welkom in the Free State and is the only child. Neither of his parents has any form of higher education qualifications, but they are both working. He stated, "*My parents provided everything for me. I cannot say I was struggling. In fact, I lived well*". He attended high school in Bloemfontein and stayed on campus until he decided to rent an apartment in town. He highlighted that, although he is an only child, he has a big extended family. Because the extended family is close, they are always looking out for each other. Modise is married and has two boys.

5.3.9 Zanele

Zanele is an academic facilitator at the UFS. She started in the UPP in 2012 and graduated with a degree in Bachelor of Arts in 2015 with distinction, an Honours degree in Communication in 2017, and is registered for a Master's Degree in Communication Sciences. She is originally from Gqeberha (formerly known as Port Elizabeth) and has a twin brother. She grew up in a single-parent household with three other siblings; her mother is a teacher. She went to "*good schools*" (she refers to good schools as those in town which pay higher tuition fees), even though her mother could not afford the fees. Her mother took them to good schools because of how she grew up (poor and struggling to survive). Her mother is the only one from her family who went to study and became a teacher by profession. Her mother valued education and wanted all her children to get educated because they would have many more life opportunities. Her mother felt that it is important to get an education rather than

having extra money at the end of the month. When they went to the final year of school, she and her twin brother had to change schools because her mother could no longer afford the school fees. They then went to a semi-private school, and due to high school fees, they were “kicked out of school when we were in the last year of the school towards the December exams”. This impacted their inclusion in writing the exams. However, because her mother is a teacher, she spoke to some of her colleagues at the Department of Education. Resultantly, they were allowed to write exams at a TVET College. However, this created problems for the twins because they were registered in one school and wrote at a TVET College. When the Department of Basic Education released the results, the twins did not have marks because they were not registered to write at the TVET College. All this happened in 2007. Unfortunately, she had to repeat the final year of school the following year. However, she admitted that she “*didn't want to repeat and opted to attend Saturday classes for two years*”, and she finally got her results two years later.

5.3.10 Tshepo

Tshepo began his studies in the UPP in 2014 and is currently busy with his Bachelor of Sciences Degree. He is from the North West Province, South Africa, and stayed with his mother whilst growing up. He attended his primary education in the Northern Cape Province and was required to travel between the two provinces daily. The distance travelled to school every day was approximately 30 kilometres by taxi. When he was in Grade 8, he came to attend high school in Bloemfontein until he finished high school. His parents went to university, and both have higher education qualifications. His father is originally from Lesotho, where he did the Cambridge Certificate and came to South Africa, where he obtained an Honours Degree. Tshepo explained that his father was a school principal for about 20 years and left teaching to work at the Department of Sports and Recreation. Tshepo has an older sister who also went to university. He mentioned not seeing his father often, but

he sometimes visits him on weekends or during school holidays. He currently does not have any children and wants to be a Geologist. Although things did not go as planned, he emphasised that “*at the end of it all, I will be a Geologist*”.

5.3.11 Ashley

Ashley is a support staff member at the South Campus of the UFS. She is responsible for administrative support. She began her UPP in 2010 and completed a degree in the Arts in 2013, an Honours degree in Psychology in 2014, and another Honours degree in Criminology in 2016. She is currently busy with a master's degree in Development Studies. She is from a rural town called Cradock in the Eastern Cape Province and has three siblings, a sister and two brothers. She went to local schools and wanted to study medicine and become a doctor. Her parents bought a house in the suburbs and are very supportive. She highlighted that her parents are her pillar of strength. She also mentioned that her parents gave her a better life than they had growing up. Her parents have high school certificates; her father worked at the Department of Correctional Services and is retired. Her mother is a nurse at an Old Age Home. While her father was working at the Department of Correctional Services, he acquired certificates in the profession, which led him to move up in his career. Ashley has a daughter and is engaged.

5.3.12 Tumi

Tumi is working as a student assistant in the computer laboratory of the UFS, South Campus. He graduated with a Bachelor of Sciences and is currently busy with an Honours degree in Quantity Surveying. Tumi is from Kimberly in the Northern Cape Province. Growing up, he went to three different schools. He attended primary schooling in the Northern Cape, his secondary school in Klerksdorp town in the North West Province, and his high school was in the town of Rustenburg, also in the North West Province. He mentioned that he grew up in a Christian home where they went to church every Sunday. His mother has

a master's degree, and his dad only has primary schooling. He has three siblings, the oldest sister passed away a while back, the second sister has an Honours degree, and the youngest sibling is still in school. He remembers that his schools were very far. He had to take two taxis to get to school. He stated that when he was in high school, he became an:

average learner reason being peer pressure and influence from my peers because when you're in high school, and you're always getting good grades, you sort of become well known, especially when teachers always saying follow this guy, do what he does. So, you became well known and even in new schools' people always ask me who my name is as if I'm doing something wrong. I realised as time went by I had a lot of these people that always want to hang out with me, and they influenced me negatively.

Unfortunately, by the time you realise that you're not where you were before, it's already too late.

Tumi expressed wanting to be a quantity surveyor but did the UPP in 2015 at the South Campus due to poor results. He currently does not have any children and is not married.

5.3.13 Mpho

Mpho works at the UFS and has a degree in Social Sciences, an Honours degree in Criminology and is currently busy with a master's degree in Gender Studies. She obtained all her qualifications from the UFS. Mpho began her UPP studies in 2007 at the Goldfields TVET College in the town of Welkom in the Free State Province, where she originally comes from. She has four sisters, all of whom have university qualifications, the highest being a PhD. However, her parents only have basic education. Mpho mentioned that she comes from a poor community in Welkom, and the schools she attended did not even have a science laboratory, and that she finished her schooling in 2006. She describes herself as a talkative and outgoing person. When growing up, Mpho initially wanted to be a doctor but later

changed her mind and wanted to be a psychologist. However, she did not become either of the two. She is not married and does not have any children.

5.3.14 Samantha

Samantha works part-time as an enrolment support staff at the UFS, South Campus. She began the UPP in 2011 and graduated with a degree in Bachelor of Arts. Samantha has a son, and she is from Heidedal in Bloemfontein. She is Afrikaans-speaking and attended and completed high school at an Afrikaans school in Bloemfontein. Samantha's mother only has a high school certificate. Samantha did not talk about or mention her father. She is one of two children with a younger brother who also did the UPP and is currently doing a degree in Social Sciences. She prides herself that she is a first-generation student in her family and the first graduate at a university with a degree.

5.3.15 Pinky

Pinky is a temporary staff member at the South Campus and is applying for jobs everywhere but has not succeeded. She began her UPP in 2011 and graduated with a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree from the UFS in 2016. She is from a small town in the Western Cape Province. She comes from a very small town and thinks many people do not even know where it is. She further mentioned that life is tough there, and many young people “*who finished high school are sitting at home doing nothing because there are no opportunities*”. Pinky's father passed away when she was very young, and her mother has no education. She stated:

My mother couldn't go to school because, at that time, during Apartheid in South Africa, Blacks were not allowed to go to school, and she was seen as Black even though she stayed in a Coloured community. In my mother's community, that community only allowed Coloureds and Whites to go to school, so she couldn't finish high school.

Pinky has an older sister who moved to Bloemfontein a few years ago and is currently working and studying at the same time.

5.4 Why I went to University – aspirations and agency

Students have different aspirations of why they want to attend university. During the interviews, participants revealed why they wanted to go to university and who helped them get to university. The majority of them revealed that someone helped them apply and assisted them in applying for the UPP. Some even revealed that they had initially applied for degree studies and were advised to do the UPP because their Admission Point Scores were insufficient to get into degree programmes. They could only access the university via the UPP because their admission point scores were too low. The minimum Admission Point requirement for university studies is 28 points with a degree declaration, and the UPP accepts students with scores between 18 and 24 points. I sought to understand how aspiration and agency manifested in students' lives and the value the programme had on their lives. The findings are discussed in the following sections.

5.4.1 Aspirations

Appadurai (2004, p. 67) defined aspirations as the ability to navigate the “complex steps between...norms and specific wants and wishes”. Aspirations are often linked to underlying values. The purpose of this analysis was to ascertain how aspirations were established. I identified three themes related to aspirations:

- Aspirations focused on values and not necessarily on educational pathways;
- Awareness of possibilities; and
- Others influencing aspiration.

5.4.1.1 Aspirations focused on values and not necessarily on educational pathways

Mabee, Mantwa and Pinky aspired to help people. Mantwa chose to be a teacher because she associates teaching with helping people. Mabee wanted to be a social worker, and Pinky wanted to be a psychologist because they both associated these careers with helping people. Their aspirations were guided by the value associated with the educational process and not necessarily the educational process itself. They explained:

I always dreamt of being a social worker, and I only knew a social worker to be someone who helps people (Mabee).

I always wanted to become a psychologist and have my own Non-Profit Organisation for orphans (Pinky).

I wanted to be a teacher to help children in my community because I didn't want them to make the same mistakes that I made (Mantwa).

These reflections help with understanding the importance of how people think about aspiration because these participants' educational aspirations were not necessarily about being a social worker, a teacher or a psychologist, but because they all valued helping people. These aspirations manifested in an educational environment, which led them to want to be in those professions. In this instance, the educational aspiration was secondary to the value aspiration.

5.4.1.2 Awareness of possibilities

Kagiso knew he wanted to attend university because his father and aunt worked at the UFS. He was, however, unaware of alternative routes to get into university when he initially applied for degree studies. He then applied for the UPP and got admitted into the programme. Kagiso's aspiration changed due to life circumstances (wanting to become a politician but changing his mind when his political mentor was brutally killed). He was able to convert the

loss into an aspirational trajectory that was evident throughout his university experience. Calitz (2015) found that students' aspirations changed due to personal circumstances. This was also found in this study: personal aspiration extended to Kagiso's dream to become better and study something else. He majored in Psychology and Sociology during the UPP.

Gore (2018) found that open days were an important exposure for students to determine their study and career paths. This was also the case for Mantwa and Kamo. The two participants explained how exposure to the UFS open days made them aware of university life. Thus, they aspired to go and study further. Mantwa explained:

When I was in Grade 12 (referring to her last year of school), my Life Orientation teacher took the whole Grade 12 class to the UFS Open Day; then I saw yoooh [expression] varsity life is so nice. I want to apply for the University, and then I applied for the UFS. That's when I was exposed to varsity life during the open day.

Similarly, Kamo indicated that part of her decision to further her studies was being exposed to different institutions' career fairs and her parents. She attended a few career fairs, exposing her to different institutions of higher learning. Thus, she applied to a few of them at career fairs. Both students became aware of the possibilities presented to them in one way or another.

On the other hand, for the other students, there was a lack of awareness about life after completing their studies. For instance, Michelle detailed how she did not think about going to study after completing her schooling. She stated:

I didn't think about going to university or studying further. After I finished my high school, I went to look for a job in order to help support my family. I then got a job at Clicks and was able to support my mom and siblings since my dad passed on.

5.4.1.3 Others influencing aspiration

The analysis of student narratives demonstrated that awareness of possibilities is not the only place where aspirations are established. Family and community are also significant in developing and guiding individual aspirations. Kamo pointed out that education has always been an important part of her family. It was introduced to her at a young age, and she knew she had to study further after completing her schooling. On the other hand, Mpho and Bontle acknowledged that they did not know they were coming to study at the UPP. Bontle's mother is the one who actually applied on her behalf. When she received her acceptance letter, she was pleasantly surprised to learn that her mother did that for her. This is because her parents are both not educated, and they value education. Mpho did not desire to go to university simply because the high school she attended never created the aspiration to motivate her to go to university. However, she detailed how she got inspired to study further by people closest to her (her sisters) when she enrolled in the programme.

The literature about aspiration indicated that the goal should be the belief in one's agency (Ray, 2003). This is important because students from poor backgrounds can be successful in higher education through the deliberate and focused use of agency. The relationship between aspirations, agency and capabilities was explored, with significance on whether students from poor, quality educational backgrounds can be successful in higher education by deliberate and focused use of agency. It is evident that aspiration leads to agency.

5.4.2 Agency

Sen (1999, p. 19) described agency as "the ability of a person to realise the goals they value and have reason to value". While aspirations are about understanding why students want to study, agency refers to how students took those first steps towards reaching their aspirations. The data analysis of this study revealed that agency manifests itself in the following ways:

- The ability to pursue goals one values: choosing to enrol in the UPP.
- Making use of the opportunity to get into higher education.

5.4.2.1 The ability to pursue goals one values: choosing to enrol in the UPP

It is important to understand how students made decisions about enrolling in the UPP as it allows agency to be evaluated (i.e., the power students have to make choices and follow things they have a reason to value). Most participants revealed that it was their decision and personal choice to enrol in the UPP, even though someone might have referred them to the UPP. However, alternately they made that choice to enrol. Again, the most common view among students was knowing they stand a better chance of employment after obtaining their qualifications. This is unsurprising, especially in a developing country like South Africa, where the youth unemployment rate is high. The majority of participants reported having chosen their degree programmes because they had a passion for studying and ultimately getting employment. When students enrol at a university, they exercise their ability to pursue a goal they value. The following excerpts illustrate how participants took those first steps towards reaching their aspirations:

A friend of mine told me about the programme, and I thought to myself, why don't I give it a try? I told my parents about the programme, and they helped me fill in the forms, and we brought the forms back to Bloemfontein (Modise).

After thinking long and hard about the information, I decided to go and register myself because I wanted a better life for myself and to also help my sister. I then registered successfully (Pinky).

I took a bus very early in the morning, the day of the registrations, because I wanted to be early and do everything myself before going back home to Botshabelo (Dineo).

I did not think about anything except of after completing my schooling, I was going to look for a job. However, when I applied for mainstream and got rejected, I was then told that I can apply for UPP, and I got acceptance into the programme. That is when my attitude change, and I became a positive person (Mantwa).

I didn't know about UPP because I applied for mainstream studies, but I could not meet the requirements. They then they said, but you can go to the Ous L (referring to the Access administration office); she will be able to assist you through the UPP process.

I was with my cousin at time, who used to study at Qwaqwa Campus, and he accompanied me to Motheo in downtown. So he accompanied me there, and then I was advised on taking Psychology and Sociology since I wanted to do Social Work (Kagiso, 2018).

Moreover, the degree of agency is seen in how students thrive at the university despite the existing challenges. The participants shared their views on how the Admission Point system in higher education challenges their freedom and experience at university. Human development is only realised by allowing students to gain access through these bridging programmes that will assist them to thrive and give them the freedom to attain their goals, individually and collectively.

5.4.2.2 Making use of opportunities to get into higher education

Social norms and opportunities can expand or diminish one's agency because they construct advantages and disadvantages, even where public resources are equally disseminated. For example, Dineo's Admission Point score was 17 after high school, which was not enough for degree studies. However, she never gave up on wanting to study further. Her agency led her to visit the UFS website to see what she could study. People have

different capability sets because of individual functionings that are influenced by their relative advantages or disadvantages in society (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a). Therefore, agency is crucial in assessing their capabilities and any economic, social, or political barriers to achieving substantive freedoms. The concept is important in assessing what a person can do with their conception of the good (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a). Walker and Unterhalter (2007) found that lacking the ability to exercise one's agency is a form of disadvantage. The majority of the participants had the necessary agency freedoms to pursue their educational goals as an indicator of advantage. Therefore, students' inability to exercise agency and realise educational achievements can be equated to disadvantage.

There is an interplay between aspiration and agency. Some of them might not have aspired to get into higher education. However, the moment they were accepted, they saw the potential and started aspiring. Thus, agency came before aspiring (e.g., Michelle). Others aspired to study a specific degree (e.g., Social Work), followed by the agency to enact on the aspiration.

The next section focuses on the transitioning process with a special emphasis on conversion factors (factors that impact a person's ability to convert resources into opportunities or capabilities) and resiliency.

5.5 Transitioning into the access programme: Conversion factors and resiliency

This section discusses the transitioning process for students. Students gaining access to higher education also need to adjust to higher education with their low Admission Point scores. This section details their experiences, what helped them and the challenges they experienced with the transition. Participants revealed that during the UPP year, the pedagogical practices and environment were a considerable enabler, offering the opportunity for them to convert those resources into capabilities and functionings.

As stated in Chapter 3, conversion factors are the “factors which allow, or do not allow, people to convert the resources and income they have into functionings and capabilities” (Deneulin, 2014, p. 29). There are three groups of conversion factors: i) personal conversion factors (i.e., metabolism, physical condition, reading ability, intelligence, health); ii) social conversion factors (e.g., policies, social norms, family relations, practices of discrimination, gender roles, power relations); and iii) environmental conversion factors such as “geographical locations, rural versus urban, climate and so on” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99). It is important to note that these conversion factors (personal, environmental and social) impact the extent to which a person can use the resources available to them to create capabilities or opportunities and convert these capabilities into functionings. In addition, there are also positive and negative conversion factors. For example, peers can play a positive or a negative role in a student’s life. Nevertheless, this depends on each student’s experience.

It is important to highlight that differences in personal attributes and institutional elements and how they relate to each other will determine the individual’s ability to turn these into achieved functionings (Sen, 1999). Gore (2018) stated that to determine disadvantage of diverse students, it is important to assess individual students’ characteristics and the socioeconomic and policy environments that affect them. From the data, personal, social and environmental conversion factors enabled or constrained the participants’ resiliency as they transitioned into the UPP. These factors included:

- a) Personal conversion factors
 - Personal traits
 - Family backgrounds
- b) Social conversion factors
 - Peer group learning
 - Supportive facilitators

c) Environmental conversion factors

- Supportive environment
- Modules that support and assist students in doing well

The above conversion factors will be explained in more detail below.

5.5.1 *Personal conversion factors*

The degree of agency is seen in how participants thrive at university despite existing challenges. For instance, participants used responses such as “*working hard*”, “*I had to learn how to speak up in class*”, and “*engage with my classmates/friends*”. These responses indicate the extent to which participants worked hard to achieve what they value.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that the conversion factors (such as having limited to no resources in high school and language proficiency) in the South African education system constrained rather than expanded student agency. This is evident in the participants’ views on how challenges from high school limited their freedom to gain access to degree studies. In this way, human development is only realised by allowing students to thrive and giving them the freedom to attain their goals individually and collectively through these access programmes. It is important to highlight that confidence and resilience are crucial personal conversion factors for this study because, without resilience, participants might not have picked themselves up from life’s setbacks. I believe a confident person can and will succeed in life. However, should one have a setback, the confidence can diminish. A resilient person will keep trying despite the setbacks.

5.5.1.1 Personal traits

Although it is important to measure potential, ability, and competence for the transition to university, focusing only on these factors alone does not present the full picture and does not consider the social justice challenges of access to higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

When building a strong self-belief and having confidence in oneself, one defines one's own values and beliefs and tries to live those in everything one does. That deep self-belief becomes resilience, which will not stop fear, disappointment or hurt when things do not work out or if setbacks are experienced in life (Skills and Development Hallam, 2020). Confidence and resilience keep a person optimistic; in this context, I used confidence as an important personal trait. Students from the access programme highlighted what assisted them in becoming confident. Samantha mentioned that during her UPP year, she became more confident, independent and she started believing in herself:

I am a type of student at school that would always go to my teachers and always questioned myself if I am wrong or right. So (UPP) taught me that I should start believing in myself and that I can also really, like I said, have an opinion, and I can speak up. I don't have to be in this shell of mine. It helped me a lot to grow as a person, and it taught me a lot like how life works out there because there was this particular example that I can't forget, and I always tell people about it, but there was this Sociology lecturer (facilitator) that always said to us that if you're a doctor you can't date a petrol attendant because of the level of how people are. So I always thought to myself that in life, you have to hang with people that understand you and that they can influence you positively. Like I can't have friends, not that I can't, but I can have friends outside, but my school friends are also people that can motivate me; we understand each other, and we speak the same language. So it helped me a lot because I made four close friends. I think I had a lot of friends, and the UPP made me a better person and see the world differently.

Mantwa explained that transitioning into the UPP was not challenging for her. She recalled the first thing she did when she was admitted and when she registered:

I changed my mind and started to be a positive-thinking human being. I studied hard for that course (UPP), and then I wanted to pass with very good marks; even though maths was still a problem for me, I used the library often, in fact, every day, and then I used the internet as well to do research. I became confident in myself.

Mantwa's except is an example of how agency developed confidence. It also shows a change in perception and how Mantwa sees herself. Tumi reflected on this by explaining that he has a good memory. He learnt better when things were explained to him and when shown pictures. For him, the UPP taught him to understand himself and to become confident in himself:

I started reflecting and understanding the person I am, and in that sense, the moment you understand yourself as a person, you know where your limits are, what you can't reach and if you can't reach and if you can't reach something that you need in your life, you need to find a way around it find a way to attain it at the end of the day.

Bontle highlighted being resilient during her UPP year by stating:

The fact that I was too scared, and I thought I was going to fail and I thought because people would say university is difficult. That is what they used to tell us when we were in high school made me so scared. I thought I am not good enough for university, so I have to always be on my books. That's how I literally studied, or I will just gather my friends, and during our free time, maybe I would explain something to them, or they explain something to me properly in our own language to understand all the work. That's how like I did everything.

Bontle converted her fear of failing into psychological resilience, which helped her succeed. Another aspect of positive functioning enhanced Zanele's capability for critical reasoning. She mentioned that the lessons she learned from the informal interaction with a

classmate enabled her to construct a more critical approach to planning her life. She admitted that she did not have peers that supported her in her learning and struggled with time management. Her challenge was that some of her classes were so far apart from each other that she and her friends had too much time and became bored, which led to them walking to her friend's house and *"sit there and watch TV and that was a bit frustrating because I came here to study"*.

One of the teaching and learning methodologies in the programme was group work, encouraging participants to work in groups. Three participants highlighted that they were initially shy, but that soon changed when they interacted with other students. For instance, Michelle mentioned that when she started in the UPP, she was not outspoken and was very shy. However, working in groups helped her to gain confidence, and she started to speak up.

Samantha stated that when she first started the programme, she was also shy and had no friends. However, she soon realised that:

I have to like socialise with other people if I want to do well. Again due to the nature of the discussions in class, I had to speak up in class. My other challenge was that my English was not very good because I went to an Afrikaans school. But I took advantage of that and bought myself an Afrikaans/English dictionary because I wanted to also participate in the discussions with my classmates.

Pinky described that because she was shy, it was hard for her to be part of a group at first, and because the classes were small, it became a challenge. She stated:

So my surname is Lambart (not her real surname), and it's so easy. When the facilitator wanted answers, he would go through the surnames, and he'd be like Lambart. I then stopped for a while to be on time in class (laughs) just to avoid him, more to avoid answering any questions and be on the spot because I hate being on the

spotlight is not me. But later on, I was like if I wanna pass, I just have to be in class and work with him, and that helped me a lot. I was a very negative person, and I can put myself down; then here, the new friends were now seeing things in me that I couldn't see in myself, and then I'm like, ohh so you at least think something positive about me, or you can see something in me. That changed how I then saw myself.

With the narrative of the participants' experiences, there seems to be a pattern emerging across their experiences: opportunities for individual and small group engagement that enabled the development of valued academic and personal capabilities. In addition, students were able to overcome their shyness in order to participate actively and be confident.

5.5.1.2 Family backgrounds

Mabee wanted to leave her father's house. She understood that in order for her to have a better life, she had to study and work hard for herself. She believes that she has good interpersonal relationships with other people and good communication skills, and that is what helped her get through so many things. She highlighted:

I think experience was the best teacher according to my experience then. I mean, I said to myself, okay, this is how life is, so in order for me to have a better life, I think I should maybe just change how I see things. I don't have to be bitter, but I have to work hard and also understand other people's situations. Maybe other people have more or worse situations than I have.

For Zanele, because she was a bit older than her peers in class, she:

Felt under pressure because all my friends at home were a year from graduating so I sort of felt that I need to get through this so that I can also graduate. Another thing was I spent a couple of years not studying and only going to school on a Saturday. I sort of wanted to do well. I didn't do well in my Grade 12 because of the

circumstance, and I sort of wanted to prove to myself that was it really circumstance or is that really you are dumb.

She highlighted that was her biggest motivator to do well. Another motivator was her mother, who went to university and became a teacher and positively changed her life.

The two participants developed physiological resilience (see Chapter 3 for the definition) because they could resist and respond to physiologic stressors they faced (LeBrasseur, 2017; Taliaz et al., 2011). For Mabee, it was her challenging family situation; for Zanele, it was wanting to graduate like her friends, thus, doing well despite their challenges.

5.5.2 Social conversion factors

Two conversion factors emerged from the data analysis. These are explained in detail below.

5.5.2.1 Peer group learning

Peer group learning emerged as a set of conversion factors that enabled participants to convert academic resources into participation. During the data analysis, six participants acknowledged that peer group learning was an important social and environmental conversion factor because it allowed participants to be comfortable in their groups and work in groups for learning. Dineo reflected on what worked well for her during her UPP. She explained that she made things easier for herself by taking advantage of the fact that some of her peers were smarter than her, and she would ask for help. She also mentioned:

I always prefer us studying in a group so that it makes it easier we shared ideas, and then it makes it easier for us to study. When I got home, I would practice what I learned with my friends.

For Tshepo, when something was challenging for him, or he did not understand something in class, he would easily go and ask his peers. He mentioned that they would even challenge each other as peers and stated:

The person who gets the most marks for the next coming test would perhaps be brought something by everybody else. That's how we were challenging each other because no one wanted to buy anything for anybody. You'd want to be the one that receives.

Kamo explained that due to her parents, who have higher education qualifications, there was no way for her to want to be the odd one in the family; making friends made her determined to do well academically. She explained:

There are lessons I learned in my UPP year that you have to work in a group and make an effort. I learned that no man is an island and you need other students. Group work was important. The classes were so nice and small, and it created a sense of belonging because we all knew each other.

Peer affiliation expanded Bontle's agency for pursuing capabilities and functionings, such as the opportunity to make friends who enhanced her academic participation. The fear of failing and the academic pressure directed her energy and time towards studying with peers and not necessarily leaving limited resources for valued peer connection. She stated:

Because I was scared of university and to fail, I made my own learning strategy which could assist me in passing my modules. I would literally come to campus every day and like, you know, make sure I come to every class, and I will literally ask questions. That was one thing that I used. I asked questions and made sure that I listen to the lecturer (facilitator) because I believe being there listening to me automatically stores in my brain or something like that. And then when I got to my place, I would just redo

whatever we did in class and go a bit into what we gonna do tomorrow, not literally writing but just to have an idea of when he (the facilitator) teaches, I have an idea what he's talking about or what he's talking about is how I studied. I also used to discuss with my classmates, and then it would make things much easier for me.

However, the positive outcome of having peers was not the same for Mantwa. She remembers that she did not use the opportunity, as indicated by the previous participant. Even though peer group pressure was positive for the other participants, it was negative for some. Mantwa admitted that even though she told herself she would work hard during her access year, it was challenging to have friends around her because they influenced her decisions negatively. She mentioned:

Most of the time, we spent time sitting under the trees gossiping, and then sometimes we'll bunk classes because we will be going to the cafeteria to listen to music.

5.5.2.2 Supportive facilitators

With the majority of the narratives, positive associations with facilitators confronted the deficit discourse. The participants described how friendly their facilitators were and how their interactions with their facilitators confronted the student-lecturer hierarchy. They pointed out that facilitators were always available to assist with anything because their classes were small. Drawing on their positive experience with their facilitators, Dineo mentioned things were “*easier because we got enough help from the facilitators*”. The only thing she struggled with was English and the computer module. She explained that the English she spoke and the written one differed. She mentioned that she received much support from her facilitators, and the facilitator was always available, making the programme easy for her. She stated:

They (facilitators) helped you and from the inside (meaning in the classroom) and outside (more social setting). I must say that I prefer to be inside than outside because

outside, you would say like its high school, and it was just more fun outside than inside because people, like students, were more focusing in class rather than outside.

She added that her main thing was being more focused on why am I here than just come and just waste money that I don't even have (Dineo).

Tshepo emphasised that the facilitators were excellent because he never thought he could get distinctions in his modules. He mentioned:

Because the facilitators are so good, this assisted me to get ten out of eleven distinctions. This is crazy because it was a massive upgrade from high school to university. All sessions were done on time, and everything was always up to date.

The majority of participants came from under-resourced schools and did not know how to use a computer. Kamo explained that it was the first time she used a computer. This negatively impacted her studies, as she failed the computer course in her first year; she passed it a year later. What helped her the most was to inquire in class about what she did not know or understand. In the UPP, students are encouraged to ask when they do not understand, and group work is strongly emphasised. Working in groups also helped her a lot. She also highlighted that when she and her peers had challenges, they would go to the facilitator for assistance and advice, which made things easier for her.

Another positive conversion factor for participants was being recognised and acknowledged for their efforts as capable students. This is what Kagiso valued within an institutional context where facilitators and students had opportunities for engagement. Affiliation with supportive facilitators expanded students' freedom to use their agency to convert available resources, such as consultation hours, into valued functionings. Similar to Kagiso's affiliation with supportive facilitators, Bontle also highlighted that her facilitators believed in her. They asked her to motivate some of the other classes. This showed her that

they approved and believed in her. This gave her joy and pushed her to work harder. Kagiso pointed out that he did not struggle to adjust to his new life and compared his experience to when he was in high school. However, he indicated some differences between high school and UPP:

The difference was the subject or modules that I had to do because they are different from the ones that I did in high school, but how everything was conducted, it was similar to high school for me. It was similar in the sense that you know, back in high school, there's less or few of you in one class, and you happen to know each other, and the teacher is somebody that you know my name, so when I go to UPP, it was similar because whoever would stand before us in class (facilitator) it was somebody that I would know by their name, and they would know me by my name as well.

He emphasised that students get connected to their facilitators, explaining that it became challenging as he did not want to disappoint them by not performing well. He stated, “because of the relationship that's there with your fellow classmates and facilitators”. It is evident that Kagiso also valued an opportunity to be known and recognised by his facilitators, which expanded his engagement with knowledge in his modules. This enabling interaction appeared to be a positive conversion factor as one conversion factor led to another positive conversion factor (Wolf & De-Shalit, 2007).

Furthermore, he mentioned that the environment was positive, influencing how he chose to do things. He stated:

Being in an environment that so positive, you also want to do positive things. It was so easy because you get to ask whatever you want to ask because facilitators were people we were always with. If you ask them a question that is not particularly related to your studies, they would be able to answer you or tell you to go to whoever who

would be able to provide a more accurate or a more proper answer. So that environment was just helpful. That's why I managed to be better throughout that year.

Modise explained that being connected to a facilitator helped him understand what he was doing 'wrong', which encouraged him to focus on getting better and being guided to independent thinking. He mentioned that when he initially started in the UPP, he realised that his study strategies were not good enough:

It was only after UPP I realised that the way I used to study might have been the problem that I did not make it in matric because I used to read the book like a magazine. I came to school with that discipline I had because I've been by living by myself for a very long time, and going to school for me has been my kind of work Monday to Friday. You go to school it's a normal routine that I did, and I did attended classes.

He added that “*it was the first time that I felt like someone cares about me, not us but me*”. He elaborated by explaining that he did his homework and when he was in class:

You read this section of what you wrote. In one of the modules, psychology, we used to do activities. Although the psychology class was a big class, but we worked in smaller groups and, as a student, have to read a section and answer some questions. So with my level of reading and English understanding, I would write the wrong things. To me, now when I start to think about it, I remember a story of what happened about some of the things we wrote. I would write those pieces, but someone will be there and say no, Modise it's not "says" and the facilitator will be correcting my language and also enhancing my knowledge of psychology.

Ashley stated that her parents made her love reading, and when she joined the UPP, she was even more exposed to reading due to books offered at the library as part of the reading material in one of the modules. This assisted her in improving her writing skills because the facilitators encouraged them to read a lot. She also mentioned that her computer skills got more advanced because she registered for the computer module:

The support of our lecturers (facilitators) was out of this world. There was really that genuine interest in and support; they were not spoon-feeding us, no, they were definitely not spoon-feeding us, but you know, when you see that people actually have a passion for something. That's what I got from my lecturers, and that's what motivated me to work even harder to make them proud because they were putting so much effort into our education. This made me more driven and more ambitious.

The facilitators supported participants by encouraging group work, which allowed them to build their self-confidence, and the constant motivation also assisted them in doing well. Participants identified facilitator affiliation as an environmental conversion factor that enabled them to convert educational resources into participation (Bangeni & Kapp, 2013; Pym et.al., 2011; Pym & Kapp, 2013).

5.5.3 Environmental factors

From the data, environmental factors emerged that encouraged and supported participants throughout the year, such as the environment and the modules that assisted them in doing well. These factors are discussed in detail below.

5.5.3.1 Supportive environment

The programme is presented at the South Campus, which can accommodate about 1500 students. The campus is smaller than the UFS's two campuses, and students are taught in small classes of not more than 45 students in a class. There are services that all registered

students can use for free such as the student counsellor, academic advisor and facilitators.

The participants reported that due to the smaller campus, they felt that the environment was very supportive. One of the other ways students are supported is through free counselling services, which they need to book at a convenient time if they require a counsellor's services. The counsellor then assists students with their challenges. Dineo mentioned that the extra-curricular support benefitted her. She explained that she also faced some problems at home and would visit the student counsellor for help to discuss the challenges she faced at home:

Sometimes I'll go to her and discuss all my personal problems that I'm encountering at home. That was also an advantage for me because at least I knew I had someone I can talk to with my personal stuff.

Mantwa also identified the support she received from her facilitator and stated:

I remember in 2011, my English lecturer (facilitator) always advised us that while we were doing the reading reactions and mind maps in her class, she said to us we must use the library more often and said if we don't get the books in the library, we are more than welcome to come to Mrs M at the administration and ask her to borrow some books from the main campus (referring to the Bloemfontein campus) for us, or we can just sit in the library to use the internet and see how to draw a mind map and be more professional. The other thing that the programme did for us was that they organised something like career guidance to prepare us for the mainstream (degree studies), whereby we had to choose relevant subjects (modules) that we are going to do the following year when we get into the mainstream programme.

In addition, Kamo reported that the small spaces in the programme assisted her in expressing herself in class, and the environment created a safe space for them as students.

The environment allowed us to ask questions where necessary. Again, you know, meeting different people with the same challenges that we're trying to get access to a mainstream degree, so I feel like that Ubuntu spirit that I learned also from Limpopo was visible and there.

She added that she valued the following:

The small spaces (referring to the environment) and having access to a close relationship with the lecture, not personal, but on an academic level. Being able to have that space where you can communicate with the lecturer (facilitator), the class was not bombarded with a lot of students that you cannot say oh, let me ask a question or the lecturer (facilitator) was in a rush and in a hurry to finish their session because the class was too full. You see those with the positive impacts, and also, it's a nice place to be, like it's on the hill even though it's cold sometimes, but it's a nice environment. It's on the hill, and for me, who comes from Limpopo, we value nature, so for me, it's also another space which I really like. It's just out of everything, and you get to reflect on things.

Kamo faced challenges such as falling pregnant and not writing examinations. However:

They actually helped me out write my other exam, I think it was computer, later on. You see that understanding that they (the UPP Administration office) could arrange for me. They even arranged for me the time I even write a test at a specific time because I had to leave to go back to Phalaborwa.

She added that she is still friends with some of her peers who started together in the UPP because they formed friendships beyond the classroom.

Tumi reported the following about the South Campus (referring to the UPP):

The UPP teaches you how to think differently, and I appreciate South Campus because they would always try to take us out of our comfort zone in the sense that they would teach us how to think differently to solve the same question. If there's a problem at hand we have, obviously, you would use your first resort to what you know and what you're good at, but then they would always try to get us to try a different way of doing it. So you know that your normal way of doing things doesn't work. At least, you know, that there is another way around. And also, what helped me to manage is time management and to work under pressure. That's one thing I can say that it's not something that you learn in high school. I would also say the lecturers here are more considerate. They try to be more assisting and the more considerate, and they try as much as they can to give you that one-on-one experience, even though there's a whole class to look after. I think when they see that you're from a disadvantaged background and you really are trying, they really do give advice. I remember one of the lecturers actually would give us quotes and cross every class just to get us motivated and going before the class starts. Even if he doesn't give us a quote that day, he would say something to motivate and encourage us, and it's very nice when you have someone who is a lecturer, and they have made it thus far and they also from a disadvantaged background. It is very nice when they tell you what they've been through during the childhood and how they got to where they are; it motivated me.

The participants revealed the need for a supportive environment to create a space for students to thrive. The next sections discuss some of the modules which participants valued the most.

5.5.3.2 Modules that support and assist participants to do well

One of the few things Michelle learned during her UPP year was in one of her modules, Skills for Competencies in Lifelong Learning (SCLL, previously referred to as the VBL module). She did not have Life Orientation when she was in her last year of schooling (2003). She emphasised learning a lot from the SCLL module:

I learned that through my education that knowledge is power, and you have to learn in order for you to understand certain things.

She mentioned that she did well in the UPP because of the assistance of her facilitators and the group work they had to do. Even though initially she did not like it, it helped her pass. However, despite performing well academically, she faced challenges in her personal life. She explained that she was still very young when she met her boyfriend and had to focus on their relationship and academics. This became hard for her as she could not balance the two well. She emphasised that the programme taught her about team building:

I always thought that I'm alone in this world and had to do everything on my own. However, during my UPP year, I developed skills to work with other people. Even though in high school I used to do study groups with other learners, when I was alone I was still thinking that those people and that they won't be here forever, and I felt that had to stand up on my own. UPP helped me to work with other people. I always had good interrelationships with other people, and I was never a shy person.

Mabee emphasised that the skill she brought to the UPP was further nurtured in one of her modules: Skills and Competencies for Lifelong Learning. She stated:

I learned a lot from that module, and I learned how to work with people. I learned how to work with other people's feelings. To be honest with you, I didn't have much of

a challenge while I was doing my UPP. Everything ran smoothly. I didn't fail any module; I even asked myself why I failed matric while I was doing UPP.

Similar to Michelle and Mabee, Kagiso reported that the SCLL module assisted him in how to go about studying. The environment is created in such a way that students are encouraged to differ and disagree with their facilitators. Kagiso stated:

In the English module, I once had a debate with my facilitator. I remember I referred to something as a full chicken, and the facilitator said there's no such thing as full chicken; it's a whole chicken. There was a bit of a problem between myself and the facilitator in class because whenever he went out to where they sell food, it was always referred to as full chicken. However, I realised that the facilitator was teaching me proper academic English instead of the English that we all know.

He mentioned that while debating with the facilitator, he related his argument to a real-life situation, asking the facilitator if she had ever gone to a restaurant or a takeaway place and seen whole chicken and not full chicken written. Due to the passion and support facilitators give students, Kagiso explained that the facilitator “later spoke with me so she can just explain everything to me. I actually had to learn a lot about “critical thinking skills”. He stated that that is what he (referring to the facilitator) *needed to do in order for me to be successful*. He mentioned that the English and SCLL modules “*actually helped me in a sense that I had to apply whatever it is that I had to learn in the class throughout my academic years*”. Kagiso also mentioned that the support they received during UPP assisted him in having more focus and striving to do better. This is because he felt strongly about not wanting to be a “loser” or “a failure.”

Zanele attested to her experience with the SCLL module (previously called the VBL module). She stated:

The VBL class was the biggest learning curve because that is where I learnt and got a lot of skills. Some of the things were repetitive, but I felt, in hindsight, the thing of making small goals so that you can reach your bigger goal. I remember one of the lecturers (facilitators) would ask us where do you want to be next year. And students would say, "Main campus". The facilitator would go on to ask, "Where are you now?" South campus. How are you going to get there? We would then be required to write that down, and this is something I would repeat on a regular basis, and then it didn't make sense. But when you get to main campus, you were like, okay, this is main campus. You have to make tiny goals to get to the bigger goal and always remembering why are you here.

Zanele also reflected on the module, Anthropology, and highlighted that it helped her learn about other people's cultures and their differences. She stated:

The module also contributed to understanding the environment in which I'm in and how culture contributes in a country because I was struggling to adapt because I was the only Xhosa-speaking person in the whole class, and I didn't speak. I've never been away from the Eastern Cape; all of a sudden, I had to deal with the language and didn't have any friends. I didn't feel like I fitted in, but then when I started Intercultural Anthropology in the second semester, that sort of made me understand more about the different cultures that you're dealing with in the classroom.

Participants reflected on the value some modules had on their academic journey, aligning with the literature in Chapter 2 regarding access programmes which are designed to serve as a bridge or a perceived gap between students' existing English language proficiency and/or academic level (McGrath, 2009).

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided a contextual background of participants who went through the UPP and shared their aspirations and agency. Throughout the chapter, the participants highlighted important aspects of what made them succeed in the UPP and emphasised the value of the programme. This chapter responded to the first two research questions. It demonstrated that although participants have different aspirations and agencies to study further, their aspirations to get into mainstream university studies remained high. Most of the participants initially applied for degree studies but did not meet the university's admission requirements and were redirected to the UPP by either a peer, family member or a UFS staff member, indicating the aspiration to explore all options in gaining access to university was there. Their stories provided the foundation for the next chapter in understanding their university experience and to better understand the transition from the South Campus to the BFN campus. The discussion on students' aspirations and agency to join university highlighted the importance of considering their capabilities instead of merely looking at their valuable achievements if one seeks to understand how participants define the value of higher education to themselves and society. The capabilities that students brought in with them are confidence, educational resilience, approach to learning and Ubuntu. This will be further discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 6: University Experiences: Transitioning from UPP into mainstream studies

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored participants' perspectives of their pathways to the UPP to investigate what factors supported or constrained their exercise of aspirations, agency, and resilience. This chapter aims to give participants a platform to voice their contextualised experiences of the transition from UPP into mainstream studies to raise awareness of what matters to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop more inclusive and equitable higher education. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first part focuses on the context and impact of the access programme on aspiration and agency after the UPP, and the second part focuses on transitioning from the UPP and becoming students in mainstream studies. This is to understand what capabilities participants expected or hoped to achieve by continuing their studies. The last section discusses resiliency in higher education, describing conversion factors that are unified at various stages in their lives to shape or influence their opportunities and freedom to access university and realise their aspirations (educational and career). While Chapter 5 addressed the first two research questions, this chapter aims to answer the third research question: How does the university experience recognise and build on these capabilities at a broader university experience post UPP?

6.2 Brief context of UPP

This section starts with a brief explanation of how the UFS system functions in order to give a broader context. There are several differences in UFS systems between the UPP and mainstream studies. The first difference is that students admitted in the UPP have one year to complete the access programme successfully. After successfully completing the UPP, a student transitions into mainstream studies at either the Bloemfontein or Qwaqwa campuses, where they complete the relevant degree programmes. Thus, the total number of academic years a UPP student will spend at the UFS in a degree programme will be four (one year of

UPP and three years of mainstream studies). For mainstream students (students who meet the UFS degree entry requirements), their degree studies are generally completed in three years. Secondly, there is a significant difference in terms of the enrolment numbers of students at each campus. The UPP at the South Campus has about 1500 full-time undergraduates, which consists of 950 first-time entering students and about 550 students who are in their second year of study who are in the extended curriculum programmes (some of these students spend two study years at the South Campus before moving to the Bloemfontein campus to finish the other two years). Bloemfontein campus has over 30 000 undergraduate students. The Bloemfontein campus also has postgraduate students, which the South Campus does not.

Thirdly, is the geographic location of the two campuses. Even though the Bloemfontein and South campuses are in the same city, the distance between the two campuses is approximately 22 kilometres. The South Campus is located in the township²⁰, and Bloemfontein Campus is in the suburbs. Lastly, the teaching and learning methodology is different for the two campuses. The UPP subscribes to a resource-based learning methodology, where classes are facilitated instead of traditional lecturing, which is done at the Bloemfontein Campus. The total number of students in a class at the South Campus is not more than 45 students, whilst classes at the Bloemfontein campus vary significantly, with some modules having more than 1 000 students in a class. Such large classes become a significant challenge for students, especially those in their first year of study (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Chapter 2 highlighted various challenges most disadvantaged participants face:

²⁰ The term “township” has no formal definition, but it is commonly understood to refer to the underdeveloped, usually (but not only) urban, residential areas that during Apartheid were reserved for non-whites (Africans, Coloureds and Indians) who lived near or worked in areas that were designated ‘Whites only’ (under the Black Communities Development Act (Section 33) and Proclamation R293 of 1962, Proclamation R154 of 1983 and GN R1886 of 1990 in Trust Areas, National Homelands and Independent States). Although formal segregation ended with the new democracy, many of these township areas and other low-income housing areas (such as informal settlements and low-income housing estates) have seen rapid growth (Treasury, 2007).

- a. Transitioning from high school into university: most students struggle with the university setup, which consists of teaching and self-study, which is different from what they are used to in high school. Participants also struggle with being away from home for the first time, adjusting to the new life and finances, among many other things. These challenges ultimately affect their mental well-being and motivation, adding an extra burden with transitioning because of their socioeconomic backgrounds and the environment they come from.
- b. Being a first-generation student: Most disadvantaged students are more likely to be first-generation students, indicating that they have no point of reference regarding the world they are embarking on, the language, and the terminologies used in higher education. They do not have anyone to ask when they need assistance. Even with that, if they find someone to assist, they do not always know what questions to ask when they need help.
- c. Demotivating lecturers: Some lecturers are not always motivating first-year students, saying, 'Look to your left and look to your right; some of you will not make it' (Coertjens et al., 2016). These discouraging words can be threatening and stressful for a first-year student.
- d. Low throughput rates: This is due to a lack of additional support in mainstream studies.

The next section presents the experiences of the participants regarding their transition from the UPP into mainstream studies.

6.3 The transitioning experiences into mainstream studies

In order to understand the impact of the UPP on students when they move to mainstream studies, it is beneficial to obtain a sense of whether their aspirations and agency are the same or whether they have changed after/because of the UPP. I particularly wanted to understand

the conditions in which the resources provided by the UPP were converted into aspirations. From the interviews, it seems the UPP helped participants in various ways: 1) by deciding what they wanted to study; 2) by providing a supportive environment; 3) the facilitators were patient and caring; and 4) the UPP mapped a way forward for the participants to want to pursue their studies and ultimately find employment.

All participants indicated that the transition was not an easy journey. Most participants indicated that the transition was difficult, especially in the first few weeks at the new campus and in mainstream studies. This educational transition or difficulty can be associated with what Wilson-Strydom (2015) termed the humpback bridge, describing it as richly descriptive of the transition from school to university in South Africa today. Wilson-Strydom used the metaphor of a humpback bridge to explain that when one stands in front of a bridge, one cannot see the other side; the only thing one sees is the hump over the bridge. She used this metaphor to explain transitional challenges in higher education. The data further revealed that the concept of the humpback bridge is still relevant and useful in the current South African state of access to higher education. The next section discusses what those humpback bridges were for participants transitioning into mainstream studies. Also, I discuss the conversion factors participants highlighted with their transition into mainstream studies.

6.3.1 Getting lost and being confused

The majority of the participants associated the difficulty of the transition process with the size of the campus, the number of students in a class and the perceived (un)caring and unavailability of lecturers. This is not surprising and unexpected because of the difference in size of the campus and lecture venues of the two campuses, as described earlier. University was a new and unknown experience for most participants. Evidence of this transition can be seen in the responses below. Michelle stated:

It was very difficult because here at UPP, it's a small campus; when I went that side, it was a big campus. I was so confused, and I didn't even know the names of the buildings. I was always late for class, and it was hard for me to remember all the buildings and all that... it was hard.

Pinky described her first few months as follows:

Yhooo ous Tshego (expressing her emotions that it was difficult), this side was way better (referring to the South Campus). Main campus you are on your own. They don't care if you attend or not.

Samantha described her first day as follows:

Horrible because the person who was showing me around wasn't there, and they weren't answering their phone on my first day on campus, so I was running like a headless chicken from FGG to Stabilis (name of lecture venues). I was all over the place, and I was late for every class, so it wasn't that nice.

The examples of the responses above are similar to what Wilson-Strydom (2015) found in her study. She found that first-year students struggled with finding their feet on campus, especially because the environment was new to them. The confusion and getting lost participants highlighted here related to the physical space of the university; the campus was much bigger than the one they knew when they were doing the UPP. The most important distinction in this thesis, specifically referring to disadvantaged students, is that the majority of the participants who went through the UPP were first-generation students and therefore had no frame of reference to how the university works. Also, they did not know who to ask for assistance or what to ask as they were unfamiliar with the university jargon. First-generation students have very different experiences from someone who comes to university and has friends whom they can ask how things work at a university and support them. Such

students might not get lost like first-generation students with no point of reference; thus, getting lost becomes more stressful for them.

6.3.2 Finances

Finances also play a significant role in participants' success. The literature on funding in higher education highlighted that many students face financial challenges when entering university (Badat, 2010; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Calitz, 2015; Gore, 2018; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; also see detailed discussion in Chapter 2). The majority of the participants indicated that they were worried about who will fund their studies. Some resorted to either taking a gap year or seeking employment to have enough money to return to university and complete their degrees. Michelle mentioned receiving a bursary, which assisted her for three years. Within the three years, she also fell pregnant, and the bursary was withdrawn. She explained her challenge as follows:

Remember, I highlighted that when I started, in those years, I stayed with my boyfriend, but we also broke up. It was difficult for me to break up with him because he gave me everything. After losing the bursary, this meant that it was a new start and a new beginning for me because I had to start all over again. I went back to my mom's house, but I didn't give up because I didn't have money.

Michelle converted her challenge into a positive outcome because she could have easily given up because there was no money for her to continue her studies, but she chose to be resilient and not give up.

Mabee's biggest challenge was worrying about who will pay for her studies. She explained wanting to become a social worker and the challenge of finances as follows:

My father was not willing to pay for my fees anymore.

This could have easily meant that Mabee could not continue with her studies. However, she managed to work hard and eventually received funding with the help of her mother, who is a shebeen queen.

For Tshepo, the challenges he faced were with his bursary, which took a long time to pay and thus caused him much stress. He explained:

For instance, last year (2017), they didn't pay for my tuition fees; they only paid, I think, in February...last days of February. It can also be stressful because instead of my parents having to pay, say, R2000, if they can or whatever amount they can, that did little to none at the end of the year because the debt would accumulate.

Remember, they don't have any money. The stressful part is that the bursary would go the whole year without paying, and then there's this big debt and interest on top of that. That really affected me negatively because of all the stress.

However, he was able to take that negative conversion factor and focus on working hard in his studies in order for him to continue receiving the bursary.

In sum, from the data above, it is evident that the majority of participants struggled with finances at universities, lacking the financial freedom to fully participate in their studies because they lacked access to funding. Chapter 2 indicated that finances for university studies are a worldwide problem. However, finances are unique to disadvantaged students because there is an extra layer that might not be the same for other students. For example, these are students whose family income is less than the other students who are not from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, the amount of worry is not the same because most disadvantaged students come from families with less or no source of income and have to rely on government funding assistance. The emphasis here falls on the stress associated with lack of or no funding which contributed to the participants being unable to fully concentrate on their studies. Thus,

this suggests that finances are one of key resources for equal participation of students at university, indicating that material deprivation is a disadvantage.

6.3.3 Lecturers are not caring

Most participants highlighted that they felt lecturers in mainstream studies did not care about them. Pinky and Mantwa described their experiences with uncaring lecturers at the Bloemfontein Campus in the following way:

At first, you excited that you are at this big nice great school, but when you get to everything, it's a bit scary. Everybody does their own thing. The lecturer doesn't care about your feelings or how you are what not. You have to be on your own and do your own thing (Pinky).

Mantwa shared the same sentiments:

At the Bloemfontein campus, the lecturers are not the same as the UPP lecturers. Here at the UPP, they still treat us like high school children. They still go after us like saying to us, please submit. When you didn't do well, they would ask you to please rewrite or resubmit and whatsoever. But at the Bloemfontein campus, they treat us like adults. Whether you in class or not, they don't care.

Tshepo described his challenge as a B.Sc. student as follows:

The department that I'm part of they were so comfortable with having a lot of White students to a point where it was very difficult for me as an African student to keep up because we come from different backgrounds, and with them, they were more fortunate as most of the students I was in class with, most of them had parents who were in the same career. So most of the lectures they would teach in such a way that they accommodate them more because they know they know certain things, and what they don't know they would try to educate them on that, but I think our group was the

one that made them aware of the fact that African students also be becoming aware of the career field now and they need to start accommodating us accordingly, and I would say throughout my three years I would say that is changed. They still I would say they're still trying to get to a point where they're accommodate all of us, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

Ashely described her experience as follows:

It was definitely different because when you come from UPP... from an environment with so much care and so much love and so much effort put into your education and having people around that genuinely care about you. And then you get to Main Campus, and there's none of that. It's just people doing the PowerPoint slides, and it's the stuff that's on the PowerPoint slides are basically in the book as well. Moving from UPP to Main Campus, I think that part not having that that kind of support, that kind of encouragement or motivation and all of that that, made it very difficult because people that side don't care less. That passion is not there in their teaching and all of that. So I think that's what made it difficult.

Participants felt the lecturers did not care because of the much larger classes; thus, not receiving one-on-one attention from their lecturers as in the UPP. These excerpts show that lecturers did not notice students and failed to understand the students' needs, assuming that all students in the lecture venue were content proficient because based on the assumption that students who are in those lecture venues all met the UFS entry requirements and therefore were ready for university life. The lecturers also assumed that all students in their lecture venues knew how to learn and were prepared for university studies. This implies that students were treated as homogenous groups that had acquired the same level of knowledge during schooling.

6.3.4 *Personal challenges*

Participants also experienced personal challenges that constrained their learning. Dineo explained that she lost her mother when she was in her second year of study. Subsequently, she had to take care of her son and siblings. However, this motivated her to work even harder because it was important for her to get an education to improve their lives, especially since she is the oldest child and the first one to go to university in her family. She shared her own experience of the difficulties she experiences and admitted that things started being more difficult for her at home and school. She explained:

My mother was struggling because some of the factories were closed, so she was sometimes at home. I didn't have taxi money to come to school, and this would lead me in sometimes not coming for classes. When that was the case, I'll rely on other students to come and tell me what they did in class. It was a bit difficult, and I remember I applied for NSFAS, but they didn't fund me. So it was not easy at all. Then 2012, when my mother passed away, I had to be at home. I had outstanding fees and owed the University R 21,000, and I didn't have money to pay the fees. So in between that gap year, I worked and made an arrangement with the UFS lawyers to be able to pay my fees. In 2015, I was done with the payment, and then I registered, but in between that time again, I went to the university and asked if I can do my other modules via University South Africa (UNISA) because the UFS modules worked together with UNISA, so I went to study via UNISA. In 2014, I went and asked UFS staff at admin if I can do some of my modules with UNISA to cut costs. They agreed and gave me a letter to do the modules at UNISA. I did three modules with UNISA, and then they told me that I can't do all of them. So I had to go back to UFS in 2015 to do some of my modules but failed one module, and I had to repeat. I then decided you know what, because I saw that I can do my outstanding modules with UNISA, and

it's much cheaper. I requested permission from UFS to do all my modules with UNISA, and they agreed. So I did all my modules with UNISA and passed in 2016.

Michelle faced extreme challenges in her second year because she fell pregnant and had to take a gap year. She explained:

In my first year, it was okay, but then my second year, it got difficult because I got pregnant that year and it was difficult because, honestly, when I was six months pregnant, the doctor told me that my pregnancy is high-risk, and I had to go to the hospital. I was lying there since I was six months, so that was also difficult for me because I had to leave school and be at the hospital. I couldn't actually focus, and sometimes I would say it's the choices we make in life. It's hard because, you know, at first, you might think it's the right choice, but then, at the end, it's not. So that was my situation.

Mantwa recalled that she was still coping after adjusting to mainstream and working hard. However, she reported the following as her biggest challenge:

My mother was the only one who supported me, and I have to take taxis to go to school, and sometimes we come out late, so I don't have time to study. I was tired, and then, on the other hand, I can see that my mother is struggling wabona (you see), so it was a bit of a challenge.

Participants indicated that things started becoming much easier once they learned how to move around campus and not get lost. Michelle stated:

At first, I started being negative because I've seen a lot of people and like, you know, when you compare yourself to others, they have everything you don't have, and I would always ask why it is like that. Why is life so unfair and it was just a lot of things that played in my head. Not knowing why life is so unfair. It wasn't easy at first,

but then I got used to that first year, so second semester, I was like, okay, it's not that bad, and you should understand that it's not like everyone is the same at home or you coming from the same home where people are getting everything. You just have to know this other side; we have to work hard to get things in this life, others just get things.

Participants aspired to complete their studies no matter how challenging. They converted their personal circumstances into aspirational trajectories evident throughout their university experience. All these participants developed psychological resilience because they eventually learned to focus on maintaining a positive attitude and working hard despite their personal hardships.

6.3.5 *Feeling alienated*

The data indicated that participants felt alienated from the lecturers. Kamo explained:

Yeah, I can even give an example that oftentimes, we find Afrikaans-speaking students when Afrikaans classes were being presented (before the language policy was approved in 2018). Those students had higher marks than those English-speaking students. It's because they have that personal relationship or that personal academic relationship with the lecturer because it's a small group. Also, some lecturers don't like crowds you understand. Sometimes they may lose their focus, or they're just they present the class. If you have any question you end up leaving any questions. The lecturer will say to you send me an email or come during consultation times, whereas if it's a small group, you quickly go through the work if you don't understand.

Tshepo mentioned that his journey was difficult, also feeling alienated. However, he reflected on the confidence he had:

The first test for Geology, I got 49 out of 50, and I thought, okay, it's about to be a breeze, and then my second test came as a 58%, and I did not understand what was going on. So then I realised as hard as I worked from South Campus, I came with the confidence but not the discipline anymore because when I came from South Campus, everything needed discipline, and when I came here, I could walk to class and then back home and then walk to school again. So, I began to relax, but when I realised that things were getting a bit difficult, I started to employ a lot more of the resources on campus. I went to the computer because everything on campus is so accessible, and I went to the library.

The two participants took a negative conversion factor (Tshepo not doing as well as he expected in his tests and Kamo with the language issue) and converted it into a positive conversion factor by using university resources to help them perform well academically.

6.3.6 Academic development skills

Participants reported that they developed skills such as critical skills, note-taking, writing skills, adapting to the new environment, managing the workload, self-awareness, and accountability. Participants highlighted that they had noticed how their academic skills expanded after UPP. They reported growth in their writing skills and critical skills, adapting to the new environment. For instance, Kagiso indicated the following when he finished at UPP and transitioned into the mainstream:

I had learned how to take proper notes, but I had to do it within two hours because I borrowed the book from the library.

Kamo learned after she failed some of her first-year modules because she was used to sitting at the back of the class. She stated:

I failed a module when I moved to the main campus, and really didn't sit well with me. Now I moved to the front where now I was a bit closer to the lecturer where even if I raise my hand, he will see it. Whereas if I'm at the back, he might not see when I raise my hand.

Participants also pointed out that, eventually, they could keep up with the workload demands after finding their feet and settling in. It is also important to mention that participants converted university resources into personal and professional development. Tumi explained:

The workload of main campus is so much more than UPP. Definitely, the work and the content are also more complex, but I wouldn't say it's so much complex such that we don't cope. It's just a matter of applying what you were taught at South Campus even though the workload is not the same but for me, I'm a person who studies under pressure; I need that adrenaline rush to keep me going. So, when I got there, the workload was so much that I realised that if I don't start studying earlier and it's going to be problems for me. But like I mentioned earlier on the moment, you understand yourself know who you are and how you cope under certain conditions. Then you can perform, you know what to do when you're faced with whatever situation, so for me, when I got there, it was always about reminding myself of who I am and what I discovered in myself, who I discovered myself to be when I was at South Campus. And for me, just that knowledge helped me cope a lot because even throughout my three years, I still studied last minute. It was because I knew which module to study, when and how to study it.

The participants revealed the channels that supported the development of capabilities. They mentioned that the smaller classes made a huge difference because they received one-

on-one attention if they struggled with their studies. Thus, the facilitation style meant they were part of the learning process and actively involved in a class by participating in activities; resource-based learning.

6.3.7 Working in groups

I previously mentioned the four main challenges of disadvantaged students. The data revealed that most participants found the transition difficult at first because they were used to small classes and a small campus. The transition resulted in these students attending classes with many more students. I questioned the pedagogical experiences of the participants during the interview to understand how it (if at all) differed from the South Campus pedagogy. Walker's (2006) definition of pedagogy refers to the teaching methods, what is taught in the classroom, and the teacher. Bourdieu (1977) reinforced the process as the power relation involved in transferring knowledge from the lecturer to the student. In the data, participants indicated that the groups they formed from the South campus assisted them tremendously when they moved to the Bloemfontein campus because they were still expected to do group assignments and had to work together to understand the content better. The majority of the participants recalled that the UPP assisted them in preparing for mainstream, working hard and being focused.

Kagiso explained that he had to adapt to a lot of classes:

You know, I felt lucky, I still had my friends, the very same people that I came with from the UPP. So it was helpful to have people that you share the same sentiments with, so we started assisting each other because we all had the same struggle trying to fit in into this huge place, but eventually, we managed to so the support system that I had from UPP, at least I took it with me to a bigger campus.

Mpho became part of a group with peers, and they studied question papers together before writing tests or examinations. She also emphasised that because she was shy to go to the lecturer alone after class, they resorted to going to the lecturer as a group if they did not understand the work. Eddie shared the same sentiments and stated:

It was a bit of a challenge to be honest, those couple of weeks when we (him and his friends) started getting lost. You don't know how the timetable works, which venue to go to, it took us a bit of time, but I'm saying as because I was still with Mpho and Vincent, so we were friends from Motheo (one of the campuses where the programme was presented) and then went to main campus together even for registration. We kind of coordinated to say we're going at this day, this time to sort out everything.

The sections above revealed both negative and positive transitional experiences and how the transitional experience was for participants. Those experiences are things students valued, which they did not have when they transitioned. When grouping all these experiences, I identified the following capabilities as valuable to these participants in their transitional phase:

- a) The opportunity to be able to navigate the campus or surroundings;
- b) The opportunity to be able to have finances;
- c) The opportunity to be able to have access to their lecturers

6.4 Resiliency and personal determination in higher education

All participants demonstrated personal determination and resiliency throughout their academic journey, which I found incredible despite their overwhelming limits in their personal, social and environmental contexts. Some examples were of finances, schools they came from, unemployed parents, and lecturers who did not care about their well-being. With the high levels of unemployment and poverty rates in South Africa, I believe that this also

attests to the resilience of participants who successfully transition from UPP into the mainstream and ultimately complete their qualifications, despite the challenges they might have faced in their first year in mainstream studies (CHE, 2010). The statements below provide a further example of participants' resilience.

Michelle highlighted:

The only person that really pushed me was my son. He gave me faith and hope for me to continue with my studies, and that's what I decided to now do. I told myself that this is not it. I can't just give up now. I worked for a year to get money for my studies and then went back to school that following year when I had the money to go back. However, every year I applied for provisional registration, and that really helped me a lot.

Most of the participants also revealed that the facilitators they had whilst at the UPP kept on motivating them, and they did not give up. Others mentioned that when they saw facilitators who taught at the UPP at the Bloemfontein campus, they felt safe and could still visit them at their offices. Chapter 3 described resilience as a reaction to the environment (a person grows up in a harsh environment, and all odds are against them, and they have to fight for everything, which builds resiliency). From the data, I argue that resiliency is unnecessary when the environment is good and supportive for students, especially when transitioning to the main campus. However, if the environment does not support students, they respond resiliently. Universities need to create a more supportive environment for students. By creating supportive environments, students will not need to become resilient.

Dineo's motivation was her circumstances. She explained:

I've always known that I want to finish my degree. I have to fight very hard to get my degree. So the challenges that I had motivated me a lot. So I've worked hard, knowing that one day I will have my degree.

Dineo demonstrated the agency-unlocking role of aspirations. Her desire to achieve her career aspirations drove her to work hard and remain focused. When she discovered that there was a possibility of her going to university, she utilised it by making an effort to apply to the UPP; thus, her aspirations motivated her and drove her into action to pursue university studies and, in the process, contributed to the achievement of her well-being (in this case, attending university and pursuing a desired course). Dineo's example shows how aspirations, agency and opportunity intersect and lead to achieving individual well-being.

The data also revealed that most participants came into the programme with little resilience because they wanted to study. The UPP further nurtured the resilient spirit because the programmes and the environment supported students. The data also showed that participants do not need to be resilient if support is offered. However, once students leave that nurturing and supportive environment (transitioning to mainstream studies), they suddenly realise that this is a shock (big classes, no one cares about you, you need to work hard and give it your all). The support should not only be given in one year but rather be continuous. The examples presented above highlight the participants' individual agency in resilient responses. However, these examples of students' resiliency are insufficient to ensure success and just outcomes of university education (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter addressed two of this study's research questions. I used the participants' voices to support the dearth of knowledge about participants that formed part of these programmes. The participants strongly emphasised the difficulty of their transition into

mainstream studies. A few themes emerged: being confused and scared, getting lost and finances. I argue that if universities do not have good supportive structures for disadvantaged students, which are intentionally seeking to break down the traditional humpback bridge (Wilson-Strydom, 2015), replacing the bridge with more effective tools for bridging the gap between the UPP and mainstream, then students might try to cope with their lack of readiness by creating a university world in which survival of the fittest is the norm. Kuh (2003, 2005, 2009) highlighted that institutional expectation of success is a critical factor in student performance. Students must be sufficiently supported to cross the humpback bridge to succeed. The value of such a programme is to assist disadvantaged students; thus, disadvantaged students need programmes such as these to help support them.

Chapter 7: Life after university: opportunities and achievements

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 investigated the participants' experiences transitioning from UPP into the mainstream and presented the findings and discussion on the transitioning process. This chapter presents the findings on participants' achievements and their lives after obtaining their qualifications. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section explores the qualifications the participants obtained, what the qualifications meant for them, and the opportunities they received after graduating. The second part will explore the value the participants attach to their education for their personal and social lives (achieved functionings). Specifically, the chapter will describe what higher education enabled them to do or become or not. The chapter contributes to this study's research questions of what additional capabilities are developed during university and how those capabilities and university experiences influence students' educational outcomes. Due to disadvantaged students coming from poor social backgrounds and attending poorly resourced schools, it is important to understand their capabilities, how they developed through the UPP and university experiences, and how they culminate into educational outcomes. Furthermore, it is important to discuss students' capabilities and functionings to demonstrate their opportunities to convert university resources into achievements, contributing to their inherent disadvantage.

7.2 Educational and personal outcomes: Qualifications obtained

This section discusses the educational and personal outcomes of each participant. Firstly, I summarise the participants' qualifications and what they were currently busy with.

Table 7*Summary of participants' achievements*

Participants	Year in UPP	Degree awarded	Current position/role
Michelle	2011	B.A	Part-time employed at the UFS
Dineo	2009	B.Soc.Sc	Part-time employed at the UFS
Mantwa	2011	B.Ed	Employed at the UFS
Mabee	2008	B.Soc.Sci PGC Ed	Employed at the Department of Education
Kagiso	2007	B.Soc.Sci PG Dip Labour Law	Employed at the UFS
Kamo	2009	B.A B.A Hon Psychology	Employed at the UFS and registered for a master's degree
Bontle	2014	B.Sc.	Part-time employed at the UFS and busy with a PGCE: Education
Modise	2002	B.Soc.Sci M.A Industrial Psychology	Employed at the UFS
Zanele	2012	B.A B.A Hon in Com Sciences	Employed at the UFS and registered for a master's degree
Tshepo	2014	B.Sc. Geology	Part-time employed at the UFS
Ashley	2010	B.A B.A Honours in Criminology	Part-time employed at the UFS, busy with a master's degree.
Tumi	2015	B.Sc. Quantity Surveying	Part-time employed at the UFS and registered for a B.Sc Honours Degree
Mpho	2007	B.Soc.Sci B.Soc.Sci Honours in Criminology	Employed at the UFS and registered for a master's degree
Samantha	2011	B.A	Part-time employed at the UFS
Pinky	2011	B.A	Part-time employed at the UFS

Table 7 illustrates that all 15 participants have obtained their qualifications at the UFS, even though not all of them finished their degrees in a minimum time of three years²¹. It should also be highlighted that all participants completed the UPP in one year and transitioned to mainstream/degree studies. Seven of the 15 participants completed a postgraduate qualification, and four were registered for master's degrees at the time of the interviews. All but one of the participants were employed at the UFS at the time of the interviews, either on a temporary or permanent basis.

When participants initially enrolled for the UPP, their educational goals and aspirations were limited because of their family backgrounds and the schools they attended. The data

²¹ It should be noted that students that begin in the UPP have a minimum of three years to complete their qualification. This means they have one year in the UPP plus three years in mainstream studies (n+1).

indicated they had limited opportunities available at that time (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3). However, when they reflected on enrolling in the UPP and their future aspirations, the data revealed that their aspirations changed over time due to the opportunity to study through the UPP. They explained that had it not been for the UPP and getting into mainstream studies, they would have never had an opportunity to know more about other opportunities and how to obtain them. They also highlighted that they could reflect on what they loved and were more mature to understand their strengths in choosing the careers they wanted. The extract below supports this change:

At first, I wanted to be a doctor when I was still in high school, and then I was exposed to it by someone, and then I realise no can't; then I moved on to wanting to be psychologist while I was doing UPP. Then I sat, and I'm thinking I'm too emotional, and I get too emotional. It doesn't work, so I dismissed the idea. I ended up finding myself in criminology, and I loved it (while she was busy with mainstream studies). I've always wanted to be an academic. I don't know why, but I think the title of doctor or Professor has a nice taste to it. It has always been nice to hear; hence I think that's why I love that title so much. That's why I thought I wanted to be medicine (Mpho 2018).

Mpho could reflect on her initial aspiration and what she wanted to become. However, being in the UPP had a positive influence on her. She understood her strength that becoming a psychologist would not be in her best interest because she is an emotional person, and she found other careers that would help her become the doctor she initially wanted to be. The literature on human development (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3) emphasises that the focus is on widening people's freedom and choices. Mpho's quotation attests to her freely choosing what she loved.

Pinky and Samantha also reflected on their journey and shared the following:

A lot of people were telling me I'm a good listener. One day I was sitting in class (in the UPP class), and Mr P was telling us about what psychologists are doing, and they behave like this, and I'm like, wow, I wanna be that person. I wanted to be a psychologist one day, and what what what, but yeah, and in Grade 10, I think I was writing this thing about what I want to do and how I want to change things. I wanted to open an orphanage. But over time, I think I was like, no, Pinky get back to reality. You have to be focused to be a psychologist. You have to have money and investors or to be to open shelters and stuff. But yeah, it didn't work out like that (Pinky, 2018).

Initially, I wanted to be a soldier, and then I wanted to be a psychologist and then when I was here (in the UPP), and I started doing all the different types of psychology, and I was like, nah, that's not for me. Then I thought I want to be a social worker, and then in the skills module, they would ask us what we would want to be, and I would go back to I wanted to be a soldier, and here I am being a student. So, I don't even know where I was, but I feel like when I was here, it gave me a reality that sometimes, when you put up goals and saying that you will become something, it's not actually what is planned for you in real life. You want to do a certain thing, but it's not really what you want. It's just the thing that I want to be this, but you don't actually become it. I'm not disappointed over the fact that I didn't become a psychologist, and I also realised that being a psychologist takes a lot of strain on the person itself, and I'm a very emotional person. So, I just thought to myself, having everybody's problems on top of mine, I won't be able to cope and the fact that I always cry, so if you would tell me a story and you cry, I would cry with you. I don't have that strength to be just sitting there and saying okay, she's crying. I have to be my emotions and not cry with you (Samantha, 2018).

From the excerpts above, it is notable that in this access programme, participants are not only taught in order for them to gain access to higher education, but there is extra care, additional support, and guidance that some facilitators provide to students. From the data, I noted a few trends that led participants to experience positive change. For instance, the data revealed that when participants become exposed to more information, such as knowing about the different careers and how they can achieve those careers, their level of maturity grows to another level. The excerpts above also indicated that all three participants wanted to be something (doctor, psychologist, soldier) as they regarded those careers as well-paying. Samantha opted for something that would assist her in getting a salary and taking care of her family. However, participants were exposed to new information and other opportunities by being in the UPP. They could make informed decisions on what mattered most to them, which was obtaining a qualification to get a decent job. Mpho highlighted that obtaining a title such as a doctor or professor influenced her to want to pursue her studies. Initially, her limited understanding of being a doctor meant that one had to study medicine. However, when she obtained more information, she understood the different channels to still get the title of doctor without necessarily having to study medicine. Pinky could also reflect and understand her capabilities by reflecting on what she valued: helping others. However, her level of maturity helped her understand what it would take to become a psychologist. In this instance, her surroundings influenced her capabilities.

Chapter 2 highlighted that participants from disadvantaged backgrounds enter higher education with multiple factors, such as coming from poorly resourced schools and being taught in English; thus, participants were not always ready to cope with the new academic demands of higher education. From the responses above, the participants illustrated how the access programme could fulfil a broader purpose in enabling them to adjust personally, socially, and culturally to a new environment. It is, therefore, important to have programmes

such as these as they support students that do not necessarily follow traditional mainstream or degree routes.

7.3 Capabilities developed during university that influenced participants' educational outcomes: professional lives

During the interviews, participants were asked where they are now in terms of their professional lives. The majority (8) indicated working part-time in different departments at the UFS. Most participants also highlighted that because they have at least a university degree, they believe they are employable and that their degrees will certainly afford them a chance to get a job. Although the unemployment rate in South Africa in the third quarter of 2022 was 25% for those aged between 15 and 24 and 71.2% for those between the ages of 25 and 34 (StatsSA, 2022) for graduates, the unemployment rate was 2.7 % compared to 38.8% for those who only had a high school certificate (StatsSA, 2021). This report also indicated that the majority of those unemployed are Black South Africans. The eight participants with part-time employment indicated that it is challenging to find a permanent job in South Africa, especially in the Free State. The Free State province's unemployment rate is 38.1% (StatsSA, 2021). Below are a few extracts from the participants on the challenges of getting permanent employment:

I am actually looking for a permanent job, but it's hard. I got a temporary job now, and I'm blessed, and I'm happy because I don't want to sit at home. That will also give me a better platform of learning more and gaining experience (Michelle, 2018).

It is the first time now getting something proper, but with a B.Soc.Sc hell, it's difficult to get something. You have to go further (in your studies), like Criminology, Sociology or Psychology fields. But if you stop with the degree, it is difficult. It's just hard not to be disappointed every time like you get no, no, no (when you apply for a job). You get

me (expression of you understand). You just feel like, okay, maybe I'm nothing or maybe it's not for me, and it's maybe for those people who are positive every time and go after their dreams, and you get me, so yeah, you just feel discouraged at some point. Yeah, like it's no after no after no of applying, and some people don't even call you back (Pinky, 2018).

Despite participants not getting permanent employment, they expressed that having a degree is better than not having one. Had it not been for the UPP, they would form part of the unemployed youth, and things would be much more difficult for them. What they appreciated the most was that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study further, which the UPP provided.

Seven participants indicated they are very grateful to have obtained permanent employment. It is noteworthy to highlight that seven of the eight participants are employed at the UFS. It is not necessarily where they want to be. However, it was the only job available to them. It is also essential to note that when a person works at the UFS on a 40-hour-a-week contract, they are eligible for study benefits. The six participants who are busy with their master's degrees indicated that they took the opportunity to study further to better their chances of getting the jobs they really want.

It should be noted that it does not mean that when a student has gone through the UPP, they automatically get a job at the UFS. For some, it was by chance; for others, it was simply by their hard work. Below are some of their responses:

Since I got my degree, I got a job. So, I started very small, I started with an internship, and at first, I thought, you know, when you are a student, you think that when you are done studying, you are gonna just walk into that dream job. My goal was actually to finish my honours degree and then do my master's in psychology, but then life happened, and then my goals changed again because after my degree, I did

my honours in Psychology, and after I did my honours in Psychology, that's when my parents couldn't fund me anymore, but then I then I got an internship (Ashley, 2018).

Due to the effort and the lessons I learned during UPP, which I also took when I went to Bloem Campus, especially time management which was a big challenge for me. I can honestly say that learning to manage my time well because I would be studying hard, and managing my time well, I was able to go far because now I managed to find a part-time job and actually go to school at the same time. Had I not learned how to manage my time, I don't think I would be studying and working at the same time (Tumi, 2019).

After I finish my undergrad, I went on and did my honours, currently pursuing my master's and working as a facilitator in my department. This is big for me because I have my own money and can afford certain things (Zanele, 2019).

For Modise, he believed that it was through his hard work and by luck that he found a job that he enjoyed and studied for. He stated:

When I was a facilitator, it was just not knowing what's going to happen next because we worked on one-year contracts. But I liked to be in the higher education environment. I don't know whether maybe I'm a comfortable person or I am in my comfortable zone, I applied for jobs, but some of them I prayed by saying that they don't respond because I enjoyed what I was doing, which is being a facilitator. I didn't see myself in government doing something totally different. I always prayed for a permanent job here (referring to the UFS) because I worked on one-year contract, and I finally got it, and I was so happy because I also got to do what I loved (Modise, 2018).

In summary, an examination of students' degrees, early professional pathways and lives indicates that obtaining a degree prepares students for the world of work. However, after obtaining a degree and not getting a job, it is then that some resort to furthering their studies in order to better their chances of getting employment opportunities. For instance, a majority of participants in this study ended up working at the UFS as opposed to working elsewhere. The data showed that before the participants could get into the UPP, they had the agency to pursue the goals they valued by enrolling in the UPP. Once enrolled in the UPP, they used the opportunity to get into higher education. Once they got into the UPP, some realised that their aspirations were focused on values and not necessarily on educational pathways; some indicated that they wanted to help their communities first, and when they got into the UPP, they wanted to take courses that would assist them in the careers they wanted to realise their dreams. In addition, there was an awareness of possibilities after getting into the programme. Some had other people influencing their aspirations, such as the facilitators.

Participants who moved into degree studies explained that the transition was difficult and challenging. They indicated a few negative conversion factors such as getting lost, issues with finances, feeling that the lecturers in degree studies are not caring as they had in the UPP and personal challenges. However, with these negative conversion factors, they could convert the challenges into positive ones by embracing and acknowledging the difficulties. Due to their aspirations of obtaining a degree, they became resilient and could convert their challenges into achieved functionings. For example, having the agency to continue your studies despite challenges. The participants noted that through the UPP, they were better prepared for degree studies and expressed that they learned how to take notes, think critically and could adapt to the new environment quickly. They converted their functionings into opportunities. The next section focuses on their personal and social lives in order to fully understand how their qualifications changed their lives.

7.4 Developed capabilities and university experiences: Personal and social lives

In addition to the participants' professional lives, I aimed to understand what other parts of their lives had changed (if any) due to their higher education qualifications and experiences. Initially, the aim was to determine if and to what extent higher education improved or reduced their well-being in their personal and social spaces. The data analysis thus played a vital role in understanding the university's role in their achieved functionings. These findings are discussed in the following sections.

7.4.1 *University empowered me*

This section details how the university empowered the participants. This section will discuss how confidence was built, how the university education improved their opportunities to find employment, and how participants indicated that they can now think more broadly and further their studies.

The participants indicated that through gaining entrance to the university and eventually obtaining their qualification, the UPP and the broader university experience empowered them to have more self-confidence and be optimistic about the future because it increased their chances of finding a job. Furthermore, participants indicated that the university also assisted them in thinking more broadly. Participants had the following responses regarding building their confidence:

I learned that side (referring to the Bloemfontein Campus) more about different cultures and just knowing people and talking to people. I've learned that there's a lot of things that I can say opened up my eyes because the things that we've learned I can apply on my work and the people that I'm meeting (Samantha, 2019).

I can say that socialising and mingling, I was a very shy person, but now I'm more openly. I can socialise with people, even in groups. I didn't like being in a group for

assignments and all that, but now I can say I know how to work in groups (Tshepo, 2019).

I learned not to give up and worked on my confidence. Like you have to try if you wanna be successful, you have to try and try and try anyway (Pinky, 2018).

With experience, you learn to accept that this is what you can and can't do. For instance, some students would want you to assist them way beyond what you are able to, and I learned to speak to people in the UPP to know what we can offer and what we cannot offer. That helped me a lot to know that there is a psychologist that we can refer students to and there are bursaries that are available. I learned that it's not only my responsibility but it can be shared, you can refer students to certain points that they can get assistance and honestly to learn to say yeah, this is all I can help with; other than this, I can't (Modise, 2018).

These extracts validate that education was psychologically empowering for these participants. As seen in their responses, they experienced an increased sense of self-confidence. In the process, they could also make decisions about their lives and act upon them. For instance, Pinky, Mabee, Modise and Zanele detailed that university education gradually demolished the introverted person in them and instilled a confident person. They could now speak up and challenge certain things in their lives. In this case, confidence intersects with recognition of one's worth. In addition to confidence, participants articulated how university education improved their opportunities to secure jobs where they earned their own income, think more broadly, and further their studies. For instance, Zanele indicated as follows:

I think for me the biggest learning curve of the biggest contributors to who I am today is the people whom I've met through this journey. I have come across people who

have told me you can do it and who have given me a challenge, and they were like, I know you can do this. I must say it feels good to have your own money and not struggling like before (Zanele, 2018).

For Modise, Kamo and Tshepo, it was more about giving back. They explained:

I work with people, and I manage a team. My university experience contributed to who I am today because I wanted to give back. I felt that there are other people that still deserve what we get or what I got and that it's important for us to realise that matric results are not determining people's future, and that is one thing that I'm battling with even if I want to leave this job that I feel if many of us start to leave probably because we think we are not getting paid enough, then the programme that we love so much might be absorbed somewhere then it disappears, and then it come a problem (Modise, 2018).

My current job is not a big position, but it is a good position. I still interact with students on academic advising. I always look back from where they come from. For me, when a student climbs the stage or when you see them during graduation, and they say thank you. That, for me, means that it's also another achievement that I was able to help a student to navigate themselves through the university and to eventually obtain that qualification that probably gave them hell yeah (Kamo, 2018).

Yoooooh (expression), the University changed me. The experience itself made me... if it weren't for University, I would probably be a nobody because it's with the university that the old me was completely gone. I got rid of the old me as soon as I got to the university because I got to realise a better life, you know, I've been exposed to this life for 12 years of my life, and then after the 12th years now I get to experience a different life of working and earning a salary, which is a life that I wouldn't have a

problem having to live every day. It was a different experience, and it made me a bigger and a better person. No, no, no, no violence. No, you know, knowing that the importance of wanting to study it's something that I took back to my friends, the friends that I grew up with, because most of them are dropouts like high school and primary dropouts. I had to go back and tell them that the bafethu (it means guys) university is very important, and now I'm being labelled a snob because now I can at least hold a conversation in English, unlike how I used to be (Tshepo, 2018)

These explanations demonstrate that higher education allowed these participants to gain and develop an understanding of different complex matters. They were able to get relevant professional skills, which enhanced their professional work. Thus, they could earn an income, improve their economic lives, and further their studies. Kamo stated:

I won't have achieved much yet, and I'm still in the process. It hasn't been an easy journey. Obviously, after my degree, my parents couldn't pay for me anymore, so I had to get a job, and I had to pay for my honours degree, which I did part-time with Unisa. I did my honours degree in psychology. Then now, I'm doing my master's in educational psychology with the university, which now the university is now helping me out by paying for my tuition. So far, I don't think I've achieved much, but the little that I've achieved, you know you honours your degree, and also I did an advanced certificate in project management. I always try to enhance myself, how I can develop myself (Kamo, 2018).

In this regard, Kamo valued her university education because it freed them from the shackles of financial dependence on her parents and enabled her more opportunities to further her studies and afford certain things she wanted and needed.

As presented in Chapter 5, one of the factors that attracted some participants to pursue a degree in higher education was a desire to earn their own income and enjoy financial security and independence to assist their families. They responded as follows:

I am the only one working at home, and I help out my mother and my six siblings. I must say it is hard because I can't stay with my boy at the moment because I don't have a permanent job. So the money I am making now helps out at home (Michelle, 2018).

I am financially helping my family, including my extended family (Kagiso).

Another reason was to assist siblings in obtaining a qualification. One can argue that this valued functioning was achieved from their accounts of life after obtaining a degree. Ashley explained:

My little sister would have never had the opportunities that she has today. I have two older brothers like I said, and my two older brothers, there's just not that thing of taking care of family. It's different for girls. There's just not that thing of taking care of the parents and all of that. So coming from where I come from and having all of that pressure giving up wasn't my choice.

However, it is important to note that some participants took longer than others to achieve this functioning. For example, due to finances and personal challenges, five participants, namely Michelle, Dineo, Tshepo, Samantha and Pinky, took a year or two longer to obtain their degrees. This aligns with Wolf and de-Shalit's findings (see Chapter 2) that disadvantage should be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon where the most disadvantaged are those who experience disadvantage in numerous areas, such as clusters of disadvantages. In addition, those with temporary jobs indicated that they had to use their networks to get jobs (those they are working for) and work hard in their temporary jobs to

impress their line managers to hire them should any vacancies be available. This shows that although the capability to get an education in itself improves economic well-being benefits, sometimes these benefits are ratified and navigated over time depending on one's social and contextual conditions. The literature on the capabilities approach highlighted that access to higher education contributes towards a theory of justice that prioritises the involvement of people in their own development; in this instance, the university is seen as a capability enabler. Thus, the access programme fosters participation in disadvantaged students' higher education by building on their educational capabilities and aspirations (Marginson, 2011). The following section explores how the university became a capability generator for participants.

7.4.2 University as a capability generator

Six participants stated that the university allowed them to get an extra income and meet with different people, and challenged their perspectives and goals, such as publishing, getting jobs even though not permanent, and discovering their passions. In the process, they learned and understood what it takes to go further in their career.

After getting my first qualification, I worked part-time and studied full-time. I was actually lucky because when I started at UPP in 2011, the following year, I worked in the UPP office by helping with applications. So I did the job part-time two times a year. I was actually lucky that I can work and study for the varsity, and this year I graduated in April, and it really helped me (Dineo, 2018).

I can say it was my degree helped me. It was a door opener for me, and I've learned a lot and through my work experiences. I've learned from different departments that how strong I am actually. It developed me to being a strong person that can work under pressure, studying and focusing on my child (Michelle, 2018).

I published an article of my honours, and I have been teaching since 2016. I also contributed towards a couple of chapters in a book edited by Miss E and Prof M (Zanele, 2019).

I initially wanted to be social worker, but I ended being a teacher. However, I was able to connect the two careers as helping people in the end. I didn't have much of a problem because I understood social work as helping other people, and then being a teacher is more common, like helping other people. I can say that I finally found my calling because even at school, there are still those learners who are very difficult to deal with, and even the principal called me to say mme (word for ma'am) when I check your profile, I can see that you did this and this and can you handle this case and then I'll handle the case (Mabee, 2018).

After my undergrad, I did honours, and then masters, which I'm proud of, and I think all these things I was able to achieve is because of you know, how you experience the entire university, and I got a job, and I love what I'm doing. The job I got I saw it as the opportunity to also go back and help someone who's like me because I facilitated in the UPP first. So for me, it's kind of now me standing in front of me, but I know how it feels to be sitting there (Modise, 2018).

These illustrations indicate that higher education provided huge opportunities to form and grow networks, which later formed part of and increased the participants' social and professional careers. Moreover, interacting with different people improved their communication and interpersonal skills and improved their chances of employment.

Another value of higher education was with regard to their aspirations. Four participants (Modise, Tumi, and Mpho) described how university education fuelled their aspirations and dreams in life. They remarked:

My goals changed when I got that matric certificate because I couldn't do civil engineering, and for some reason, I fell in love with Psychology in the UPP. So the dream of civil engineering was still at the back of my mind somewhere, but then I fell in love with Psychology. That's where I thought I must be doing and because we exposed to it in second and third year, I thought that okay, it works with people, then this is what I want to do. Industrial Psychology made it better by saying we can work with people in the workplace, and to be honest, I took one year because I think I'm one of those people who sat down and did long-term goals that last year of my studies that now what? How am I going to get work? What type of work and I looking for? That's when I started to think about so now Psychology and Industrial Psychology I must do, up to a Master's at least and do internships (Modise, 2018).

Honestly, I would say back then all I wanted was a degree and go work, but now I learned so much, not just during the UPP, but through all my four years I learned so much that right now, I intend to do my Master's and then my PhD later on in life having decided when that will be. But I think I want to study further and then also another thing, not just to focus on one career field, but to diversify, look at other things that I could study that could be beneficial for me because, at the end of the day with the current unemployment rate I think we need to know as much as we possibly can. So if you exposed to any knowledge or any opportunities for you to study further your studies, I think we should grab it with both our hands because we don't know what the future holds (Tumi, 2019).

I am currently busy with my Master's. Academically I have achieved two qualifications that I am proud of, you know. Like studying opens doors for you actually if I put it in like that because, come to think of it, I now work, and I still work at an institution, so like it has opened a lot of doors (Mpho, 2018).

These responses suggest that university education improves personal status and, to some extent, also their societies. The majority of the participants indicated that they come from societies where most people have low levels or no form of education at all. Acquiring higher education and furthering their studies changed their statuses in society. People treat them with respect and use them as role models to the younger generation (achieved functioning). The data revealed that higher education is not merely an end in itself. Rather, it creates capabilities for the future. Therefore, if more students from disadvantaged backgrounds can acquire a university degree and are given the respect and acknowledgement given to university graduates, the societal patterns and norms that devalue disadvantaged students might start to shift slowly and, in the long-term lead to more equality and confronting the deficit discourse in higher education. I agree with Walker and Mathebula (2019) that when a student obtains a higher education qualification, the qualification contributes to opening up social mobility, with the potential to break the links that bind together low income, inequality, and unemployment more than when a student only has 12 years of school education.

7.5 Resiliency through the participants' experiences

Chapter 3 highlighted resilience as the ability to overcome adversity and how research focused on understanding why certain people succeed despite adverse circumstances (Schoon & Bynner, 2003). It also emphasised that disadvantaged students have traditionally been labelled by their risk factors instead of their ability to manage those circumstances, which is their resilience (VanderPyl et al., 2014). In the interviews, all participants saw themselves as resilient because of their achievements. It is also important to highlight that these disadvantaged students had to juggle personal and social lives (see Chapter 5), which has made them resilient in one way or another. The next section explores what participants meant when they indicated they were resilient.

7.5.1 *Understanding resiliency through participants' experiences*

When trying to understand resilience through the participants' experiences, the data illustrated that the majority of participants tend to bounce back after a setback. Below are a few extracts from the interviews:

Uhhh, to fail is not always sharp. You don't feel good at all, especially when you were putting everything in, and you're like, but I studied for this and didn't even ask this they were asking that thingy and what, so you feel disappointed, and then especially when it's more than one module you'll feel like a failure, but at the end of the day if you want to finish it. You have to try and try and try again until you pass in order to graduate. So, I learned to not give up. Like you have to try if you wanna be successful, you have to try and try and try anyway. You have to try, not give up, even though you are feeling bad or pitying yourself. You have to just pick yourself up and go on and try harder (Pinky, 2018).

I do get up after a setback, especially in my studies, but like I said, sometimes. It's like when you want something or when something was too hard for me, like a situation, it takes time, but eventually I will get up (Tshepo, 2018).

Actually, I like that word because my friend that I used to live with for the last two years from 2016 until now in 2018, we always sort of like had these impromptu conversations. We find words that describe our journey at that time, and last year (2017), my word was resilient in the sense that I didn't finish my honours in a year. It took me a whole two years to write my thesis. They dared me to publish, and it was still that resilience. It took me four years to complete a three-year degree and still resilience. So, I like that word. For me, resilience is about continuously just keep on going regardless. You think about challenges that I faced as a student, and you

always have to get up at 6:00 am to go to class, and that takes a lot of resilience.

When it's two days before Easter and still have to go to class because you have an assignment and you have to study three weeks in advance because you know that if I don't, then I'll probably fail this test, that takes a lot of resilience. So, I like that word, so I would describe myself as a resilient person definitely (Zanele, 2018).

In the English module it showed me the potential that I have when I was doubting myself, to be honest. I never thought I'll have anything beyond honours, and my mother can attest to that, but someone triggered something in me and said that you have the potential, you can pass UPP, and you can pass first year. You can pass your second year. You can pass your honours, you can have the master's degree, and being in the environment (referring to the UFS), and now in the Access Programme, you get people who empower you, to be honest. Not because it's your study (referring to my PhD study), but you get people that really empower you rather than bring you down. I was a facilitator, and I met with other facilitators and I also met with other coordinators, and then other coordinators will tell you that someone in the industrial field, and remembering that I did Industrial Psychology, is looking for someone who can facilitate. We were provided with training on how to facilitate. It's not something that we came up with or born with it, and then being me, I think in that space it made me realise who I am. I am that type of person who wants to assist others. I don't see myself in an environment where I'm locked in the office doing admin without assisting or providing what I know to other people (Modise, 2018).

Like I said (laughs). My life, you know, when I got here, I didn't think I would become who I am, and I didn't think I'll be as comfortable as I am today, and I didn't think at a point I thought you know, what one day you just I'm gonna like come here is me wasting my parents money and I'm gonna regret but because I was... before I got here

I actually used their money from the schools that I come from which I don't think it's it worked me going there I wish I just came here the first time and like I thought I was not going to forgive myself for wasting their money. But at the moment and at the point I am, and at that point they are at, they forgot about all that I waste. I would call it like that. I think it's a waste or something like that. Yeah, but looking at them right now, looking at me and looking at our lives and our future and the family and the situation we are at, at the moment, it literally clears everything and brings something new because of the experience that I had from the beginning until now, so yeah, so I think yeah, I am resilient (Bontle, 2018).

These extracts illustrate that even though there were challenges, participants were able to overcome them. The participants expressed their challenges, but endured the setbacks, bounced back from adversity, and grew through their experiences. These participants were able to engage in resilient behaviour. Their responses indicate that they were able to grow from their challenging experiences. This is in line with what Richardson referred to as resilient reintegration. The participants grew emotionally and did not simply regain homeostasis (see Chapter 3). The literature on resilience (see Chapter 2) identified four types of resilience. From the participants' responses, it can be argued that they had psychological resilience because, despite their challenges, they could focus on maintaining a positive effect even though they were exposed to psychological stresses (Boardman et.al, 2008). They were able to manage those circumstances and become resilient.

Despite their disadvantaged environment and circumstances, they could successfully obtain resources supporting their studies. The participants' narratives prove that resilience is indeed a developed trait or an internal capability, as Nussbaum explained (see Chapter 3). Thus, resilience is not something a person is born with but rather something a person learns. Programmes, such as the UPP, help and nurture students to become academically resilient in

higher education. All participants highlighted that resilience is important for educational performance. Furthermore, I believe that it is important to understand students' challenges. Some participants remarked on why resilience is important in educational performance:

If you give up, and then you will be back to square one, where you started (Pinky, 2018).

Resilience is quite important because sometimes the problem is not as big as you think it is; even if it's as big, sometimes you also have the capability to go through it. If you qualify to come and study a particular course, when you get here, it might seem as if though you are incapable, but the fact that you actually made it means that you're capable. So it's always good to remember that you're here for a reason and you have goals to accomplish, and if you're not resilient enough to remind yourself that listen, I came here for a reason, I have goals, and I'm not going to leave here until I've accomplished those goals. That's the one thing I keep telling myself. Even if I get a zero percent for that test, it's fine. Somehow I came here for a reason, and I'm going to live here forever with what I came here for (Tumi, 2019).

I think especially for students, those days they were faced with so much pressure of strikes and of class disruptions. And if you have to constantly get up and go do what you are here to do, I think that is important and sort of motivating yourself to do well. And do well is subjective; maybe passing well or maybe getting through a year. The thing is to constantly go forward to move forward. I think that's what resilience is; regardless of if today's not a good day, get up tomorrow and do better than you did yesterday or tomorrow might even be worse, but honestly, always just get up and always try and try and try so I think for me that definitely (Zanele, 2019).

I feel like you have to think and ask yourself why you are actually doing it. Why are you here? Because once you actually tell yourself, I am here, I'm going to do this and I want to do this, then your educational performance literally becomes better you improve all the time. So if you don't tell yourself I'm going to do this, and I want this to happen, then it's not important (Tshepo, 2018).

The resilience demonstrated by participants who participated in this study is remarkable. Their narratives provided a sound understanding that academic success can be seen as a measure of resilience in the South African context. When exploring the research on schooling in South Africa (see Chapters 1 and 2) in conjunction with the high levels of unemployment and poverty, this attests to the resilience of disadvantaged students who do fight the system to gain access to higher education, successfully transition to university, and eventually complete their university qualifications, despite the high drop-out levels in the first year and the low proportion of students who actually graduate (CHE, 2010; Scott, 2010). The participants' narratives, especially the excerpts above, are examples of their resilience. Disadvantaged students' resilience is crucial if they strive to break the cycle of poverty. Thus, universities must have various support structures to support those participants who do not typically come directly into the mainstream, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined participants' personal and professional lives after graduating at the UFS to understand what value they attached to obtaining their degrees. The findings on obtaining their degrees indicated that higher education gave them the opportunity to achieve their valued functionings. Through their higher education experience, participants indicated they acquired relevant knowledge, values and skills important for employment. For instance, they were able to think critically, write academically and reason.

With regard to their personal and social lives, the findings revealed that higher education boosted their confidence and self-esteem. In addition, higher education enabled participants to achieve some economic independence and access to postgraduate studies. This gave them a voice and ability to decide on and pursue their valued goals. One of the key findings from this chapter was that obtaining a qualification does not necessarily mean the end. Obtaining a qualification indicates an achieved functioning; thus, a student has reached their goal. However, it also means that education can open up many other doors, indicating achieving a capability.

Chapter 8: Summary, Reflections, and Conclusions: Towards a more equitable and just higher education

8.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the study by first reflecting on the aim of the study and highlighting the critical questions of the research. Secondly, based on the findings, this chapter makes recommendations for a more equitable and just higher education, specifically for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The chapter will also explain the study's contribution to existing scholarship. This chapter will conclude by highlighting the limitations of what the study could not do and make recommendations for further research.

8.2 Summarising the study

In conceptualising this study, my starting point was an interest in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I aimed to understand how they navigate their way into higher education. In addition, she sought to understand what assets they bring into higher education that institutions of higher learning would tap into to create a more just university and support those students who do not follow traditional access routes. It was important to understand widening participation, especially in the South African higher education context, mainly rooted in injustices because of the country's history of Apartheid. I wanted to understand all these issues from a capabilities and resilience literature viewpoint, arguing that little attention is paid to disadvantaged students and the assets they bring with them. It was, therefore, important to investigate the experiences, insights, and sensitivities of disadvantaged students that do not traditionally follow mainstream or degree studies routes. The argument made in Chapters 1 and 2 was that despite improvements made in the post-apartheid South African higher education system that resulted in widening access for historically disadvantaged students, the challenge remains overwhelmed by several injustices that might impede the success of these participants.

Initially, I highlighted that research on the dilemmas of access to higher education focused on widening participation, especially among disadvantaged students. However, very little is known about the challenges these students face when trying to obtain access to higher education and, secondly, the challenges they face when gaining access to higher education. I wanted to explore the issues of transitioning for these particular students. Using the UFS's UPP and a group of 15 participants that went through the UPP as a case study, I sought to understand the dilemmas of access specifically for disadvantaged students and their transition from the UPP into mainstream studies and how they were able to succeed or not throughout their studies and what lead to their success or not. I investigated their challenges with access and transitioning because I believed the injustices inherent to students that come through such programmes are remediable and should and can be eliminated.

Chapter 2 reviewed international and national literature on massification and widening participation in higher education, exploring conceptualising the dilemmas of access and widening participation in higher education. As an example, from the international literature, the chapter revealed that in the global North, particularly in the UK, the process of massification and diversification has led to the increased use of the term 'non-traditional' when applied to students. In the global South, specifically in South Africa, the term is linked with the terms 'disadvantaged' or 'underprepared' (Boughey, 2012). The chapter summary (see Figure 1) elucidated that massification implies widening access, and participation implies equitable access. However, with massification implying widening access, it does not necessarily suggest equitable participation.

Nevertheless, both concepts influence access and disadvantage. The chapter's core was to explore the literature about these concepts. A focus was then given to the UK and the USA as they are similar to the global South and the USA being one of the first countries to experience massification in higher education. Despite a vast increase in massification, there have also

been concerns about student retention and success in universities, which have been intensified by massification.

The global South also witnessed astonishing higher education growth, but not as much as the global North. When exploring massification in the global South, specifically in Africa, I found that massification did not have the same pattern as the global North (as an after-effect of World War II). The possible reason is that individual countries started massification after independence from the colonising countries (Assié-Lumumba, 2006). After independence, many African countries tried to build their own higher education system. In South Africa, massification also entailed increasing enrolment numbers of previously excluded groups into higher education to produce human resources vital for economic growth and ending the social injustices that originated from the past Apartheid system (CHE, 2016). However, as massification increased, higher education institutions suffered the challenges of resources such as physical space, finances, and human capacity to cope with this significant massification issue (Mohamedbhai, 2008). This challenge impacted massification and equity, requiring equitable access. With equity, several issues are linked to participation, such as social class, minorities, and gender. Even though widening participation interventions have managed to increase the participation of diverse groups, nevertheless, participation of diverse social groups has not changed because equitable access and fair participation have not yet been reached. This is because systems cannot provide all students equal opportunities (access to universities and employment) (David, 2010; Gore, 2018). This participation issue creates a disadvantage because of social class, race, gender, and other issues.

Transition issues also emerged, and it was crucial to understanding those challenges through the student's lens. Even though some studies (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Badat, 2010; Mzangwa, 2019) are concerned with issues relating to transformation in institutions of higher learning, especially in terms of racism, gender inequality, and institutional and cultural

practices, the most significant focus in the literature tends to be on enrolment numbers when looking at those changes. For me, this means that less attention is given to the difficulties of forces that shape students, especially those disadvantaged in their everyday lives. However, there has been some development in higher education, both internationally and nationally, that worked hard to enhance equitable access (see Chapter 2). Despite efforts to enhance equitable access, there are challenges with the transition for students who do not follow mainstream routes (see Chapter 2). Chapter 2 also highlighted the core concepts of access and disadvantage, which revolved around ensuring equal opportunities for all students to pursue and succeed in higher education, such as gaining access for individuals from diverse backgrounds to enter and participate in higher education institutions. This means that institutions of higher learning need to remove barriers and provide equal opportunities for all individuals to pursue higher education. Secondly, disadvantage refers to the obstacles, inequalities, and systemic barriers that certain individuals or groups face in accessing and succeeding in higher education. Disadvantaged students often face multiple challenges like finances and limited educational resources. If equity is about fairness and ensuring that every student has an equal chance to succeed, higher education must acknowledge that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will need different levels of support and resources to overcome barriers and achieve educational goals. However, suppose they cannot afford tuition, living expenses and accommodation. In that case, this poses a significant barrier to gaining access to higher education. These concepts are important in addressing inequities and inclusion in higher education, creating a more just system to support disadvantaged students.

Chapter 3 discussed the capability lens on access to higher education. This was to demonstrate its richness and show how it functions to conceptualise a desirable change that should take place at universities if they are to contribute to social justice. Key ideas in the capabilities approach were introduced. From there, the dimensions of education and how the

capabilities approach was used in higher education were described in relation to the relevance of access for disadvantaged students. The benefit of using the capabilities approach is found in its focus on well-being and individuals and recognising students' resilience by connecting their unique biographies to the university's perspective.

The capabilities approach considers the well-being of individuals and asks an important question of the extent to which people are able to be and do what they have reason to value being and doing. Functionings are similar to outcomes; they refer to an achievement of being and doing what a person has reason to value. Both capabilities and functionings refer to opportunity freedoms. Through the lens of injustices, one must ask if different people have the same opportunities to achieve the outcome and not ask if different people have achieved the same outcome. The chapter also explained the role of aspirations and agency in influencing the conversion factors of resources into valuable educational achievements. I explored the unique capabilities list framework from Walker (2006) that contributed innovatively to understanding access to higher education, the capabilities list from Wilson-Strydom that addressed transitioning into higher education for disadvantaged students' education, and the Miratho Matrix, which guided discussion and the design of a student-centred well-being focused university system. The capabilities approach literature in higher education offered valuable insights into understanding and promoting social justice in higher education. I briefly summarised how the capabilities approach helps one think about social justice in higher education. Firstly, the focus was on individual flourishing, emphasising the individuals' freedom and capability to live a life they have reason to value. It is not just about access to education. It is more about the outcomes and opportunities that education provides individuals in order for individuals to develop a range of capabilities, such as critical thinking and reasoning, as they are important for individual well-being and flourishing. Secondly, the capabilities approach highlighted the importance of equal opportunities in higher education.

The focus is more on addressing disparities in access to education, especially for disadvantaged groups, and the need to think about policies and practices that promote equal access, inclusivity, and diversity in higher education. The main aim is to enable all individuals to develop their own capabilities and reach their full potential. Thirdly, higher education must provide opportunities for students to develop their agency. All these assisted in understanding the theory and research on access to higher education.

Furthermore, I aimed to understand the link between resilience and the capabilities approach and how it can be used in higher education, especially when looking at disadvantaged students. When reflecting on Chapter 3 regarding resilience and the capabilities approach, I noted that the two strongly link to understanding and supporting disadvantaged students in higher education. As mentioned in Chapter 3, resilience refers to an individual's ability to bounce back from setbacks despite facing adversity or challenging circumstances. When combined, resilience becomes a critical component in fostering the development of individuals' capabilities and promoting social justice.

Chapter 4 described the data collection methods and the issues that might have arisen during the data collection process. When I described the data analysis, I focused on explaining how the interviews were conducted and analysed and how the participants were selected. The ethical conduct was done together with the potential limits in unforeseen circumstances.

The next section presents my reflection on the research questions that guided the study.

8.3 Reflecting on answers to the research questions

Chapters 5 to 7 addressed the research questions and provided empirical data derived from participant interviews. The following research questions guided me:

8.3.1 Research question 1

What capabilities do typically-labelled 'disadvantaged' students bring to higher education (i.e., pre-university capabilities), and how did these capabilities develop in the context of students' lives?

This question was addressed in Chapter 5. The aim was to provide empirical data derived from the interviews with participants. In order to understand the capabilities that typically labelled disadvantaged students bring into higher education at the UFS, I conducted interviews with 15 students who began their studies in the UPP, wanting to understand why they went to university. The findings in Chapter 5 detailed how participants described their own personal experiences of how they came to be at the UFS. The data reflected that students bring different capabilities into higher education, despite the challenges they may face. What was important for participants was that they came from different levels of society. Some did not have parents or siblings that went to university to guide them, and for some, it was by chance that they ended up in the UPP. In addition, the socio-economic status at home and understanding that a higher education qualification would give one a better chance in life, participants reflected on their aspirations (personal and others) and an awareness of possibilities through getting into the UPP.

Reflecting on this question, the data further revealed how aspiration manifested, and three themes related to aspirations emerged. The first was aspirations focused on values, not educational pathways. Here participants associated specific careers with what they valued, and their aspirations were guided by the value associated with the educational process and not necessarily the educational process itself. When participants reflected on what they wanted to be and why, it helped me to understand the importance of how higher education institutions need to think about the aspirations of students in higher education, especially for those who do not follow traditional degree entrance. From the data, it was evident that for some

participants, their educational aspirations were not necessarily about what they wanted to be, such as a social worker, a teacher, or a psychologist. These values stem from wanting to help others; that is how aspiration manifests in the educational environment. In this instance, the educational aspiration was secondary to the value aspiration. The second aspiration was the awareness of possibilities. Participants reflected on what influenced their decision of wanting to go to university. It was through awareness of possibilities, such as career exhibitions, that they aspired to attend university. The third aspiration was based on others influencing aspiration. Participants revealed that other people influenced their aspirations of going to university. In the analysis of participants' narratives, they revealed how their families and communities contributed significantly to developing and guiding individual aspirations. Some participants revealed that education has always been important, thus, pursuing tertiary education. Moreover, most participants viewed themselves as struggling because they could not afford university fees.

The schools they came from also disadvantaged them because when they arrived at the UFS in the UPP, they could not speak proper English. Their academic writing level was not up to the university level. These findings were not unexpected because students were now entering a totally new environment to them. However, once they gained access to the UPP, they could use the opportunities, such as the support they received from the environment and their facilitators. This made participants determined to work hard to go into mainstream studies. This also meant they would transition to the main campus if they passed the UPP. Chapter 5 highlighted that participants understood that getting a degree is a means out of poverty and living a better life. These findings confirm the literature on access and disadvantage (see Chapter 2), particularly regarding corrosive disadvantage for students from poor social backgrounds. The lack of financial and educational resources compromised the freedom of participation (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007). However, despite their challenges with

finances, psychological, and critical thinking, they were able to adapt to their new lives. I needed to understand why they went to university and their aspirations and agency. Finally, what came out very strongly was that their aspirations were focused on values and not necessarily on educational pathways. This observation also resonated with the capabilities and the resilience (they developed resilience in the face of adversity) literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, as participants revealed that they had a range of capabilities and strengths that they bring to higher education, such as educational resilience, approach to learning, confidence, and social relations. These capabilities, developed within the context of their lives, contributed to their resilience and potential for success. It is, therefore, important for universities to recognise and value the capabilities of disadvantaged students, as they significantly contribute to understanding resilience within higher education settings. The capabilities literature indicated that when acknowledging and building on these strengths, institutions can create supportive and inclusive spaces that further enhance these students' capabilities and ultimately promote their academic success, personal growth, and contributions to the broader society.

8.3.2 Research question 2

How does the university experience recognise and build on these capabilities? During UPP and during broader university experience post UPP.

The second research question was addressed again in Chapter 5. I sought to understand students' experiences in the UPP and the transitioning and what challenges participants experienced that assisted in building on the capabilities which they initially had. When responding to this research question, I specifically focused on aspirations and agency. Evidence from the data showed that participants' aspirations were influenced by the environment and facilitators that populated their aspirations, as well as the information that flowed through those resources. The participants confirmed that the different people

(facilitators and peers) they met and interacted with while in the UPP opened their minds to other possibilities, which broadened their aspirational maps. They also developed other aspirations, such as furthering their studies, because of the encouragement of their facilitators. Furthermore, participants revealed that the pedagogical practices and environment were a huge enabler during the UPP year, allowing them to convert those resources into capabilities and functionings.

Despite the majority of participants experiencing some challenges, such as finances and personal challenges, those challenges had the potential to constrain students' capability to aspire. As Michelle observed, these challenges lowered her aspirations because she had to drop out of university and find a job. However, she eventually returned to finish her studies and obtain her degree. While gaining access to higher education through the UPP provided students with opportunities to cultivate their capacity to aspire, certain practices had the potential to contract the development of this capability. However, participants detailed how their facilitators would encourage them to work hard, encourage group work, and use the opportunity they had to be part of the programme. Participants revealed that despite their setbacks and challenges, they overcame those challenges by focusing on working hard and passing the UPP.

Thus, if universities have more programmes such as the UPP, these programmes have the potential to nurture students' aspirations and cultivate their academic skills. The literature on access and capabilities highlighted the extent to which the university experience recognises and builds on the capabilities of disadvantaged students can differ. This depends on specific contexts and the efforts made by the institution (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4). Through the interviews, it was evident that the UPP was able to build on the existing aspirations and agency of participants, which is why participants were able to thrive and succeed. In this instance, it is both access and success, especially for disadvantaged students. Universities

need to build on those capabilities by providing support and implementing inclusive policies; this will empower students to do well.

8.3.3 Research question 3

What additional capabilities are developed during university? UPP specifically and the broader university experience.

The third research question was addressed in Chapters 5 and 6. I sought to understand the transitioning process by examining the conversion factors and resiliency. When participants eventually got accepted into the programme, that was one thing. The challenge shifted to participants with a low APS adjusting to higher education. Participants revealed struggling with multiple things, such as confidence, inability to speak in front of the whole class, critical thinking, and academic writing skills. However, because the UPP is designed in such a way that it meets students at the level at which they are, they were able to build their confidence through the support of the environment. From the interviews, I identified three conversion factors that enabled resiliency: personal, social, and environmental conversion factors. The data revealed that participants indicated positive thinking and motivation as personal conversion factors. The conversion factors were as follows:

Social conversion factors:

- Peer group learning
- Supportive facilitators

Environmental conversion factors:

- Supportive environment
- Modules that support and assist participants in doing well
- Family backgrounds

Identifying the capabilities that are enlarged through the UPP and into the mainstream was an iterative process that required I to go back and forth between the theory and data by describing what emerged from the data analysis and reflecting on how those findings relate to the theoretical capabilities of disadvantaged students. The data showed that transitioning into the mainstream was challenging, especially during the first few weeks—challenges such as getting lost, finances, feeling alienated, and lecturers not caring. However, because all participants aspired to complete their studies no matter how challenging, they could convert their personal circumstances into aspirational trajectories and develop psychological resilience (Ong, et al, 2006). They eventually learned to focus on maintaining a positive attitude and working hard despite their personal hardships. In the data, participants highlighted specific capabilities they gained from their UPP experiences and took those into mainstream studies, such as language competence, approach to learning, knowledge and imagination and social relations and social networks. In the resilience and transitioning literature, multiple challenges were highlighted, revealing that participants were able to navigate the changing environment and bounce back from failures and setbacks because the university experience presented various academic and personal challenges that promoted adaptability and resilience.

8.3.4 Research question 4

How do these capabilities and university experiences influence students' educational outcomes?

The fourth research question was addressed in Chapter 7. My aim was to understand the capabilities participants highlighted and how their university experience influenced their educational outcomes. Participants emphasised multiple challenges. However, despite their personal and academic challenges, they all stated that giving up was never an option; all of them obtained their degrees, with some pursuing postgraduate studies. It is imperative to

highlight that when participants first enrolled in the UPP, their educational goals and aspirational were limited because of their family backgrounds and the schools they came from and not meeting the entry requirements for the university. The data revealed that the opportunities available to them at that time were limited (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3). However, when they reflected on enrolling in the UPP and their future aspirations, their aspirations changed over time due to the opportunity to study through the UPP and transition into mainstream studies. They highlighted that had it not been for the UPP, they would have never gained entrance into mainstream studies. During the UPP, they started learning more about getting more opportunities and how to obtain and use them.

Participants specified that the UPP and the broader university experience empowered them to have more self-confidence and be optimistic about the future because they had a better chance of finding a job, especially in a country with such a high unemployment rate. Education psychologically empowered participants and helped them think more broadly. The literature on the capabilities approach highlighted that access to higher education contributes towards a theory of justice that prioritises the involvement of people in their own development; in this instance, the university is seen as a capability enabler. Participants were better equipped to succeed academically by developing academic competence and critical thinking capabilities. Higher education provided enormous opportunities for participants to form and grow networks after graduation. Interacting with different people also improved their communication and interpersonal skills and improved their chances of employment. These developed capabilities served as valuable resources shaping students' educational outcomes because university education fuelled some participants' aspirations and dreams.

Chapter 7 highlighted that most of the participants indicated that they come from societies where most people have low levels or no form of education at all. Therefore, when they acquired a university degree and furthered their studies, their statuses in society changed

(achieved functioning) because of the respect they received from their communities. Thus, higher education is not merely an end; instead, it creates capabilities for the future. It is also important to note that systemic barriers and inequalities can impact the extent to which students can fully develop their capabilities and realise desired functionings. The development of these capabilities through university experiences enhances students' educational outcomes.

8.3.5 Research question 5

How do the capabilities approach and the theory of resilience framework help in thinking differently about students who are commonly labelled as 'disadvantaged'?

The capabilities approach and the theory of resilience framework provided an alternative perspective that challenged the notion of students being labelled as “disadvantaged”. My aim was to reflect on how the two frameworks helped in thinking differently about students commonly labelled as disadvantaged. In other words, how does the capabilities approach build on the resilience framework? These two frameworks focus on agency and capabilities. The capabilities approach shifts the focus from viewing students as passive recipients and forces one to recognise their agency and inherent capabilities, arguing that instead of labelling students solely based on their disadvantaged circumstances, an emphasis should be on understanding students' capabilities, including their strengths, aspirations, and potential. This perspective recognises that students possess various capabilities that may not be fully realised because of external barriers and inequalities. For instance, participants revealed their challenges and highlighted that even though there were challenges, they were able to overcome those challenges and endure those setbacks. Thus, they could bounce back from adversity and grow through their experiences.

On the other hand, the resilience framework recognises the importance of considering the broader context in which students' lives unfold. The data revealed that despite their challenges, participants were able to focus on maintaining a positive effect even if they were exposed to psychological stresses (Boardman et al., 2008). They managed those circumstances and became resilient, which means they developed psychological resilience. Thus, despite their disadvantaged environment and circumstances, students successfully obtained resources that supported them in their studies. This proves that resilience is indeed a developed trait or an internal capability, as Nussbaum explained (see Chapter 3). In addition, it means that resilience is not something a person is born with but rather something a person learns. I commend the resilience demonstrated by this study's participants. Their narratives provided a good understanding that academic success can be seen as a measure of resilience in the South African context, especially when one looks at the research on schooling in South Africa (see Chapters 1 and 2) in combination with the high levels of unemployment and poverty. This attests to the resilience of disadvantaged students who do fight the system to gain access to higher education, successfully transition to university, and eventually complete their university qualifications, despite the high levels of dropout in the first year and the low proportion of students who actually graduate (CHE, 2010; Scott, 2010). All these issues change how one thinks about students commonly labelled as 'disadvantaged' because they have assets universities need to tap into to create a more just higher education space. The capabilities approach and the resilience framework provide a lens of potential and possibility rather than defining students solely by their disadvantages, as revealed in the data. Adopting the capabilities approach and resilience framework shift one's thinking from a deficit-based perspective to a more holistic, strengths-based approach. This will enable universities to better understand and support the diverse capabilities and resilience of students who do not follow traditional access routes. Furthermore, universities should also recognise that every

student is a unique individual that comes into the university with diverse needs, aspirations and strengths. Universities also need to move beyond superficial labels and must focus on creating an inclusive, supportive, nurturing and flexible educational environment that assists all students to realise their potential. This will subsequently lead to more equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for such students.

8.3.6 Research question 6

What are the implications for more just university policy and practice?

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made for more just university policy and practice:

1. Equitable access and fair opportunities: university policies should prioritise equity in access and opportunities by ensuring that all students, regardless of their social backgrounds, have equal access to higher education. Doing so will assist in addressing systemic barriers, such as financial constraints, educational inequalities, and discriminatory practices, and providing targeted support to disadvantaged students to ensure equitable access and opportunities.
2. More resources and support, especially for the transition: universities must prioritise the provision of extensive resources and student support services that address students' needs, provide financial aid and/or bursaries and access to a wide range of psychosocial support (i.e., counselling, physical and mental health services).
3. There should be policies on how to support students in the different transitional phases to help them adjust to university life.

From the data shared in the previous chapters, the underlying aspects are equitable access and opportunities. There is also an issue with transitioning because participants were only sharing just the process of transitioning. Although most students struggle to gain entrance to

university, it becomes a significant challenge for those from disadvantaged educational and social backgrounds as they attended schools with limited or no resources. All students struggle with finances and are confused (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). However, what makes this exceptional for disadvantaged students is that if everyone is concerned about finances, for disadvantaged students, it is beyond merely being concerned about finances. These are students whose family income is less than the other students, if there is an income, as some indicated that their parents were not working and were relying on NSFAS. Also, there is a difference between the amount of concern for ordinary students and disadvantaged students. Because of the lack of funds and educational resources these students faced, extra attention must be paid to finances because of its corrosive disadvantage. There is a clear distinction between a first-generation student without friends and a non-first-generation student coming to university with friends from school, for example. The latter knows who to ask if they need advice. A first-generation student has no frame of reference for how a university works and does not know whom to ask for help and assistance. They also do not know what to ask as they are unfamiliar with the university jargon. These are some of the issues indicated in the literature about why it is more difficult for a disadvantaged student to attend university. These findings confirm Wilson-Strydom's work on what should work in terms of policy and practice and access. This study found that more support is needed to help students succeed. It should not only be about massification, but access should be equitable and with success. The current policies mainly highlight access but not necessarily success. This is a deficit approach because the support and methodology (Calitz, 2015) need to meet students at their level. Universities need more access programmes to help students gain equitable access to higher education.

8.4 Contribution of the study

This study made several contributions to the research topic. First, participants do not come as blank slates. As we have seen in Chapters 5 and 6, they come in with a solid drive, resilience, determination, and a range of other factors (capabilities). They come in with specific capabilities (see Chapter 5), and the interaction between what they come with and the environment assists them in succeeding. Even their response to the environment means they can be resilient. However, that meaning takes away the responsibility from the university if students are resilient. Secondly, the fact that the UPP participants are resilient indicates that it is the university's responsibility to help students be more resilient instead of having to build up coping mechanisms to survive at university. Thirdly, if universities build supportive environments to nurture these capabilities and focus on strengthening support in areas where students need it, then success is inevitable. I concur with the capability viewpoint of Wood and Deprez. They highlighted that "access to higher education must try to expand opportunities for students to be and to do both in the spirit of individual development and its impact on and influence of social enhancement" (Wood & Deprez, 2012, p. 477).

8.5 Limitations of the study and suggested areas of further research

This section highlights the limitations of this study with a particular reference to what the research was not able to achieve due to some constraints. I also share suggested areas of further research. Firstly, using the narrative life history interview research method was both a challenge and a reward. From the onset, I knew that focusing on the challenges disadvantaged students faced in higher education and understanding the transition would be ambitious and challenging. This was very much true, as the data to analyse was time-consuming, though very valuable. Nonetheless, I remain convinced of the importance of researching the challenges of access and the complex transitioning process. Positioned within the paradigm of constructivism, I specifically sought a research methodology that would assist with

answering the research questions. I used the narrative research design by using life history interviews, creating a unique opportunity to obtain the participants' life stories.

I was aware of my own biased view because of working in the programme and because the participants I interviewed might have responded in such a way as to impress me because they knew I was the Head of the Programme. The participants viewed me as an authoritative figure (Soudien, 2007). In that sense, it became frustrating to see how some participants wanted to provide me with the 'right' answers and how some held back and did not want to reflect on some of the questions critically. I believe that much work still needs to be done in higher education if institutions aim to be conducive to academic success, enabling students who continue to experience being discriminated against based on their admission point scores.

This research needed critical and in-depth responses, sometimes constrained by some participants' lack of confidence, language, and cultural misunderstandings. However, because of my diverse skills in speaking multiple languages, I could mediate and request them to respond, ask questions in their mother tongue, and seek clarity if something was unclear. This was a significant breakthrough as participants started to open up and share more. I assured the participants that whatever they discussed with me was solely for research purposes, informing them that they were being interviewed as I was registered for a PhD and did not interview them in my capacity as the Head of Access.

Besides the limitations, the life history research offered me with invaluable insight into understanding and getting the whole story of what contributed to her participants' resilience and the capabilities they brought with them into higher education. From a capability viewpoint, individual voice can be deprived of disadvantaged students when institutions of higher learning fail to construct platforms for all students to contribute to discussions about

aspirations, freedoms, and agency. Because the capabilities approach is interested in the lives people have reason to value, an interpersonal, voice-based method offered a particularly rich way to explore individual experiences. Focusing on student life history also enabled detailed accounts of important injustices for disadvantaged students. Participants revealed how admission policies created an environment that made getting into higher education difficult, if not impossible, for them. However, I believe more research can be done to understand these challenges of hierarchy, admission policies, and enabling pedagogy to support these students.

Having a smaller number of participants was both an advantage and a limitation because the data from the one-on-one engagements suggested a more extensive qualitative study that tracks students' experiences. I in no way claim that the experiences of these 15 participants only reflected the challenges students from the disadvantaged face or those who went through the UPP. However, it is evident from the divergent literature in higher education research that many deserving students face exclusion, are not afforded an opportunity to get into higher education, or are supported when transitioning. Institutional commitment to rigorous qualitative research is needed across more representative disadvantaged first-generation students. This could add to enhanced, effective, and socially just programmes that enable success for disadvantaged university students (Siry & Zawatski, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

8.6 Conclusion

I found this study tremendously challenging yet exhilarating and a meaningful research journey. I addressed the research questions as well as formulated the capabilities framework for disadvantaged students and the transition issues. However, many more questions have also emerged. There is substantial evidence from this research that unjust system arrangements exclude many students while offering a thin version of participation based on the admission point scores. For a student that had to apply to the UFS and is informed that

they do not qualify for university are less likely to be given reasonable opportunities to develop critical academic capabilities. It was evident from the data that once a student has been granted access to study, the university brings confusion, loneliness, hardship, and fear of failure, but also a misrecognition of a student's potential. Through programmes such as the UPP, students are given that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to perform themselves into higher education.

I hope this research will enhance collaboration between policymakers, staff, and students, as there is a need for more access programmes to support students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The admission point scores are not the only factor that should be considered when giving offers to students. Through access programmes, policies can be developed to investigate a number of assets students bring into higher education to have more just policies to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The next step in my research journey is to explore the value of the capabilities approach further to understand access with success for disadvantaged students in a South African higher education context, applying and testing the capabilities framework highlighted in this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Approval letter



Faculty of the Humanities

20-Sep-2018

Dear **Miss Setilo**

Ethics Clearance: **Capabilities, resilience and success of UFS access students: Confronting deficit discourses**

Principal Investigator: **Miss Tshegofatso Setilo**

Department: **Centre for Africa Studies Department (Bloemfontein Campus)**

APPLICATION APPROVED

With reference to your application for ethical clearance with the Faculty of the Humanities. I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Research Ethics Committee of the faculty that you have been granted ethical clearance for your research.

Your ethical clearance number, to be used in all correspondence is: **UFS-HSD2018/0504**

This ethical clearance number is valid for research conducted from 20-Sep-2018 to 20-Sep-2021. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension.

We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure we are kept up to date with your progress and any ethical implications that may arise.

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

Yours Sincerely

Dr. Asta Rau
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of the Humanities

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Appendix B: Interview schedule

Life history interview schedule

Introduction:

Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today. As I explained when we completed the informed consent forms, this interview is focused on getting to know you and understanding your life and experiences, with a particular focus on the University Preparation Programme (UPP), your experiences at the UFS and how you came to be where you are now.

Everything we discuss will be treated confidentially and I will not use your name or other identifying information when working with the data and writing up the research. A pseudonym will be used at all times.

Our interview should take approximately 60-90 minutes.

Questions:

1. Please tell me about yourself, your family background, schooling experiences, community you grew up in, and how you came to enroll in the UPP.

Probes (as needed – will depend on responses to the broader question):

- Where did you grow up?
 - What is the highest level of education your parents completed?
 - Do you have siblings? What is their highest level of education? What are they doing now?
 - When you were growing up, were your parents working? What are they doing now?
 - What was your schooling like? How did you do at school? What was good and what was not good about school?
 - How did you find out about university?
 - What led you to come to university?
 - How did you travel to university or who brought you to university?
 - How did you come to enroll in the UPP at the UFS?
2. Thinking back to when you first enrolled in the UPP, what assets (e.g. skills, experiences, abilities etc.) did you bring with you that helped you to study successfully?

- How did you develop these assets (skills, experiences, abilities etc.) prior to university?
 - Where did you learn these assets (skills, experiences, abilities, etc.)?
3. Do you think the UPP and the university more broadly recognized, valued and/or built on these assets (skills, experiences, abilities etc.)? How? Please explain and give examples.
 4. Please tell me about your experience in the UPP.

Probes (as needed – will depend on responses to the broader question):

- What worked? What didn't work?
 - What did you learn, what did you not learn?
 - How did your UPP experience benefit you?
 - Was there anything that made your UPP experience difficult? How?
Please explain and give examples.
 - How did you perform academically in the UPP?
 - How did you fund your UPP year?
5. In what ways did you develop (academically, personally, socially) through your UPP year?
(Please give specific some examples).
 - What supported this development and what made it difficult?
 6. Please tell me about your experiences studying at the UFS Bloemfontein Campus after the UPP.

Probes (as needed – will depend on responses to the broader question):

- How was the transition into mainstream studies from UPP?
- How did you cope with the transition from the UPP to mainstream studies?
- How did your UPP experience prepare you (or not) for mainstream study?
- Were there any skills you learned in your UPP year that you brought with you into mainstream studies?
- How did you apply what you learned during your UPP year in mainstream studies?
- What worked well in your mainstream studies? What didn't work?
- What did you learn, what did you not learn?
- Was there anything that made your mainstream studies experience difficult?
How? Please explain and give examples.

- How did you perform academically in mainstream studies?
 - How did you fund your studies?
7. What were your educational and personal goals/aspirations when you first started in the UPP? Did these goals/aspirations change over time? How and why?
8. What have you achieved since you completed your studies?
- Why do you think you were able to achieve this?
 - Did you face specific challenges along the way? Please explain and provide examples.
 - How did you overcome these challenges?
9. How would you say your university experience contributed to you getting to where you are today?
10. Thinking of your life story, would you describe yourself as someone who is resilient? Why/why not? Please give examples.
- If yes, what factors supported your resilience, and what made it more difficult to be resilient?
 - Did you ever feel like giving up? (if yes, please give examples) Why? Why not?
11. Do you think resilience is important for educational performance? Why?
12. Thinking back over your life story, is there anything that you would like to have done differently? Why?
13. As someone who started in the UPP and has gone on to achieve all that you have, what advice would you give to young people entering the UPP now?
14. Do you have any other comments about your life story and your educational journey?

Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your stories with me.

Appendix C: Information letter

RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

DATE: 22 September 2018

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Capabilities, resilience and success of UFS access students: Confronting deficit discourses

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Tshegofatso Setilo 2005024381 Contact: 078 579 0375

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Humanities: Center for Gender and Africa Studies

STUDYLEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Dr. Sonja Loots
051 401 3776

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The aim of this research is to confront deficit thinking through understanding the capabilities that typically-labelled 'disadvantaged' students bring to higher education. Capabilities are developed and put into action within particular institutional contexts, so this study also aims to understand how the university influences (positively and negatively) students' capability formation, which in turn influences their educational achievements and their employment outcomes.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Tshegofatso Setilo and I work at the University of Free State at the South Campus in the Access Division. I am also a doctoral student and I am conducting this PhD research in order to understand how access programme students achieve success, and in so doing, to counter the common deficit-understanding of students who enter university via access programmes. My interest in this topic stems from the fact that I am a former student of this access programme and I currently coordinate the UFS University Access Programme.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: *UFS-HSD2018/0504*

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You have been invited to participate in this project because you were a student in the University Access Programme at the University of the Free State. Participants have also been purposively selected to include different academic years of enrollment in the UPP, different study options, and different types of degree pursued in mainstream studies. Thus, you have been invited to participate because you can contribute valuable information about your experiences at both the UAP and mainstream studies at the university, including the challenges you faced and ultimately your success in obtaining a degree at the UFS.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

You are going to be participating in a life history interview focused on your own story and experiences, with a particular focus on your experiences in the UAP, your experiences at the UFS Bloemfontein Campus in mainstream studies and how you came to be where you are now. The interview will take about 60-90 minutes of your time and I will arrange with you a time and a venue suitable and convenient to you. The interview will be recorded and transcribed verbatim.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary and there is no penalty for non-participation. Being in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There are no direct benefits or incentives for participating in this study but the research through its recommendations will be beneficial to future students. You will also have an opportunity to reflect on your own educational and personal experiences which is likely to be personally valuable to you. This will also give you an opportunity to gain more in-depth knowledge about your own educational journey and academic success.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

I do not anticipate inconveniences of taking part in this study. I will conduct the interviews at a time and place of your choosing and therefore try to minimize disruptions to your other obligations. In the event that you experience any unhappiness or discomfort with the way the interviews are being conducted you are welcomed to discuss with me or my study leader. If at any point you experience feelings of distress or difficulty arising from the research I will refer you to a free counselling service called LifeLine Center. The line operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year. The contact details are 0861 322 322 and you are welcomed to use the service at any point in time.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your responses will be kept confidential. All participants will be given a pseudonym and actual names will not be used so that no one will be able to connect you to the responses you give. Only pseudonyms will be used in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher will have access to the actual recording of your interviews. Confidentiality will be protected in any publication of the information by using pseudonyms. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

The recorded interviews will be stored by the researcher on a password protected personal computer and after transcription the audio files will be deleted. For future research or academic purposes, the transcription data (with pseudonyms not actual names) will be stored on a password protected computer. Future use, beyond this study, of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

Please note that there will be no monetary or other incentives for participating in this study. There will also be no costs for you as a participant because I will travel to meet you wherever you are located in Bloemfontein.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact me, Tshegofatso Setilo on 078 579 0375 or SetiloT@ufs.ac.za and I will share the research report with you. You may also contact me should you need any further information about the study. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr Sonja Loots, email LootsS@ufs.ac.za, contact number 051 401 3776.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the audio recording of the in-depth interview.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____