

**A FRAMEWORK FOR FACILITATING THE  
TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY IN  
SOUTH AFRICA: A CAPABILITIES APPROACH**

by

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I declare that the study hereby submitted for the Philosophiae Doctor in Higher Education Studies in the Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, is my own independent work and that I have not previously submitted this work, either as a whole or in part, for a qualification at another university or at another faculty at this university. I also hereby cede copyright of this work to the University of the Free State.



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## Acronyms

ACT – America College Test

AD – Academic Development

ANA – Annual National Assessments

ANOVA – Analysis of Variance

AUSSE – Australasian Survey of Student Engagement

BEAMS – Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students

C2005 – Curriculum 2005

CAPS – Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements

CHE – Council on Higher Education

DIRAP – Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning

EDU – Education, UFS Faculty of

EFA – Education for All

EMS – Economic and Management Sciences, UFS Faculty of

FET – Further Education and Training

FSDoE – Free State Department of Education

HDI – Human Development Index

HEDA – Higher Education Data Analyser

HEMIS – Higher Education Management Information System

HESA – Higher Education South Africa

HSC – Health Sciences, UFS Faculty of

HSRC – Human Sciences Research Council

HSSSE – High School Survey of Student Engagement

HUM – Humanities, UFS Faculty of

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

NAS – Natural and Agricultural Sciences, UFS Faculty of

NBTs – National Benchmark Tests

NCHEMS – National Centre for Higher Education Management Systems

NEED – Need for Education and Elevation

NPHE – National Plan for Higher Education

NSC – National Senior Certificate

NSFAS – National Student Financial Aid Scheme

NSSE – National Survey of Student Engagement

SAHSSLE – South African High School Survey of Student Engagement

SASSE – South African Survey of Student Engagement

SAT – Scholastic Aptitude Test

SPSS – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

Suburban HSC – Suburban Higher Socioeconomic Context

Suburban LSC – Suburban Lower Socioeconomic Context

UC – University of California

UCT – University of Cape Town

UFS – University of the Free State

UK – United Kingdom

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

UPP – University Preparation Programme

USA – United States of America

## **Abstract**

Access to university in South Africa has been, and continues to be, a highly contested area that is plagued with many layers of complexity rooted in the social, political and educational past and present. Situated within an overarching commitment to fair and just higher education, in this thesis I have attempted to understand the complex field of access to university. I have done this by focusing on the transition from school to university, through the lens of the capabilities approach as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The capabilities approach provides a framework for seeking to understand what young people entering universities are able to be and to do and what limits their being and doing. As such, the capabilities approach requires us to move beyond measurable access statistics to a more nuanced understanding of the agency and well-being of students admitted to university.

Four research questions guided the study.

1. How do first-year students at the UFS experience the transition to university in their first year of study?
2. How do learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 from local UFS feeder high schools experience the process of preparation for and access to university?
3. How can these experiences of the interface between school and university be theorised using a capabilities-based social justice framework?
4. Based on the evidence from the research, what interventions could support efforts towards a more socially just transition for these students?

Working within a pragmatic paradigm, the study employed a mixed methods research design. My starting assumption was that in order to thoroughly understand the transition to university, it is necessary to study both the final years of schooling and the first-year at university. As such, the study focused on the University of the Free State (UFS) and a sample of 20 feeder schools. A total of 2816 learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 completed the quantitative South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement (SAHSSLE) (adapted from the version used in the United States) in September 2009. The SAHSSLE provides a wealth of data regarding educational practices at school as well as learners' experiences and

attitudes towards their education. A smaller sample of 33 learners also completed qualitative reflections on their school experience, plans for universities and their ‘university knowledge’. At the university level, I collected qualitative data from 128 first-year students in 2009 using focus group methodology. In 2010 an additional sample of 142 first-year students were asked to provide a written description of their first month at university and to draw a picture of how they experienced the transition.

The thesis covers much theoretical ground related to higher education and social justice as well as in the specific study area of access. In the access domain I make use of Conley’s multidimensional model of university readiness together with research on effective educational practices that underpins the student engagement literature and instruments. Drawing on the theory and literature, I propose an ideal theoretical capabilities list for the transition to university. Following a detailed presentation of the empirical results structured in two main sections, namely: transition to university experiences and readiness for university; I then make use of the capabilities framework to theorise the transition to university.

Taking the well-being of students as the starting point, the capabilities framework for the transition to university asks what the outcome of a successful transition should be. Rather than defining success merely as measurable performance (such as changing enrolment demographics, credits passed in the first-year or progression to the second year of study for example) which does not take student well-being into account; the capabilities framework presented argues that educational resilience should be regarded as the outcome of a successful transition to university. In this context, resilience is defined as follows:

- Being able to navigate the transition from school to university within individual life contexts;
- Being able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically and to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints; and
- Having aspirations and hopes for a successful university career.

A pragmatic capabilities list and framework for the transition to university is proposed and defended, together with specific recommendations for how this framework could be applied to facilitate the transition to university. The seven capabilities for the transition to university are as follows:

1. Practical reason
2. Knowledge and imagination
3. Learning disposition
4. Social relations and social networks
5. Respect, dignity and recognition
6. Emotional health and reflexivity
7. Language competence and confidence.

These seven capabilities encompass the lessons learned from the literature review of university access and the first-year at university, the capabilities literature, and the empirical data within an overarching commitment to social justice and the promotion of the well-being of students. The thesis ends by considering what the UFS could do differently to facilitate the transition as well as what the UFS could do in partnership with schools.

**Key terms:**

Higher education; access; readiness; transitions; social justice; capabilities approach; Amartya Sen; Martha Nussbaum; pragmatism; mixed methods

## Samevatting

Toegang tot 'n universiteit in Suid-Afrika was, en sal voortaan 'n hoogs omstrede veld bly, wat geteister word deur verskeie komplekse lae wat gegrond is in die sosiale, politiese en opvoedkundige hede en verlede. Geleë binne die oorkoepelende verbintenis tot billike en regverdige hoëronderwys, poog ek in hierdie tesis om die kompleksiteit van die gebied van toegang tot universiteit, te verstaan. Ek het dit bewerkstellig deur te fokus op die oorgang van skool tot universiteit, deur die lens van 'n “bekwaamheidsbenadering” [capabilities approach], soos ontwikkel deur Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Die “bekwaamheidsbenadering” verskaf 'n raamwerk wat poog om te verstaan wat jongmense wat universiteite betree kan wees en kan doen en wat hul wese en dade beperk. Sodanig vereis die “bekwaamheidsbenadering” ons om verby meetbare toetredingstatistiek te beweeg, na 'n meer geskakeerde begrip ten opsigte van agentskap en welstand van studente wat toegelaat is tot universiteit.

Vier navorsingsvrae het hierdie studie gelei:

1. Hoe ervaar eerstejaarstudente aan die UV die oorgang tot universiteit in die eerste jaar van hul studies?
2. Hoe ervaar leerlinge in Grade 10, 11 en 12 van plaaslike UV voederskole die voorbereidingsproses vir universiteit en toegang tot universiteit?
3. Hoe kan hierdie ervarings van die koppelvlak tussen skool en universiteit geteoretiseer word deur gebruik te maak 'n “bekwaamheidsgebaseerde” sosiale geregtigheidsraamwerk?
4. Gebaseer op bewyse van navorsing, watter intervensies kan pogings tot 'n meer sosiaal-regverdige oorgang vir hierdie studente, ondersteun?

Binne die pragmatiese paradigma, volg die studie 'n gemengde navorsingsontwerp. My aanname, as vertrekpunt, was dat om 'n deeglike begrip van die oorgang tot universiteit te toon, is dit noodsaaklik dat beide die finale jare van skoolopleiding en die eerste jaar op universiteit bestudeer moet word. As sodanig fokus die studie op die Universiteit van die Vrystaat (UV) en 'n steekproef van 20 voederskole. 'n Totaal van 2816 leerlinge in Grade 10, 11 en 12 het 'n kwantitatiewe vraelys getiteld Suid-Afrikaanse Hoërskoolopname vir

Leerderbetrokkenheid (SAHSOLB)('n aangepaste weergawe van 'n vraelys in gebruik in die Verenigde State) in September 2011, voltooi. Die SAHOLB verskaf 'n rykdom van data met betrekking tot opvoedkundige praktyke in skole, asook leerlinge se ervarings en houdings ten opsigte van hul opvoeding. 'n Kleiner steekproef van 33 leerlinge het ook kwalitatiewe refleksies met betrekking tot hul skoolervaring, planne ten opsigte van universiteite en hul “universiteitskennis”, voltooi. Op universiteitsvlak, het ek kwalitatiewe data van 128 eerstejaargestudente in 2009 ingesamel deur middel van fokusgroep-metodologie. In 2010 is 'n bykomende steekproef van 142 eerstejaargestudente gevra om 'n geskrewe beskrywing van hul eerste maand op universiteit te verskaf en om 'n prentjie te teken van hoe hulle die oorgang ervaar het.

Die tesis sluit omvattende teoretiese agtergrond met betrekking tot hoëronderrys en sosiale geregtigheid, asook in die spesifieke veld van toegang, in. Rondom die domein van toegang, het ek gebruik gemaak van Conley se multi-dimensionele model van universiteitsgereedheid, tesame met die navorsing oor effektiewe opvoedkundige praktyke wat studentebetrokkenheid literatuur en -instrumente, onderskraag. Voortspruitend vanuit die teorie en literatuur, stel ek 'n ideale teoretiese “bekwaamheidslys” vir die oorgang tot universiteit, voor. Na aanleiding van 'n omvattende voorlegging van die empiriese resultate, gestruktureer in twee hoofafdelings, naamlik: oorgang na universiteit ervarings en gereedheid vir universiteit; gebruik ek dan die “bekwaamheidsraamwerk” om te teoretiseer oor die oorgang tot universiteit. 'n Pragmatiese “bekwaamheidslys” en -raamwerk vir die oorgang tot universiteit word voorgestel en verdedig, gesamentlik met spesifieke voorstelle hoe hierdie raamwerk toegepas kan word om die oorgang tot universiteit te fasiliteer.

Deur die welstand van studente as vertrekpunt te neem, vra die “bekwaamheidsraamwerk” vir die oorgang tot universiteit wat die uitkomst van 'n suksesvolle oorgang moet wees. Eerder as om sukses bloot as 'n meetbare prestasie (soos verandering van inskrywingsdemografie, krediete geslaag in die eerstejaar of vordering tot die tweede jaar van studie byvoorbeeld) te definieer wat nie die student se welstand in ag neem nie; voer die voorgestelde “bekwaamheidsraamwerk” aan dat opvoedkundige veerkragtigheid as die uitkomst van 'n suksesvolle oorgang tot universiteit geag moet word. In hierdie konteks word veerkragtigheid as volg gedefinieer:

- Om in staat te wees om die oorgang van skool na universiteit te bewerkstellig binne individuele lewenskontekste;
- Om in staat te wees om risiko te beding, om akademies te volhard en om te reageer op opvoedkundige geleenthede; en
- Om aspirasies en hoop te hê vir 'n suksesvolle universiteitsloopbaan.

'n Pragmatiese “bekwaamheidslys” en raamwerk vir die oorgang tot universiteit is voorgestel en verdedig, tesame met spesifieke aanbevelings vir hoe hierdie raamwerk toegepas kan word ten einde die oorgang tot universiteit te fasiliteer. Die sewe bekwaamhede vir die oorgang tot universiteit is as volg:

1. Praktiese denke
2. Kennis en verbeelding
3. Ingesteldheid tot leer
4. Sosiale verhoudings en sosiale netwerke
5. Respek, waardigheid en erkenning
6. Emosionele integriteit
7. Taalvaardigheid en selfvertroue

Hierdie sewe bekwaamhede omvat die lesse geleer uit die literatuuroorsig van universiteitstoegang en die eerste jaar op universiteit, die “bekwaamheid” literatuur, en die empiriese data in 'n oorkoepelende verbintenis tot sosiale geregtigheid en die bevordering van die welstand van studente. Die tesis word afgesluit deur om te oorweeg wat die UV anders kan doen om die oorgang te fasiliteer, asook wat die UV in samewerking met skole kan doen.

“The power to do good almost always goes with the possibility to do the opposite” (Sen, 1999, p. xiii).

“The way things are does not determine the way they ought to be”  
(Sandel, 2010, p. 165).

# Chapter 1: Introduction

“[T]he issues we are grappling with in the field of access and performance are ideologically problematic, conceptually complex and deeply embedded in the struggle for social justice and global competitiveness. They will probably dominate educational debates for some time to come” (Council on Higher Education, 2010, p. 53).

## 1.1 Setting the scene

Access to university in South Africa has been, and continues to be, a highly contested area that is plagued with many layers of complexity rooted in the social, political and educational past and present. Situated within an overarching commitment to fair and just education, and particularly higher education, in this thesis I have attempted to understand the “ideologically problematic” and “conceptually complex” field of access to university. I have done this by focusing on the transition from school to university, through the lens of the capabilities approach as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000, 2003, 2011; Sen, 1979, 1985a, 1993, 1999). The capabilities approach provides a framework for seeking to understand what young people entering universities are able to be and to do and what limits their being and doing (Sen, 1993). As such, the capabilities approach requires us to move beyond measurable access statistics to a more nuanced understanding of the agency and well-being of students admitted to university.

This has been an ambitious project since my starting assumption was that it is not possible to fully understand access to university – and more specifically, the experience of the transition from school to university – by researching only one of either the schooling or university sectors. As such, my research has encompassed an exploration of the school to university transition from the perspective of both school learners and university students. I have focused on the University of the Free State (UFS) and a sample of 20 local feeder schools as the case study for this research. The outcome is the formulation of a capabilities-based framework for how universities and schools might partner to work towards better preparing prospective students while they are at school. In the concluding chapter, I propose selected

partnership interventions that might be considered between the University of the Free State (UFS) and local feeder schools.

### **1.1.1 South African higher education in brief**

Debates about higher education in South Africa must be seen both within historical context and also within the transformation imperative of a country emerging<sup>1</sup> from a deeply discriminatory, repressive and socially unjust past. The country's patterns of political exclusion, racial and class discrimination and inequality have their roots in colonialism, the emergence of the mining sector and resultant need for cheap labour, and then later the formalization of racial discrimination by the nationalist party through the apartheid system of governance (Dison, Walker, & MClean, 2008; Ross, 1999). This complex history has had major implications for how the purpose of education, and higher education more specifically, were and are understood, particularly as part of state governing mechanisms. The education sector – both schooling and higher education – were integral to apartheid ideology and practice (du Toit, 2010). Universities were defined as 'creatures of the state' and assigned specific purposes in support of the state ideology (Bunting, 2002). All levels of education were differentiated on the basis of race and ethnicity. Eight different government departments controlled education institutions which resulted in even further fragmentation of the national education system. By 1994 when the new democratically elected government came into power the country had 36 higher education institutions serving different race and ethnic groups and also offering either theoretical qualifications (universities) or vocationally oriented programmes (technikons). Through a comprehensive restructuring process these 36 institutions were merged to form 23 institutions – eleven universities, five universities of technology and six comprehensive universities (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 59). Cloete notes that "[T]he post-1994 period saw unprecedented changes in South African higher education" (Cloete, 2002, p. 87). He continues to describe the first two years as "a massive, participatory drive towards policy formation", the culmination of which was the report of the National Commission on Higher Education released in 1996. The next phase included the development of the White Paper 3 - A

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<sup>1</sup> One may argue that since South Africa is in its 17<sup>th</sup> year of democracy that it is inaccurate to refer to a country still emerging from its difficult past. However, the extent of transformation and redress needed as well as the increasing levels of inequality (and injustice) evident at all levels of society implies that the emergent process is still underway and likely to be so for many years.

Programme for Higher Education Transformation – which was released in 1997 and followed by the Higher Education Act 101 promulgated in the same year. The 1994-1999 phase was focused on policy formation and putting a new legislative framework in place; and the post-1999 phase focused on implementation of this new policy and legislative environment (Cloete, 2002, pp. 87–88; Council on Higher Education, 2004). The White Paper 3 specified four purposes for South African higher education (Ministry of Education, 2007). These four purposes (presented verbatim from the White Paper 3, pp 7-8) are:

To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. Higher education equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. It is thus a key allocator of life chances an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens.

To address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge driven and knowledge dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy. Higher education teaches and trains people to fulfil specialised social functions, enter the learned professions, or pursue vocations in administration, trade, industry, science and technology and the arts.

To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Higher education encourages the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas, policies and practices based on a commitment to the common good.

To contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge. Higher education engages in the pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry in all fields of human understanding, through research, learning and teaching.

This policy was legally formalised in the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997. In February 2001 the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) in South Africa was released. The NPHE outlined the framework and mechanisms through which the policy goals and transformation imperatives of the White Paper and Higher Education Act could be implemented (Ministry of Education, 2001). Amongst others, the NPHE established indicative targets for the size and shape of the higher education system. Of particular relevance in the context of this study is the recommendation that the participation rate in higher education should increase from 15% to 20% as well as the strong focus on equity issues (Ministry of Education, 2001).

On paper then, South Africa defines the purpose of higher education in what we might call a socially progressive manner that positions higher education as a public good. However, in practice, there is a complex tension between the goals of the dominant model of neoliberal economic development and those related to social equity and redress (Badat, 2007; Boughey, 2007a; Dison et al., 2008; du Toit, 2010; Waghid, 2008). Arguably, the neoliberal human capital formation role of higher education has been given greatest emphasis in South African higher education (although a public good discourse remains evident) and this has had critical consequences for access to university, as I outline in Chapter 2 (Badat, 2007; Boughey, 2005, 2007a; Council on Higher Education, 2009; Dison et al., 2008; Fataar, 2003; Waghid, 2009).

## **1.2 Turning to access**

As the CHE quotation presented at the start of this introduction implies, increasing access to higher education and improving students' chances of success in their university studies have been, and continue to be, an important research focus within higher education studies and higher education policy in South Africa and beyond. The challenge of under-preparedness of students entering higher education has become increasingly important as universities struggle to improve their throughput rates in a context in which schooling no longer seems to provide sufficient preparation for entering university (see for example, Coughlan, 2006; Foxcroft, 2009; Griesel, 2006; Jansen, 2003, 2010; Scott, 2010; Scott & Yeld, 2008; Wilson-Strydom, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Yeld, 2010). This challenge has also been gaining prominence in higher education literature globally (see for example, Conley, 2005a, 2008a; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008; Hurtado, 2010; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). Yet, we are reminded by Merisotis and Phipps (2000) that under-preparedness is nothing new and in fact dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century when Harvard College provided tutors in Greek and Latin for students underprepared in these areas (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000, p. 69). Nonetheless, international and national trends, as well as student performance at the UFS itself, highlights the importance of understanding how levels of preparedness impact on success at university.

### 1.2.1 Access and success/graduation

At the international level, the National Centre for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) reports that of the 2009 cohort of freshman (first year college students) in the North American higher education system between 64.4% and 82.7% continue on to their second year of study.<sup>2</sup> The average three-year graduation rate<sup>3</sup> across all states in the United States (US) was 29.2% in 2009, and the six-year graduation rate<sup>4</sup> was 55.5%.<sup>5</sup> For students in the United Kingdom (UK) (both mature and young entrants) the Higher Education Statistics Agency reports that the non-completion rate from first-year to second year was 12.9% for the 2008/2009 entrants.<sup>6</sup> The graduation rate in the UK was 38.7% in 2007 (OECD, 2010). In the South African context, approximately 30% of students drop out of university during their first year of study (i.e. retention rate is about 70%), an estimated 44% complete a three year degree after five years of study, and an estimated 15,000 students from the 2000/2001 cohort of first-year students were 'lost' to the system, i.e. were no longer enrolled at South African universities and did not graduate (Scott, 2008, 2010). Nationally, the graduation rate for universities averages at about 22% (Council on Higher Education, 2009, p. 35).

Further interrogation of South African higher education data shows that at the national level the success rates for white students is much higher than for black students (Scott, 2010). For example, the national cohort study of the students entering the system in 2000 showed that for Social Sciences programmes the graduation rate after five years was 34% for black students and 68% for white students; for Life Sciences programmes it was 31% for black students and 63% for white students; and for Business and Management programmes the graduation rate for black students was 33% compared to 83% for white students (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007, p. 16) At the 2010 Higher Education Summit, Minister Blade Nzimande reminded participants that the low levels of student success and graduation in the country "represents not only a deep disappointment and a tragic sense of lost opportunity for individual students and their families, but is also a loss for our national development potential and a waste of talent and scarce resources" (Nzimande, 2010, p. 5).

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2075&Itemid=141](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2075&Itemid=141)

<http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?submeasure=223&year=2009&level=nation&mode=graph&state=0>

<sup>3</sup> Percentage of first time full time bachelor's degree seekers who obtain their qualification in three years.

<sup>4</sup> Percentage of first time full time bachelor's degree seekers who obtain their qualification in six years.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level=nation&mode=map&state=0&submeasure=27>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2075&Itemid=141](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2075&Itemid=141)

Considering the UFS specifically, the success rates<sup>7</sup> have been in the region of 70% between 2001 and 2009. This measure of student success, positions the UFS poorly when compared with other South African universities (Ministry of Higher Education and Training, 2011, p. 27) and where a national target of an 80% success rate has been set (Ministry of Education, 2001). Institutional graduation rates<sup>8</sup> are also low, at 18.5% in 2010<sup>9</sup>. When considering undergraduate students only, the graduation rate at the UFS is even lower; 18.9% in 2006, 16.8% in 2009, and 15.7% in 2010. In 2010, the success rate for white students was 82.1% compared to 66.0% for black students<sup>10</sup>. The impact of learning in an environment embedded within a complex history of unjust social structures and an institutional culture which still remains divided in various ways along race, class and gender lines is evident.

### **1.2.2 Access and socioeconomic context**

Although somewhat more difficult to quantify (compared to ‘race’ differences that are commonly noted in South African higher education literature and data), access and success is also greatly influenced by class or socioeconomic context divisions (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Council on Higher Education, 2010; Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Soudien, 2010a). In many cases, the students making up the cohort of the unsuccessful within South African universities are those from poorer backgrounds who then find themselves in debt and without a qualification. For example, the 2010 review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) reported a 72% dropout rate for students with NSFAS support (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2010, p. xiv). When the NSFAS review was done there were more than 10,000 NSFAS borrowers who were blacklisted<sup>11</sup> (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2010, p. xviii). Against this context Amartya Sen’s warning stated at the outset of this thesis is pertinent: “the power to do good [increasing access to university for those previously excluded] almost always goes with the possibility to do the opposite [creating a generation of unsuccessful and indebted young people]” (Sen, 1999, p. xiii).

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<sup>7</sup> Number of credits enrolled divided by number of credits passed.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers of students graduating as a percentage of enrolment within a specific academic year.

<sup>9</sup> Data as per the UFS Management Information System (HEDA) on 28 May 2011– audited HEMIS data.

<sup>10</sup> Data as per the UFS Management Information System (HEDA) on 28 May 2011

<sup>11</sup> It is promising to note that in June 2011 it was reported that all students who had been blacklisted for NSFAS loans had been removed from the records of the credit bureaus (Merten, 2011).

### 1.2.3 Access and schooling

Although student success is a complex phenomenon with many influencing factors, one of the key elements that decades of research has highlighted is that of pre-university preparation, i.e. quality of schooling (Conley, 2005a; Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Yeld, 2010). The state of schooling in South Africa has been the focus of much attention and critique for several years and the schooling sector continues to deal with the difficulties of transforming a deeply divided and unequally resourced education landscape. Challenges of an inappropriate curriculum, poor levels of teacher preparation, lack of resources in schools, the absence of a culture of teaching and learning, and questionable leadership within schools and district structures have been widely documented in academic publications and popular articles (for example see, Bloch, 2009; Chisholm, 2004b; Christie, 2008; Colditz et al., 2009; Dada et al., 2009; Department of Basic Education, 2011; Harley & Wedekind, 2004; Jansen, 2010, 2011; Reddy, 2006; South African Institute of Race Relations, 2010; van der Berg et al., 2011).

Obviously problems in the South African schooling system influence the levels of preparation of students entering higher education in the country and the effects of poor schooling are evident in the poor performance, nationally and for UFS students in particular, in the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) (Prince, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2010a, 2010c; Yeld, 2009). Yet, this is not a South African-specific phenomenon as tends to be portrayed in media reports, even though the unique historical background of the South African context creates certain distinctiveness. For example, the Standards for Success project led by David Conley between 1998 and 2001 focused on identifying the specific knowledge and skills needed for success in US colleges. The study showed that in many instances schools were preparing prospective students to meet admission criteria for college or university, but not necessarily to be successful once admitted (Conley, 2005a, 2008a). Conley refers to this as the gap between being *eligible* and being *ready* for successful higher education study (Conley, 2005a, 2008a). Understanding this gap and how to bridge it are critical for higher education in South Africa.

### 1.2.4 Access and readiness

Research has pointed to a range of reasons for the gap between eligibility and readiness, including the extent to which students have developed important cognitive strategies for

effective learning, have covered sufficient content knowledge, have acquired academic behaviours necessary for success and have the contextual skills and knowledge to understand how higher education works (Conley, 2008a). These factors are related to what has been argued in the research on epistemological access which emphasises the importance of understanding disciplinary conventions that underpin what counts as knowledge and informs how knowledge is constructed (Boughey, 2005; Council on Higher Education, 2010; Jacobs, 2009; Morrow, 2009a). Morrow states that “epistemological access is learning how to become a successful participant in an academic practice” (Morrow, 2009b, p. 78, see also Bernstein, 2000). Research on epistemological access emphasises the role of personal and social histories and contextual embeddedness in the learning process. Using participant observation, Boughey (2010) shows how students make use of familiar contexts to understand political philosophy texts and to position themselves in relation to what they are learning. As such, interventions that seek to reduce the gap between eligibility and readiness that adopt a limited focus on helping students to develop academic and/or language skills, such as grammar, note taking and so on without taking the complex contexts in which students are embedded into account, are likely to have limited success (Boughey, 2008).

In addition, several authors have also highlighted the impact that demographics such as race, socioeconomic background, gender and the family’s level of education have on readiness for higher education. These types of factors commonly define the contexts from which students come and within which they are functioning, and so must be understood when considering readiness and interventions to improve readiness (Hurtado, 2010; Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005a; Mushi, 2003; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

In dealing with the challenge of student under-preparedness, the focus of universities in South Africa has mostly (although not exclusively) been on what can be done *once students enter higher education*, e.g. offering various academic development programmes or courses, bridging programmes and extended degrees that seek to assist students to develop academic skills. Similarly, a wealth of research has been conducted on the first-year experience (see for example, Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Leibowitz, van der Merwe, & van Schalkwyk, 2009). Several influential theories of student development and performance at university include student background and pre-university academic and social experiences as a factor in their models, but less attention is directed to how universities might work with schools to improve student

readiness prior to entry (Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many studies focus on measurable performance or school marks (grades) and the extent to which this predicts university level success (for some examples see, Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Less research has focused specifically on the interface between school and university, particularly in terms of the capabilities entering students need to improve their chances of success, and the educationally purposeful activities required at school level for the development of students' capabilities to learn effectively and to cope with the cognitive demands of higher education (Hoffman et al., 2008). Conley summarises this challenge well when he states that "a key problem is that the current measures of college preparation are limited in their ability to communicate to students and educators the true range of what students must do [and be] to be fully ready to succeed in college" (Conley, 2008a, p. 3).

Thus, access to university is far more complex than "merely putting more bodies into existing institutions" (Council on Higher Education, 2010, p. 179). "Expanding formal access in ways that guarantee epistemological access - a decisive factor and a necessary condition for enhancing students' academic performance - requires substantive changes within and at the intersections of the official, pedagogic and social domains" (Council on Higher Education, 2010, p. 181). Without such changes, universities run the real risk of doing the opposite of what is intended when they increase access.<sup>12</sup> Against this background, the research problem outlined below emerged.

### **1.3 Research problem**

At the outset of my study (in my research proposal) I formulated my overarching research question as follows:

Given the under-preparedness of students entering the University of the Free State (UFS), how can the UFS and feeder schools work together to ensure that students are better prepared for successful higher education study?

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<sup>12</sup> The history of increased access at the University of Makerere in Uganda is another example. Although Makerere University is a specific case and has a unique reform history that is somewhat different from the South African case the lesson of unintended or unforeseen consequences remains relevant and lends support to the arguments made here. Authors reflecting on access issues at Makerere University concluded that "this access may be concealing far-reaching contradictions" (Kwesiga & Ahikire, 2006, p. 41).

However, as my research developed, it became clear that this question was better seen as the broad aim or problem to be investigated in my study; the outcome I am hoping to achieve from the research. I felt that it was necessary to pose four more specific questions (which also incorporate the research objectives listed in the proposal), for the research process, rather than only the outcome, namely:

1. How do first-year students at the UFS experience the transition to university in their first year of study?
2. How do learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 from local UFS feeder high schools experience the process of preparation for and access to university?
3. How can these experiences of the interface between school and university be theorised using a capabilities-based social justice framework?
4. Based on the evidence from the research, what interventions could support efforts towards a more socially just transition for these students?

Answering these research questions has required thorough engagement with relevant theory and existing research as well as my own empirical research at both school and university levels.

## **1.4 Methodology**

The empirical research was done using a mixed methodology (using an integrated parallel mixed design) within a pragmatic paradigm (See Chapter 5 for a full explanation of the methodology and specific methods used for the empirical work). It is helpful to present a brief summary of the methods in this introductory chapter so that the reader has a sense of the empirical work that was done whilst reading the theoretical chapters that are presented in this first part of the thesis.

At school level, a sample of 20 feeder schools was selected from the Bloemfontein area. The school sample included a representation of a range of socioeconomic contexts, language of instruction, geographic location (suburban and township) as well as the gender of the learners. I worked with learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 at each of these schools. In September 2009 a total of 2816 learners completed the South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement

(SAHSSLE) which provides data regarding educational practices at school level as well as learners' learning experiences and attitudes towards school and education more broadly. Also included in the survey were items related to the types of support provided by schools, and items about learners' future educational plans. The survey was essentially quantitative, with one open-ended question included at the end. During the June/July school holiday period in 2010 I ran a holiday programme<sup>13</sup> focused on life skills and preparation for university for learners in Grades 11 and 12. The 20 schools sampled for this study were asked to nominate learners to attend the programme. Although the holiday programme itself was not included as part of this study, I used the opportunity to collect additional qualitative data from the 33 learners participating. Each learner completed an open-ended written reflection on their school experience and their plans for university as part of a 'start-up questionnaire' for the holiday programme. In addition, the learners also completed a qualitative questionnaire on 'university knowledge'.

At university level, I collected data from first-year students in 2009 and again 2010. In 2009 I conducted focus group discussions with a total of 128 first-year students (10 focus groups) including students of different race and gender groups, from all faculties of the university, as well as students who lived in residence and students who lived off-campus. The focus group discussions centred on how students experienced coming to university and the support they had received whilst at school regarding choice of university and study direction. In 2010 I worked with 142 first-year students. Each student wrote a description of their first month at university and then drew a picture of how they experienced the transition to university. These qualitative methods generated a wealth of interesting data that has formed the basis of my understanding of students' transition experiences.

## **1.5 Chapter outline**

This section presents a brief overview of the contents of each of the nine chapters making up this thesis. Much of the literature review work is presented in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, but I have also integrated my review of the literature throughout rather than in specific literature review chapters only. I found this approach to managing the literature appealing as it allowed

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<sup>13</sup> The holiday programme was called Your Global Positioning Series (YGPS) Workshop Series 2010.

me to formulate the different elements of my arguments towards the framework I propose, more clearly and logically. My unfolding argument towards a capabilities based framework for understanding the transition to university is made theoretically and empirically. A summary of each chapter is presented below.

### *Chapter 1: Introduction*

This chapter sets the scene for the study. I briefly discuss higher education in South Africa, including a focus on access debates to contextualise the study and also to present rationale for why this topic was selected. The chapter includes an overview of the research problem and a short summary of the research design and methodology. Following this chapter outline, I discuss important terminology. The chapter ends with a reflection on my personal positioning as researcher.

### *Chapter 2: Dilemmas of Access*

Chapter 2 sets out to provide an overview of the field of access as a body of research within higher education studies. This review includes a discussion of educational transitions, the first year at university, debates about meritocracy and university readiness. In the chapter I argue that the multidimensional model of university readiness proposed by Conley provides a useful framework for understanding readiness in the context of this study. I pick up an argument introduced in Chapter 1 that to properly understand the transition to university it is necessary to research both schooling and the first-year of university. The metaphor of a humpback bridge is used to reflect on the gap between school and university. The value of learner/student engagement as a theoretical and methodological approach for understanding educational practice at school and university levels is introduced, with a particular focus on explaining how student engagement can be applied in the context of this study. Moving from the broader level analysis of access research, the chapter then focuses specifically on the South African context (access and schooling), including a brief historical review and consideration of current debates. The chapter ends with an overview of access and school partnerships at the UFS.

### *Chapter 3: Access and Social Justice*

From the outset, this study has been firmly located in a social justice agenda. In Chapter 3 I focus specifically on access and social justice. Following a section in which I make a case for why social justice matters for higher education I then turn to theories of social justice that might be useful for understanding access dilemmas. I present a short review of the theories of John Rawls, Iris Marion Young, and Nancy Fraser – including specific consideration of how each theory might be applied to access issues. I conclude that, while all three theories have aspects that are useful for my study, that the capabilities approach as advocated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum provides the most applicable theoretical framework of social justice for my study.

### *Chapter 4: The Capabilities Approach*

Chapter 4 builds on the analysis and arguments of Chapter 3 to present a case for the value of the capabilities approach for understanding the transition to university from a social justice perspective. The chapter begins by introducing the capabilities approach and guides the reader through the central concepts on which the capabilities approach is built, namely: functionings, capabilities, agency, and well-being. After setting out the conceptual underpinnings of the capabilities approach, the chapter then continues to position the capabilities approach as a normative framework for interpreting issues of social justice in the context of access. The existing research using the capabilities approach in an education and higher education setting is reviewed, with a particular focus on four studies of specific pertinence for my study. I then move on to consider the debates about capabilities lists, arguing for the importance of formulating a capabilities list for the transition to university. Drawing on the review of the access literature presented in Chapter 2 as well as Walker's (2006) capabilities list for higher education, I then present an ideal-theoretical capabilities list for the transition to university. The final section of the chapter looks at how the capabilities approach provides a theoretical framework for research; both agency and social structure/context and their interaction. After introducing the concept of conversion factors, a critical capabilities approach concept for my study, I end the chapter by proposing a theoretical capabilities framework for the transition to university.

### *Chapter 5: Research Design and Methodology: Pragmatism and Mixed Methods*

Chapter 5 turns to my research and methodology. I position the study within the pragmatist paradigm and present an argument for why the pragmatist rather than a transformative paradigm is used. The research design I have used falls within the domain of mixed methodology. The value of mixed methods is argued and I explain why I have selected to make use of an integrated parallel mixed methods design. This is followed by a discussion of the research process followed and the sampling procedures used at both school and university level. I introduce the set of quantitative and qualitative research instruments used in the study and explain briefly why each was included. Following a discussion of the various ethical considerations of the study, including voluntary participation, no harm, and anonymity and confidentiality, the chapter ends with a description of the manner in which I managed the quantitative and qualitative data.

### *Chapter 6: Introducing the Research Participants*

Since I am working at both the school and university levels and have two samples of school learners and two samples of university students it was important to introduce the research participants in some depth. This is important in setting the scene for the coming results chapters. These introductions are also important from the perspective of the capabilities approach which emphasises the need to take account of the lives of individuals rather than aggregate groups only. The analysis presented in Chapter 6 demonstrates the inclusion of a broad based sample that includes a diverse group of school learners and students; diverse in terms of demographics, school background and socioeconomic context. Importantly, the chapter includes information about the context of the research participants' lives outside of the school context in order to situate the research participants within the realities of their everyday lives.

### *Chapter 7: Results – Investigating the School-University Interface and Transition Experiences*

Chapter 7 focuses on presenting the results related to research questions one and two. In this chapter I aim to present a richly descriptive, yet analytical account of learner and first-year students' experiences of the interface between school and university. As is good practice in mixed methods, I present the quantitative and qualitative data in an integrated manner. This

adds to the richness of the data. I have sought to allow the voices of the students and learners that participated in the study to speak out through the chapter. As such, many quotations are presented, using the exact wording, spelling and grammar of the original text. The chapter begins with an analysis of first-year UFS students' experiences of the transition to university. Eleven emergent themes were identified and are explained in the text. After presenting the transition experiences of students, the chapter turns to focus on readiness for university, from the perspective of high school learners and first-year students. I make use of Conley's four dimensions of university readiness to structure the results reporting. The four dimensions of readiness are: key cognitive strategies, key content, academic behaviours and university knowledge. The chapter ends by showing how both first-year students and lecturers appear to manage the challenge of generally low levels of readiness for university by coming to accept mediocrity and failure. I briefly introduce the discourse of mediocrity and failure identified through the analysis of the qualitative data and reflect on what this might imply for access with success.

#### *Chapter 8: Theorising the Transition Experience from a Capabilities Perspective*

The focus of Chapter 8 is research question three which asks how the learner and student experiences discussed in Chapter 7 can be theorised using a capabilities-based social justice framework. In this chapter I return to the ideal-theoretical list of capabilities for the transition to university, together with the broader capabilities framework that I proposed in Chapter 4 and interrogate this theoretical framework in terms of my empirical data. Each of the nine capabilities included in the ideal-theoretical list are discussed, and an argument presented for why (or not) the capability should be included in a pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university. In presenting this analysis, and defending the final capabilities list – consisting of seven capabilities – I make use of Robeyn's (2003) list of five criteria that should be followed in formulating a capabilities list. The seven transition to university capabilities I have included in my final list are: practical reason; knowledge and imagination; learning disposition; social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional health and reflexivity; and language competence and confidence. I argue – drawing my empirical data – that the outcome of a successful transition to university should be the building of educational resilience which takes the well-being of students into account, rather than the more common measures of success which include demographic profiles of enrolled students and number of

credits/subjects passed in the first-year of study. The chapter ends with a detailed analysis of the personal, social and environmental conversion factors that impact on the transition to university. I then integrate the capabilities list and analysis of conversion factors to propose a capabilities framework for the transition to university. The framework includes the identification of possible points of intervention for the UFS and its feeder schools.

### *Chapter 9: Reflections, Conclusions and Way Forward*

Chapter 9 begins with a brief review of the thesis, with a focus on summarizing the logic of the study. I then turn back to the four research questions that guided the study and reflect on what has been learnt and how this study has added value. As such, I present both reflections on, and answers to the research questions. The chapter includes reflections on all four of the questions, but I have given greater attention to question four since questions one to three were the topics of Chapters 7 and 8, and therefore have already been considered in some detail. In my discussion of research question four, which asks about possible interventions to support the transition to university, I discuss what the UFS could do differently, and what the UFS could do in partnership with feeder schools. I argue that the capabilities list and the capabilities framework for the transition to university provide a unique entry point for formulating partnership interventions. The chapter concludes by arguing that using the capabilities framework proposed here provides a new language for thinking and talking about access and transitions, and a practical conceptual tool that can be used as the basis for participatory planning processes for the UFS and feeder schools.

## **1.6 Terminology**

It is important at the outset of this thesis to clarify some of the terminology that I am using and to present the specific definition of understanding I have for key terms. In particular, the following terms (in alphabetical order) need clarification: capabilities, learner/student, race, and student engagement.

### 1.6.1 Capabilities

Although the theoretical details of the capabilities approach will be unpacked in depth in Chapter 4, it is important to note upfront how I am using the notion of capabilities in my work since the concept can be interpreted in subtly different ways and the term capability has specific everyday uses which differ from the manner in which it is used here. For Sen, capability refers to the range of opportunities from which one can choose (Sen, 1999; see also, Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a). In this sense capabilities are “described as the real and actual possibilities open to a given person” (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a, p. 32). Nussbaum uses the concept of capabilities<sup>14</sup> in a slightly different and, arguably, a more carefully defined way (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; see also, Crocker, 1995). She differentiates between *combined capabilities* which are the various opportunities available to a person and *internal capabilities* which are fluid and dynamic characteristics of a person. Internal capabilities “are to be distinguished from innate equipment: they are trained or developed traits and abilities, developed, in most cases, in interaction with the social, economic, familial, and political environment” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21). In this sense, internal capabilities can be seen as a type of *personal power* needed to be able to function, given supportive external and social conditions (Crocker, 1995, p. 161). As such, the concept of internal capabilities or personal powers captures the notion of skills (Gasper & van Staveren, 2003), yet personal powers are also more than skills. A focus on developing skills rather than capabilities places too great an emphasis on de-contextualised individual abilities and too little emphasis on the interaction with the social, economic, familial and political environments that define what skills can be developed and by whom and also provide the bounds within which skills may, or may not, be used. As such, “capabilities are understood both as opportunities, but also as skills and capacities [personal powers] that can be fostered” given a supportive context/environment (Walker, 2006, p. 128). This distinction is particularly important where preparedness for higher education implies more than academic skills alone and where the opportunities to develop the skills and capacities needed for higher education are not equally available to all (see Chapter 2). I will return to this issue in Chapter 4 where the capabilities approach is presented as a basis for understanding the transition to university from

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<sup>14</sup> While Sen tends to use the singular notion of ‘Capability’, Nussbaum explicitly uses the plural ‘Capabilities’ to emphasise that the elements making up people’s quality of life are plural and qualitatively distinct. She argues that these different elements cannot be combined into one notion, or metric, of Capability (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). Following this line of reasoning, I use the term capabilities throughout. In Sen’s later works he refers to both capability and capabilities. To avoid confusion, I use only the term capabilities throughout the thesis, even when referring to Sen’s earlier work.

a social justice point of view, but for now it is important to clarify that I am using the concept of capabilities to refer to personal powers which includes skills, abilities and opportunities.

### **1.6.2 Learner/student**

In the South African education environment, post 1994, the term learner is used to refer to those in the schooling system and the term student to those learning in environments other than schools. Thus, in this thesis I use the term learner when I am writing about schooling and student when writing about higher education. This distinction, which is peculiar to the South African context, can create confusion when presenting international literature where it is common to find reference to high school students. For this reason, I have used the term learner consistently to refer to those in schooling systems, irrespective of the national context.

### **1.6.3 Race**

In this thesis I make use of ‘race’ categories commonly used in higher education statistics (such as those in the HEMIS<sup>15</sup> system). While I do not subscribe to racial classification, the extent of injustice remaining following the long legacy of racial classification in the country demands that these categories be used (with care) when arguing for a more socially just higher education system.

### **1.6.4 Student engagement**

The term engagement, like the notion of capabilities, has several meanings and is commonly used in the English language in a manner that is less specific than how the term is used here. The most commonly used definition can be summed up as follows (drawing on the Oxford English Online Dictionary<sup>16</sup>): “to participate or become involved in”. While the notion of student engagement does include the concepts of participation and involvement, the construct, as used here and in the student engagement literature, includes more than these elements. Student engagement is defined as the “*time and energy devoted to educationally purposeful*

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<sup>15</sup> Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS)

<sup>16</sup> <http://oxforddictionaries.com>

*activities” by students and institutions of learning such as schools or universities* (High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2005, p. 1).

## **1.7 Personal positioning**

Being in the fortunate position of conducting doctoral research that was closely related to the work I do on a daily basis has proved both a major support as well as, to some extent, a hindrance in the completion of this study.<sup>17</sup> It has been a support in that my attention and intellectual efforts have been focused on the field of accessing or entering university which helps in developing clarity of thought and also facilitated some of my data collection processes. It has been a hindrance in that working with the practical difficulties of the transition to university, from the perspectives of the university, schools, learners and students has also continually raised new questions and issues worthy of research that could not be accommodated within the bounds of a manageable doctoral thesis.

From both a personal and professional perspective, I am deeply committed to the cause of students entering university under-prepared and often with little chance of success within current university environments and I see this as an area of injustice in higher education. It is my commitment to a more just higher education system that provided the inspiration for my study as I believe that workable solutions to this complex transition can be found, particularly if schools and universities can work together towards this common goal. I believe that listening to, understanding and presenting the range of, often contested, perspectives (voices) of school learners and university students is an important contribution that this study makes. The agency of each of these groups of actors is critical in working to facilitate the transition from school to university. The capability approach presented in Chapter 3 provides the framework for understanding learner and student agency and, importantly, the limits placed on it by educational institutions and the broader social context. In recognition of this, I have intentionally sought to present the voices of these agents in the form of quotations and extracts from focus group discussions and students’ written contributions. I trust that the voices and

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<sup>17</sup> At the time of data collection I was employed at the Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development at the University of the Free State. I was responsible for admissions testing, the analysis of results and working with students to inform them of the outcome of their results. In addition, I was also managing the Open Learning project which involved research in schools and the running of a holiday workshop series. At the time of writing up the thesis I had moved to the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP) where I am responsible for monitoring and institutional research, as well as admissions testing.

agency of the participating learners and students speak out strongly through this text. My reasons for conducting this study are neatly summed up by Hart, who drew substantially on the capabilities approach in her study of widening participation in higher education in England.

“[I]n terms of educational policy and pedagogy there is a possibility of simply upholding existing structures of inequality and maintaining the false image of a meritocratic society based on qualifications and credentials. Alternatively there is a possibility of emancipatory practice which attempts to expand young people’s capabilities and develop opportunities for them to pursue a life they have reason to value. This requires listening to students about the constraints they identify to their well-being and agency freedoms as well as assisting them in identifying unseen barriers and constraints. It is about preparing them for the inequalities and injustices they may face and helping to equip them as far as possible to negotiate such circumstances to their best advantage” (Hart, 2009, p. 401).

It is my aim that the research and theorisation presented in this thesis contributes, in a small way at least, to the quest for ‘emancipatory practice’ in the area of access to university.

## Chapter 2: Dilemmas of Access

“Is it possible to have access and equity in university education in the twenty-first century?” (Campbell, 2003, p. 35)

“While not a firm equation, hard work plus privilege will usually trump hard work alone” (Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2000, p. 13)

### 2.1 Introduction

The South African higher education policy context, since the early 1990s, has supported increasing and broadening access to university study as one aspect of a strong focus on the redress of past inequalities in the interests of building a more equitable higher education system. This commitment is reflected in various policy documents such as the Education White Paper 3 and the National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 2001). This policy environment has translated into many visible changes in the sector. For example, in terms of increasing access (massification) the system in 2007 enrolled 761 090 students compared to 525 000 in 1994 and 394 700 in 1990 (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 61, 2009, p. 19). Thus, the headcount enrolment in higher education almost doubled between 1994 and 2007. From an equity perspective, there has been an increase in the proportion of African students enrolling in higher education from 40% of enrolment in 1993 to 63% in 2007 (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 62, 2009, p. 18). Given statistics such as this, it might be tempting to assume that the sector is performing well in terms of both increasing and broadening university access and that social justice gains have been made.

Yet, nationally, the participation rate in higher education remains at 16.3% which is below the national target of 20% (Council on Higher Education, 2010, p. 3). Further, the national cohort study of the year 2000 group of first-time entering students (reported in Chapter 1) has shown the extent of drop out and also highlighted that many students require five years and longer to complete a three-year degree (Scott et al., 2007). The picture is even bleaker when broken down by race groupings. While the overall higher education participation rate is 16.3%, the participation rate for white young people between the ages of 20 and 24 years

is 60% compared to only 12% for black young people in the same age range (Council on Higher Education, 2009, p. 19). A consideration of graduation trends shows that the percentage of students graduating within five years is approximately double for white students compared to black students (Scott et al., 2007, p. 17). As I noted in Chapter 1, these challenges are not only a 'race' issue, but reflect the complex web of social injustices related to students' socioeconomic contexts and educational backgrounds (see for example, Council on Higher Education, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2008; South African Institute of Race Relations, 2010; Wilson-Strydom & Hay, 2010). Despite a progressive national policy context and many positive developments in improving and broadening access to university, it is clear that major problems remain in ensuring a successful transition from school to university. Indeed, I have argued in Chapter 1 that we might consider the current implications of increasing access, without increasing chances of success, to be a 'new' form of injustice in higher education. Such are the dilemmas of access, and so it remains pertinent to contemplate the question quoted at the start of this chapter, "Is it possible to have access and equity in university education?" (Campbell, 2003, p. 35).

My starting point in contemplating these dilemmas was a careful review of the literature, international and national, focused on access to university and the transition between school and university more specifically. The chapter works from the broad context of international research on access and educational transitions, to South African specific issues, and finally I present a brief overview of the current status and recent history of access work at the UFS in order to contextualise my study. There is a vast body of literature on university access covering a range of closely related, but separate areas of focus. I have attempted to touch on the breadth of the literature in this chapter, but my focus has more specifically been on the transition to university. On the basis of my work in the area of access and admissions as well as my review of the literature I present the following themes as of particular relevance in the context of access and the transition to university:

- Complexities of educational transitions and the first year at university;
- Debates about meritocracy and access;
- University readiness (including admissions testing); and
- Research on effective educational practice at school and university levels.

Each of these is considered in turn in the sections that follow.

## 2.2 Educational transition



Figure 1: Example of a humpback bridge

([http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1263/1186115057\\_7f88a4aaed\\_o.jpg](http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1263/1186115057_7f88a4aaed_o.jpg))

Challenges in the area of educational transition, be it from primary to secondary level or secondary school to higher education have been researched for many years. The analogy of a humpback bridge for understanding educational transition was first used 25 years ago by Steed and Sudworth (1985) in the context of the transition from primary to secondary school in England and Wales. This analogy was used because:

“Traditional in structure, the humpback bridge survives because the volume of traffic wanting to cross is not sufficient to generate demands for change to a more efficient form of bridge. Its narrowness restricts passage to certain categories of road users. Unable to see over it, one forms a view of what is going on at the other side by listening to reports brought back or by making surmises from those activities that create sufficient noise, unless one is prepared to venture across oneself” (Steed & Sudworth, 1985, p. 23).

This metaphor remains richly descriptive of the transition from school to university in South Africa today, and is helpful for theorising this transition (see also, Johnston, 2010). The concept of the humpback bridge as an inefficient, traditional structure that has outlived its time is a useful depiction of the current state of access to higher education in South Africa. There has

been little change, at the depths needed, in the way that universities and schools collaborate to prepare students for this transition despite the major transformation in the education system, particularly regarding the dramatic increase in student numbers and the changing demographics of the student body since 1994. For most students, an outdated and inefficient humpback bridge remains their principal means of negotiating the transition from school to university. Many students braving the gap between school and university are first-generation students who do not have family members that attended university; are unable to see over the humpback bridge and so must surmise an understanding of the unknown university world. Marshall and Hargreaves extend this analogy and remind us that “it is not possible for individuals on *either side* to see across the humpback bridge, such that any judgments or impressions made about conditions on ‘the other side’ have to be based on conjecture or imagination” (Marshall & Hargreaves, 2007, p. 65, emphasis added). In other words, neither schools nor universities have a clear view of what the other does. Similarly, Johnston (2010, pg. 6) notes that “despite the need for more attention to transition, the institutional response is often muted, and over-reliant on piecemeal and reactive measures to specific problems and crises.”

Several authors have researched educational transition (in different contexts and at various levels of the educational system); as an element of understanding student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pittman & Richmond, 2008), within the context of increasing and widening participation (Belyakov, Cremonini, Mfusi, & Rippner, 2009), from the perspective of enrolment management (Hossler & Anderson, 2005), as a factor influencing student success (Gorard et al., 2007; High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; Kuh et al., 2007; Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, & Coles, 2009; Scott & Yeld, 2008), transition between two and four year higher education institutions (Lang, 2009), student and staff expectations and capacities (Leibowitz, van Schalkwyk, van der Merwe, Herman, & Young, 2009; Maitland Schilling & Schilling, 2005), methodologies for understanding transitions (P. Green, Cashmore, Scott, & Narayanan, 2009), and the transition experience as a specific focus of study in its own right (College Board, 2010; Conley, 2008a; Hoffman et al., 2008; Howard & Johnson, 2004; J. Lee & Ransom, 2010; Marshall & Hargreaves, 2007; Reid & Moore, 2008; Taylor Smith, Miller, & Bermeo, 2009; Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez, & Carroll, 2001; Wilson-Strydom & Hay, 2010). Green et al. (2009, p.50) argue, and provide empirical evidence for their claim, that social and academic transitions should be seen as entangled processes which do not necessarily follow a

linear trajectory “involving movement from one state of being, place, or social context to another.”

Relatively little has been done on the transition experience itself in the South African context. Here, the focus has tended to be on research considering interventions during the first year at university (for a useful compilation of research on the first year with a South African focus see, Leibowitz, van der Merwe, et al., 2009). As such, in the South African context the focus remains largely on the university side of the humpback bridge rather than on both sides as well as the bridge itself. Researchers working at Stellenbosch University in South Africa report that “[A]lthough a variety of pre-university interventions are discussed in the literature, reported interventions appear to be fragmented. There seems to be no holistic and integrated approach towards pre-university interventions in schools – particularly in South Africa” (Nel, Troskie-de-Bruin, & Bitzer, 2009, p. 978).

What does the literature that is available about the transition from school to university teach us? Knox and Wyper (2008, p.17) identify eight stages in the transition to first year at university. These are: pre-entry, induction, first few weeks, first assessment, end semester one, end semester two, examination ‘resits’, and transition to the second year. Working in the South African context, Nel et al. (2009, p. 985) identify three (related) levels comprising the transition to university. The pre-entry phase (schooling), the enrolment/access phase (application, course selection, registration), and the after enrolment phase (first few months to the first-year of university) (see also, Gorard et al., 2007; Harvey et al., 2006; Whittaker, 2008). Academic, social, financial and cultural factors operating at each of these levels were identified in an effort to formulate a theoretical framework for a holistic pre-university intervention. This research usefully highlights the interdependence of a complex array of factors at the school level (including the major impact of the unequal South African schooling system) that influence the transition experience. While universities are urged to “adopt a holistic approach to the school-university process” (Nel et al., 2009, p. 988) it remains somewhat unclear how this holistic approach might be put into practice by South African universities and schools.

We can learn from international experiences in this area. Some examples of interventions that seek to work on both sides of the humpback bridge are summarised here to provide a basis from which South African specific conceptualisations might be built. One example is the range

of dual enrolment programmes offered in the United States (US), which can take many different forms (Wang Golann & Hughes, 2008). These programmes allow high school learners to complete courses that carry credit for both their high school qualification and also at college or university (Conley, 2005a; Hoffman et al., 2008). Dual enrolment programs expose high school students to college or university level coursework and introduce them to the university environment whilst they are in school. “That early exposure can be critical in ensuring a successful transition to college, particularly for low-income and first-generation students who are unfamiliar with higher education and what it will take to earn a baccalaureate degree” (Taylor Smith et al., 2009, p. 2). Another example is the College Board’s<sup>18</sup> Advanced Placement (AP) programme that offers 37 university level courses to high school students covering a range of different subject areas. Each AP course is modelled on a comparative university level course. The culmination of the programme is a suite of university-level assessments (tests). Strong performance in these tests is rewarded by many colleges and universities, some of whom also grant credit for selected first-year courses. The AP courses are offered at high schools. Research consistently shows that students who do well in the AP examinations achieve greater success at university (College Board, 2009; J. Lee & Ransom, 2010; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Warburton et al., 2001). First-generation students themselves also report that participating in AP courses better prepared them for college, particularly with respect to writing skills and managing the college or university level workload (Reid & Moore, 2008).

### **2.3 The first year at university**

Compared to pre-university factors and the interface between schooling and university (beyond admissions testing and school results) it has been more common for research on the transition to university and/or access to focus on the first-year of university, sometimes called the first-year experience. It is useful to briefly consider this literature as it is of direct relevance to the transition (but not on its own sufficient). Johnston (2010, p.30) sums up the main points in the literature on the first year and on first-year experience as including the following topics: (1) nature and importance of the first year experience, (2) curriculum imperatives, (3) responses and measures to enhance the first year, (4) institutional priorities and enhancement, and (5)

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<sup>18</sup> See [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) for additional details.

student surveys, assessment, evaluation and measurement of the student experience in the first year. Similar issues were raised by other authors presenting literature reviews of the first-year experience in various contexts (for example, see Gordon, 2008; Harvey et al., 2006; Johnston & Kockanowska, 2009; Knox & Wyper, 2008; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

In addition, several studies on the first year focus on how students and institutions manage diversity during their adjustment to college or university (Frick, 2008; Harvey et al., 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Han, Saenz, Espinosa, & Cerna, 2007; Jones, 2005; McInnis, 2001; Nunez, 2009; Strydom & Mentz, 2009). The importance of students developing a sense of belonging as opposed to alienation; social networks, new friendships, and the building of social or cultural capital also receive much attention and have been noted to have a positive influence (although causality has not been established) on self-esteem, academic performance, and social acceptance (Krause et al., 2005; Mann, 2001, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Serra Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Related is a growing body of research focused on understanding, or advocating in the case of more policy oriented studies, an increased personalisation of the learning experience within higher education (and also during the transition and first year context) (Dietsche, 2009; Knox & Wyper, 2008; OECD, 2006; Zukas & Malcolm, 2007). For example, Knox and Wyper (2008, p. 5) stated that “continuing to treat students as if they are a homogenous group is no longer appropriate. There is a need for fundamental change across the sector and a focus on personalisation of the student experience in order to ensure that students feel as if they are each treated as an individual and that they belong within the sector” (cf, student responses in focus groups about ‘just being a number’ in section 7.3.1.1). The importance of better understanding students’ expectations of coming to university, the gaps between student and staff expectations, and of recognising the diverse and sometimes contradictory expectations of individual students and across different student groupings have also been noted (Maitland Schilling & Schilling, 2005; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). In addition to student expectations the explicit and implicit expectations of staff as well as the campus environment play an important role in the transition experience (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005b; Maitland Schilling & Schilling, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini, Cabrera, &

Bernal, 2001; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). The issue of student and academic staff expectations is also an area that emerged from my data and so will be tackled further in the results chapters.

While there is much variation in the form that first year interventions take, most are reported to focus in one way or another on providing an extended orientation and introduction to university life, together with assistance in the development of time management and study skills (Jamelske, 2009; for some examples, see Johnston, 2010; Krause et al., 2005; Leibowitz, van der Merwe, et al., 2009; Upcraft et al., 2005). Given the diversity of students and higher education institutions, Johnston (2010, pg. 3) usefully reminds us that “it may be better to think in terms of ‘multiple first years’, with nuanced transitions influenced by diverse backgrounds and contexts, rather than a one-size-fits-all format.” With this caveat in mind, it is none-the-less helpful to consider the principles of good practice in the first-year that have been proposed by Gardener, Upcraft and Barefoot (2005) based on their extensive experience working in this area and wide review of relevant literature. These authors identify the following eleven principles of good practice, which, arguably, provide a useful summary of key lessons from the literature (paraphrased from Gardner, Upcraft, & Barefoot, 2005, pp. 515–517):

1. The foundation of success in the first year lies in institutional commitment at all levels, from university leadership to student leadership. Institutions should clearly and specifically state their objectives for first-year students. A commitment to first-year success should pervade all educational initiatives inside and outside of the classroom.
2. Student learning should be central, inside and outside of the classroom. Institutions should be specific about student learning being their highest priority and investment in supportive campus environments should demonstrate this commitment.
3. There should be a clearly formulated partnership between student affairs and academic affairs in order to integrate class and out-of-class learning experiences.
4. A delicate balance of challenge and appropriate support is required across learning environments. Both inside and outside the classroom, the learning environment should avoid creating an imbalance between challenge and support.
5. First-year students are more successful when the institution communicates, and holds students accountable, for high standards of academic performance that

- challenge them to perform at their best. Related is ensuring the establishment of appropriate codes of conduct for an optimal learning environment.
6. The campus climate should be inclusive and supportive of all students and should embrace diversity. Research on the actual backgrounds of students should inform campus climates rather than anecdotal or stereotypical notions of who incoming students are.
  7. Systematic assessments of first-year initiatives should be conducted to serve as a basis for identifying areas for improvements and demonstrating good practices. These systematic assessments should include regular research on first-year student needs and expectations.
  8. Students are likely to be more successful if they are treated with dignity and respect. This takes many forms, but includes providing appropriate support, not admitting students who do not have a reasonable chance of succeeding, and not seeing the first-year as an opportunity to 'weed-out' those not suitable for university. (Although not mentioned in the Gardner et al. (2008) chapter, student initiation, which remains a relatively common practice in the South African higher education context, would be an example of practices which undermine dignity and respect of first-year students).
  9. Institutions should explicitly teach first-year students what and how to learn, i.e. the strategies and skills they need to fulfil their educational goals. Opportunities for growth and development of skills necessary to become responsible and active citizens should be available.
  10. The importance of ensuring that staff (academic and administrative) are committed to and involved in first-year success should not be underestimated. In particular, academic staff working with first-year students should be skilled in providing challenging learning environments with appropriate support.
  11. It is ultimately the students themselves who need to take responsibility for their own success. Students should assume responsibility for engaging in the learning process, working hard and making use of the institutional support structures provided. This expectation should be communicated to students at the outset of the first year.

These principles provide a helpful starting point for thinking through the first-year experience and several also emerge as particularly important from my data. However, as has been argued in this section, a focus on one side of the humpback bridge of educational transition is not sufficient, albeit the common response of higher education.

## **2.4 Views of the student**

A final point that needs to be mentioned in the context of interventions universities put in place to support the variously named ‘under-prepared’, ‘at-risk’, ‘first generation’ students is that, even if not intentionally so, these interventions are usually based on a deficit understanding of students and their capabilities (Smit, 2012). Whittaker (2008, p.26) notes that much of the research on access and transition tends to be based on a deficit model, seeking to identify interventions to reduce problematic drop out and success rates, and so focuses specific attention on groups of students identified as ‘at risk’. While this element will always remain important, she argues that the concept of a successful transition should be measured in terms of the engagement and empowerment of **all** students and should be rooted in valuing and building on the various strengths, skills and knowledge that learners bring to higher education, regardless of the specific student profile. Along similar lines, authors drawing on the adult education tradition have criticised ‘traditional’ university education as being decontextualised and failing to position students in their unique contexts, instead viewing the increasingly diverse student body as a ‘set of problems’ (see also, Gardner et al., 2005; and, Schreiner & Hulme, 2009 for a similar argument in the South African context; Zukas & Malcolm, 2007, p. 21).

While the principle of moving away from a deficit model is a critical component of the capabilities framework for the transition to university that I present in later chapters, I believe that we need to be cautious of moving to the opposite extreme at which point we refuse to honestly recognise and take on contextual or structural deficits which are quite different from individual deficits (see Chapter 3, section 4.5 on conversion factors). For example, it would be short-sighted in the South African context to make the shift away from deficits too emphatically due to the major deficits of the school system and the university response which must be named, understood and challenged in the interests of social justice. The critical point

though, is to question whether the explicit recognition of schooling deficit implies personal deficit of the student (Smit, 2012). This is where the mistake is commonly made – it has become all too common for academics to adopt a deficit view of the student in response to the deficits operating in the social and educational contexts. In addition, it is also important for the unit of analysis – educational or institutional systems versus individual students – to be made explicit. In this thesis, my approach has been to avoid a deficit model of the individual student (see Chapter 3 where the Capabilities approach is explained). Instead, I have sought to understand how the social and educational environments have limited the opportunities for students entering university.<sup>19</sup> This is not to assume that students from poor quality educational backgrounds do not have backlogs in their learning that need to be tackled, but it is to assume that under-preparation is not a defining feature of what a student can become. The prevailing ideology of meritocracy that commonly (implicitly and/or explicitly) underpins approaches to access and admission is a particular site through which deficit approaches operate, and so can be challenged.

## 2.5 Meritocracy and access

When considering the myriad of challenges and contradictions of university access (particularly when working through a social justice lens) it is important to think through the “prevailing and largely unquestioned ideology of merit” that commonly underpins access debates (Oakes et al., 2000, p. 8; see also, Chang, 2000; Harris, 2010; Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez, 2003; Morley & Lugg, 2009; Serra Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; Sternberg, 2007). Writing shortly after affirmative action was outlawed in the State of California in favour of merit based approaches for university admissions; these authors describe the ideology of merit as one which “conflates the ability to profit from educational opportunities with prior achievement in the traditional academic curriculum, as gauged by conventional measures. Moreover, it positions students with this prior achievement as more *deserving* of these opportunities” (Oakes et al., 2000, p. 8, emphasis in the original). Similarly, Young (1990, p. 200) refers to “the myth of merit” and shows how criteria for determining merit “are normative and cultural rather than neutrally scientific” (p. 204). Young does not suggest that such criteria cannot be used, but

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<sup>19</sup> The Capabilities approach is particularly useful in this respect. See, for example, Section 8.5 where conversion factors are discussed.

rather emphasises the importance of trying to make the normative and culturally situated nature of merit criteria known rather than presenting merit as a neutral means of making complex admissions decisions. Along the same lines, Oakes et al. (2000) call for broadened conceptions of what preparation for higher education and the related idea of merit mean (see also, James, 2007, for a similar argument in the Australian context; and, Scott, 2009 in the European and North American contexts).

Debates about access and meritocracy are commonly seen as an issue of justice. For example, Cunningham (2007) positions the idea of merit in opposition to that of equal opportunities for those groups traditionally excluded from higher education. The latter position, that of equal opportunity, focuses greater attention on the role of universities in society and so supports arguments for privileged admission requirements for particular groups of students (e.g. affirmative action) in order to correct for social injustices. Arguments for affirmative action in admissions commonly note that students from traditionally excluded groups “must cope with a structure and a system that defines merit in ways that do not privilege them” and as such, fairness (or justice) requires some form of different treatment for such groups in the interest of broader social gains (Arendale, 2010, p. 3, citing Walpole 2007, p. 15; see also, James, 2007; and Kwesiga & Ahikire, 2006 for a similar argument made in the context of access to Makerere University in Uganda). There is also an important body of work focusing on affirmative action debates within critical race theory (for some examples, see Allen, Teranishi, Dinwiddie, & Gonzalez, 2000; D. Bell, 2000; Carroll, Tyson, & Lumas, 2000; Chang, 2000; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Ladstone-Billings, 1998; Ladstone-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Yosso, 2005).

Taking these ideas further from a political philosophy stand point, Sandel (2010) describes how the idea of a fair meritocracy seeks to further remedy injustices by correcting for social and economic disadvantage. A fair meritocracy aims to remove obstacles to achievement by providing equal educational opportunities, so that those from poor families (or other disadvantaged groups) can compete on an equal basis with those from more privileged backgrounds. Interventions such as Head Start programmes, childhood nutrition, various health related programmes, education and skills development programmes are implemented in the name of establishing a fair meritocracy and bringing everyone, regardless of race, class or family background, to the same starting point. “According to the meritocratic conception, the

distribution of income and wealth that results from a free market is just, but only if everyone has the same opportunity to develop his or her talents. Only if everyone begins at the same starting line can it be said that the winners of the race deserve the rewards” (Sandel, 2010, p. 154). Rawls (and Sandel), however, argues that while this fair meritocratic conception (particularly common in a market driven society) might correct for some morally arbitrary advantages, such as family background, it still falls short of justice as the ‘natural lottery’ means that some people will always run faster, be more confident, or adapt better to the requirements of formal schooling than others (Rawls, 1999; Sandel, 2010). Thus, making admissions decisions based on merit only will always be tainted with some form of moral arbitrariness, and hence cannot be said to be just (Sandel, 2010).

A related issue is that merit-based decision making, (even when placed within the ambit of ‘fair meritocracy’ as described here) places far greater emphasis on individual agency and achievement than on the structural or social conditions that either support or limit achievement for different groups of people.<sup>20</sup> Brennan and Naidoo (2008, p. 290, emphasis in the original) note that:

“[A]longside the arrival of mass higher education we have the growing dominance of a neo-liberal culture emphasising individual competitiveness and responsibility spreading through society, though more advanced in some societies than others. A meritocratic ideology is central to this culture, bringing with it the message that your problems are all your fault. And similarly, your privileges are all your own achievement.”

A similar argument is made by Morley and Lugg (2009). These authors did a study in which they mapped meritocracy at four universities – two in Tanzania and two in Ghana. Amongst other findings, they noted that “socioeconomic and gender privilege are coded as academic merit” (Morley & Lugg, 2009, p. 55).

What do these arguments imply for a study on the transition from school to university? What are we to make of these debates in the South African context that is plagued by very poor quality schooling for the majority of young South Africans – but particularly black South Africans? Further complicating these questions is the fact that the current higher education

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<sup>20</sup> Tackling this issue of the relationship between individual agency and the social context is central to the Capabilities approach that I put forward in the coming chapter, in particular the notion of conversion factors. Sen and Nussbaum emphasise that different people have different capacities to convert resources into capabilities and achievements (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1985b, 1999). The importance of understanding conversion factors is covered in detail in the coming Chapter 4 (see Sections 4.5 and 8.5).

system is unlikely to be able to accommodate greater numbers of students without major investment in academic staff and teaching and learning facilities and, hence, difficult admissions decisions must be made. My reading of the access landscape in the South African higher education context is that we can identify two main considerations that bear mention in the context of meritocracy and access. The first consideration is the debates about affirmative action in higher education admissions, including whether this approach is morally defensible and socially just, and also the mechanisms for implementation (e.g. how to identify students). The practice of the University of Cape Town (UCT) in this regard is the most commonly referenced case in academic and public debates since UCT explicitly makes use of race-based criteria for admissions.<sup>21</sup> Race-based criteria are also used for making selection decisions in Medical Schools across the country. A recent edition of the South African Journal of Higher Education (volume 24, no. 2 of 2010) was devoted to this debate about affirmative action in university admissions.

These debates are complex, nuanced, and also imbued with ideologies and different disciplinary explanations. At the core, however, is the challenge of higher education transformation in a still deeply divided country. While most participants in the debate recognise the importance of higher education providing entrance pathways for prospective students from ‘disadvantaged backgrounds’, the definition of disadvantage remains somewhat elusive, with debates centred on the extent to which race should be used as an indicator of disadvantage when making admissions decisions (Bitzer, 2010; Erasmus, 2010a, 2010b; Jansen, 2010; Soudien, 2010b, 2010c). However, admissions at UCT, which is a highly selective university attracting top candidates, plays out somewhat differently compared to many other universities in the country (Bitzer, 2010). For example, many other universities (including the UFS which is my focus here) only apply selection in a few specific programmes – such as the health sciences and engineering where offered. For the majority of programmes, all candidates meeting the minimum entrance criteria are accommodated until all the available places are full. Several universities (again including the UFS) accommodate many ‘walk-in’ students. These are students who do not apply to the university during their final year of schooling, but arrive on campus at the start of the academic year and apply and register at the same time. Often these are students who first needed to gather up sufficient financial resources and who were

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<sup>21</sup> UCT has a task team reviewing this approach to admissions, under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor.

waiting for their final school results to make sure that they qualified for university entrance before paying the university application fees. Accommodating such students is, arguably, an important aspect of equity in higher education transformation given the major inequalities in South African society.

The second consideration – which is of particular relevance in this study – is about the extent to which prospective students demonstrate their likelihood of being able to cope successfully with university study; in other words, their levels of preparedness or readiness. This issue can be approached from a limited merit-based perspective with minimum achievement levels at school, and sometimes also on standardised admissions tests, taken as a proxy measure of academic preparation with only the top performers gaining entry. However, the legacy of unequal education in the country and the clear focus on equity and redress from the 1990s has demanded that the notion of readiness be expanded to include potential to succeed. A range of alternative tests that provided access routes to talented students who did not meet the standard admissions criteria were developed in the early 1990s (Griesel, 2003; Koch, Foxcroft, & Watson, 2001). In addition to providing alternative access, the argument made is that “it is essential at admission to assess the learner’s level of preparedness for university education, so as to identify areas that require development, if one is serious about equity and redress” (Koch & Foxcroft, 2003, p. 193). This implies that using measurable academic performance as the sole means of gaining entry to higher education is likely to be limited when seeking to build a more socially just higher education environment. Given the importance of understanding and critiquing notions of university readiness in the South African context, and indeed to my project in this thesis, the following section focuses specifically on this issue.

## **2.6 University readiness**

Arguably, one of the ways in which some of the difficulties of merit-based admissions discussed above have been managed is by focusing greater attention on readiness or levels of preparation for university than strictly on merit or achievement. While readiness and merit need not be different, depending on how each concept is used, it is plausible that a more just approach to university access and admissions might be achieved when the broader concept of

‘readiness’ (as compared to merit only) is used as the basis for making admissions decisions and for broadening access. However, while the intuitive idea that a broader concept of readiness is likely to be more inclusive than the idea of merit only, the question about how readiness is defined and measured is rather more difficult to answer. Readiness, like merit, is most commonly measured by considering school leaving results which are seen to provide one of the best, albeit imperfect, predictors of success in higher education (Bowen et al., 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition to school performance, the use of various admissions tests has also played an important role in assessing readiness (and merit), particularly in the USA where the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) are widely used. In the late 1990’s it was reported that more than 90% of all public and private higher education providers in the USA required their applicants to submit test scores with their application (Beatty, Greenwood, & Linn, 1999). More recently, however, increasing numbers of institutions have adopted what has been termed ‘test-optional’ admissions policies (Hoover, 2011; NACAC, 2008). These changes reflect the complex concerns and often polarised debates about the use of admissions tests in the context of admissions fairness, concerns that have yet to be resolved. Universities in South Africa have also made use of various tests to complement school results, the most recent development being the piloting and then large scale introduction of the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) from 2009 (Yeld, 2009).

### **2.6.1 School performance and admission testing**

A discussion of access issues and readiness for university would be incomplete without some consideration of school performance and admission testing. In this section these two topics are briefly presented.<sup>22</sup> Although internationally (and more recently in South Africa) there has been major public interest<sup>23</sup> in admission testing, the body of research on this issue has shown that school performance, and in some cases a combination of school performance and test results, remains the best predictor of success at university (for selected examples of this

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<sup>22</sup> The issue of testing is a vast and complex field encompassing issues from the conceptual and moral arguments for and against testing, to test construction, standardisation, procedural issues, psychometric properties, predictive validity and so on. In this section I attempt to broadly demonstrate my understanding of the role of school performance and testing, since I regard both as essential components of the transition to university. However, since my focus in this thesis is on arguing for a broader conception of readiness that incorporates, but goes beyond school performance and testing, – using the capabilities approach – I only briefly explore the topic of admission decisions from the perspective of school performance and admissions testing in this section.

<sup>23</sup> Admission testing has become a multimillion dollar business in the USA. For an interesting discussion of this history and analysis of the stakeholders and complex politics involved, see Douglas (2007).

literature, see Bowen et al., 2009; Burton & Ramist, 2001; College Board, 2009; Conley, 2005a; Douglas, 2007; Geiser & Santelices, 2007; Helms, 2008; Kirkup, Wheeler, Schagen, Morrison, & Whetton, 2008; Nel & Kistner, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Scholtz & Allen-Ile, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2010c). For example, Bowen et al. (2009, p. 114) state that:

“the findings are dramatic...an increase in test scores of one standard deviation is associated with an increase of less than 2 percentage points in six year graduation rates....In sharp contrast, an increase of one standard deviation in high school GPAs [Grade Point Average] is associated with increases of more than 10 percentage points in graduation rates at the less selective sets of universities.”

In fact, these authors argue that the “main story line” of their research is that “high school grades are a much better incremental predictor of graduation rates than are SAT/ACT test scores” (Bowen et al., 2009, p. 113; for similar findings see, Geiser & Santelices, 2007). While Bowen and colleagues focus specifically on graduation rates as a measure of educational attainment, it has perhaps been more common for research to focus on using school results and admission tests to predict success in the first year of study at university, although the findings remain similar (see, Burton & Ramist, 2001 for a discussion of this issue). It is important to note that while school results and/or admission tests have been shown to predict performance in higher education to some extent, the actual variance in student performance that is predicted remains relatively low due to the complex range of factors that impact on student success (Bowen et al., 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It is this complex range of factors that I am seeking to understand.

One of the debates in the area of admissions testing considers the relative predictive value of tests of ‘general reasoning’ or aptitude (often seen to be a measure of potential) compared to tests of achievement in specific subject domains, such as language and mathematics. In support of the latter approach (content-based testing) Bowen et al. (2009, p. 131) argue that a careful combination of school results and content-based achievement tests appear to provide “the most rigorous and fairest way to judge applicants”. There appears to be some level of consensus in the more recent literature regarding a preference for admissions tests that measure high school curriculum-related content rather than more general aptitude or ability (for some examples, see Beatty et al., 1999; College Board, 2009; Conley, 2007a; Douglas, 2007; Kirkup, Schagen, Wheeler, Morrison, & Whetton, 2007; Kirkup et al., 2008; Terenzini et al., 2001). Various reasons are provided, but quite common is a concern about the burgeoning industry of

standardised test preparation services (particularly in the USA context) (Douglas, 2007; Hossler & Anderson, 2005; NACAC, 2008). Of particular concern is the fact that students from poorer backgrounds are less likely to be able to afford such support, and so this introduces further bias into the system (in addition to differential school backgrounds). In addition, authors have noted a growing tendency to ‘teach to the tests’ in schools to the detriment of sustained attention to the school curriculum. Tests focused on achievement in subject areas are seen to provide a better motivation for students to focus on covering the breadth and depth of their school subjects (Bowen et al., 2009; Douglas, 2007; Geiser & Santelices, 2007; NACAC, 2008).

Differential performance on standardised admissions tests across different groupings of tests takers – including ethnicity, race, gender, socioeconomic context, school background, parental level of education, home language and others – has been found in several studies (for some examples, see Bowen et al., 2009; Campbell, 2003; Cliff, Yeld, & Hanslo, 2003; Conley, 2008a; Copland, Sachdev, & Flint, 2008; Douglas, 2007; Flemming, 2000; Hurtado, 2010; International Association of Universities, 2008; James, 2007; Kirkup et al., 2007, 2008; Kobrin, Sathy, & Shaw, 2007; McDonald, Newton, Whetton, & Benefield, 2001; Morley & Lugg, 2009; NACAC, 2008; Oakes et al., 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sternberg, 2007; Terenzini et al., 2001). Kobrin et al (2007) analysed 20 years of SAT data and found that the differential performance on the tests across subgroups remained largely consistent over time, despite changes in the tests themselves.<sup>24</sup> Findings such as this raise a series of questions about the use of these tests in the context of social justice and access, and in the South African context with marked inequalities in a number of areas (see section 2.8). A related issue gaining increasing recognition in the testing literature is that of test performance for learners or students who are not writing tests in their mother tongue or home language (Beatty et al., 1999; Kirkup et al., 2008; NACAC, 2008). This is also of critical importance in the South African context where the

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<sup>24</sup> One new avenue which appears to hold promise is the admissions testing based on Sternberg’s theory of successful intelligence which was used as the basis for the development of a test called WICS (Wisdom-Intelligence-Creativity, Synthesised). Sternberg (2007) reports that piloting of this test as an additional component of the admissions process for 15,000 students applying to Tufts University (Massachusetts) provided a means for the university to admit 30% more African-American and 15% more Hispanic American students than the previous year because the WICS measured a much broader concept of ability. Another is emerging research being conducted by academics at Oxford University who have shown that performance in a test that measures candidates’ deep learning was not influenced by the type of school from which candidates came. In addition, high scores in a written question in which candidates needed to argue in favour of a specific position produced more than a 70% chance of a first class pass irrespective of school background and school results (GCSE scores) (Mellanby, Cortina-Borja, & Stein, 2009). These two studies present examples of emerging research considering alternative approaches to admissions testing. Another is that of dynamic assessment. It is, however, beyond the scope of this research to explore the details of these studies.

majority of learners and students learning in a language other than their mother tongue (Cliff & Hanslo, 2009; Koch & Foxcroft, 2003; Koch et al., 2001). It has been argued that when students are writing a test in a language in which they are not familiar, the test becomes a test of language proficiency, rather than a test of the specific skills and abilities it was designed to measure and so is less helpful in identifying potential or aptitude (Kobrin et al., 2007; Koch & Foxcroft, 2003).

While the testing debates briefly discussed above are taking place internationally (and obviously have relevance for South Africa too), in our context that is plagued by the lingering legacies of apartheid education and growing inequality across most sectors of society, and particularly within quality of schooling (Bloch, 2009), an additional angle needs to be taken into account. This is usefully summed up by Cliff and Hanslo (2009, p. 274) as follows:

“[C]learly, in a context where secondary school educational provision has been adequate and well resourced, there may be no need to consider such alternative measures. However, where this provision has not been adequate or where students come from backgrounds that might mean they are under- or unprepared to meet the demands of higher education study, some form of alternative assessment of their potential may be necessary” (see also, Cliff, Ramaboa, & Pearce, 2007; Griesel, 2003, 2006; Herman, 1995; Koch et al., 2001).

As a result, several universities in the country have made use of various forms of admissions tests and alternative routes for accessing universities. In addition to using tests to identify potential or preparedness, higher education in South Africa has also needed to confront challenges of curriculum relevance, responsiveness and appropriateness of new school curricula for the increasingly diverse student body. It was against this backdrop that Higher Education South Africa (HESA) initiated the National Benchmark Test Project in 2006, the purpose of which was to:

1. Assess entry-level academic and quantitative literacy and mathematics proficiency of students;
2. Assess the relationship between entry level proficiencies and school-level exit outcomes;
3. Provide a service to higher education institutions requiring additional information in the admission and placement of students; and
4. Inform the nature of foundation courses and curriculum responsiveness (Griesel, 2006, p. 4).

The NBTs were piloted in 2009 with seven higher education institutions, prior to wider-scale rollout from 2010. The emerging NBT results have highlighted quite starkly the vast numbers of students who are currently entering universities without the required proficiency levels in academic literacy, mathematics, and quantitative literacy (Prince, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2010a, 2010c; Yeld, 2009). The South African context is further complicated by the low levels of content knowledge demonstrated by the teachers themselves (Bloch, 2009; HSRC, 2008; van der Sandt & Nieuwoudt, 2003). Yet, “[T]he fact remains – and needs continually to be restated – that higher education must build on the foundation created by the education and training opportunities which precede students’ progression into higher education” (Griesel, 2006, p. 5). The NBTs, together with school leaving results, provide one means of understanding the academic foundation from which universities should build and where additional learning support is needed to ensure better success rates. However, as will be seen in the coming sections, measures of proficiency, aptitude, or content knowledge, as important as they are in access and admissions, remain only a partial component of the multi-dimensional preparation or ‘readiness’ required for making a successful transition to university. It is to this topic that we now turn.

### **2.6.2 Readiness as a multidimensional construct**

The difficulty of predicting performance at university on the basis of school results, with or without additional admissions testing, was noted in the section above. For example, Geiser and Santelices (2007, p. 25) found that only about 30% of the total variance in college grades could be explained by school and SAT performance (working with a sample 79,785 students entering UC over a four year period). These results are not unlike those found at the UFS specifically (Wilson-Strydom, 2010c). Geiser and Santelices (2007) further emphasise that the prediction is even more limited when working with performance of individual students, as opposed to group outcomes or averages over large samples where some of the specifics of individual differences are masked. In addition, as I argued in the introduction to this thesis (and will build on further in the coming chapter), there are problems, from a social justice perspective, with treating students as numbers, averages or homogeneous groups rather than as individuals who are an end (of value) in their own right (cf Sen, 2009). Cliff et al. (2007, p.1) note that:

“research into entry-level preparedness has contributed two major sets of insights into debates about what makes students engage successfully in higher education: (1) that factors influencing success are a complex blend of cognitive, affective, motivational, dispositional, socio-cultural, economic and institutional variables; and (2) that the changing characteristics of student bodies worldwide have foregrounded the need to better understand the complex relations between student and institutional characteristics and success”.

This quotation highlights the ‘complex blend’ of factors that impact on success – and also the transition experience itself. For these reasons, my starting point in thinking through how we might enhance the transition to university in the interests of student success and social justice, has been to acknowledge that while school performance and admissions tests (NBTs in this specific case) are an essential and valuable component of the admissions process, researchers have tended to focus too much attention on these measures, possibly to the detriment of a broader and more complex understanding of readiness for university. Facilitating a more effective transition from school to university “cannot emerge from the use of standardised tests alone; [it] must be grounded in broader efforts to better understand students’ high school learning experiences” (High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2005, p. 7).

While several well-known theorists of student experience, development and success in higher education all make reference to (variously named) pre-university characteristics and experiences of entering students, the focus of theory and research remains on what happens once in higher education with much less emphasis on schooling and the transition experience itself (Astin, 1985, 1991, 1999; Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Upcraft et al., 2005). For example, Astin (1991) identified 146 possible pre-college (or input) factors that influence student performance, such as high school results, admissions test scores, race, ethnicity, age, gender, religious preference, parental levels of education, reasons for attending university and others (Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005, p. 30). Following a review of Astin and Tinto’s theories Crissman Ishler and Upcraft (2005, p. 31) conclude that “if institutions are to challenge and support first-year students in their academic success, they must focus on both the characteristics and experiences of their students prior to college, as well as their experiences both inside and outside the classroom once they are enrolled and how these variables interrelate.” An initial reading of this conclusion implies that these authors acknowledge the importance of pre-university characteristics and a more active engagement with the interface between university and schooling, with at least

some focus on what happens at school. Yet, if one continues with the passage, it ends as follows: “[T]his means more careful attention to who is admitted and to the creation of collegiate environment that is conducive to student persistence once students are enrolled” (Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005, p. 31). Thus, again, the focus is turned to measurable admissions criteria and the first year at university – i.e. only one side of the humpback bridge.

One of the most sustained and thorough accounts of readiness for university has been the work of David Conley<sup>25</sup> who has developed a multi-dimensional concept of readiness (Conley, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010a). Conley’s model of college readiness draws on research spanning nearly 20 years in the North American context. The concept takes account of a wide range of qualitative and quantitative studies, over time, in different socioeconomic and schooling contexts, and taking a wide range of stakeholders’ perspectives into account, including perspectives from both the schooling and university environments. The model seeks to provide an alternative way of understanding, defining and measuring readiness not provided by other authors reviewed and also, arguably, provides a basis from which to formulate interventions to build a new bridge between school and university. I have demonstrated in an earlier publication that Conley’s multidimensional model of university readiness is useful for understanding the transition to university in the South African context (and for the UFS specifically) (see, Wilson-Strydom, 2010b).<sup>26</sup>

Conley’s work draws attention to the need to understand the gap between being **eligible** (commonly assessed using school results and admissions testing) for university study, and being **ready** to be successful at university. Similarly, the six-year national study on high school exit standards and higher education entrance standards conducted by Stanford University’s Bridge programme recommended that it is critical to “create an awareness that getting into college is not the hardest part [ ] true college opportunity includes having a real chance to succeed” (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003, p. 4). The multidimensional model of college

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<sup>25</sup> David Conley is the Director of the Centre for Educational Policy Research (CEPR) and the Educational Policy Improvement Centre (EPIC) both located at the University of Oregon. EPIC is a non-profit organisation that works closely with CEPR. EPIC’s work is focused on a series of educational policy and practice initiatives that aim to increase student success in college and university but focusing on the public schooling system and the extent to which schooling prepares students for college and university – i.e. school/higher education alignment. EPIC has developed a range of resources to assist both schools and learners/students to prepare for college. These include the CollegeCareerReady School Diagnostic (EPIC, 2010a) and the College-Readiness Performance Assessment (C-PAS) (EPIC, 2010b). For more information on the work of EPIC, see [www.epiconline.org](http://www.epiconline.org) and <http://cepr.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>26</sup> The data used in this paper draws on the data collected for this thesis, in particular the focus groups conducted with first-year students at the UFS in 2009.

readiness developed by Conley (2005, 2008) takes account of four facets (see Figure 2): key cognitive strategies, key content, academic behaviours, and contextual skills and awareness (also called college or university knowledge). Conley (2008, p.5) notes that “because college is truly different from high school, college readiness is fundamentally different from high school completion.” It is thus critical for universities to understand the experiences of their first-year students whilst at school, the extent to which these experiences have prepared them for university, and also how students are experiencing the transition from the school environment to the university environment.

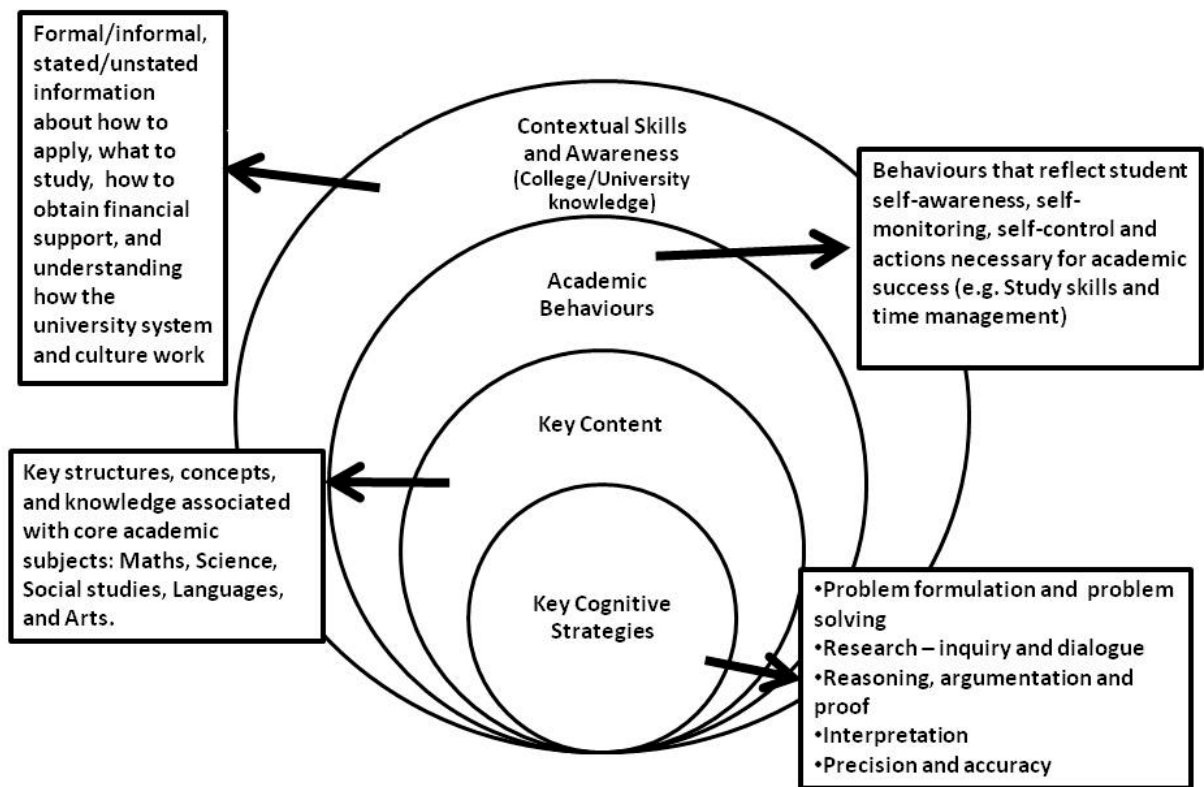


Figure 2: Multidimensional model of college/university readiness (adapted from Conley, 2008, p. 6)

Conley’s work demonstrates that even though important, it is not enough for learners to complete their schooling with content mastery only (commonly reflected in good school

leaving results); they must also develop analytic and writing skills that are consistent with what is required at university. Also important is that learners are supported to understand how they learn best, i.e. they need to learn how to learn (Chickering, 2006). In a similar vein, Jacobs (2009, p.241) reminds us of the “need for lecturers to make the hidden disciplinary discourses explicit to students at the first-year level” – in other words, epistemological access must be consciously fostered during the first year. This development of analytical and writing skills and the intellectual maturation process that accompanies it is seldom done at schools (Conley, 2005a, 2008a; Johnston & Kockanowska, 2009). In addition, the development of academic behaviours (academic self-management skills) needed to cope successfully with the demands of university study together with college/university knowledge (understanding how the higher education system works) are critical (see also, A. D. Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2008; Perna, 2004; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, Thomas, & Li, 2008; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).<sup>27</sup> Tornatzky et al. (2002) usefully describe college knowledge as the instrumental information needed to engage with the college or university environment. Research conducted with students in Scotland highlighted the need for more and better communication about “what it means to be a student at university today” (Johnston & Kockanowska, 2009, p. 51), with particular emphasis on expectations of students regarding independent learning, self-assessment and writing styles, together with an understanding of the implications for how one approaches the study of a specific discipline(s). In addition, students also called for better communication about what being at university entails at the level of day-to-day activities, such as number of lectures students commonly attend each day, what happens in a lecture, tutorial and laboratory requirements, class preparation requirements, reading requirements and the expected size of the entering cohort (Johnston & Kockanowska, 2009, p. 52; see also, Knox & Wyper, 2008). Conley (2009) sums this up succinctly as follows:

“Secondary and postsecondary education will need to connect much more systematically and in ways that enable all students, but particularly those who are the first in their families to attend college, to be prepared for the challenges they will face in entry-level college courses. Postsecondary access will be a cruel hoax for these students if success in college is beyond their reach. High school and college will need to change substantially and **in tandem** to achieve the goal of preparing more students for college access”(Conley, 2009, p. 7 emphasis in the original)

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<sup>27</sup> These components of university readiness also align well with the capabilities framework proposed for understanding the transition to university, see section 4.5.

My research (during the early stages of this PhD) focused on assessing the extent to which Conley's model was useful in the South African context. This research confirmed that the transition experience was difficult for almost all participating students; including those who had been at 'good' schools generally believed to prepare students well for university (Wilson-Strydom, 2010b).<sup>28</sup> This finding supports the calls made in this thesis for universities in South Africa to pay greater attention to the transition experience, and particularly to how university preparation might begin at school level. The focus group discussions revealed that students did indeed need to navigate their way over a humpback bridge when making the transition from school to university. Overall, my earlier work confirmed that the experiences reported by students were in line with Conley's multidimensional model of university readiness (Wilson-Strydom, 2010b). Chapter 6 presents further data to confirm and build on this finding.

Having established that this multidimensional model of university readiness is applicable in the South African context – and the specific institutional focus on my work – the next question on which one must reflect is how this might be used to inform interventions that improve the transition from school to university? To improve the transition experience universities need to have a much deeper understanding of students' educational practices at school level. It is not sufficient to consider learners' academic performance only. Readiness implies much more contextual knowledge about the educational experiences and practices of learners whilst at school. The learner/student engagement framework presented in the coming section provides a means of developing this understanding, and as will be argued below, is particularly useful because it allows for comparisons to be made between educational practices at school and university levels. In introducing the learner/student engagement framework below I draw specific references back to Conley's multidimensional model of college readiness to show how the learner/student engagement approach provides a means for assessing key aspects of readiness.

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<sup>28</sup> There is increasing anecdotal evidence of learners at top performing schools being coached ahead of the Mathematics and Physical Science examinations so performing very well in the grade 12 examinations. However, when these learners enter university they are not able to perform as well where understanding and application of content knowledge is needed.

## **2.7 Effective education practices: student<sup>29</sup> engagement**

There has been a growing focus on student engagement as an approach for understanding effective learning environments. As will be shown below, student engagement has been used in a wide range of national contexts as well as at school, post school, community college and university settings. In their introduction to an edited book focused specifically on student engagement in higher education, Harper and Quaye (2009, p. 3) note that:

“[We] are persuaded by a large volume of empirical evidence that confirms that strategising ways to increase the engagement of various student populations, especially those for whom engagement is known to be problematic, is a worthwhile endeavour. The gains and outcomes are too robust to leave to chance, and social justice is unlikely to ensue if some students come to enjoy the beneficial by products of engagement and others do not.”

### **2.7.1 Conceptual underpinnings of student engagement**

The importance of creating learning environments (be it at school or university) that foster active engagement by learners and students has gained increasing recognition in the literature (for some examples, see Astin, 1985, 1999; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Del Rios & Leegwater, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kuh, 2007; Kuh et al., 2007, 2005a; Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009; Mann, 2001, 2008; Strydom & Mentz, 2010a; Student Development and Success, 2008; Willms, 2000; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006, 2009). Mann argues that we need change the perspective from which we approach research seeking to understand learning experiences “from a focus on surface/strategic/deep approaches to learning to a focus on alienated or engaged experiences of learning” (Mann, 2001, p. 8).

There is increasing evidence that the student engagement framework provides a useful conceptual and methodological approach for interrogating educational practice at both schools and universities (Chickering, 2006; Kuh, 2007; Kuh et al., 2007, 2005a; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; Wilson-Strydom & Hay, 2010). The concept of student engagement has been used to understand the educational experiences of school learners (Willms, 2000; Wilson-Strydom &

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<sup>29</sup> In the South African context the following terminology is used – when learning at the school level we speak of learners and when learning at the higher education level we speak of students. However, in much of the international literature, and the student engagement literature itself, the term student is used for both school learners and higher education learners. For ease of reading, in this section I refer to the student engagement framework since this is the commonly used name for the approach. However, I do not refer exclusively to university students, but am using the term in the inclusive sense that includes higher education and school level learners.

Hay, 2010; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006, 2009, 2010); first-year students (Hayek & Kuh, 2004; Krause, 2005; Krause et al., 2005; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Richardson & Coates, 2010); low income and first generation students (Del Rios & Leegwater, 2008; Filkins & Doyle, 2002; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Shouping & Kuh, 2002); commuter and part time students (Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009); students from minority religious groups (Mahaffey & Smith, 2009); students with disabilities (Nichols & Quaye, 2009); racial/ethnic minority students (Del Rios & Leegwater, 2008; Kuh & Natalicio, 2004; Mahaffey & Smith, 2009); international students (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2003); and lesbian, gay and bisexual students (Schueler, Hoffman, & Peterson, 2009) – to mention a few specific examples. As such, this approach to understanding how students engage with and experience their learning environment has been shown to be of value in many contexts, and also for work with an explicit social justice agenda.

In particular, I have drawn on the work of a group of researchers based at Indiana University in Bloomington who conceptualised and continue to lead the field of student engagement. At the higher education level, the student engagement work has been driven by Kuh and his colleagues at the Centre for Postsecondary Research, and at the high school level the work has been driven by a team of researchers based at the Centre for Evaluation and Education Policy – both located at Indiana University in Bloomington, USA. Student engagement is defined as the **“time and energy devoted to educationally purposeful activities” by students *and* institutions of learning such as schools or universities** (High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2005, p. 1). As such, the approach provides a useful means of researching student agency as well as institutional conditions that support or hinder student agency.

The conceptual framework of student engagement has drawn heavily on the work of Chickering and Gamson (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991), as well as Astin’s theory of involvement (Astin, 1985, 1991, 1993, 1999). Given the importance of these theories to the student engagement approach it is useful to briefly consider the key tenets of each. Building on more than 50 years of research on teaching and learning, Chickering and Gamson (1987) presented seven principles of good practice in undergraduate teaching and learning. These seven principles (presented in Box) draw on six ‘powerful forces in education’, namely: activity, expectations, cooperation, interaction, diversity, and responsibility (Chickering & Gamson,

1987, p. 1). The wide impact and use of these principles was documented in a reflective article published by Chickering and Gamson 22 years after the seven principles were first published (Chickering & Gamson, 1991).

Box1: Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (quoted from Chickering and Gamson, 1987)

1. *Encourages Contact Between Students and Faculty:* Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few key faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.
2. *Developing Reciprocity and Cooperation Among Students:* Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team efforts than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding.
3. *Encourages Active Learning:* Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorising pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.
4. *Gives Prompt Feedback:* Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. When getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence. In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves.
5. *Emphasises Time on Task:* Time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and professional alike. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty. How an institution defines time expectations for students, faculty, administrators, and other professional staff can establish the basis of high performance for all.
6. *Communicates High Expectations:* Expect more and you will get more. High expectations are important for everyone – for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well-motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations for themselves and make extra efforts.
7. *Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning:* There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college. Brilliant students in the seminar room may be all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students rich in hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come easily.

Alexander Astin is widely regarded as a key theorist in the field of higher education and student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In particular, his work on student involvement (Astin, 1993, 1999) and assessment of student, staff and institutional performance (Astin, 1985, 1991) has been extensively used within higher education research and practice. The concept of student involvement underpins the more recent work on student engagement. Astin notes that “[Q]uite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Unlike content theories of learning which tend to place students in a passive role, Astin’s work emphasised the importance of active participation in the learning process. This is not a new idea in 2012, but at the time Astin was writing his original works – mid 1970s to mid 1980s –

he challenged much of the dominant understanding of teaching and learning which assumed that knowledgeable professors lecture to students who are then able to acquire the professor's knowledge. In his 1984 publication he focused on the theory of involvement in higher education (republished in 1999), Astin describes his agenda as follows:

“A major impetus for the development of the student involvement theory was my exasperation at the tendency of many academics to treat students as a kind of ‘black box’. On the input end of this black box are the various policies and programs of a college or university; on the output end are various types of achievement measures such as the GPA or scores on standardised tests. It seemed that something was missing: some mediating mechanism that would explain how these educational programs and policies are translated into student achievement and development” (Astin, 1999, p. 520).

Working from this departure point, Astin argued that students' time was one of the most precious institutional resources – yet was seldom explicitly considered by higher education leaders, administrators and academic staff. The theory of student involvement, together with the set of complex empirical work supporting it, show that “the extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains” (see also, Astin, 1993, 1999, p. 522). Importantly, it is not just the quantity of time, but the quality of time spent on educationally effective activities. This concept of ‘time on task’ should not be seen in too limited a way to argue that all learning takes place in formal learning settings or through drill and practice type of activities. Rather, the way that the concept of student time is used by Astin and by Kuh and his student engagement colleagues, specifically takes account of learning outside of the formal curriculum as well as a host of different types of learning activities – in particular active and collaborative learning (Astin, 1993, 1999; Kuh et al., 2007, 2005a). The key point is that students' time needs to be spent on learning activities that are most effective given the context of the particular student.

This argument is also important in the context of epistemological access introduced above. If a student is not able to make sense of the context and meaning of the work they are engaging with, then they will not be engaging in quality learning and the educational practice would not be effective. Putting it a slightly different way, Krause (2005, p. 12) reminds us that we need to see engagement itself as a multidimensional concept and that to be effective at university students need to learn the “rules of engagement” – i.e. how one needs to learn at university. In one of Boughey's (2005, 2008) studies on epistemological access, she worked with

students at a historically black university who were required to engage with the work of philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as a component of a political philosophy course. She concluded that the “students’ engagements with the texts are based on understandings of a context which differs from the context of the university. The actions undertaken by students to learn, therefore, are deeply related to their identities as individuals outside the university and how they understand ‘outside’ contexts” (cf. Conley’s notion of university knowledge). As such, effective educational practice needs to help students understand the “processes of knowledge construction” that are central to learning at university level (Boughey, 2008, p. 198). This is done by avoiding a narrow focus on developing autonomous learning skills or strategies in favour of engagement with content through which students explore academic constructs and come to understand “what counts as ‘appropriate’ in the construction of academic knowledge and academic texts” (Boughey, 2005, p. 241). Returning to the importance of how students use their time, Boughey (2005, p. 141, emphasis is in the original) concludes that “it is necessary to ensure that time is available for students to truly *engage* with the content. If programmes are ‘content heavy’, then it is likely the engagement will be superficial.”

In sum, Astin argues that what students do matters for their learning and development; that the focus of educators and researchers must include an understanding of “what students are actually doing – how motivated they are and how much time and energy they are devoting to the learning process” (Astin, 1999, p. 526). The research on epistemological access extends this argument by emphasising that we cannot understand ‘what students do’ without understanding who students are and where they come from (this is also in line with the focus on agency within the capabilities approach, see sections 4.3 and 4.5).

The student engagement approach, as articulated by Kuh and his colleagues, takes Astin’s assumption that what students do matters, a step further. These authors argue that, while what students do is of central importance, what educational institutions do to create opportunities for engagement (or involvement) is equally critical. Thus,

“student engagement has two key components that contribute to student success. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the ways the institution allocates resources and organises learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities” (Kuh et al., 2005a, p. 9).

A final assumption of the student engagement approach, which is of particular relevance to my work, is that it is essential to 'listen' to students/learners themselves in order to understand how they experience their learning environment and also to understand how this environment can be enhanced (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 8). For example, the Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS) project, whose work was based on the concept of student engagement, emphasised the value of collecting and analysing accessible data that educational institutions can use to improve student learning and success (Del Rios & Leegwater, 2008). The BEAMS project was focused on post-schooling colleges, but a similar argument has also been made for schools (Willms, 2000).

In concluding this sub-section focused on the theoretical underpinnings of student engagement, I wish to insert a cautionary note – drawing on the work of Krause (2005) in the Australian context. Much of what has been written in my introduction of the concept of student engagement has focused on the positive implications that enhancing engagement has. Indeed, such is the general focus in the literature. However, Krause (2005, p. 11) reminds us that “we need to challenge old paradigms that depict engagement in solely positive terms.” She argues – based on empirical data from several universities in Australia – that for some students, their university experience might be likened more to engaging in a battle or conflict. “These are the students for whom the culture of the institution is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting. For instance, students from disadvantaged backgrounds typically lack the social and cultural capital required to ‘talk the talk’ and ‘walk the walk’ at university” (Krause, 2005, p. 9; see also, Brooking, Gardiner, & Calvert, 2009; Mann, 2001, 2008). It is thus important to adopt a critical and reflective stance on the notion of engagement and on the university environment itself, which, even when intentionally seeking to enhance engagement may not do so for all students. Krause (2005, p. 12) recommends that we broaden our view of engagement and acknowledge that (1) “engagement is a multidimensional concept which is at once positive for some and a battle for others who may not be familiar with the rules of engagement in the university setting”, and (2) that in order to strive towards meaningful engagement we need to prepare, support and empower students with explicit strategies that allow them to build on positive engagement experiences and to manage conflicts that are likely to arise from their attempts to engage with the many and various challenges of studying at university. Building university knowledge is one such strategy.

### **2.7.2 Student engagement constructs and research instruments**

Building on the theoretical basis explained in section 2.7.1, several research instruments have been developed for ‘measuring’ student engagement. First administered in the year 2000, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), developed for university students, has been completed by over a million students at more than 1300 colleges and universities in the USA. An Australasian version of the NSSE – the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) – has been developed and was administered for the first time in 2007. During this first year, 25 higher education institutions across Australia and New Zealand participated (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). In 2008 a total of 25 universities took part, 35 in 2009, and 55 (almost all the universities in the region) in 2010 (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, 2009, 2010). This growth in institutional participation highlights the growing recognition of the value that the concept of student engagement adds to the complex terrain of student success.

Following on the success of the NSSE research in the USA, a High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) was developed and completed by almost 200,000 high school students between 2004 and 2006 (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006, p. 665). In 2007 and 2008, more than 134,000 high school learners in the USA completed the survey, and in 2009 another 42,754 were sampled (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). The results of the school survey, in the USA context, have demonstrated the value the concept of student engagement has, particularly in the context of improving teaching and learning behaviours so contributing to learner success and school improvement (Del Rios & Leegwater, 2008; Willms, 2000; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006, 2009, 2010).

In 2006 an adapted version of the NSSE that targets university students was developed for the South African context. The South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) was administered for the first time in South Africa at the University of the Free State in 2006 and 2007 (Student Development and Success, 2008). This research, was extended in 2009 to cover seven South African universities, and has demonstrated both the theoretical and practical value of student engagement as a conceptual basis for enhancing student/learner success and supporting systemic improvements in South African higher education (Strydom & Mentz, 2010a, 2010b; Student Development and Success, 2008). The South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement (SAHSSLE) used in this study is an adapted version of the

HSSSE, and also draws on lessons from the adaptation process of the SASSE (See Chapter 5 for methodological details).

The student engagement research instruments – at both university and school levels – provide data in the following areas (paraphrased from, Kuh et al., 2005a, pp. 11–13):<sup>30</sup>

- **Level of academic challenge.** Challenging intellectual and creative work is a key element of student learning. There are three components of academic challenge, namely: the nature and amount of assigned academic work, the complexity of cognitive tasks, and standards used to evaluate student performance. Specific questions cover areas such as preparation for class, reading and writing, using higher order thinking skills, institutional environments that emphasise studying and academic work, and students' perceptions about how hard they need to work to meet their instructor's standards.
- **Active and collaborative learning.** Research has shown that students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and have opportunities to think deeply and apply what they learn in various settings. When students collaborate to solve problems or master complex material they develop a set of valuable skills in preparation for the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter having completed their studies. Specific questions include, for example: asking questions in class, making presentations, working in groups in class and/or out of class, participating in community projects, discussing ideas/readings with others.
- **Student interaction with academic staff/teachers.** Much research has shown that, in general, the more contact students have with their lecturers/teachers the better. Through such interactions lecturers/teachers serve as role models, mentors, and guides for lifelong learning. Specific questions include, for example: discussing marks or assignments with teachers, talking about career plans, getting feedback on performance, working with teachers on research or other projects.
- **Enriching Educational Experiences.** Effective educational institutions offer a range of different opportunities – both inside and outside the classroom – that complement the

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<sup>30</sup> At the university level – the NSSE and SASSE – measure each of these areas as student engagement benchmarks. Individual universities can then compare their performance to national benchmark, or to the performance of other similar universities. At the high school level, the student engagement research has not sought to benchmark performance using the same five benchmarks used for higher education, essentially because the schooling system in the USA is so diverse. Instead, the emerging research has pointed to three dimensions of student engagement as described in this chapter.

goals of the academic programme. A critical area is exposure to diversity. Technology can also be used in many ways to provide enriching experiences. Specific questions include, for example: working with diverse groups of learners, learners of different races, internships, projects, community service or volunteer work, independent study and a capstone experience.

- **Supportive campus/school environment.** Students perform better when the institution is committed to success and cultivates positive working and social relations among all students. Specific questions in this area include, the extent to which the campus/school environment promotes good relations between students, between students and teachers, provides support for students to succeed academically, helps learners cope with non-academic responsibilities, and helps students to thrive socially.

More recent work, particularly in the context of high schools, has pointed to three conceptual dimensions (as opposed to statistically identified scales or benchmarks) of learner engagement (paraphrased from, Yazzie-Mintz, 2010, pp. 16–17, see also, Yazzie-Mintz, 2009):

- **Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement** focuses mostly on engagement during instructional time and with instruction-related activities. This dimension can be described as engagement of mind.
- **Social/Behavioural/Participatory Engagement** is concerned with learner actions and participation outside of instructional activities; such as non-academic school activities (sport, culture, etc), social activities and interactions with the school community (learners and teachers) beyond the instructional setting. As such, this dimension is concerned with engagement in the life of the school or university.
- **Emotional Engagement** considers the extent to which learners feel or experience a connection to their school and the school community, and includes questions such as general feelings regarding the school or university, the level of support students perceive is available, and the students' place in their school or university community. This dimension has been described as engagement of the heart.

Yazzie-Mintz (2010, p. 2) argues that a focus on these three dimensions of engagement allows for a conception of student engagement as a deeper and broader construct than to put too strong an emphasis on the behavioural aspects, such as time on task, attendance, and extent

of participation in different learning activities. He notes that “though researchers often attempt to identify specific student behaviours (time on task, attendance), student characteristics (self-efficacy), or school structures (small learning communities, presence of technology) as discrete indicators or predictors of engagement, reviews of the research literature best support a definition of engagement that is complex and ‘multifaceted’” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010, p. 2). For example, the results of the HSSSE survey have pointed to a disjuncture regarding the actual time students report spending on various educational activities and the relative importance they accord to these activities. The importance accorded to different educational practices has a critical impact on student effort and ultimately their engagement (when understood in a broader manner) or experiences of alienation from the learning process (Mann, 2001; Yazzie-Mintz, 2009, 2010). In this study I have worked more with Yazzie-Mintz’s understanding of engagement which, arguably, is also better aligned with Conley’s multidimensional model of college readiness and with a commitment to epistemological access rather than formal access only.

There has been some debate in the literature regarding the validity of, particularly the NSSE benchmarks, in predicting educational outcomes (in support of the NSSE see, Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010; questioning the NSSE validity see, Porter, 2009). However, since my use of the student engagement framework and instruments (See Chapters 5 and 6) has not involved using the items or benchmarks for prediction of performance, these debates, while important to mention, are of less relevance to my work. Instead, I have made use of the student engagement approach and instruments as one means (in the context of a mixed methods study) of investigating and describing educational practices as they occur in schools and at university in an effort to better understand readiness for university.

### **2.7.3 Applying the student engagement framework to the transition from school to university**

“What is the purpose of schooling in high schools today? Is it to get students to pass classes and standardized tests, get a high school degree, and move on? Or is it to engage students deeply in learning, to plant seeds of intellectual interest that will carry students to the next stages of education and work?” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006, p. 11)

While the major focus of student engagement research has been on effective educational practices at the high school and university levels as separate areas of focus, the concept of

student engagement and the related research instruments also provides a useful means of exploring the interface between schooling and university by facilitating the collection of comparable data on education practices at school and university levels. As such, I have found the notion of student engagement to be a useful framework and methodology for assessing educational practices in the context of the transition to university, taking account of the multidimensional approach to university readiness presented above. In this section I briefly report on the student engagement research that has specifically focused on the transition to university, firstly to demonstrate the value of this framework in the context of my work, and secondly to highlight some of the key lessons that have emerged and which can inform my understanding.<sup>31</sup>

In section 2.6.2 above, Conley's multidimensional model of college readiness was presented as a helpful way of approaching the assessment of readiness for university study in a manner that allows us to move beyond focusing only on measurable performance – school grades or admissions tests – as a proxy for readiness. The student engagement framework, with its emphasis on effective educational practices from the perspective of both the school learner and university student, provides a useful means of gathering empirical data for assessing readiness. The student engagement instruments provide measures that allow one to explore readiness in terms of Conley's dimensions of key cognitive strategies, academic behaviours, and university knowledge (see Figure 2.). Importantly, the student engagement measures also provide the basis for including the emotional dimension of learning and readiness which is, arguably, an aspect missing from Conley's model.

Three papers<sup>32</sup> have been published that focus specifically on how learner/student engagement data help us to understand readiness for higher education (High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; Kuh, 2007; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006). All three papers base their

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<sup>31</sup> There is an additional student engagement research instrument called the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) (see <http://bcsse.iub.edu/?cid=232> for further details about the BCSSE). This survey is completed by first-year students shortly after they start at university. The survey aims to assess the student engagement activities at high school (by asking the first-year student to reflect on their high school experience), students' expectations regarding their own engagement at university as well as what they expect the institution to provide in terms of engagement opportunities and emphasis (Kuh, 2007). Given my focus on the transition experience – which, as I've already argued, requires explicit attention to both sides of the humpback bridge – the BCSSE is limited in that it measures first-year students' reports of how they experienced high school rather than questioning students whilst engaged with their high school experience. In addition, to properly understand educational practices at school level, and the extent to which these experiences prepare students for university level study, it is essential to focus on several years of the high school experience, which is possible using the high school survey.

<sup>32</sup> In addition, we have published a book chapter in which similar results were shown in the South African context using the pilot data collected as part of my PhD research (see Wilson-Strydom and Hay, 2010).

arguments on empirical work that compares data from the HSSE with data from the NSSE – i.e. measures of learner engagement at the high school level are compared with measures of engagement at the university level (typically with a focus on the first-year). The findings are consistent and point to the fact that while the majority of high school learners report high expectations regarding their intention to enter higher education they are not engaging in the kinds of educational activities at school that are like to prepare them for university level learning. In particular, at high school learners tend to spend about half the time preparing for class compared to first-year university students; they spend relatively little time reading and write very few papers or essays of more than five pages in length (High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006). Further, at high school, learners in the US appear to be able to meet the expectations placed on them with relatively little effort. McCarthy and Kuh (2006, p. 666) refer to this as the “mediocre overall effort” that is required of learners when at high school. They conclude that there is “a major problem in the educational pipeline – the substantial gap between what [learners] do in high school and what they will be expected to do once in college” (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006, p. 666).

Research has also shown that low income and first-generation students derive particular benefit from engaged learning practices, in terms of their cognitive development and overall success, where an institutional commitment to student engagement translates into interconnected learning support networks, early warning systems and safety nets provided in a context of high but realistic expectations of students (Filkins & Doyle, 2002; Kuh et al., 2008, 2005a). However, the particular challenges of engaging first-generation students in effective educational practices has also been noted (Krause, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Thus, institutions need to devote specific attention to finding ways in which to create opportunities that will assist first-generation students to engage in the types of educational activities most likely to facilitate their success at the university level. Filkins et al. (2002) also highlighted the importance of a supportive university environment as a mechanism for mitigating some of the pre-university risk factors students might bring to their higher education experience. Focusing specifically on first-year students, Krause (2005) reminds us that it is not sufficient to simply ask whether first-year students are engaged in their learning or not, but that we need to understand the various ways in which engagement plays out, as well as what constitutes effective and successful engagement in the first year specifically.

The HSSE research conducted with high school learners across the USA, since 2006, has pointed to what has been termed an ‘engagement gap’ (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006, 2009, 2010). Similar findings have also been reported in the New Zealand context (Brooking et al., 2009). While the existence of an ‘achievement gap’ in schools has been well documented (including in South Africa), the notion of an engagement gap has been the focus of less research. The research in this area, at the schooling level, appears to point to an overlap between achievement and engagement gaps (Brooking et al., 2009; Wilson-Strydom, 2010d; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). The US research, from 2006 to 2010 points to the following consistently identified engagement gaps (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010, p. 17):

- Girls report higher levels of engagement across all three dimensions compared to boys;
- White students and Asian students tend to report higher levels of engagement than students of other race/ethnic groups;
- An engagement gap exists between students who completed several years of their high school career at the same school, compared to students who transfer between schools;
- Students who have been placed in advanced classes report higher levels of engagement;
- Students who are placed in support classes or special education streams consistently report lower levels of engagement; and
- Students from poorer backgrounds (those who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches) report lower levels of engagement than those from more affluent backgrounds.

These trends provide further evidence of the importance of creating possibilities for epistemological access that takes into account who students are and where students come from, rather than focusing on formal access (numbers of students enrolling) only. More research is needed to understand these issues in the South African context, hence the value of this study. In the results presented in the coming chapters I will refer back to many of these findings and reflect on the extent to which supporting or conflicting results were found in my own work.

The multidimensional concept of university readiness and the learner/student engagement framework both emphasise the importance of understanding educational practice and educational transition in context and from the perspective of the students and the institutional environment. Related, both approaches work from an assumption that there cannot be a ‘one size fits all’ solution to the challenge of school to university transition. This argument is summed up by Jansen (2010), with particular reference to the South African higher education context, as follows:

“All of the former white universities have made mistaken assumptions about entry-level social and instrumental skills of their black students, many of whom in actuality are the first-generation university entrants in their families. These institutions routinely assume that their students come from a reading culture, can navigate a well-stocked university library, have had access to computers and the Internet, and possess basic studying and writing skills, family mentors with university degrees, and supplementary sources of income. In short, South Africa’s problem is not simply a matter of poorly prepared students; it is also a matter of poorly adapting universities” (Jansen, 2010, p. 132).

While I have reflected on the South African higher education context in several previous sections (see sections 1.1, 1.2, and 2.1) I have not yet focused specifically on access to university in South Africa or on the details of the schooling context. This understanding is essential if we take seriously the call to move beyond the current humpback bridge via which students enter universities. The following two sections briefly consider the complex context and debates regarding access issues and schooling in South Africa.

## **2.8 South African access context: historical background and current issues**

I have made reference to South African specific issues throughout the thesis thus far, it is Nonetheless useful to briefly draw these points together and present an overall picture of access to university in the South African context. While South Africa experiences many access challenges similar to other countries, we cannot understand schooling, higher education, and access more specifically without taking account of the complex historical legacies that continue to inform everyday life and educational practice.

Much of the work in the area of accessing university within the South African context has been done within the ambit of what is known as ‘Academic Development’ (AD). AD emerged in

South Africa in the early 1980's as a means of supporting small numbers of black students who were entering historically white liberal universities for the first time after completing poor quality schooling under the Bantu Education system (Boughey, 2007a, 2007b; Odendaal & Deacon, 2009; Scott, 2009). As such, Boughey (2007, p. 2) reminds us that this early AD work was based on a "deficit assumption about which the students they served in the context of an assurance about the rightness of the practices which characterised the institutions into which they has been admitted." As such, this early AD work (although many examples of this approach remain in practice today) might be classified as liberal in the sense that it sought to provide equal educational opportunities, through appropriate support to disadvantaged students entering universities. In the context of an emerging policy discourse in the early to mid-1990s that argued that difficulties faced by black students were structural as opposed to individual, calls were made for AD to be integrated, or infused, within mainstream work (for example, Walker & Badsha, 1993). Within this phase of the AD work, the focus tended to move towards institutional transformation issues such as curriculum relevance and the appropriateness of teaching methodologies, given the context of an increasingly diverse student body.

Although my focus here is not on academic development per se, it is important to acknowledge these roots since the ideologies and agendas of academic development continue to underpin much of the work on university access at present. AD in South Africa has tended to work from the assumption of a mismatch between increasingly diverse students and university education, irrespective of whether this is seen as an individual issue of student under-preparation, often due to poor quality schooling and general 'disadvantage', or as a result of structural inequalities and the need for institutional transformation. As a result, the response has tended to involve various initiatives and interventions at the university level needed to identify potential of the poorly prepared, support students, or challenge the dominant system. This support is manifest in different ways including, for example, a more limited focus on developing language skills such as grammar and sentence construction (implicitly assuming that knowledge is neutral and uncontested), to more substantial work on helping students to "master the literacy norms of each discipline (and to empower them to question these norms)" (McKenna, 2003, p. 64). The later work that considers the discursive rules of the disciplines falls into the realm of epistemological access and takes account of the complex social and cultural aspects of learning discussed above (Boughey, no date, 2005; Morrow, 2009a).

More recently, Scott (2009, p. 37) identified three areas on which AD work from about the year 2000 tends to focus, namely: curriculum, student selection and placement, and teaching development (see also, Boughey, 2010). The focus area of student selection and placement comes closest to the focus I am arguing for, but does not go far enough. Work on selection and placement focuses on different techniques and methods for identifying potential beyond (often unreliable) school performance measures, and methods of understanding the current levels of preparedness and/or potential of entering students through testing or other forms of assessment (for some examples, see Cliff & Hanslo, 2009; Cliff et al., 2007; Koch & Foxcroft, 2003; Yeld, 2009, 2010). All of this work is of essential importance, but if we are to make a dent in the still very low participation rates together with high dropout and low graduation rates, there is a need for AD researchers and practitioners to begin to devote greater attention to schooling itself. The data I present in the coming results chapters supports this claim.

While I do not wish to undermine the critical importance of AD work – and in particular the mainstreaming of AD within undergraduate education and the emerging role for AD in efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning within South African universities (Boughey, 2007b; Council on Higher Education, 2011) – I argue that one of the limitations of this work has been the almost exclusive focus on students once they enter university. It is my contention that insufficient attention has been paid to the interface between school and university levels and that this limits what AD is able to achieve. Higher education cannot (and should not) ‘solve’ the problems in the schooling sector, however, this does not mean that universities should not work with feeder schools to support school improvement, but more importantly, to identify school learners with university potential and support them during their final years of school in an effort to make the transition to university less dramatic. This of course requires a careful and nuanced understanding of the schooling context (as well as educational practices at schools).

## **2.9 South African schooling context**

The vast challenges in South African schooling require little introduction and the growing disintegration of quality schooling, except for a small number of independent and ex-

Model C<sup>33</sup> schools serving a tiny minority of learners, has been well documented (Bereng, Cloete, Lenka, Marais, & Ranoto, 2009; for some examples, see Bloch, 2009; Christie, 2008; Cloete, 2009; Foxcroft, 2009; Jansen, 2011; Phurutse, 2005; Simkins & Paterson, 2005; Simkins, Rule, & Bernstein, 2007; S. Taylor & Yu, 2009; Wilson-Strydom & Hay, 2010; Yeld, 2011). While it is not necessary for me to delve into too great a detail on the many challenges of schooling in the country, a few key points bear mention. Importantly, we cannot divorce the present context from the past, as Christie (2008, p. 2) reminds us “building a new society does not start on clear ground. Change emerges from what already exists.”

Much has been written about the history of South Africa’s education system and the transition process since the fall of apartheid (for some examples, see Bloch, 2009; Chisholm, 2004b; Christie, 2008; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Ross, 1999; N. Taylor, Muller, & Vinjevoold, 2003; S. Taylor & Yu, 2009; Vanderyar & Jansen, 2008). In 1994, the first democratically elected government of South Africa faced the enormous challenge of transforming an education system that had been constructed as a cornerstone of apartheid social engineering. This was an education system that had been firmly designed along racial and ethnic lines, with an explicitly ideological approach to curriculum – Christian Nationalist Education for white South Africans, premised on “a practice of racial domination, obedience to authority and education as preparation for rule” (Bloch, 2009, p. 44) and Bantu Education for black South Africans where “education was for obedience in a divided society and economy that seemed to feed blacks only the morsels of what South Africa had to offer” (Bloch, 2009, p. 44). The management of schooling was fragmented into 18 different education departments, formed, administered and funded on a racial basis. Spending on the education of white children was approximately ten times the spending on education for black children (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). As a result, schools designated for black children were severely underfunded, poorly resourced, overcrowded and with a teaching staff who were poorly trained (Chisholm, 2004b). These deeply problematic schooling environments become further complicated as education itself became a site of anti-apartheid struggle, as is commonly symbolised by visual images of the 16 June 1976 Soweto

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<sup>33</sup> Model C schools are quasi-government schools that are administered and largely funded by parents and alumni bodies. The schools receive government subsidy and fall under the jurisdiction of the provincial education department. However, school governing bodies function autonomously and are free to set school fees, appoint additional teachers (who are then not paid by government), invest in school infrastructure, set school rules and admissions policies and so on. In most cases these schools are those that, under apartheid, served white children only. The term Model C is no longer used officially and it has thus become common place to refer to these schools as ex-Model C schools.

uprisings during which police fired live ammunition at a group of un-armed school children. In particular, educational resistance centred on the vastly unequal schooling system, ideologically bound approach to curriculum and pedagogy, and being forced to learn in Afrikaans, all within the context of growing resistance to the overarching apartheid apparatus. Bloch (2009, p. 56) notes that “[T]his is a past that is all too recent, that often exists in living memory. The educational past of South Africa carries conflict, much pain and trauma, and many anti-educational sentiments.”

From 1994, the education landscape – at all levels – was drastically reformed. This included the restructuring of the 18 racially-divided education departments into nine, a completely revised approach to budgeting principally designed to support the achievement of equitable educational outcomes. There was a decentralisation of educational control and all educational institutions were opened up to all race groups. In the schooling context, these changes are specified in the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The preamble states that:

“this country requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people's talents and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic well-being of society, protect and advance our diverse cultures and languages, uphold the rights of all learners, parents and educators, and promote their acceptance of responsibility for the organisation, governance and funding of schools in partnership with the State” (Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. 1).

The various policy and curricula changes that have followed, have in one way or another, sought to contribute to the achievement of this ideal, although in practice often the opposite has resulted. One particularly contested area has been that of the school curriculum (Harley & Wedekind, 2004). Harley and Wedekind (2004) note that the scale and extent of curriculum change is likely to be unparalleled in the history of curriculum change. The new curriculum – commonly referred to as Curriculum 2005 (C2005) – was based on three main pillars. These were, (1) that it was outcomes-based, (2) it was based on an integrated knowledge system in which school subjects were replaced with learning areas, and (3) was the promotion of learner-centred pedagogy. I will not present the many arguments for and against this curriculum change as this is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, it is recognised that C2005

developed more as a political project than a pedagogical one (Bloch, 2009; Harley & Wedekind, 2004).

One, amongst many, of the major problems with C2005 was the focus on outcome statements only without any specification of content or pedagogy. The result was that the better resourced and better trained teachers were able to engage with the curriculum in more meaningful ways (or in some cases continue teaching as they always had) than more poorly resourced and poorly trained teachers could (Christie, 2008; Fiske & Ladd, 2004). C2005 did not take account of the harsh realities and dramatic inequalities in South African schools, and so, contributed to growing educational inequality rather than working to undermine it (Bloch, 2009; Chisholm, 2004b; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Harley & Wedekind, 2004; Taylor et al., 2003). Following a review in 2000 of C2005, the Revised National Curriculum Statement was released in 2002, and this has formed the basis of the curriculum – which culminated in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) after 12 years of schooling. Following a review of the NSC (Dada et al., 2009), 2011 has seen the introduction of another revision to the curriculum called the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS).<sup>34</sup>

This complex historical legacy, both during and post-apartheid, has given rise to (amongst others) what van der Berg et al. (2009, p. 8) refer to as the double burden faced by poor learners in the country. While internationally there is much evidence to show that poor children attending poorer schools tend to underperform compared to their better resourced peers; in South Africa this is compounded by our past. “There is the burden of poverty (operating on both an individual and institutional-social level) and then there is also the burden of attending a school that still bears the scars of neglect and underfunding under the apartheid dispensation” (see also, South African Institute of Race Relations, 2010; van der Berg et al., 2011, p. 8). Although significant expansion of the education system and a lengthening of the average education of successive age cohorts has been achieved since the early 1990s, the performance of learners in the schooling system has grown increasingly problematic (Simkins & Paterson, 2005; van der Berg et al., 2011).

Seen in the context of comparable middle income countries, the enrolment rates of young people in schooling are above average trends, the proportion of learners entering grade 12

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<sup>34</sup> For further details on CAPS please see <http://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/CurriculumAssessmentPolicyStatements/tabid/419/Default.aspx>.

(final year of school) is about average, but the proportion who successfully complete 12 years of schooling is below average (Gustafsson, 2011). In addition, the relative under-achievement of South African school children has gained increasing recognition in the past decade, with our performance being one of the lowest in the world as well as amongst the worst in Southern Africa and across the continent more broadly (Reddy, 2006; Shepherd, 2011; Simkins & Paterson, 2005). Bloch (2009) notes that some 60-80% of South African schools could be identified as dysfunctional, and equally worrying is that top performing South African learners' performance is only average when compared to international performance. The Annual National Assessments (ANA) conducted in early 2011 involved the testing of all learners in public schools in Grades 2 to 7 – a total of more than six million learners. The 2011 ANA report supports the findings of the various international assessments South Africa has participated in, with only between 12% and 31% of the learners performing at the 'achieved' level of performance. Fewer than half of the learners, across the four ANA tests performed at a level indicating partial achievement (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

Further compounding the curriculum, school resourcing, major inequalities and poor performance of learners in our schools has been the performance of teachers and the increasingly dominant role of teacher unions in the education sector. Bloch (2009, p. 106) calls this issue "one of the greatest silences in education today." This silence has been broken somewhat since the three week teacher strike that took place in 2010 not long before learners were due to write their end of year examinations. A general lack of professionalism amongst teachers, principals and education officials has been well documented (for example, Bloch, 2009; Colditz et al., 2009). In his 2011 State of the Nation Address, President Zuma noted that the focus in basic education for the year would be the three T's – Teachers, Textbooks and Time, and he reminded the country that "[W]e reiterate our call that teachers must be at school, in class, on time, teaching for at least seven hours a day" (Zuma, 2011, p. 7). While it is positive that government is prioritising education, we do need to ask ourselves how it is possible that the president needs to remind teachers to be at school in class and on time – and the implications of this for South African learners.

The effects of an increasingly dysfunctional school system can be summed as follows:

"The worst failure of our schools is thus the way they fail the learners themselves. Our young people are not given hope, exposure to opportunity or the means to grasp

and realise possibilities for growth and achievement. Instead of flying, a large majority of our children find hurdles and blockages to hold them back. They find that they have little chance to get ahead just when they thought that hard work and focused aspiration would enable them to shoot for the stars. To frustrate the hopes and dreams of our generations to come is the most cruel and unsustainable blow that we could visit upon our youth” (Bloch, 2009, p. 60).

While it is tempting for universities to argue that addressing the myriad problems in the schooling sector is not the work of a university this is somewhat short sighted. Obviously resolving these deep running problems in South African schools is going to require major changes across various levels of society, from individual learners and teachers, to families and communities, government, private sector and trade unions. Nonetheless, work on the transition to university must be located within this highly unequal and relatively low performing school sector, and, as I argue in later chapters, dismantling the humpback bridge requires that universities work with schools to prepare learners for university by building capabilities for a successful transition, and in a small way at least also potentially contribute to school improvement.

## **2.10 Access and school partnerships at the University of the Free State**

As noted in the Introductory chapter, in this study I have taken as my focus the case of the UFS and 20 carefully selected local feeder schools (see chapter 5 for the sampling methodology). The UFS dates back to 1904 when the first students enrolled in a BA programme at what was then known as Grey University College. Although the university started as a predominately English medium of instruction institution, during the 1940s Afrikaans became the official language of instruction. In the 1990s English was again introduced and the UFS became a parallel medium of instruction higher education institution. The UFS has seven academic faculties, namely: Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Health Sciences, Law, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, The Humanities and Theology. In 2003, as part of the national process of merging higher education institutions, two additional campuses became part of the UFS – the Qwaqwa campus which was formally a campus of the University of the North, and the Bloemfontein campus of the former Vista University. In 2011, the UFS enrolled a total of 33, 319 students, with first-year students making up 16% of the student body, returning undergraduate students 40%, transfer students 6%, postgraduate students 31%, and occasional students (i.e. students not enrolled for degree

programmes) 7%. A total of 2900 staff members work across the three campuses of the university.<sup>35</sup>

To properly contextualise my work, it is important to briefly reflect on the history and current practices with regard to access work at the UFS as well as the ways in which the university currently works with schools. Very little research has been done on these access routes. As such, much of the information presented below has been taken from internal university reports.

### **2.10.1 Access**

The UFS's work related to widening access began in 1993 when the Need for Education and Elevation (NEED) programme began. The NEED programme emerged in response to the challenges of providing an access route to the university – initially for black learners – who came from a background of poor schooling that did not provide the basis for university level education. The NEED programme has evolved over the years and is now known as the University Preparation Programme (UPP). The UPP is based on a partnership between the UFS and the Further Education and Training (FET) College sector. The programme is offered from the UFS South and Qwaqwa campuses as well as the Bethlehem campus of Maluti FET College, the Northern Cape FET Urban College in Kimberly, the Welkom campus of the Goldfields FET College, the Sasolburg Campus of the Flavius Mareka FET College and the Oudtshoorn Campus of the South Cape College. Students complete two compulsory modules – Basic Skills and Competencies and Academic Language, two first-year university level courses and two FET College level courses. Thus, students earn university credit during the UPP year which means that the programme is more than just a bridging course. When it started in 1993, the UPP had a total of 73 students enrolled. This increased to 1481 by 2010. Altogether, a total of 10 282 students have been enrolled in the programme since 1993. The success rate for the UPP programme has been in the range of 50 to 69% over the years and since 1993 more than 4500 students have enrolled for degree study following completion of the programme. However, only 1467 degrees and 181 diplomas have been awarded to students who began their studies in the programme (Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development, 2010). This

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<sup>35</sup> See [www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za) for more background information.

means that only 16% of the students who have participated in the UPP since 1993 have eventually achieved a university level qualification. It has not been possible for the programme coordinators to track the performance of students who may have chosen to enter FET colleges so it remains unclear how many students may have completed an FET level qualification.

This low overall level of success, when one considers the achievement of a university qualification, raises important questions about the extent to which this approach to broadening access has contributed to access with success. More research is needed to understand why only approximately one third of students who have progressed from the UPP to the study at the UFS have completed their qualifications. These relatively poor success statistics notwithstanding, the programme has also played an important role in the transformation at the UFS. Particularly in the early years of the programme, the UPP played a critical role in broadening access to black students who would not have otherwise qualified for university entry. The fact the UPP began as an English medium of instruction programme, within an Afrikaans medium of instruction university, helped to create and support impetus for changes in the language policy to accommodate both Afrikaans and English, so opening up the university for a more diverse body of students. Further, the 1467 students who have achieved university degrees – which includes seven students who have qualified as medical doctors, and 24 students who qualified as lawyers – would not have been admitted to the university without the UPP as an access route (Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development, 2010).

At present there are three main access routes to the UFS, all based exclusively on performance in the final grade 12 examinations. Depending on the Admission Point Score a prospective student achieves, they may be admitted directly into a degree programme (commonly known as mainstream study), an extended degree programme (three-year degree programmes offered over four years and including additional academic development support), or into the UPP that was described above. Extended degree programmes are offered in the Faculties of Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Humanities and Natural and Agricultural Sciences. None of these access routes involves engagement with schools beyond the typical school marketing visits that are carried out by all universities.

### 2.10.2 School partnerships

The UFS has been involved in a range of partnership projects and/or interventions that have involved the schooling sector for at least the past decade. However, these efforts have tended to be ad hoc and not coordinated into a focused approach to working with schools. Several service learning modules offered at the UFS are based on partnerships with schools. At present, a total of 21 Primary Schools and 28 Secondary Schools<sup>36</sup> are involved in service learning modules offered by various departments across Faculties.<sup>37</sup> The School of Continuing Education has been running several enrichment programmes with local schools. For example, Family Maths and Science programmes that aim to demystify maths and sciences for primary school learners and their families have been run in schools in the Northern Cape and Free State.<sup>38</sup> An ICT Laboratory project makes use of multimedia technologies for learning maths and sciences in a classroom situation. The ICT Laboratory project is offered from the UFS Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses. Schools encourage Grade 10, 11 and 12 learners with at least 60% in Science and Mathematics to enrol in the programme. In 2010 a total of 355 school learners were enrolled in the programme.<sup>39</sup>

During 2010, the Rector of the UFS, Prof Jonathan Jansen, initiated the university's flagship community engagement project, called the 'Schools Change Project'.<sup>40</sup> The Schools Change Project was launched in early 2011. The project aims to provide intensive support to 20<sup>41</sup> poorly-performing secondary schools in and around Bloemfontein in order to improve learner performance and ensure that learners from the schools are optimally prepared to enter university. The overall goals of the project are four-fold:

1. To improve the academic achievement of all learners;
2. To build strong schools that are sustainable;
3. To create optimal opportunities for students from targeted schools to access university;  
and
4. To focus the community engagement efforts of the UFS.

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<sup>36</sup> Five of these secondary schools participated in my study (see Chapter 5).

<sup>37</sup> For more details on service learning modules at the UFS, please see <http://supportservices.ufs.ac.za/content.aspx?id=207>.

<sup>38</sup> See <http://fams.ufs.ac.za/> for further information on Family Maths and Science.

<sup>39</sup> For more information on the ICT Laboratory, please see <http://e-education.ufs.ac.za/default.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> At present there is very little written information about this project. The information presented in this section draws on the project proposal prepared in November 2010 (Helene Perold and Associates, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Two of these 20 schools were schools included in my sample (see Chapter 5).

Together, the achievement of these goals should provide the basis for working towards a model that can be used to facilitate school improvement nationally.

This section has shown that the UFS has a relatively long history of access work and is also currently engaged with schools in a number of ways. I have not sought to evaluate these initiatives in any way for this study. Nonetheless, given the success rates reported for students at the UFS (and nationally), more work is needed in this area. It is my aim that the capabilities framework I present in this thesis might go some way in supporting the work already underway as well as providing a new and different lens through which issues of access and school partnerships might be approached.

## **2.11 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to present a review of the literature on access and the transition from school to university in the context of social justice. This chapter has highlighted that, despite a progressive higher education policy and legislative environment with an explicit commitment to broadening access with success in South Africa since the early 1990s, major access dilemmas remain. The brief overview of access at the UFS further highlighted this national challenge in the context of a specific university where the poor success of students entering via alternative access routes was noted. As the early sections of this chapter and Chapter 1 pointed out, even for many students – at the UFS and other South African universities – that meet the admission requirements for university, success remains elusive. While the vast and deep problems within the South African schooling sector must be taken into account in understanding the poor performance of students, I have also argued, drawing on the work of Conley, that when universities assume that eligibility (usually measured in terms of school performance) and readiness for university are the same thing, problems are likely to arise. The problem of the humpback bridge – a traditional and outdated structure – was presented as a useful metaphor for thinking about the transition to university. This metaphor emphasises the link between schools and universities occupying opposite ends of the humpback bridge. Neither schools nor universities are able to see over the bridge to properly understand what happens at the other side. I highlighted that much work in the area

of access and the transition to university has focused on *either* school improvement or support for students once they enter university (particularly in the first year), but seldom both. As such, my study addresses an important gap in our understanding of access by intentionally researching both ends of this bridge.

Of particular importance in tackling the dilemmas of access is a move towards a multidimensional understanding of readiness for university, rather than the almost exclusive focus on measurable school performance that remains common practice (as important as this as one component of readiness is). Conley's module of multidimensional college or university readiness was presented as a possible means of thinking through the complexities of access particularly when understood as epistemological access rather than formal access only. As noted in the chapter, in previous work I have shown the relevance and appropriateness of this model in the context of students at the UFS. Moving beyond an understanding of measurable school performance as the basis of readiness requires that we explore the education practices that take place at the schools from which our students come. I presented the learner/student engagement framework and instruments as a useful tool for researching educational practice at the school level and for providing quantitative data regarding Conley's facets of readiness. The student engagement body of work draws our attention to what students or learners **do**; their learning activities (rather than measurable performance only) and as I will show in coming chapters, information about educational practices are essential in building capabilities needed to improve students' chances of a successful transition to university.

The arguments and figures presented here clearly show that access and equity have not yet been achieved. I argue that we can do much better than at present. When working from a departure point that emphasises social justice in higher education we need to think somewhat differently about access. In the coming chapter I show that the capabilities approach, developed, by Sen and Nussbaum, opens new avenues for how we understand and respond to these dilemmas of access.

## Chapter 3: Access and Social Justice

“Determining what justice demands of a university will always be complex, appealing to contested principles often involving cross-purpose argumentation and mixing considerations of justice with other interests” (Cunningham, 2007, p. 155).

### 3.1 Introduction

Given the complex web of access dilemmas considered in Chapter 2, it seems critical to ask how we might foster access for social justice, rather than for (unintended) social injustice. In this chapter I begin to argue that the capabilities approach provides a useful means for conceptualising an approach to access that is embedded in a social justice agenda. At this point in the thesis I am embarking on the journey towards a capabilities perspective on access for social justice. My argument for this perspective will be made here and throughout the coming chapters. In this chapter, I begin by introducing the notion of social justice and present an overview of approaches to social justice in an education context. I explore how notions of social justice are inextricably linked to views about the purpose of higher education and especially so in the context of an increasing neoliberal influence on higher education globally and in South Africa. The chapter considers key theorists in the area of social justice and some of the work that has been done in this area from a higher education perspective. My analysis of the approaches to social justice of John Rawls, Iris Marion Young, and Nancy Fraser shows that while each have important contributions to make in understanding access to university from a social justice perspective, each are also limited in key respects. In discussing these limitations I begin to argue for the capabilities approach as the most useful social justice framework for my research in the chapter, which continues in depth in Chapter 4.

#### 3.1.1 Why social justice matters for higher education

‘Social justice’ is one of the current ‘buzz words’ in education, higher education and various other fields, and together with related terms such as equity for example tend to “have a *feel good* flavour to them that can cover up the absence of precise meaning” (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008, p. 287, emphasis in original). When used as a ‘buzz word’, the term loses much of its meaning and particularly its value in understanding the South African higher education

context. As such, it is necessary to interrogate the notion of social justice, what it means, and why it is helpful in understanding the complex transition from school to university. I start from the explicit recognition that social justice is a somewhat ambiguous concept with respect to public higher education (Cunningham, 2007). Public universities aim, on the one hand, to make higher education accessible to a societies' population (the public). On the other hand, public universities remain elitist institutions, access is limited to a minority, and graduates are granted a privileged status (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). "This Janus-faced feature of universities makes it difficult to determine what justice requires with respect to them" (Cunningham, 2007, p. 153). Robeyns (2009, p. 102) reminds us that even though the meaning of justice is contested, and there is "thus no consensus on what the appropriate subject matter of theories of justice should be. *This does not of course mean that nothing can be said of it at all*" (Robeyns, 2009, p. 102, emphasis added). Indeed, higher education researchers and theorists have long debated challenges and contradictions within higher education that fall into the realm of social justice.

These debates commonly play out in the terrain of interrogation of the purposes of higher education which are articulated in different ways, often depending on the specific agenda being promoted, or the ideological underpinnings of a particular organisation or person(s). Even though education (and higher education) is commonly portrayed in terms of its positive and liberatory potential – particularly within the access and lifelong learning discourses – there has also been a long history of theorisation of the various and complex ways in which education both reproduces and reinforces class inequalities, and how higher education embodies an ethos of individual achievement and competition, so reinforcing the hierarchy of social advantage (Archer et al., 2003, pp. 1–2; see also Jonathan, 2001). Jonathan (2001, p. 49) notes that:

"whilst public education does benefit everyone, it necessarily also benefits some more than others, with those gaining most likely to be those who start out better placed, whether that is by nature or circumstance<sup>42</sup>."

In the context of my work, this quotation emphasises the importance of considering how social, economic and educational inequalities impact on the transition to university. Furlong and Cartmel (2009, p. 8) draw our attention to the fact that social justice aims are often in tension and contain competing objectives with understandings of the purpose of education,

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<sup>42</sup> It is precisely these circumstances influencing chances of higher education access and success together with how circumstance and individual agency intersect to create or limit opportunity that I am seeking to understand.

particularly in the context of globalization and the neoliberal market ideology underlying the global economic, political, and educational environment (see also, Waghid, 2008).

Along similar lines, many argue that the notion of higher education as a public good has over the past two decades been replaced by neoliberal market models focused on producing a more vocationally skilled workforce in the interests of economic advancement that benefits a few. Related is the underlying assumption that higher education is an industry serving ‘clients’ (students) rather than a social institution serving broader social (or public good) purposes such as the education of a democratically informed and critical citizenry (for some examples of authors raising these concerns, see Archer et al., 2003; Arendale, 2010; Arum & Roksa, 2011; Bowen et al., 2009; Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Gewirtz, 1998; Giroux, nd, 2002, 2008; M. Green & Barblan, 2004; Leibowitz, 2009; Nussbaum, 2006, 2010; Ramphele, 2004; Robeyns, 2006; Sawyerr, 2004; Sikes & Vincent, 1998; Singh, 2001; Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Waghid, 2009; Walker, 2006, 2010). Although himself arguing convincingly for a return to public good purposes of higher education in an African context, Sawyerr reminds us of the complexities and contradictions of higher education in developing country contexts. He notes that:

“This more socially focused conception [e.g. deepening of democracy] of the public good does pose some problems in respect of higher education. How can one justify, for example, spending the same public funds to educate one university student that would support several secondary school pupils – especially when the college graduate also is likely, thereby, to improve her or his life chances to a much greater degree than the secondary school graduate? Higher education, as we have seen, is an inherently privileging experience, and the situation is compounded by the very nature of university work, which tends to encourage ‘meritocratic individualism’ by encouraging and rewarding individual success and achievement. Thus, even though its broader social purposes include the equalization of life chances, higher education tends to pull in the direction of individual competitiveness and reproduction of privilege – a contradiction that needs to be addressed by those who advocate the treatment of higher education as a ‘public good’” (Sawyerr, 2004, p. 44).

The complexities that Sawyerr draws attention to can be partly explained by the contradictions inherent in two dominant ideologies informing understandings of the purpose of education – human capital based approaches and rights based approaches. Many authors argue that the dominant ideology informing education (and higher education), policy with its foundations deeply rooted in neoliberal ideology and politics, is the human capital

understanding of education (Assie-Lumumba, 2005; Brock-Utne, 2003; Chisholm, 2004a; Giroux, 2002, 2008; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Robeyns, 2006; Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Walker, 2006, 2010; Walker & McLean, 2010). Essentially, human capital approaches to education are based on the assumption that investment in education is required as a prerequisite for economic growth, hence the global focus on massification of higher education. From the perspective of student expectations of the purpose of higher education Giroux notes that “[W]ithin the neoliberal era of deregulation and the triumph of the market, many students and their families no longer believe that higher education is about higher learning, but about gaining a better foothold in the job market” (Giroux, 2002, p. 435). Walker (2006) asked United Kingdom-based academic staff at a university what they understood the purpose of universities to be. One of the interviewees reported that “[T]he tension between economically desirable pursuits and the expansion of the mind was never far from the surface in discussions about what universities are for” (Walker, 2006, p. 7). Based on her research and experience working in higher education, Walker argues further that policy trends in higher education, including for example human capital theory, have tended to prioritise the economic returns from higher education. “Simply put, human capital theory views education as an investment to improve productivity and the level and distribution of individual earnings” (Walker, 2006, p. 8). In other words, the value or the purpose of higher education lies in the extent to which investment in individual students increases economic productivity, incomes and so produces greater national wealth. In the knowledge economy, higher education has become a prime lever of capitalist growth and development.

In contrast to human capital understandings of the purpose of education are rights based approaches – although policy often draws on both ideologies (hence the complexities and contradictions described above). Approaching education as a right is in effect the conceptual antipode of approaching education in terms of the creation of human capital and these differences have consequences for the conceptual understanding of human beings as either inputs for economic growth or as the ultimate ends of moral and political concerns (Robeyns, 2006, p. 75). As such, the rights based framework for understanding educational purpose emphasises the intrinsic importance of education irrespective of whether the specific educational opportunity will pay off in human capital or economic terms. Organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) argue for rights based approaches to education. In

practical terms, this is reflected in, for example, the Education for All (EFA) movement focusing on universal provision of primary school education.<sup>43</sup>

Rights based approaches are commonly used in work that has a social justice agenda. Despite the value of this framework from a social justice perspective, rights based approaches have also been criticised for tending to operate more at the rhetorical level than at the level of actual practice in everyday life. Thus, while declarations might be made stating that equal access to education is a fundamental human right; in practice this is seldom achieved. Further, rights based approaches make statements about rights to be achieved (overall outcome statements) but seldom provide precise guidance regarding where the duty to ensure that these rights are actually achieved lies (Robeyns, 2006; Spreen & Vally, 2006).

A further reason why social justice matters is due to the extent of inequality in the system, and the resilience of this inequality to efforts at building more just systems (see Sections 1.1, 2.5, 2.8, 2.9 for specific examples related to access). Much research on higher education and social justice focuses our attention on various inequalities inherent within higher education institutions and systems more broadly. Related is the difference between *increased* participation and *widened* participation and the way in which these terms are used in policy discourse and practice – often leading to surface change only. For example, it is possible to increase participation (more enrolments) without widening participation (more enrolment from previously under-represented groups) (Archer et al., 2003; James, 2007). For example, Isaac, Karabel and Jacquez (2003) showed convincingly that inequalities in admission to the University of California (UC) were mostly closely related to race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (with nearly 70% of variance in the percentage of high school graduates gaining a place at UC being explained by parental levels of education). Depending on the context in which one is located, broadening access or participation might refer to inequalities in access based on gender, race, class, location or a combination of these. In the UK context the focus of broadening participation tends to be on class issues (see for example, Archer et al., 2003; Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Watts & Bridges, 2006), while in the USA race/ethnicity are commonly the focus; for example the access challenges faced by African-American and Latino students are typically addressed (Barron, 2003; Beatty et al., 1999; Bowen et al., 2009; Del Rios

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<sup>43</sup> For further details on UNESCO's work in the area of the right to education and the Education for All movement, please see [http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed\\_for\\_all/](http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/).

& Leegwater, 2008; Hausmann, Ward Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Taylor Smith et al., 2009; Warburton et al., 2001). In his analysis of equity and status in Australian higher education, Marginson (2011) points out the inherent tension in higher education equity policy based on whether equity is understood as fairness or inclusion. Equity as fairness argues for, and measures, the growth in the absolute numbers of underrepresented groups in higher education, while equity as inclusion considers the proportional representation of underrepresented groups in higher education. In section 2.1 I presented South African higher education statistics which highlighted this specific issue. The large growth in the number of African students in the higher education system, together with the fact that there are now larger numbers of African students than white students enrolled in higher education, is commonly used as the basis for arguing that transformation has taken place. However, when we look at proportional representation we see that 60% of the white population in the 18-24 years age group participate in higher education compared to only 12% of the black population in the same age range (Council on Higher Education, 2009). This is clearly an issue of social justice. To borrow the words of Marginson (2011, p. 24); “Equity policy has succeeded. Equity policy has failed.”

Meaningfully engaging with such complexities and contradictions requires careful consideration of what is meant by social justice and how this translates into policy and practice. Returning to the work of theorists of social justice, and the application of these theories to the higher education context, is thus critical. Building a deeper theoretical understanding of issues of injustice is essential for efforts to identify an approach that can best assist in understanding access from a social justice perspective, and – importantly – provide a basis for formulating interventions in the interests of a more just system. In the section below I briefly present the ideas of three key theorists of social justice whose work is commonly used in an educational context. The discussion below is not intended to cover the breadth and depth of these theories. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the key tenets of such work in order to theoretically situate the capabilities approach to social justice that forms the basis of my work.

### **3.2 Theoretical frameworks for understanding social justice**

Falling within the intersecting realms of philosophy, politics and legal theory, social justice is a topic that has received attention from various perspectives. Miller (1999) provides a

useful definition as a starting point for sketching a theoretical landscape of social justice in relation to higher education.

“When we talk and argue about social justice, what exactly are we talking and arguing about? Very crudely, I think, we are discussing how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society. When, more concretely, we attack some policy or some state of affairs as (being) socially unjust, we are claiming that a person, or more usually a category of persons, enjoys fewer advantages than that person or group of persons ought to enjoy (or bears more of the burdens than they ought to bear), given how other members of the society in question are faring” (Miller, 1999, p. 1).

Thus, drawing on Miller’s definition, social justice is about understanding and interrogating how different people or groups are faring in comparison with other people or groups in a specific context (such as a university) or more broadly in society. This often involves the consideration of distributional issues, both in terms of distribution of advantages and disadvantages. Since the notion of social justice is commonly defined in terms of how benefits and/or burdens are distributed within a society, the concept of social justice is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of distributive justice. One of the key theorists working in the area of distributive justice is John Rawls.

### **3.2.1 John Rawls: Justice as fairness**

The work of Rawls is particularly important and he is often regarded as one of the most influential theorists on social justice in the past century (Sen, 1999, p. 63). In his seminal book, “A Theory of Justice” where Rawls presents his case for ‘Justice as Fairness’, he starts by making a distinction between justice and social justice. He argues that many things can be said to be just or unjust; for example, people’s actions, attitudes, judgments, and even particular individuals themselves. However, when considering social justice, the object of concern is “the way in which the major *social institutions* distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages and disadvantages from social cooperation” (Rawls, 1999, p. 6, emphasis added). Schools and universities, as is the focus in this study, can be seen as examples of such social institutions.

In order to establish what a fair society would look like Rawls proposes a thought experiment that he calls the ‘original position’. The original position is a space in which the

thinker is placed behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ in the sense that one has no knowledge of one’s place in society, one’s gender, colour of one’s skin, social class, profession, abilities etc. Rawls describes the original position as a hypothetical situation in which “no one knows his [sic] place in society, his class position or social status, nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like” (Rawls, 1999, p. 11, see also p. 118). He argues further that when behind the veil of ignorance one does not even know what their specific conception of the good life (well-being) is. In this way, his theory of justice was set up to explicitly respect the many different views of what constitutes the good life common in a pluralistic society. When deciding on principles of justice from the original position we would not privilege specific individual characteristics, talents, social positions, social institutions, values or judgments about what is good, but would select principles of justice that would be fair to everyone as we would not be able to select principles more favourable to the type of person that we actually are or our position in society. This thinking can be contrasted to utilitarianism which argues that justice implies acting in a manner that benefits the greatest number even if some must be disadvantaged in the process (Rawls, 1999; Robeyns, 2009; Sandel, 2010). Thinking from the original position, Rawls then articulates two main principles that he believes would be chosen as the basis of a just society.

Rawls’ first principle “is that the distribution of income and opportunity should not be based on factors that are arbitrary from a moral point of view” (Sandel, 2010, p. 153). Rawls makes use of the veil of ignorance as a philosophical device to articulate this main idea. In the context of educational opportunity specifically, consider the following extract from Sandel’s recent book exploring issues of justice.

“Those who have supportive families and a good education have obvious advantages over those who do not. Allowing everyone to enter the race is a good thing. But if the runners start from different starting points, the race is hardly fair....One way of remedying this unfairness is to correct for social and economic disadvantage. A fair meritocracy <sup>44</sup> attempts to do so by going beyond merely formal equality of opportunity. It removes obstacles to achievement by providing equal educational opportunities, so that those from poor families can compete on an equal basis with those from more privileged backgrounds. It institutes Head Start programs, childhood nutrition and health care programs, education and job training programmes – whatever is needed to bring everyone, regardless of class or family background, to the same starting point. According to the meritocratic conception, the distribution of income and wealth that results from a free market is just, but only if everyone has the same opportunity to develop his or her talents. Only if everyone

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<sup>44</sup> See section 2.5 for discussion on meritocracy and access.

begins at the same starting line can it be said that the winners of the race deserve their rewards.

[However] Rawls believes that this meritocratic conception corrects for certain morally arbitrary advantages, **but still falls short of justice**. For, even if you manage to bring everyone up to the same starting point, it is more or less predictable who will win the race – the fastest runners. Being a fast runner is not wholly my doing. It is morally contingent in the same way that coming from an affluent family is contingent” (Sandel, 2010, pp. 153–154, emphasis added).

Thus, Rawls argues that our position in society – be it economically, socially, due to our family’s standing, or in terms of our natural talents and abilities – is the outcome of a “natural lottery” and so is arbitrary from a moral point of view, i.e. cannot be said to be just and thus cannot be used as the basis for making decisions about distribution (Sandel, 2010, p. 154).

The second principle of justice Rawls presented specifically tackles the issue of distribution in the context of social and economic inequalities. This principle is known as the ‘difference principle’, and argues that inequalities in wealth and social standing are just only if they are of greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1999, pp. 65–70; Robeyns, 2009, pp. 107–108). Thus, according to the difference principle, those who are least well-off must benefit from any economic or social inequalities for these inequalities to be just. Rawls identifies the worst off in society by assessing their holdings of what he calls primary goods which are required for pursuing the good life (Rawls, 1999). Robeyns and Brighouse (2010, p. 1) describe primary goods as means or resources, broadly understood and note that “primary goods are, according to Rawls, those goods that anyone would want regardless of whatever else they wanted.” Thus, in sum, Rawls’ work argues for a conception of social justice as fairness, where inequalities can only be seen as just should the inequality lead to the greatest benefit for the least well off (in terms of their holdings of primary goods). In an ideal society, primary goods would be equally distributed.

### ***3.2.1.1 Applying Rawls’ theory to access***

Some aspects of Rawl’s theory are useful for understanding access for social justice. For example, Rawl’s critique of meritocracy and unfair advantage and the notion that policy decisions should be made such that the worst off benefit most are important in the context of

the access dilemmas discussed in Chapter 2. However, there are two main criticisms of Rawl's approach to social justice that are pertinent in the context of my study. In 1979 Sen presented the Tanner Lectures at Stanford University during which he questioned utilitarianism as well as Rawl's notion of 'Justice as Fairness', in particular his use of the concept of primary goods (or access to resources) as the basis for measuring equality or inequality. Arguing against Rawl's approach of identifying the worst off in society on the basis of their access to primary goods, Sen notes that this approach does not adequately account for the differences in the extent to which unique individuals *are able to actually make use of resources in their lives*. He argued that working towards equal distribution of resources does not necessarily resolve issues of inequality and injustice (Sen, 1979, 1985b). Similarly, Nussbaum states that "the resource-based approach doesn't go deep enough to diagnose obstacles that can be present even when resources seem to be adequately spread around" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 68). For example, consider two university students who both receive a NSFAS loan of the same amount. Student A lives on campus in residence and is able to meet his financial needs with the loan and a part-time job he has at the university library in the evenings. Student B must take two taxis to reach his home in a nearby township. In addition, his mother is ill with cancer and he must also assist with the costs of her medication as well as her care. Despite the fact that students A and B have access to the same financial resource – an equivalent NSFAS loan – student A is more able to convert this resource into successful university study than student B. As such, considering distribution of resources as the primary means of determining justice hides important aspects of inequality and so potentially perpetuates injustice – as has arguably been the case with respect to broadening access to university in a manner in which many students drop out without a qualification, but with accumulated debt (see Chapter 2:).

Sen's other major critique of the work of Rawls, and other modern philosophers working on justice, is that their theories of justice are 'ideal theories'; theories that seek to define what a perfectly just society would look like and how such a society would function, and so are often rather abstract and somewhat detached from real world issues of inequality and injustice. Several other authors advance similar critiques, noting that ideal theories do not provide much guidance about how to reach this ideal society, or how to work towards creating a comparatively more just version of the world we currently live in (Gewirtz, 2006; Robeyns, 2009; Sen, 2006; Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). Instead, Sen calls for a focus on how the practical realities of injustice we see all around us can be eliminated, even though this would

not lead to a perfectly just world. Robeyns (2009, p. 105, emphasis added) states that “[W]hen we try to apply contemporary theories of justice to the *actual reality of our chaotic and often messy world*, there are all sorts of complications that need to be taken into account, such as trade-offs between different values, power imbalances between different social groups, unintended consequences of justice-enhancing interventions and policies, or interests of individuals and groups that may conflict with concerns for justice.” A similar argument holds when striving towards a more just approach to university access – we are unlikely to reach a situation of a perfectly just system of university access where every young person irrespective of race, gender, socioeconomic context and school background has an equal chance of gaining access, and once admitted has an equal chance of being successful – but we should act intentionally to reduce the glaring injustices that play out on a daily basis for many learners and students. I argue in this thesis that the capabilities approach provides a means of understanding issues of social justice in the context of university access in a manner that seeks to engage with the ‘messy world’. I will argue later (see section 4.5) that the capabilities framework is particularly useful for research on access to university, embedded in a social justice imperative, with the many complex and often ‘messy’ aspects this involves particularly when individual subjectivities and agency are considered in relation to higher education institutional issues and the broader social, economic and political environment.

Finally, several authors argue that a focus exclusively on distributive justice is a limiting conception of social justice which embodies much more than distributive elements only (Fraser, 1996, 1997; Gewirtz, 1998; Robeyns, 2009; Young, 1990). In particular, the works of Iris Marion Young (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1996, 1997) – who both start off from a critique of distributive justice – have been quite widely used in education and higher education contexts, and it is to the work of these two theorists that we now turn. I will argue below that while both Young and Fraser offer important insights into how access can be understood, their theories remain limited – in comparison to the capabilities approach – in key areas of specific relevance to access and higher education.

### 3.2.2 Iris Marion Young: Justice and the politics of difference

In her book – *Justice and the Politics of Difference* – Young begins with a detailed critique of distributive approaches to justice (Young, 1990). She argues that “instead of focusing on distribution, a conception of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression” and that “social justice means the elimination of institutionalised domination and oppression” (Young, 1990, p. 3 and 15). There are two main aspects to her critique of distributive theories of justice. The first is that a focus on the allocation of resources (wealth, income and positions in society) and/or material goods masks important social structures and institutional contexts (including decision-making power, procedures, division of labour and culture) which determine distribution patterns and so impact on social justice. Related is the concern that distributive theories of justice tend to take the form of ideal theories and so assume that ideal social structures and institutions are in place (Young, 1990, pp. 18–24). In seeking to overcome these difficulties, theorists of distributive justice often argue that they do not only focus on material goods, but also include non-material goods such as respect, power, or opportunity. Rawls’s list of primary goods is an example in point; including, amongst others, basic liberties, freedom of movement and choice, and the social basis of self-respect (Rawls, 1999; see also, Robeyns & Brighouse, 2010). Young (1990, pp. 24–30) sees this as the second major area of a critique of distributive justice and resource based approaches. She argues that this understanding of non-material social goods assumes that they are static end-state patterns (or things) rather than complex social processes based on, often conflicting, rules and relationships making up social life.

Although she critiques distributive justice, Young does not argue that distribution is unimportant, but rather that a focus on distribution of resources alone is not sufficient. She argues that there are two social conditions that define injustice; namely: oppression and domination (Young, 1990, p. 37). In Young’s formulation, oppression and domination can be described as follows:

“Oppression consists in systematic institutional processes which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognised settings, or institutionalised social processes which inhibit people’s ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen.”

“Domination consists in institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions...Thorough social and political democracy is the opposite of domination”(Young, 1990, p. 38).

Young then identified ‘five faces of oppression’ – exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. She argues that these five faces of oppression make up a family of concepts and conditions that constitute injustice. These ideas have been usefully applied in an education context by various authors.<sup>45</sup> Gewirtz (1998) draws on Young’s five faces of oppression’ to propose five questions that educational policy and research should consider in relation to issues of education, social justice and inequality. She invites researchers and policy analysts to consider the extent to which [higher] education policy (and we could add to this higher educational practice) support, interrupt or subvert the following mechanisms of inequality construction and maintenance:

1. Exploitative relationships such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, sexism, heterosexism and so on, both within and beyond educational institutions.
2. The various processes of marginalisation, exclusion and inclusion both within and beyond educational institutions.
3. The promotion of relationships that are grounded in principles of recognition, care, respect, and mutual gain versus relationships that produce powerlessness and oppression for educational workers and/or students.
4. The various practices of cultural imperialism, including which cultural differences should be affirmed, universalised or rejected.
5. Violent practices that aim to damage, humiliate, or destroy persons within and beyond educational institutions (paraphrased from Gewirtz, 1998, p. 482).

In later work, Gewirtz (2006) uses Young’s formulation of justice – particularly the notions of understanding social justice, as a multidimensional concept, in context rather than as an ideal theory – to analyse educational policy in England. Another application is seen in the theoretical work of Eisenberg (2006). Although specifically noting that Young did not directly apply her ideas on social justice to education policy, Eisenberg (2006, p. 8) uses Young’s work

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<sup>45</sup> In 2006 a full edition of the journal *Educational Philosophy and Theory* focusing on the application of Young’s work in education was published.

to think through the many challenges that arise in the politics of education. She demonstrates how Young's ideas apply to the challenge within an education context of "equalising and expanding the opportunities of individuals both in terms of the jobs they might have access to and therefore the materials resources they can hope to enjoy, and in terms of their role as citizens and therefore in terms of their cultural status, inclusion and political power" (Eisenberg, 2006, p. 13). Concrete strategies for breaking down structures of oppression in an education context would include for example, curricula and programmes that both reflect and raise awareness of societies consisting of multicultural, multinational and multilingual groupings, as well as tackling issues of oppression and domination such as racism, sexism and so on. The targeted appointment of decision makers in education contexts who represent disadvantaged groups is also important (Eisenberg, 2006). This focus on disadvantaged *groups* is an important theoretical standpoint taken by Young (1990; 2001).

Young (1990, p. 40) is explicit in her formulation of oppression and injustice that "oppression is a condition of groups" (see also, Young, 2001). As such, oppression occurs when a group experiences any of the five faces of oppression. In this context, a group is defined as "a collection of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life" (Young, 1990, p. 43). In the tradition of poststructuralist philosophy, Young argues that groups – as social processes – constitute the individual's notion of self, and as such, the unit of analysis should be at the level of the group and not at the level of the person. Taking this line of argumentation further, she states that social justice "requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression" (Young, 1990, p. 47, see also 2006a). In some of her later writing (including a 2006 paper specifically focused on education), Young (2001, 2006b) clarifies her standing with regard to understanding injustice as a condition of groups. She argues that structural injustices (inequalities produced through social processes) tend to operate on various groupings of people – be it groupings based on race, gender, age, ability and so on – rather than on individuals. However, this does not mean that the ultimate purpose of promoting justice and equality should be limited to groups. Instead, Young (2001, p. 6) notes that "the ultimate purpose for making assessments of inequality is to promote the well-being of individuals considered as irreducible moral equals" but that this assessment should take place at the level of the group since "groups are positioned by social structures that constrain and enable individual lives in ways largely beyond their individual control." This argument bears similarity to many

of the tenets of the capabilities approach that I will present below (in particular the notion of conversion factors in section 4.5). However, the fundamental limitation for understanding the transition to university is that Young's approach to social justice does not provide sufficient analytical space for understanding individual agency which is critical in an education context.

### ***3.2.2.1 Applying Young's Theory to Access***

Applying Young's approach in the context of access to university would require that the unit of analysis become various groupings of students – perhaps by gender, race or class, first generation students, or students with poor schooling backgrounds. The focus would be on how the university can ensure that these groups are recognised and respected and that they do not experience any or all of the five faces of oppression. Young would argue that the social groups that are marginalised in a university setting must be provided a meaningful space to participate in the life of the institution and in decision making processes (Young, 2006a). While the representation of less privileged groups within the university is critical, as is an institutional understanding how group membership impacts on access and success, Young's approach does not provide a means for understanding individual agency and individual differences. When one works with students (and in the context of education more broadly), the importance of seeing a student as part of a group (or multiple groups) as well as an individual who is operating within a specific personal, social, economic and familial context that may be quite different from the context of other group members is clear. Working in the context of widening participation in Britain, Hart (2011, p. 2) argues that “whilst significant group differences can be helpful in indicating patterns of inequality this is not adequate to comprehensively identify disadvantage for specific individuals.” We cannot assume that all first-generation students for example are grappling with the same transition issues, although we know that there will be areas of commonality. The example of the two students with NSFAS loans presented above is a case in point (see section 3.2.1). Thus, Young's privileging of the group over the individual limits the value of this approach for my work. As I will argue later (see sections Chapter 4: and 4.5), the focus of the capabilities approach on individual lives and well-being, regarding each individual as an end in themselves, is of particular value in promoting a just approach to university access. Further, I will show how the capabilities approaches provides a theoretical basis and opens up

an analytical space that allows for a focus on both agency and structural constraints on individuals and groups.

### **3.2.3 Nancy Fraser: Parity of participation**

Another important social justice theorist to consider is the feminist philosopher, Nancy Fraser. Like Young (1990), Fraser (1996, 1997, 2009) takes issue with too narrow a focus on distributive justice. She argues that both distributive justice (socioeconomic dimension), justice as recognition (cultural dimension), and justice as representational (political dimension) should be accommodated in any approach to understanding social justice, and so she presents an argument for a multidimensional approach to justice that she refers to as parity of participation. For Fraser,

“[the] meaning of justice is parity of participation...justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social life”(Fraser, 2009, p. 16)

The work of Fraser further deepens our understanding of the forms (in)justice can take, and how these forms are interrelated. In particular, she draws our attention to three dimensions of social justice as participatory parity: (1) redistribution, (2), recognition and (3) representation (Fraser, 1996, 1997, 2009; see also, Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

The first dimension, *redistribution*, is a form of socioeconomic justice. In a social, political and economic climate of injustice, this dimension requires the redistribution of wealth, opportunity, and material resources to those from whom this has been excluded. The second dimension, *recognition*, is related to cultural and symbolic issues and is “rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication” (Fraser, 1997, p. 71). Injustices in this dimension include cultural domination, rendering certain cultures or groups ‘invisible’, disrespect of difference and stereotyping for example. The third dimension, *representation*, falls into the political realm. Representation is about who belongs or is included within a community or society, decision making and contestation procedures, and how participation occurs. Fraser (2009, p. 16) argues that this political dimension of justice “furnishes the stage on which

struggles over distribution and recognition are played out.” Thus, social justice understood as *parity of participation*, “requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (Fraser, 1996, p. 30). For this participatory parity to be realised it requires that the distribution of material resources allows for participants to be independent and have a voice, as well as that “institutionalized cultural patterns of interpretation and evaluation express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem” (Fraser, 1996, p. 31).

A critique of Fraser’s work has been put forward by Robeyns (2003a). Robeyns – a philosopher who has worked substantially on the capabilities approach – argues that Fraser’s (1996) critique of distributive justice (which includes implicit critique of the work of Rawls and Sen) is misplaced as it assumes that all theories with a strong distributive element are “equally unable to incorporate issues of recognition” (Robeyns, 2003a, p. 540). She presents a comparison of Fraser’s notion of participatory parity and Sen’s capability approach and concludes that not only does the capability approach incorporate recognition concerns, but that the capability approach “is broader and able to handle some cases of injustice that are difficult to fit into Fraser’s theory” (Robeyns, 2003a, p. 548). More particularly, Robeyns (2003a) notes that the capability approach can be applied to a wider variety of cases since it is not only about justice, but also about broader notions of social change and human development.

### ***3.2.3.1 Applying Fraser’s theory to access***

Applying Fraser’s work on social justice to teaching and learning (and equally relevant to access debates) at a South African university, Leibowitz (2009) demonstrates the relevance of Fraser’s dimensions of justice in the South African higher education context (see also, Tikly & Barrett, 2011, who apply both Fraser’s and Sen’s work to education quality in low income countries). Leibowitz argues that the multidimensional nature of participatory parity is important because research on teaching and learning tends to emphasise either material conditions, or affective and relational issues, or the academic and cognitive domain. A similar argument holds for research on access specifically (see Chapter 2). Seldom are these different dimensions held in balance (Leibowitz, 2009, p. 87).

The concept of parity of participation can be usefully applied in understanding many of the access dilemmas presented in Chapter 2. At the broadest level, widening access is about expanding participation. The dimension of redistribution can be applied to issues of funding, changing student demographics and is seen in arguments about the need to increase the proportion of young black people in higher education and the need to ensure that those from poor backgrounds are provided with financial support. The dimension of recognition is particularly important, and arguably, not always given sufficient attention in the context of access. This aspect of social justice requires attention to be drawn to issues of language of instruction, the extent to which diverse groups of students are respected in the manner in which the university welcomes its new students, and the extent to which the university and academic staff make assumptions about individual students based on their group membership. The increasing concern with identifying ‘at risk’ students and what this means in terms of how such students are positioned within the university would be an example in point. The final dimension, representation, operates at the level of the political. In the context of access, this would turn our attention to the manner in which access decisions are made, including access to residences, the way in which students are received by student leaders, and broader decision making processes regarding the manner in which the first year of university is organised.

The relevance of Fraser’s work notwithstanding, Leibowitz argues that the notion of participatory parity does not pay sufficient attention to individual agency. She states that “with an emphasis on social structure and inequality is the potential tendency to attribute deficit, pathology or victimhood to members of oppressed groups” (Leibowitz, 2009, p. 94) and so to assume that teaching and learning is an activity that is done to students and not with them, an approach she argues is a one-dimensional view of social justice in education and also of human development more broadly (Leibowitz, 2009, p. 93). In proposing a model for teaching and learning as a pedagogy of possibility, Leibowitz argues for the importance of adding to Fraser’s three dimensions a clear formulation of how agency and structure interact. Privileging structural issues over agency is potentially deterministic and “seems to fail to account for the existence of agency, or the will to succeed against the odds, despite one’s social class background” (Leibowitz, 2009, p. 95). Working in higher education and with students, I am continually struck by the examples of students who succeed against the odds and in spite of the major inequalities and injustices in the system (see also empirical chapters), thus I agree with Leibowitz’s critique of Fraser. Although Leibowitz makes passing reference to the capabilities

perspective and the work of Walker (2006) as a means of doing this, she does not take up this line of argument specifically (Leibowitz, 2009, p. 96). I shall build on these ideas, particularly Leibowitz's critique regarding the missing agency dimension in the coming chapter where I argue specifically for a capabilities approach for understanding access and the transition to university from a social justice point of view.

### 3.3 Conclusion

I began this chapter by presenting a case for why I see social justice to be important in a higher education context. The difficult tension faced by public universities that are simultaneously elitist institutions and providers of life chances was discussed together with the related debates about the extent to which higher education is and/or should be seen as a public good. Much of the chapter was devoted to presenting a brief, but critical overview of the work of three prominent social justice theorists. In all three cases I have noted that while there are aspects of these approaches to social justice of relevance and value in the context of access to higher education, in each case the approach is limited for my specific study for several reasons. I have also provided pointers towards my unfolding argument that the capabilities approach provides a more comprehensive account of social justice – explicitly taking both structural injustices and individual agency into account – and so is the framework of choice for my study. The potential of the capability framework within the field of education has been noted by an increasing number of authors in recent years. For example, Unterhalter and Walker conclude their book on the capability approach and education with the following statement:

“it is important to acknowledge the genuinely radical ideas for education in the capability approach – not only its concern with heterogeneity and actual living out of valued lives, but also its call for *both* redistribution of resources and opportunities *and* recognition and equal valuing of diversity along intersecting axes of gender, social class, race, ethnicity, disability, age and so on. It thus integrates distributional, recognitional and process elements of justice” (Unterhalter & Walker, 2007, p. 251, emphasis in the original).

In the coming chapter I introduce the capabilities approach and present my argument for a capabilities framework for conceptualising the transition to university.

## Chapter 4: The Capabilities Approach

“The world in which we live is not only unjust, it is, arguably, extraordinarily unjust. It is not frivolous to seek a framework for a theory of justice that concentrates on advancement, not transcendence, and also allows being globally interactive, rather than being intellectually sequestered. We have good reason to abstain from concentrating so fully on the program of identifying the totalist – and possibly parochial – demands of transcendental, contractarian justice. We have to move the theory of justice out of that little corner” (Sen, 2006, pp. 237–238).

In the preceding chapter I made several references to the capabilities approach, particularly in relation to the critiques of other approaches to theorising social justice. At this point, it is useful to take a step back and systematically introduce and outline the key tenets of the capabilities approach before showing more specifically how the notion of capabilities can be used to frame an exploration of the transition to university from a social justice point of view.

The capability approach was pioneered during the 1980s and 1990s by Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize winning economist and philosopher. Sen sought to provide an alternative to the dominant utilitarian and neo-liberal approaches to development and well-being. One of the practical outcomes of Sen’s work, pioneered by Mahbub ul Haq, has been the Human Development Index (HDI) now widely used in development studies and in comparing relative human development<sup>46</sup> levels of countries (for a recent discussion of capabilities and human development see, Alkire, 2010). The capability approach has a wide disciplinary audience and application, or in Sen’s words there are a “plurality of purposes for which the capability approach can have relevance” (Sen, 1993, p. 49). The ideas of the capability approach have also been developed further and in a slightly different direction by the well-known feminist philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, who has proposed a list of ten basic capabilities that she believes determine a “decent social minimum” of human functioning universally (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 75, see also 2011).

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<sup>46</sup> The concept of human development seeks to move discussions about what development means beyond the dominant approaches focusing only on income as measured by Gross National Product (GNP). Human development is defined as follows: “Human development aims to enlarge people’s freedoms to do and be what they value and have reason to value. In practice, human development also empowers people to engage actively in development of our shared planet. It is people-centred. At all levels of development, human development focuses on essential freedoms: enabling people to lead long and healthy lives, to acquire knowledge, to be able to enjoy a decent standard of living and to shape their own lives. Many people value these freedoms in and of themselves; they are also powerful means to other opportunities” (Alkire, 2010, p. 43).

The capability approach is not a theory of (social) justice in the traditional philosophical sense, but rather a normative framework that can be used to guide understandings of individual well-being and social arrangements in a manner that supports a striving for just outcomes (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a, 2009b). As the quotation at the start of the chapter emphasises, Sen is critical of the Rawlsian assumption that thinking about justice should be in the direction of formulating the requirements and institutions needed for a perfectly just society. Sen argues instead that we need to accept that the achievement of a perfectly just society is unlikely and instead focus our energies on understanding how we can minimise the myriad of injustices all around us (Sen, 1979, 1985b, 1990, 1999, 2006, 2009). He describes the aim of his work in the area of capabilities and justice as seeking “to clarify how we can proceed to address questions of enhancing justice and removing injustice, rather than to offer resolutions of questions about the nature of perfect justice” (Sen, 2009, p. ix). The capabilities approach is thus a “tool and a framework within which to *conceptualise* and *evaluate* these phenomena” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94, emphasis in the original). At its core, the approach is about focusing on what people are **effectively able to do and to be**, i.e. their capabilities, within a comparative frame of reference (Sen, 1979, 1985b, 1999).

In providing an introduction to the capability approach, it is useful to begin with a brief definition of the four key concepts on which the framework is built (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; Hart, 2009; Nussbaum, 2000, 2006; Sen, 1979, 1985b, 1993, 1999):

1. The concept of ***functionings***: being or doing what one values and has reason to value (achieved outcomes).
2. The concept of ***capabilities***: the freedom one has to enjoy valuable functionings (opportunity freedom).
3. The concept of ***agency***: the ability of a person to realise the goals that they value and have reason to value. Sen defines an agent as follows: “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well” (Sen, 1999, p. 19). He then continues on to note that; “this work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions” (Sen, 1999, p. 19).

4. The concept of **well-being**: the capabilities approach assumes that in assessing how well someone is doing, the focus needs to be on “the ‘wellness’ of a person’s state of being...The exercise, then, 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). In this sense, 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. Importantly, “the capability approach thus proposes a broad, rich, and multidimensional view of human well-being and pays much attention to the links between material, mental, and social well-being, or to the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of human life”(Crocker & Robeyns, 2009, p. 65).

Coming sections in this chapter explain these concepts and their importance and interconnectedness within the capability approach. I recognise that the capability approach terminology (with its roots in economics and philosophy) employs terms that are not always intuitively clear to a multidisciplinary audience. For this reason, in explaining the key concepts, I have included specific examples related to education and higher education in order to ground the concepts in a practical educational setting.

#### 4.1.1 Functionings and capabilities

*Functionings* can be defined as achieved outcomes, the things that a person is able to be or to do. At a broad level, functionings encompass, for example, being adequately nourished, being employed, being literate, doing a job that is meaningful and fulfilling. If we consider (higher) education, functionings would include, for example, being able to read, being able to take part in university life, taking responsibility for oneself, or being able to pass an examination. The second important element of the concept of functionings is that it refers to outcomes that a person values or has reason to value; i.e. individual choice (agency) is explicitly recognised. An achievement or outcome is not a functioning if it is not something that is valued by the person concerned (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a, p. 32). For example, a young man who has just completed an accounting qualification at the instruction of his father despite the fact that

he is a passionate and talented painter who wished to study fine arts, would not necessarily view his accounting qualification as a functioning or an achievement that he as reason to value.

The notion of *capabilities* combines the concept of functionings with opportunity freedom. Capabilities are the freedom (choices or options) a person has to enjoy valuable functionings (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; Deneulin, Nebel, & Sagovsky, 2006; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1979, 1999). Put very simply, “A functioning is an achievement [outcome], whereas a capability is the ability to achieve [potential]” (Sen, 1985a, p. 48; see also Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 4). As such, a functioning can be seen as the active realisation of capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 24–25). As discussed in section 1.6, Sen and Nussbaum define capabilities in somewhat different ways, with Sen emphasising only the opportunity or freedom dimension of capabilities, while Nussbaum sees capabilities as personal powers which incorporate skills, capacities and opportunities (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1992, 1999). Nussbaum’s approach is used in this work where I focus on capabilities as personal powers that underpin the achievement of various functionings.

The distinction between capabilities and functionings is critical because understanding outcomes/achievements only does not necessarily provide sufficient information to understand how well someone is really doing. Consider the following fictional (although very realistic in the context of my study) example of two young women who both graduate from university with an undergraduate commerce qualification (scenarios adapted from, Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, pp. 4–5, drawing on my experience working with UFS students). The first young woman, Judy, attended a middle class suburban high school and came from a reasonably affluent home. Her father had not been to university as he took over the family business when he completed school. Her mother was a high school teacher. Although Judy had a trainee manager job available at her father’s company on completing school, she decided that she wished to experience university before commencing her working life. She did not need to achieve high marks as her future was secure, so she made the most of all the social opportunities available at university. Her schooling had also equipped her relatively well for the demands of university and she enjoyed the discussions and debates in class, but she spent only the minimum time possible on her studies. The second young woman, Bernita, grew up in a semi-urban township area. Her family was poor; her father was unemployed and her mother worked as a domestic worker. The school she attended was under-resourced and there was little commitment to

teaching and learning. Nonetheless, Bernita was strong academically and with a lot of hard work and studying until late at night she managed to meet the entrance criteria to university on completion of her Grade 12. She was the only learner from her school to go to university. Once at university, Bernita found it difficult to fit in with many peers from a different social class and background to hers. The poor quality of teaching at her school did not prepare her well for discussions in class nor for her written work. At school she was mostly able to talk in Sesotho, her mother tongue, (although she learned in English) so she felt anxious to speak in English at university and was unwilling to venture an opinion in class or when doing group work. Bernita worked very hard while at university, but lacked confidence in her abilities and tended to blame herself for poor performance, and as a result she did not ask her lecturers for additional support.

Despite these very different experiences and learning trajectories, both young women obtained second class passes in their commerce degree. Although the educational outcome is the same (a second class pass), the capability sets of Judy and Bernita differ tremendously. Considering only the outcome masks areas of injustice and inequality that should be addressed (see also, Pendelbury & Enslin, 2004; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Understanding differences in capabilities such as those highlighted in this fictional example are of particular importance in seeking to facilitate the transition from school to university.

“The capability approach requires that we do not simply evaluate functionings [outcomes] but the real freedom or opportunities each student had available to choose from and to achieve what she valued. Our evaluation of equality must then take account of freedom in opportunities as much as observed choices. The capability approach, therefore, offers a method to evaluate real educational advantage, and equally to identify disadvantage, marginalisation, and exclusion” (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 5).

This identification of educational disadvantage, marginalisation and exclusion opens up a space for action towards the overall aim of social justice within higher education, and in the context of this study, specifically related to enhancing the transition to university. “The quality of life a person enjoys is not merely a matter of what he or she achieves, but also of what options the person has had the opportunity to choose from.” (Hart, 2009, p. 392, quoting Sen 1999a, p.45).

There is some debate in the capabilities literature regarding whether the focus of analysis should be on functionings, on capabilities or both (for example, Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a;

Crocker, 1995; Crocker & Robeyns, 2009; Sen, 1992; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Sen and Nussbaum argue for a focus on capabilities because both place emphasis on the intrinsic value of freedom (or options/opportunities) (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1985b, 1992, 1999). This issue is particularly relevant in the case of education which can be seen as both a functioning (being educated) and a capability (having educational opportunities). Nussbaum (2011, p. 25) reminds us that capability and functioning are two sides of the same coin, and if people were never able to function then it would not make sense to look at capabilities or opportunities to function. Similarly, in much earlier writing, Sen (1992, p. 50, emphasis in original) states that “the first thing to note is that capability is defined in terms of the *same* focal variables as functionings.” In seeking to unravel these complexities inherent in the capabilities approach, Crocker and Robeyns (2009, p. 71) propose a conceptual way around this debate by arguing that “one could focus on achieved functioning levels but – where appropriate – include the exercise of choice as one of the relevant functionings.”

The key point to note from this debate is that the notions of capabilities (personal powers) and functionings (outcomes or achievements) are closely linked. Further, it is not possible to directly observe or assess capabilities. Instead, functionings – which can be observed – need to be used as a proxy for assessing capabilities (Sen, 1992).

#### **4.1.2 Fertile functioning and corrosive disadvantage**

The capabilities approach has been used and developed – both theoretically and empirically – by Wolf and de-Shalit (2007) in their exploration of the meaning of disadvantage. Wolf and de-Shalit argue that disadvantage should be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon where the most disadvantaged are those who experience disadvantage in multiple areas, i.e. clusters of disadvantage. There are three aspects of these authors’ work of particular relevance in the context of my study. The first of these is the notion of risk and, related, that of insecure functionings. Drawing on empirical work in Israel and Britain, Wolf and de-Shalit (2007, p. 66) argue that one way of identifying disadvantage is to identify those who are exposed to risks that they would not have taken had they had another choice. The argument is not that there should be no risks, but that some people face undue risks and although they might have certain capabilities in the present they are not able to count on them in the future (see also, Nussbaum,

2011, p. 43). Further, “disadvantages and risks compound each other and cluster together” (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007, p.10). A simplified example in the context of higher education is the student who depends on bursary funding support but is unsure from year to year whether funding would be granted and if so, whether the amount will be sufficient. Such a student is able to study, but faces the risk of not being able to pay fees at any time. Further, depending on the amount provided by the bursary, the student may be able to pay for fees but not cover living expenses. As such, the student eats only one meal per day and is inclined to become ill due to poor nutrition so misses class. Due to missing classes, and spending a lot of time trying to earn extra money as a part time waiter the student performs poorly academically and struggles to earn the minimum credits required for a renewal of funding the following year...The risks continue and, as is seen in this example, cluster together, creating multiple levels of disadvantage.

In developing their theory of disadvantage, Wolf and de-Shalit add two important new concepts to the capabilities approach, namely, **fertile functioning** and **corrosive disadvantage**. Fertile functionings (or capabilities)<sup>47</sup> refer to functionings (or capabilities) that tend to promote or assist in securing other functionings or capabilities. Corrosive disadvantages are those disadvantages that tend to yield further disadvantage (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Based on their empirical research, these authors argue that those who are most disadvantaged tend to be in a situation where multiple disadvantages cluster together. As such, they note that special attention should be given to “the way patterns of disadvantage form and persist, and to take steps to break up such clusters” (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007, p. 10). Identifying fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages provide the means for identifying these clusters of disadvantage as well as possible steps to remedy them.

In seeking to understand the transition to university from a social justice perspective, identifying fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages holds particular value because they point to specific areas for intervention. In chapter 5 I investigate the transition to university – from the perspective of learners and students. This analysis points to fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages on which I then build on in Chapter 6 where a capabilities framework for the transition to university is presented.

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<sup>47</sup> See also Nussbaum 2011, p. 44

## 4.2 Capabilities and social justice

Given the pervasiveness of the human capital approach within an education and higher education context (see section 3.1), and also given the overlaps and critical differences of this approach to that of capabilities, it is helpful to briefly highlight the similarities and differences. Particular emphasis is placed on why the capabilities approach provides a more useful way of understanding social justice. The human capital approaches were developed within the field of economics. The contribution this work made to traditional economic theories was immense, particularly in drawing attention to the human element of development. With a focus on building human capital through investment in education and skills development, this approach was critical in drawing attention to the value of education, and particularly higher education which had been regarded of less importance than primary education by powerful international players such as the World Bank (Lanzi, 2007; Robeyns, 2006, 2009; Sen, 1997, 1999). However, human capital theories are limited in that they focus exclusively on the instrumental economic benefits of education; “human qualities that can be employed as ‘capital’ in production in the way that physical capital is” (Sen, 1997, p. 1959). Further, it is generally assumed that labour markets work rationally and once someone is educated the labour market will allocate them to appropriate employment (Unterhalter, 2009a). As such, the human capital framework ignores the myriad forms of injustice that operate within education itself and in society more broadly, which limit certain groups’ access to opportunity. The capabilities work, and particularly the more recent writings of Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2006, 2010), extends the human capital conception of education to include both instrumental and intrinsic values of education and the role that education plays in the expansion of individual freedoms, as well as influencing social change. The focus of the capabilities approach on the *actual lives* of people, on what they are able to be and do, means that this approach is directly concerned with *practical, everyday forms of inequality and injustice*. The capabilities approach views each and every individual as an end in themselves, and not the means to some other (larger) end such as the elusive notion of ‘development’ or in the context of my work – the chasing of equity targets and increases in student numbers.

The capabilities approach also extends rights based approaches to education, by drawing attention to the fact that just because rights have officially been granted it does not mean they will be realised in practice (Nussbaum, 2000, 2006; Sen, 1999, 2009). For Nussbaum, the

capabilities approach “provides important precision and supplementation to the language of rights” (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 37). For example, working from a feminist standpoint, Robeyns notes that “[I]n rights based approaches, men and women are entitled to equal rights, but once these rights have been granted, no further claims for social change can be made. For example, if citizenship rights grant equal access to schooling for boys and girls, then governments might be satisfied under such a rights based approach, even if the outcomes display significant gender inequalities” (Robeyns, 2006, pp. 80–81; see also, Nussbaum, 2000, 2003).

As is evident from the preceding paragraphs, the level and depth of debate and analysis regarding social justice, capabilities, the nature of freedom, human development and so on is extensive and cuts across the disciplines of philosophy, political philosophy, economics, law, social theory, and development studies. My focus here is on applying the capability approach – which has already been shown to be of immense value in a higher education context (see 4.3 below) – to the issue of university access and the transition from school to university.

### **4.3 Capabilities approach and (higher) education research**

Within a capabilities framework it is possible to approach education issues in two ways. Firstly, one can consider the “capability to participate in education” (Vaughan, 2007, p. 116). Secondly, 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 (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999; Vaughan, 2007). In the context of this study, the first approach, that of the capability to participate in education, in particular higher education, is the focus. Working at the schooling level, Vaughan explains how the capability to participate in education could be assessed as follows: “[A]n assessment of the capability to participate would, therefore, compare constraints that might affect the freedom of a child to achieve various educational functionings” (Vaughan, 2007, p. 116). It is thus important to ask what might prevent a student from engaging in the learning process at school or university, whether there are specific factors affecting the ability to attend school or university and so on. Influences on the ability to effectively participate in education can be found both within and outside of education institutions and include, for example, the range of social institutions and the social norms on which they function, personal characteristics of the learner and a host of environmental factors

(Vaughan, 2007). The same argument can be applied to university education, and in the case of this study, the transition from school to university (see below).

Several authors have made use of the capability framework for researching education at various levels and these studies have demonstrated the conceptual depth that the approach provides in a higher education context (Hart, 2007, 2008, for some examples, see 2009; Lanzi, 2007; Nussbaum, 2006, 2010; Saito, 2003; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Walker, 2005; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Watts & Bridges, 2006)<sup>48</sup>. Walker (2006, pg. 142) identifies five reasons why the capabilities approach is of particular value in the context of striving for social justice in education. These reasons are as follows (paraphrased from Walker 2006, p. 142):

1. Both the intrinsic and instrumental value of higher education are recognised;
2. The approach addresses both recognition and redistribution as key elements of social justice;
3. Agency as a measure of individual advantage or disadvantage in and through higher education is foregrounded;
4. Individual agency and social and institutional arrangements are located on the same plane; and
5. A space is created to focus on the capabilities that should be fostered in an effort to achieve educational/pedagogic rights.

Before setting out the specific application of the capability approach that underpins my study, it is useful to briefly consider in a little more detail some of the studies that have been done in the areas of education and higher education from a capabilities perspective. These examples of published research on education and capabilities highlight the richness and varied applications possible with the broad ambit of the capabilities approach. Because the capabilities approach is based on understanding what people can actually be and do (on the lives people live in practice), the boundaries between conceptual critique and practical action for change (towards more just outcomes) are potentially blurred (Walker, 2006, p. 142). As such, the capabilities approach provides both a conceptual lens for theoretically exploring the transition to university from a social justice point of view, as well as the basis for proposing interventions; drawing on the actual experiences of students.

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<sup>48</sup> In 2012, a special edition of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* focused on education and capabilities was published further broadening the reach of literature in this area.

### 4.3.1 Examples of relevant studies using the capabilities approach

In a schooling context, Terzi presents a strong argument for why the capability to be educated should be seen as a fundamental entitlement and thus that the provision of quality education for diverse learners is a matter of social justice (Terzi, 2007). She also presents a possible list of basic capabilities required for educational functionings. These include literacy, numeracy, sociality and participation, learning dispositions, physical activities, science and technology and practical reasoning (Terzi, 2007, p. 37). Terzi notes that “[S]ince education plays a crucial role in people’s well-being, it follows that unequal opportunities or access to education and its fundamental enabling conditions would constitute an unacceptable inequality” (Terzi, 2007, p. 41). A useful review of educational reforms in Queensland Australia was done drawing very specifically on Sen’s book ‘Development as Freedom’ published in 1999 (Harreveld & Singh, 2008). These authors conducted a policy analysis of the Queensland Government’s Education and Training Reforms – particularly considering ‘senior learning’ that sought to reposition senior secondary school to incorporate more flexible and vocational learning opportunities for young people likely to drop out of high school. They found that the flexible learning opportunities introduced did indeed create opportunities for young people with few educational options, and also supported the development of what might be seen as key functionings such as literacy and numeracy. From an educational policy analysis perspective, Harreveld and Singh conclude that “the usefulness of Sen’s (1999) capability approach for policy analysis lies in its potential to engage with the multi-level socioeconomic processes that get worked out over time through complex multi-faceted reforms” (Harreveld & Singh, 2008, p. 222). The capability approach has also been used to advance an argument for why post-secondary education is critical for low-income women with children because of what it enables them to be and to do (Deprez & Butler, 2007; see also Sen, 1999). From a philosophy of education angle, Saito (2003) explores the links between the capabilities approach and education, and concludes her theoretical paper with a call for educationists to explore the possibilities that capabilities based analyses open up. More recently, Unterhalter presented a conceptual analysis of the meaning of equity in education drawing on reflections from the capabilities approach (Unterhalter, 2009b).

From a higher education perspective, and particularly with respect to university access, four further studies bear mention. Walker has presented the capabilities approach as a

framework for evaluating higher education pedagogy and student learning within the context of the social and pedagogical arrangements that influence possibilities for equality in learning opportunity (Walker, 2006, 2008, 2009). One of the areas in which she focuses in this work is that of widening participation in the UK higher education context. In this work, Walker asks “How do we evaluate equality achievements in relation to widening participation?” (Walker, 2006, p. 90). Working with 14 students who were part of a Widening Participation project, Walker reports that even though their individual experiences differed and several encountered various difficulties in their studies, all 14 students felt that participating in higher education had helped them to expand their life choices and opportunities. She concludes that understanding widening participation from a capabilities perspective requires us

“to recognize the ways in which higher education and pedagogy might as easily generate ‘capability deprivation’. It alerts us to the ways in which education produces both equity and inequity, belonging and exclusion. The capability approach asks that we look at what widening participation students are able to be and do, according to what they value for themselves” (Walker, 2006, p. 108).

Walker’s study thus shows how the capabilities approach places research on accessing higher education within the realm of a discourse of ethics. In a recent paper, Marginson (2011, p. 23) addresses the complex and contradictory ethics of participation in higher education, and sets out to answer the question – “has socioeconomic equity in higher education advanced, concurrent with the growth of participation?” Drawing on Sen’s analysis of theories of justice (Sen, 2009), Marginson shows how there is an underlying tension in approaches to equity in higher education. He argues that the dominant equity as fairness approaches focus on “purifying the mechanisms of fair competition, especially at the point of entry into first degrees. But this neglects the fact that individual agents have an unequal capacity to compete” (Marginson, 2011, p. 30). The result is that while participation of under-represented groups increases in absolute numbers, proportional representation remains as unequal as ever. Instead of equity as fairness which draws on ideal theories of social justice, Marginson (2011, p. 28, emphasis added) argues that realist approaches to social justice (approaches to which Sen’s work is aligned) provide a better means of engaging with the challenges of equity in higher education because the focus is on “actual human behaviours and the achievement of justice in *real situations*.” He argues further that, when seeking to overcome injustice, the focus should be

on understanding, in depth, the various inequalities in higher education and then to identify strategies “in pursuit of smaller changes at many points, rather than all points at once (and hence in none)” (Marginson, 2011, p. 34).

Watts and Bridges (2006) make use of the capabilities approach in their critical considerations of the injustices present in widening participation discourse and policy in the UK. Researching working class young people who chose not to enter higher education, these authors use Sen’s work to show that the “twin agendas of social inclusion and economic development lead to the reformation rather than the resolution of injustice” (Watts & Bridges, 2006, p. 143). Watts and Bridges used the method of life histories as means to capture the experiences of their sample of young people not in higher education, and so moved beyond widening access debates that so often focus on statistics indicating trends in access. The study showed that some working class young people who chose not to pursue higher education may have in fact made a different decision had they had access to more and better information within social and educational contexts in which higher education was understood and seen to be of value. However, this argument did not apply to all participants. Indeed, some of the young people with whom they worked had achieved the functionings (outcomes) they wished to achieve and were living a life they ‘valued and had reason to value’ without attending university. This was not because of low aspirations or their contextual backgrounds, but because they “had made valuable and reasonable choices by not participating in higher education” (Watts, 2009, p. 428; Watts & Bridges, 2006). Thus, these authors conclude that “[A]lthough wider access is to be applauded, the failure to address the real opportunities people have to enjoy the educational lives they want to lead (including the opportunities to quit education free from the accusation of having low aspirations and achievements) suggests that this may be an enterprise that is doomed simply to establish other educational injustices” (Watts & Bridges, 2006, p. 157). Thus, the authors highlight the role that hidden assumptions can play in research on access, particularly when the researcher is focused on making a case for social justice gains through widened participation.

The fourth study of particular value in the context of my work was also done in the context of widening participation in the UK. Hart (2008) worked with a sample of 580 young people in South Yorkshire all in their final year of (post-compulsory) schooling (i.e. sixth form learners). Making use of focus groups, surveys and individual interviews Hart explored the

aspirations of learners in their final year of school together with the opportunities and support that was available to them in exploring these aspirations. Through the study, Hart showed that “access and presence within a formal educational setting does not indicate anything of the quality or meaning of the experience for a given individual” (see also, Hart, 2007, 2008, p. 4). She argues further that the term ‘participation’ [or access in the South African context] is a loaded term rooted in an incorrect assumption that increasing numbers “is synonymous with better forms of participation” (Hart, 2008, p. 4). Three broad dimensions of participation emerged from Hart’s research with the six form learners. These dimensions are as follows: (1) participation in the *decision* to engage in education of different types; (2) the *experience* of participation or non-participation; and (3) the *outcomes* of participation (Hart, 2008, pp. 4–5). Hart shows how these three dimensions interplay in various ways for different participants and create multiple advantage or disadvantage for the young people she worked with (see also, Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007 and section 3.3.2). These three dimensions of participation in higher education can be used as a conceptual tool for understanding widening participation policy and practice from a capabilities perspective. Hart argues that the capabilities approach “highlights the way current policy tends to be evaluated in terms of outcome, based on achievements such as numbers applying to, and being accepted at, higher education institutions, as well as the level and number of qualifications achieved [none of which take] account of the well-being an individual has achieved, or indeed the range of opportunities the individual has been able to choose from” (Hart, 2007, pp. 37–38).

In taking some of these ideas further, Hart (2009) explored the spaces and new directions that the capability approach potentially opens up for philosophy of education research. She makes specific reference to understanding higher education from a capabilities point of view noting that:

“when looking at what a person is able to be or do this encompasses (but is not restricted to) looking at what a person has. For example, a young person may be able to gain a university place providing they achieve certain qualifications (having). However, their capability to achieve the functioning of ‘doing’ going to university is contingent on the individual being able to operate effectively in that environment socially, psychologically and from a practical point of view. For example, an individual may risk being alienated from family and friends if they come from a social milieu in which participating in higher education is not the norm. This in turn may affect whether they take up and maintain their university place. The capability approach draws our attention to the myriad of complex social, personal and

environmental factors which affect what a person is able to (and chooses to) do and be” (Hart, 2009).

In this study, I am trying to understand this myriad of factors that influence what young people entering university are able to be and do. In this section I have demonstrated both the value of, and the many ways in which the capabilities approach has been applied to education generally and higher education more specifically. Specific attention was drawn to four studies that are of particular relevance to my work.

#### **4.4 Capability lists**

There is much debate in the capabilities literature – across disciplines – on whether or not one should propose a list of capabilities that we should strive towards ensuring as minimum criteria for justice (for some examples see, Alkire, 2002; Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; Nussbaum, 2000, 2003; Robeyns, 2003b; Sen, 1999, 2004; Walker, 2006; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Sen argues against such a position, preferring to leave the formulation of a possible list of capabilities up to the specific group of people in question, taking their unique context into account (Sen, 1999, 2006, 2009). For Sen, the participatory and deliberative process of formulating specific capabilities within a specific context is critical and hence he does not support a generic or universal list of capabilities and his capabilities approach is deliberately incomplete thus allowing space for deliberation (Sen, 1990, 1993, 1999). As such, Sen’s capability approach is “a framework of thought, a normative tool, but it is not a fully specified theory that gives us complete answers to all our normative questions” (Robeyns, 2003b, p. 64). Sen argues that there is no problem with listing important capabilities within specific contexts for a particular purpose. He objects to the idea of “one predetermined canonical list of capabilities, chosen by theorists without any general social discussion or public reasoning” (Sen, 2004, p. 77). Capabilities list(s), understood from Sen’s perspective, can provide benchmarks for assessing progress in working towards more than just outcomes within a specific context and also provide possible mechanisms for identifying and assessing injustice in context and ensuring space for public participation and deliberation. Any list should always remain open to revision in the light of new evidence and further deliberation.

In contrast, in her influential work, “Women and Human Development”, in which a specific, philosophically-grounded version of the capability approach is presented, Martha Nussbaum presents a strong argument for why a list of Central Human Capabilities (see box 2) based on universal values is essential and applicable to all countries and across all contexts. She argues 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). For Nussbaum, Sen’s approach is “too vague” and does not provide sufficient substantive basis to construct a normative conception of social justice (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 33). In her 2003 defence of the list of Central Human Capabilities Nussbaum concludes that “the bare idea of capabilities as a space within which comparisons are made and inequalities assessed is insufficient. To get a vision of social justice that will have the requisite critical force and definiteness to direct social policy, we need to have an account, for political purposes of what the central human capabilities are, even if we know that this account will always be contested and remade” (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 56). The list of capabilities Nussbaum proposes is intentionally flexible to take account of human diversity; her list is “open-ended and humble” and the details of each capability can be more concretely specified in accordance with the specific context in which it is being used (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 77). She notes that “we want universals that are facilitative rather than tyrannical, that create spaces for choice rather than dragooning people into a desired total mode of function” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 59).

Nussbaum’s list of capabilities is presented in Box 2 on page 108. These central capabilities affect all aspects of a person’s life, including education and in line with the notion of personal powers discussed above, include combinations of skills, abilities, and opportunities. Nussbaum’s list was developed drawing philosophically on Aristotelian thinking, and empirically on her extensive work with poor women in India. Each of the ten capabilities should be seen as separate components of one’s overall capability set, which means that the achievement or satisfaction of one by a larger amount does not mean another is not needed. All are of equal importance, although two, ‘practical reason’ and ‘affiliation,’ are noted to be of special importance “since they both organise and suffuse all the others, making their pursuit truly human” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 81 and 82).

Wolff and de-Shalit (2007) have done empirical work and public consultation using interview methods to validate Nussbaum's list. In addition to validating Nussbaum's list of 10 capabilities, based on their empirical work, these authors proposed to expand Nussbaum's list to include the capabilities of: (1) doing good to others; (2) living in a law-abiding fashion; (3) understanding the law; and (4) the ability to understand and speak the local language (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007).

Despite the fact that Nussbaum's work has been widely used, there have also been specific critiques of her approach to capabilities, in particular her focus on creating a universal list of central human capabilities. Sen's argument against the formulation of one canonical list was noted above (Sen, 2004). Various other authors have also critiqued Nussbaum's universalism. For example Charusheela (2009) argues that despite Nussbaum explicitly drawing on work in various countries and across cultures, her work remains ethnocentric (see also, McReynolds, 2002). In 'Woman and Human Development', Nussbaum presents an articulate defence of universal values taking on particularly the critiques from cultural, diversity and paternalism perspectives. The reader is referred to chapter 1 of *Woman and Human Development* for a comprehensive account (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 34–110). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the complexities of these arguments, and since my application of the capabilities approach uses the limited notion of a list relevant to a specific context and purpose (Sen, 2004) issues of universalism do not apply (see, Alkire, 2002).

**Box 2: Central Human Capabilities**  
(Nussbaum, 2000, p. 78-80)

1. **Life:** Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as not to be worth living.
2. **Bodily Health:** Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. **Bodily Integrity:** Being able to move freely from place to place; having one's bodily boundaries treated as sovereign, i.e. being able to be secure against assault, including sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. **Senses, Imagination and Thought:** Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason – and to do these things in a 'truly human' way, a way informed and cultivated by adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing self-expressive works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to search for the ultimate meaning of life in one's own way. Being able to have pleasurable experiences, and to avoid unnecessary pain.
5. **Emotions:** Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear and anxiety, or by traumatic events of abuse or neglect. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that has been shown to be crucial in their development.)
6. **Practical Reason:** Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience.)
7. **Affiliation:**
  - a. Being able to live with and towards others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship. (Protecting this Capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting freedom of assembly and political speech.)
  - b. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails, at a minimum, protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, caste, ethnicity, or national origin. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.
8. **Other Species:** Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. **Play:** Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. **Control over One's Environment:**
  - a. **Political:** Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.
  - b. **Material:** Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), not just formally but in terms of real opportunity; and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure.

Other authors and researchers making use of capabilities have argued for the value of lists defined for specific purposes. Robeyns argues that it becomes difficult to *apply* the capabilities approach to a specific applied issue (as opposed to ideal theorising) – such as the transition to university – if we do not provide some substantive basis from which to “choose the relevant

capabilities and indicate how important each will be in an overall judgement” (Robeyns, 2003b, p. 64, emphasis added). This argument is not necessarily in opposition to Sen’s clear commitment to participation and dialogue. The key, though, is to review the processes used to formulate the list of capabilities in the first place, the purpose of the list, and the manner in which specific lists are used. In seeking a middle ground that takes both Sen and Nussbaum’s perspectives into account, Walker argues that “there is a valid case for a list, but this should be for a specific purpose, or evaluation, or critique; it should not be fixed or canonical, it should not be hierarchically ordered and it should in some way include participation and dialogue” (Walker, 2006, p. 49).

Drawing on her work, in the UK context, with widening participation students as well as other groups of students, and also considering the lists proposed by four other groups of authors, as well as broader research in the area of higher education, Walker has proposed an ideal-theoretical list of higher education capabilities – capabilities that should be developed through higher education. These are presented in Box 3 on p.110. She notes 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, p. 128). This understanding of capabilities is in line with Sen’s definition of agency (see pg. 92). Agency includes the freedom to decide (choice and opportunity) and the “power to act and be effective” (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009, p. 75). This power to act and be effective can be equated with Walker’s notion of capacity that can be fostered and Nussbaum’s concept of internal capabilities or personal powers. This distinction is particularly important for education researchers since education functions to build skills and capacity and so this component of capabilities must be factored into capability lists when used in an education context.

**Box 3: Ideal-theoretical list for higher education capabilities (Walker, 2006, p.128-129)**

1. **Practical Reason:** Being able to make 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 judgment.
2. **Educational Resilience:** Able to navigate study, work and life. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints. Self-reliant. Having aspirations and hopes for a good future.
3. **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 judgments. Being able to debate complex issues. Being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development, for career and economic opportunities, for 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.
4. **Learning Disposition:** Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.
5. **Social Relations and Social Networks:** Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems or tasks. Being able to work with others to form effective or good groups for collaborative and participatory learning. Being able to form good networks of friendship and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.
6. **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 need. Having competence in inter-cultural communication. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning; a voice to speak out, to debate and persuade; to be able to listen.
7. **Emotional Integrity, Emotions:** Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning. Being able to develop emotions for imagination, understanding empathy, awareness and discernment.
8. **Bodily Integrity:** Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the higher education environment.

In applying this list of capabilities to guide higher education research with a social justice agenda, Walker states that

“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).

#### 4.4.1 Conceptualising a capabilities list for access to university

Before I propose a conceptually-based capabilities list for access to university, it is important to reflect on why such a list is likely to be helpful in the quest to improve the transition to university and so promote access for social justice. For Nussbaum, specifying a list of capabilities is essential in order to avoid the problems of *omission* and *power* (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a, p. 43; Nussbaum, 2000). Omission refers to the challenge that groups may inadvertently overlook a capability that is important and thus having a list from which to start thinking is useful. This is particularly relevant in the context of the transition to university where, for example, entering students may not yet have a sense of the capabilities that are important for successful university study or may not have considered certain capabilities due to adaptive preferences and the limitations of their schooling and/or social and economic contexts. The problem of power refers to the possibility that the powerful in a specific context will select capabilities in order to advance specific views, possibly at the expense of marginalised groupings. The debates about meritocracy presented in Chapter 2 are a case in point (see Section 2.5).

When arguing for a capabilities list for higher education specifically, Walker (2006, p. 45) provides three overarching reasons. This first is that a targeted list is needed to focus the capability approach on the specificities of higher education, since the broader capabilities approach accommodates the expansive area of human development. Secondly, this level of specificity provides the basis for arguing for approaches to higher education pedagogy that explicitly seek to foster capabilities and equality. Lastly, the formulation of a targeted capabilities list is needed to test the usefulness and possible applications of the capabilities approach in a higher education context. Similar logic can be applied to the even more specific focus on access and the transition to university. A list of capabilities that underpin a successful transition to university would ensure a focused concentration on the specificity of this particular educational transition, and the role of access in building a socially just higher education environment. Understanding these capabilities and how they can be fostered could then inform the development of interventions that explicitly aim to build or enhance specific capabilities. Finally, proposing and applying such a list would allow us to test the usefulness of the capabilities approach for work on access with success. “We need to ask not only which capabilities matter, but how well we are doing practically in higher education in fostering these

capabilities” (Walker, 2006, p. 142). Conceptualising a capabilities list focused on the transition to university provides a means of identifying what capabilities are important for a successful transition and then presents the basis for an evaluative account of the extent to which these capabilities are being fostered. Such an understanding, ultimately, provides the basis for action.

Having made the case for why a capabilities list specific to the transition to university would be useful, the next step is to review how such a list may be formulated in a manner that does not undermine the agency of individual students that is so central within the capabilities approach, and that ensures some form of public participation in the formulation of the list. I am fortunate that the path towards the development of capabilities lists has been opened up by several researchers (for some examples, see Alkire, 2002; Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a; Flores-Crespo, 2004; Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2003b; Walker, 2006; Walker, MClean, Dison, & Peppin-Vaughan, 2009; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007), and out of this work have emerged specific processes that should underpin the development of such a list. At a broad level, Alkire and Deneulin note that there are two key questions that must be considered when approaching the task of formulating a capabilities list. These are: “(1) which capabilities do the people who will enjoy them value (and attach a high priority to); and (2) which capabilities are relevant to a given policy, project or institution?” (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a, p. 45). The most explicitly formulated criteria for developing a capabilities list have been defined by Robeyns as the basis for her capabilities work in the area of gender inequality (Robeyns, 2003b). The five criteria are as follows (paraphrased from Robeyns, 2003b, p. 70-71):

1. *The criterion of explicit formulation:* This is the most basic criterion and implies that the list should be explicit, discussed and defended.
2. *The criterion of methodological justification:* The method used for generating a list must be clearly explained, scrutinised and defended as the most appropriate method for the specific issue at hand.
3. *The criterion of sensitivity to context:* The level of abstraction at which the list is pitched should be appropriate to meet the specific objectives for which it was formulated. A pragmatic approach is recommended taking into account that it is important to speak the language of the debate into which one wishes to engage.
4. *The criterion of different levels of generality:* If the list being developed aims at an empirical application or wishes to lead to specific policy and intervention

proposals, then at least two stages should be followed in its design. The first stage involves drawing up an ‘ideal’ list that is unconstrained by the limits of data or measurement, or of socioeconomic or political feasibility. The second stage is focused on drawing up a more pragmatic list that takes such constraints into account.

5. *The criterion of exhaustiveness and non-reduction:* The capabilities included in the list should include all important elements, each of which should not be reducible to the other. While there may be, and often is, some overlap, this should not be substantial. This does not exclude the possibility of a subset having such an important status that it requires consideration on its own, independent of the overall set.

While all five criteria are important and I have sought to adhere to them all (see my account of how I did this in Chapter 8, Table 13) criterion 4 is of particular relevance since the list being proposed here, and the broader framework that it will underpin, are explicitly seeking to inform feasible proposals for how universities and schools can partner to foster capabilities. The two stage approach has underpinned my method of proposing the list. Drawing on the theoretical work I have done in the three chapters making up this part of my thesis I propose below an ideal-theoretical list as a first step. The empirical work in the coming chapters provides the basis for fleshing out a “more pragmatic list” (Robeyns, 2003b, p. 71), the details of which are presented in Chapter 7.

As noted above, Walker (2006) developed an ideal-theoretical capabilities list for higher education. In developing this list, she applied all five of Robeyn’s criteria for formulating capabilities lists, carefully reviewed six existing capabilities lists, and drew on empirical work with university students together with her own experience working in higher education over many years. Although focused on pedagogy in higher education, I propose that this list provides a useful starting point, with some adaptations and additions, for beginning to understand the transition to university from a capabilities point of view and to use this understanding to identify specific capabilities that should be fostered. Walker’s list is not the only capabilities list that has been proposed in the context of higher education (for example, Bozalek, 2004; Flores-Crespo, 2004). However, since the work done by these authors was

reviewed by Walker and has informed the list that she has proposed I have taken her list as the starting point for formulating a conceptual list for the transition to university.

In Table 1 on the following page, I have presented Walker's list with her definitions of each capability. Drawing on the theory and research presented in preceding chapters, I have proposed specific definitions for an ideal list of capabilities for the transition to university. In addition, I have added, one extra capability that I argue is critical in the context of access to university. Table 1 shows my definitions as well as examples of the literature, theory and existing research (see Chapters 1 and 2 for details) that I have drawn on in formulating each definition. I will return to this list in the coming empirical chapters in which the theoretical aspects presented below will be examined.

Table 1: Ideal-theoretical list of capabilities for the transition to university

Ideal-theoretical list of higher education capabilities	Definition (Walker, 2006, p. 128-129)	Proposed definition for transition to university focus	Illustrative examples <sup>49</sup> of literature, theory, and research informing the proposed capability
1. Practical reason	Being able to make 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 judgment.	Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about post-school study and career options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge of 'seeing' over the humpback bridge (Marshall &amp; Hargreaves, 2007; Hoffman et al. 2008)</li> <li>• Social class and other factors influencing choice and aspiration (Archer, 2003; Archer et al. 2003; Furlong &amp; Cartmel 2009; Hart 2007, 2008; Watts &amp; Bridges 2006; Unterhalter 2009)</li> <li>• The idea of building college knowledge (Conley, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010)</li> <li>• Research on schooling in South Africa (Bloch 2009, Christie 2008; Wilson-Strydom 2010, Wilson-Strydom &amp; Hay 2010)</li> </ul>
2. Educational resilience	Able to navigate study, work and life. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints. Self-reliant. Having aspirations and hopes for a good future.	Able to navigate the transition from school to university within individual life contexts. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints. Having aspirations and hopes for a successful university career.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understandings of the capability to participate in education (Vaughan 2007)</li> <li>• Schooling challenges in South Africa (Boch 2009; Christie 2008; Fiske &amp; Ladd 2004; Simkins &amp; Paterson 2005; Wilson-Strydom &amp; Hay 2010)</li> <li>• Access and academic development research</li> <li>• Academic behaviours (Conley 2005)</li> <li>• Risk and resilience in higher education (Hart 2009, Watts &amp; Bridges 2006)</li> <li>• Conley's (2005, 2010) work on contextual skills and awareness and academic behaviours as elements of readiness</li> <li>• Debates about meritocracy (Arendale 2010; Cunningham 2007; Morely &amp; Lugg 2009; Oakes et al 2000)</li> </ul>

<sup>49</sup> To avoid creating an unwieldy and difficult to read table, illustrative examples of the theory, literature and research of relevance to each of the capabilities have been presented here. The examples included are sufficient to show how theory and prior research has informed my conceptualisation of this theoretical list. The details of my review of this body of work have been shown in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Ideal-theoretical list of higher education capabilities	Definition (Walker, 2006, p. 128-129)	Proposed definition for transition to university focus	Illustrative examples <sup>49</sup> of literature, theory, and research informing the proposed capability
3. 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 judgments. Being able to debate complex issues. Being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development, for career and economic opportunities, for 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.	Having the academic grounding needed to be able to gain knowledge of chosen university subjects, and to develop methods of academic inquiry. Being able to use critical thinking and imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School performance data – e.g. international testing results, grade 12 performance, NBTs and other testing (Bloch, 2009; Simkins &amp; Paterson 2005; Simkins et al. 2007; Wilson-Strydom 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Yeld 2011)</li> <li>• University performance data (Council on Higher Education 2004, 2009; Scott et al. 2007; Wilson-Strydom 2010, 2011)</li> <li>• Aspects of the multi-dimensional model of readiness, including key content knowledge and academic behaviours (Conley, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010)</li> <li>• Research on epistemological access (Boughey 2005; Council on Higher Education 2010; James 2007; Morrow 2009)</li> </ul>
4. Learning disposition	Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.	Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having the learning skills required for university study. Being an active inquirer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research on expectations – of both students and academic staff (Chickering &amp; Gamson 1987; Kuh et al. 2005; Kuh et al 2007; Maitland et al 2005; Pascarella &amp; Terezini 2005; Pitkethly &amp; Prosser 2001; Tinter &amp; Pusser 2006)</li> <li>• Level of academic challenge (Kuh et al. 2005)</li> <li>• National Benchmark test performance data (Prince, 2009, 2010; Wilson-Strydom 2010, 2011, Yeld 2009, 2010)</li> <li>• Academic development research and practice – often had a focus on developing learning skills (Krause et al. 2005; Johnston 2010; Leibowitz et al 2009; Upcraft et al. 2005)</li> </ul>

Ideal-theoretical list of higher education capabilities	Definition (Walker, 2006, p. 128-129)	Proposed definition for transition to university focus	Illustrative examples <sup>49</sup> of literature, theory, and research informing the proposed capability
5. Social relations and social networks	Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems or tasks. Being able to work with others to form effective or good groups for collaborative and participatory learning. Being able to form good networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.	Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems or tasks. Being able to form networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conley's multidimensional readiness model – dimension of key cognitive skills (Conley 2005, 2007)</li> <li>• Personalisation of the learning experience and learner centred approaches (Dietsche 2009; Knows &amp; Wyper 2008; OECD 2006)</li> <li>• Belonging, friendship and adjustment (Hausmann et al. 2007; Hurtado &amp; Carter 1997; Pittman &amp; Richmond 2008)</li> <li>• Astin's work on involvement (Astin 1985, 1991, 1999, 1993)</li> <li>• Student engagement work – at school and university levels (Kuh et al. 2005, 2007; Shouping &amp; Kuh 2002; Yazzie-Mintz 2006, 2009)</li> <li>• Active and collaborative learning (Kuh et al. 2005)</li> <li>• Social/behavioural /participatory engagement (Yazzie-Mintz 2010)</li> </ul>
6. Respect, dignity and recognition	Being able to have respect for oneself and for others, as well as receiving respect 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 need. Having competence in inter-cultural communication. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning; a voice to speak out, to debate, to persuade; to be able to listen.	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. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transformation and diversity within schools and universities (Christie 2008; Soudien 2010a, Taylor et al. 2003; 2010b);</li> <li>• Critiques of deficit-approaches to access (Arendale 2010; Gardener et al 2005; Schreiner &amp; Hulme 2009; Whittaker 2008; Zukas &amp; Malcolm 2007)</li> <li>• Approach students as individuals rather than groups or 'numbers' and respect for student diversity (Arendale 2010; Astin 1999; Chickering &amp; Gamson 1987, 1991; Gardener et al 2005; Harper &amp; Quaye 2009; Krause 2005; Whittaker 2008; Wilson-Strydom 2010d)</li> </ul>

<b>Ideal-theoretical list of higher education capabilities</b>	<b>Definition (Walker, 2006, p. 128-129)</b>	<b>Proposed definition for transition to university focus</b>	<b>Illustrative examples<sup>49</sup> of literature, theory, and research informing the proposed capability</b>
7. Emotional integrity	Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning. Being able to develop emotions for imaginations, understanding empathy, awareness and discernment.	Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional engagement (Yazzie-Mintz 2010)</li> <li>• Supportive campus environment (Kuh et al. 2005, 2007)</li> <li>• Issues of discrimination (race, class, gender) (Archer &amp; Hutchings 2003; Furlong &amp; Cartmel 2009; Hurtado &amp; Carter 1997; Hurtado et al. 2007; Soudien 2010; Vanderyar &amp; Jansen 2008)</li> <li>• Academic staff approaches to communicating expectations, and providing suitable support (Chickering and Gamson 1987; Gardener et al. 2005; Kuh et al 2005; Conley 2007; Wilson-Strydom 2010d)</li> </ul>
8. Bodily integrity	Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the higher education environment.	Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the school and higher education environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issues of discrimination (Archer &amp; Hutchings 2003; Furlong &amp; Cartmel 2009; Hurtado &amp; Carter 1997; Hurtado et al. 2007; Jansen 2010; Soudien 2010)</li> <li>• Research on gender issues in education (Nussbaum 2000, 2006, 2011; Sen 1993, 1985a, 1985b, 1999; Untehalter 2007, 2009a, 2009b)</li> <li>• Emotional engagement (Yazzie-Mintz 2010)</li> </ul>
<i>Additional capability proposed based on the body of access research</i>			
9. Language competence and confidence		Being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic literacy performance of South African university students (Cliff et al. 2007; Cliff &amp; Hanslo 2009; Griesel 2003; Koch et al. 2001; Koch &amp; Foxcroft 2003; Prince 2009, 2010; Wilson-Strydom 2009, 2010b)</li> <li>• Student reports of difficulty with language (Wilson-Strydom 2010d)</li> <li>• National assessment results in South African schools showing low levels of literacy (Department of Basic Education 2011)</li> <li>• Wolf &amp; de-Shalit (2007) identified language competence as an additional capability for Nussbaum's list when applied specifically in the context of understanding issues of disadvantage</li> </ul>

#### **4.5 Social contexts, agency and capabilities: implications for understanding access**

One of the key ideas within the capability approach is that in a just world social structures or social organisations should expand people’s capabilities – their freedom to achieve what they value doing and being. Capability and functionings are influenced by individual circumstances, relationships with others, and social conditions and contexts which create spaces for options to be achieved or not. The capability approach emphasises the basic heterogeneity of individuals as a key aspect of educational equality and provides a conceptual framework for connecting individual histories with social and collective arrangements (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1979, 1985b, 1990, 2009; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Sen argues that “[T]here is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the forces of social influences on the extent and reach of freedom” (Sen, 1999, p. xi–xii).

Social norms and opportunities can expand or diminish one’s agency. Often social norms construct disadvantages, even where public resources are equally distributed (see also, Crocker & Robeyns, 2009; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Inequality is evident when people have different capability sets (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009a). Thus, while agency is an important element of the approach, it is explicitly recognised that individual functionings (outcomes) are influenced by one’s relative advantages or disadvantages in society. A learner’s opportunities will be helped or hindered by the choices and actions of others; for example, the quality of teachers, productive peer relationships, policy that enables their learning and so on. “Sen, therefore, integrates the personal [agency] and the macrosocial in securing and expanding intrapersonal and interpersonal freedoms” (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 9).

The concept of *conversion factors* plays an important role in bringing together agency and social contexts. People differ in many ways and these differences affect the extent to which they can convert opportunities into achievements (functionings). While differences do not inherently imply inequality, differences become inequalities when they impact on capabilities. Sen reminds us that “there is evidence that the conversion of goods to capabilities varies from person to person substantially, and the equality of the former may still be far from the equality of the latter” (Sen, 1979, p. 219). For example, a learner who is blind is different from a learner who

can see. This difference is not inherently a form of inequality, but if Braille text books and other learning support needed for blind learners is not provided, then the educational capabilities of the blind learner will be limited compared to the learner who is not blind (see also, Nussbaum, 2000, 2003).

Paying attention to conversion factors provides a mechanism for understanding what is needed to realise potential outcomes (functionings) (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 10). In 'Development as Freedom' Sen identified five ways in which individual variations impact on the conversion of resources, such as income, into well-being and freedom. These five sources of individual variation are (paraphrased from Sen, 1999, p. 71):

- Personal heterogeneities: People have disparate physical characteristics connected with disability, illness, age, or gender, and these make their needs diverse.
- Environmental diversities: Variations in environmental conditions, such as climatic circumstances (temperature ranges, rainfall, flooding and so on), can influence what a person gets out of a given level of income, or other resources available to them.
- Variations in social climate: The conversion of personal incomes and resources into the quality of life is influenced also by social conditions, including public educational arrangements for example.
- Differences in relational perspectives: The commodity requirements of established patterns of behaviour may vary between communities, depending on conventions and customs.
- Distribution within the family: Incomes (and educational opportunities) are shared within the family. The well-being or freedom of individuals in a family is dependent on how income and resources are distributed within the family.

Taking these ideas further, Robeyns draws our attention to three groups of conversion factors: **personal conversion factors** such as metabolism, physical condition, reading ability, intelligence, health and so on; **social conversion factors** such as policies, social norms, family relations, practices of discrimination, gender roles, patriarchy, power relations and so on; and **environmental conversion factors** such as geographical locations, rural versus urban, climate and so on (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99). These conversion factors impact on the extent to which a

person is able to make use of the resources available to them to create capabilities or opportunities. In an article considering how the capabilities approach can be used within education, Walker concludes by identifying what she sees as some important questions that should inform educational research. One of these questions is: “*Do some people get more opportunities to convert their resources into capabilities than others?*” (Walker, 2005, p. 109). This is precisely what I wish to understand in the context of the transition from school to university in order to formulate a framework for facilitating the transition from school to university.

A focus on conversion factors is particularly useful in the context of an unequal education system, and in seeking to formulate ways in which to enhance the capabilities of those who currently have limited options, often due to the social context (structure) in which they find themselves. The provision of educational resources alone is not sufficient to ensure a just higher education system. It is the relationship between the available resources and the ability of each student to convert these into valued capabilities and then make choices which will inform their actual functionings (outcomes) that ought to be evaluated (Walker, 2006, pp. 32–33). This argument can be summed up as follows:

“Evaluating capabilities, rather than resources or outcomes, shifts the axis of analysis to establishing and evaluating the conditions that enable individuals to take decisions based on what they have reason to value. These conditions will vary in different contexts, but the approach sets out to be sensitive to human diversity; complex social relations; a sense of reciprocity between people; appreciation that people can reflect reasonably on what they value for themselves and others; and a concern to equalize, not opportunities or outcomes, but rather capabilities” (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 3).

Thus, the capability approach emphasises the role of individual agency and choice, but reminds us that the freedom of agency individuals have is qualified and constrained by social, political and economic factors and opportunities. In a higher education context, Walker (2006, p. 36) makes reference to the need to understand social arrangements and *institutional conditions of possibility*. In this way, the capability framework provides a means for exploring the processes underlying both different and similar outcomes (functionings) of access in a manner that exposes injustices that may be masked by a consideration of outcomes only.

This interplay of agency and social context can also lead to what has been termed ‘adaptive preferences’ where the choices individuals make are conditioned by their contexts. For example, Nussbaum has shown how women “adjust their desires to the way of life they know”

(Nussbaum, 2000, p. 136, 2003) and sometimes “undervalue basic human capabilities that they later come to value, because of social habituation and social pressure” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 140). Making a similar argument when using the capabilities approach in an education context Unterhalter (2009, p. 219) reminds us that we need to question the range of educational choices available to people. She states that “we would need to ask whether people’s educational aspirations had become adapted to their respective circumstances, and whether the low-income group had a range of valued learning opportunities to choose from” (for specific examples of adaptive preference related to social class positioning see, Archer, 2003; Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Unterhalter, 2009a, p. 219). As such, when working within a capabilities framework we need to ask complex and searching questions that take us beyond the realm of a more narrow focus on satisfaction or preference as the basis for making meaningful choices.

In my research I have sought to understand the agency of school learners in their final years of schooling and students entering university, together with their social and institutional conditions of possibility (at the levels of the school and the university) that might enable or constrain their capabilities. I focus on conversion factors that impact on the extent to which students entering higher education are able to convert their opportunity/resource (a place at university) into capabilities and valued functionings, such as making a successful transition to university from school, being successful in their first year of study, and ultimately completing a qualification that they value and have reason to value. Such an understanding provides a solid foundation from which to conceptualise interventions that could improve this transition. Figure 3 shows visually how the capabilities approach, and particularly the notion of conversion factors and adaptive preferences, can be used to conceptualise the essential elements that should be explored in a study on the transition to university.

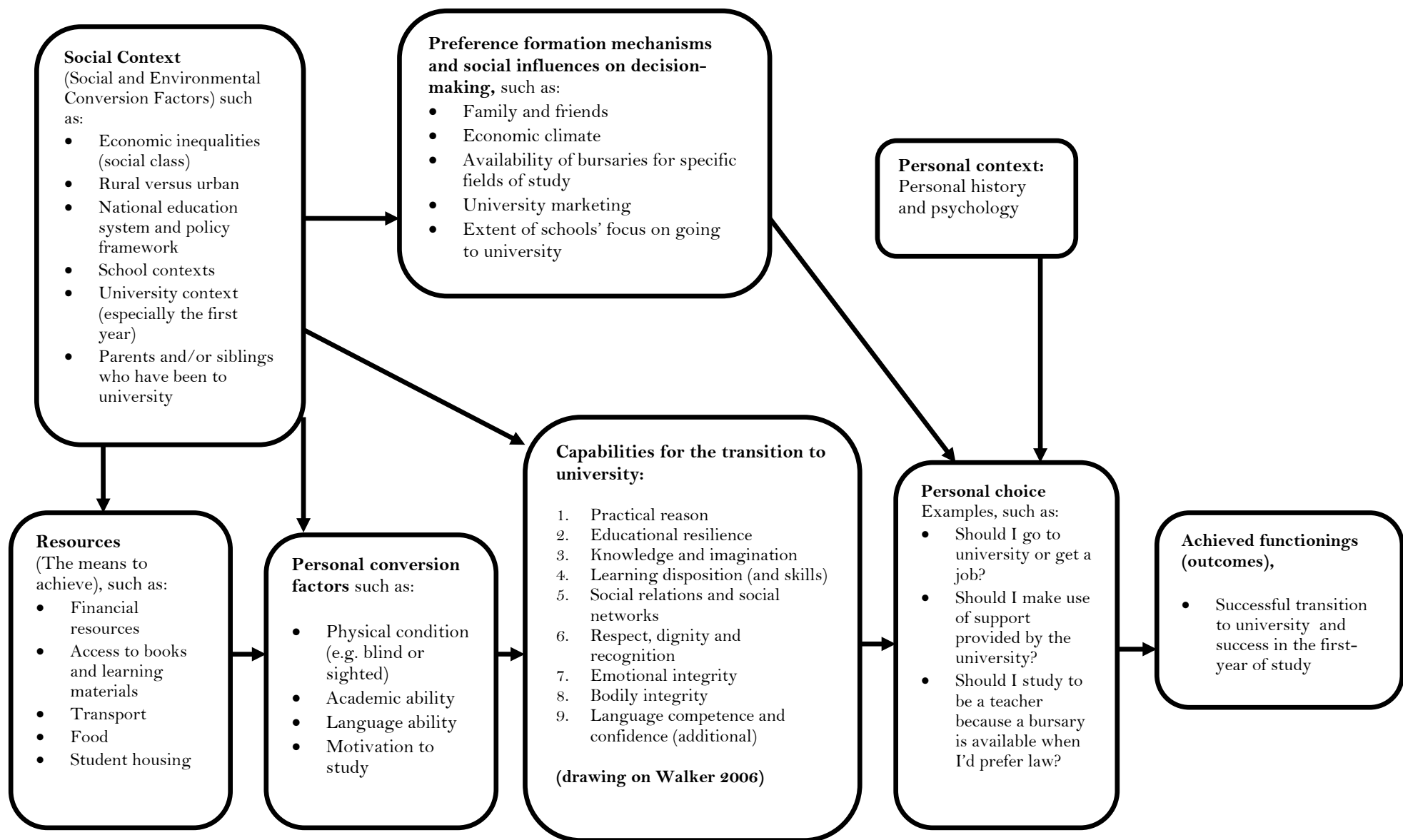


Figure 3: Stylised representation of a capabilities framework for conceptualising the transition to university (adapted from, Robeyns, 2005, p. 98)

The framework shown in Figure 3 provides a summary of what needs to be understood in order to formulate meaningful interventions supporting the transition to university in a manner that seeks to enhance or build students' capabilities to successfully negotiate their first year of university (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). The research design and methods I have used in this study (see Chapter 5) were intentionally selected in order to ensure that each element of this framework, as applied to the transition to university or university access, could be researched and the interactions between each of the components understood as the basis from which a capabilities framework for improving the transition from school to university can be developed. The importance of the theory and research on access and education transitions presented in Chapter 2 are also highlighted in Figure 3. This body of work provides the discipline-specific theoretical and empirical grounding for understanding the different elements depicted. In particular, the multidimensional model of college readiness presented in section 3.4.2 is important in understanding the social context in which the transition experience occurs as well as individual conversion factors that affect whether students are able to make use of available resources in a manner that enhances their capabilities for making a successful transition to university.

#### **4.6 Conclusion: Striving for university access that promotes social justice**

When considering the domain of increasing or broadening access to university, there is a tendency to focus on outcomes such as the number/proportion of diverse students who have been granted access and the resources that students require, such as financial aid for example (see Chapter 2 for a review of the literature on access) (Hart, 2007, 2008). This focus on measurable outcomes of access allows claims for access gains to be made, e.g. growing numbers of black students entering university, without sufficient reflection on how meaningful these gains really are, even though they do provide evidence of some transformation in the sector. Seldom is sufficient attention given to students' capabilities, their opportunity freedoms or their freedoms to make effective use of the opportunity of university study. While personal conversion factors such as academic preparation tend to be considered in making admissions decisions, less often are the social and environmental conversion factors really understood and actively tackled by universities – even if recognised rhetorically. The result of this is evident in the poor success of students described above together with the large numbers of students with extensive debt despite having not completed their qualification (see Chapters 1 and 3). As such, in many instances

access currently does not lead to success or well-being of students, but perhaps instead to new forms of injustices such as young people dropping out of university with accumulated debt, self-doubt and no qualification.

How might the capabilities approach presented in this chapter provide a framework to inform access debates and interventions that explicitly seek to support social justice? I have provided several reasons in the preceding arguments. The capabilities framework provides a means of understanding our deeply divided education system in a manner that usefully brings together individual agency and choice with the impact of social contexts on this agency. An understanding of how conversion factors affect the capabilities of students to be successful at university has the potential to provide a theoretical and practical foundation for formulating interventions to enhance opportunities and the freedoms needed to convert those opportunities into actual achievements or functionings that are valued. As Walker argues, the capabilities approach shifts the axis of analysis to establishing and evaluating the conditions (social contexts) that enable different individuals (agents) to make choices about what they want to be and do (Walker, 2006). Thus, the capabilities approach highlights the importance of understanding the social arrangements and institutional conditions of possibility for access in pursuit of just outcomes and so provides a conceptual framework for exploring the complex transition to university in a manner that exposes injustices that are otherwise masked. A capabilities approach to university access and success can bring to the fore the unequal conversion of higher education opportunities that currently perpetuate various injustices in the South African higher education system.

The debates related to formulating capabilities lists were tackled in the chapter and I presented my argument for the importance and value of proposing a capabilities list specifically focused on the transition to university. I argued that such a list provides a means of identifying what capabilities are important for improving this transition and a basis for an evaluative account of the extent to which such capabilities are being fostered. This understanding potentially provides a basis for action. Drawing on relevant theory, literature and existing research I proposed a theoretical list of capabilities for the transition to university. In preparing this list I drew heavily on the work of Walker (2006) who proposed an ideal-theoretical list for higher education more broadly. In line with Robeyn's (2003), this theoretical list must now be assessed in light of empirical evidence in order to present a more pragmatic list that specifically takes account of both measurement constraints and particularly existing socioeconomic and political limitations. This second step is essential since the purpose of generating the list in the first place has been to inform

practice towards a more just process of accessing university. The next few chapters of the thesis present my empirical work.

In conclusion, Walker (2010: 486) states that

“we are better at critiquing what constrains higher education policy and its misalignment with the social good, but imagine less about what to do in its place, or how to advance the spaces of freedom which persist in universities.”

In this thesis I attempt to begin to imagine and theorise new ways of confronting the legacies of our past and the injustices of the present through the enhancement of students’ capabilities to successfully access and engage with university study so striving to ensure that the power to do good does not result in the opposite (Sen, 1999, p. xiii).

# Chapter 5: Research Design and Methodology: Pragmatism and Mixed Methods

“A mixed methods approach to social inquiry distinctively offers deep and potentially inspirational and catalytic opportunities to meaningfully engage with the differences that matter in today’s troubled world, seeking not so much convergence and consensus as opportunities for respectful listening and understanding” (Greene, 2008, p. 20).

## 5.1 Introduction

In Chapter One I set out my broad research aim, research questions and specific objectives. It is useful to briefly re-state my research questions and objectives since my methodology was developed to respond to them. Four research questions have guided my work, namely:

1. How do first-year students at the UFS experience the transition to university in their first year of study?
2. How do learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 from local UFS feeder high schools experience the process of preparation for and access to university?
3. How can these experiences of the interface between school and university be theorised using a capabilities-based social justice framework?
4. Based on the evidence from the research, what interventions could support efforts towards a more socially just transition for these students?

In this chapter I present the research design and methodology of my study. Working within a pragmatic paradigm I have made use of mixed methods because:

“[A] mixed methods way of thinking rests on assumptions that there are multiple legitimate approaches to social inquiry and that any given approach to social inquiry is inevitably partial. Better understanding of the multifaceted and complex character of social phenomenon can be obtained from the use of multiple approaches and ways of knowing” (Greene, 2008, p. 20).

In the sections that follow I spell out my rationale for positioning my work within the paradigm of pragmatism as well as for using mixed methods as my chosen methodology.

Following a theoretical argument for pragmatism and mixed methods the chapter moves into the more practical aspects of the research. I summarise the research process followed, introduce the various research instruments used, and address ethical issues. An overview of how I managed and analysed the data gathered is also presented.

## **5.2 Exploring paradigmatic issues**

A paradigm can be defined as “a conceptual model of a person’s world view, complete with the assumptions that are associated with it” (Mertens, 2008, p. 73). Put another way, a paradigm can be understood as the philosophical assumptions made about the nature of the social world (ontology) and what counts as valuable knowledge (epistemology). Paradigms provide a lens through which researchers “look at particular things [topics] in particular ways and offers appropriate philosophical and theoretical justification for this way of seeing, observing, and interpreting” (Greene, 2006, p. 93).

A brief excursion into the debates and issues related to social research paradigms is needed since mixed methods research is based on the ‘compatibility thesis’ which argues that qualitative and quantitative research can be combined and that these two research orientations are epistemologically coherent (Greene, 2008; Mertens, 2008; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The contestation between the value of quantitative versus qualitative research methods and/or positivism and constructivism has been called the ‘paradigm wars’ (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) and it is important to briefly consider some of the key issues in this long standing debate. Mixed methods research is seen by some as the third way, moving beyond positivist/post-positivism versus constructivist/interpretivist distinctions (for example, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Broadly speaking, constructivism emerged in opposition to positivism and post-positivism, arguing particularly that value-free, objective research was not possible, that realities are constructed by researchers who draw on their values and beliefs throughout the research process.

One of the tools used in making arguments about how constructivism or interpretivism differed from positivism/post-positivism was the setting up of what was called paradigm contrast tables in which the major differences between these two paradigms were summarised across philosophical axes such as ontology, epistemology and axiology (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, citing Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These tables, as well as the

argument being made for a qualitative turn in social research were based on what has been termed the incompatibility thesis. The incompatibility thesis stated that it was not philosophically or methodological sound to make use of both qualitative and quantitative methods because of the incompatible fundamental paradigmatic assumptions on which each methodology was based (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In response, several authors have drawn on the work of Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, John Dewey and Richard Rorty in arguing for the compatibility thesis and the related paradigm of pragmatism as a way of overcoming this forced philosophical and methodological dualism (for some examples see: Cherryholmes, 1992; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2006; Howe, 1988; Morgan, 2007; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

In his seminal article in the *Educational Researcher* in 1998, Kenneth Howe argued convincingly for the compatibility thesis drawing on pragmatist orientations (Howe, 1988). He argued that combining qualitative and quantitative methods “is a good thing” and that mixing methods is not epistemologically incoherent since there is not simply a one-way relationship between methods and epistemology in which epistemology determines methods, but a two-relationship in which epistemology or paradigms “are evaluated in terms of how well they square with the demands of research practice” (Howe, 1988, p. 10). As such, pragmatism rejects “irrelevant abstract epistemological considerations that cannot be squared with the actual practices employed in gaining empirical knowledge” (Howe, 1988, p. 10). In this way, as Feilzer states “[M]ixed methods research has been hailed as a response to the long-lasting, circular, and remarkably unproductive debates discussing the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative versus qualitative research” (Feilzer, 2010, p. 6).

### **5.2.1 Pragmatism**

Since this study has firm roots within a social justice agenda it is tempting to assume that the paradigmatic roots of the research methodology are located within a transformative paradigm (sometimes also called the transformatory-emancipatory paradigm) (Mertens, 2007, 2008). This is, however, not the case although elements of this paradigm do inform my study. This section provides a rationale for why I positioned this study within the pragmatist paradigm. However, it is useful to consider in a little more detail the central tenets of both the transformative and pragmatic paradigms as a starting point.

Much of the conceptual and practical work focused on developing the transformative paradigm, particularly with respect to mixed methods research, has been done by Donna Mertens. She notes that

“the basic beliefs of the transformative paradigm provide an overarching framework for addressing issues of social justice and consequent methodological decisions. The role of the researcher in this context is reframed as one who recognises inequalities and injustices in society and strives to challenge the status quo, who is a bit of a provocateur with overtones of humility, and who possesses a shared sense of responsibility” (Mertens, 2007, p. 212).

This overview of the transformative paradigm is well aligned with this study, however when one delves deeper into the assumptions and practices of the transformative paradigm then important differences emerge. One of the central tenets of the transformative paradigm is that issues of power are privileged and explicitly addressed during all stages of the research. This means that research participants, particularly those who have tended to occupy a relative position of little or no power, should be involved in the study as active participants in the conceptualisation of the research problem, methods to be used, data gathering, analysis, interpretation and sharing of results (Mertens, 2007; see also Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Three main reasons underlie my decision not to position this study within the transformative paradigm. Firstly, the key tenet of involving the research participants in all aspects of the study, including problem formulation and research design decisions was not met. Rather, the rationale for this study and the formulation of the research problem and objectives emerged from the growing evidence that efforts to increase access to university in South Africa (and at the UFS more specifically) are not leading to success for many students and in fact could be seen to be creating new forms of injustice (see Chapters 1 and 2 for details). In addition, my day to day work with students entering university pointed to the many challenges faced in making the transition from school to university. The second reason is that privileging of social injustices, often focused on differences between groups whether based on race, social class, gender, disability etc., as tends to be emphasised in the transformative approach runs a danger of ‘essentialising’ difference and assuming a homogenous experience of injustice within a group that is treated unfairly<sup>50</sup>. Rather, the aim of this study is to understand experiences of all students and then to work towards a just (fair) system of university access that enhances the capabilities of this very diverse group of young people to successfully make the transition to university. As was argued in Chapter 4, my study explicitly recognises that individual agency, conversion

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<sup>50</sup> See my argument for not making use of Iris Marion Young’s approach to social justice for a similar reason (Section 3.2.2).

factors and choice are critical influences and that attention to just outcomes only – such as the right to access to university or equal participation for students of different race or class groupings – is insufficient to fully understand injustice within the access terrain. The third, and closely related reason, is that the transformative approaches tend to focus almost exclusively on social structures and relations of power (Mertens, 2008). In contrast, this study, drawing on the capabilities approach, seeks to foreground both individual agency and social or institutional structures (contexts) as central elements of the transition experience understood from a social justice perspective.

Thus, instead of the transformative paradigm, I conceptualised this study working within the paradigm of pragmatism. A useful definition of pragmatism is provided by Feilzer (2010, p. 8, emphasis added) who states that

“Pragmatism, when regarded as an alternative paradigm, accepts, philosophically, that there are singular and multiple realities that are open to empirical inquiry and orients itself towards *solving practical problems in the ‘real world’*”.

Pragmatism focuses on the research problem – the reason that the study is being conducted, the rationale – and the consequences of the research. Thus, a central tenet of pragmatism is that research should be socially relevant, addressing specific concerns in the ‘real world’ and seeking to propose possible solutions (Armitage, 2007; Badley, 2003; Creswell, 2009; Feilzer, 2010). Such is the focus and overall purpose of my research.

Pragmatism emerged in response to the ‘paradigm wars’ discussed above and explicitly sought to reject the incompatibility thesis which forced the researcher to choose between post-positivism and constructivism (Armitage, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Johnson et al., 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Thus, pragmatism might be regarded as a pluralistic approach recognising the value of different paradigms in solving ‘real world’ research problems. Morgan (2007) argues that pragmatism adopts an inter-subjective approach with an emphasis on processes of communication and shared meaning, as opposed to the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity commonly used by quantitative and qualitative researchers respectively. Related is the pragmatic stance which asserts that there can be both a ‘real world’ and individual constructions and interpretations of that world; that “we are historically and socially situated, that when we read the world we can never be quite sure if we are reading the ‘world’ or reading ourselves” (Cherryholmes, 1992, p. 14). Similarly, instead of assuming a position of either inductive or deductive reasoning, pragmatic research makes use of

abductive reasoning which involves moving back and forth between induction and deduction, between data and theory (Morgan, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Pragmatists argue that the concept of transferability should be used when making inferences from data. Transferability refers to an understanding of the factors influencing whether or not the research results can be used to help understanding in other situations – or transferred to other situations. It is necessary to assess how much of the knowledge generated might be usable in other situations and on what grounds this claim might be made. Thus the emphasis is on “what people can do with the knowledge they produce and not on abstract arguments about the possibility or impossibility of generalisability” (Morgan, 2007, p. 72). Key for researchers working within a pragmatist framework is an understanding of consequences and potential outcomes of research and related practice (Cherryholmes, 1992; Creswell, 2009). In a similar vein, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) argue that mixed methods research (the approach commonly used by pragmatic researchers) blurs the dichotomy often created between researchers and everyday human problem solvers. They argue that mixed methods parallel everyday problem solving in ways that qualitative and quantitative research alone is not able to, and so it is argued that mixed methods emphasise a humanistic conceptualisation of research processes focused on practical outcomes and an iterative, cyclical approach to achieving deeper levels of understanding.

### **5.3 Mixed methods**

Since the concept has been used in various ways, it is important to define precisely what is meant by the term mixed methods (Johnson et al., 2007). In the first issue of the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, the editors defined mixed methods as,

“research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or programme of inquiry. A key concept in this definition is integration” (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4).

More recently, Bazeley defined mixed methods as follows:

“Mixed methods [ ] is broadly defined to include any study in which more than one paradigmatic or methodological approach, method of data collection, and/or type of analysis strategy is employed for a common purpose, regardless of whether those methods or approaches might be defined as quantitative, qualitative, a combination of, or somewhere in between approaches that might be classified as qualitative or quantitative” (Bazeley, 2010, p. 1).

The central tenets of these definitions can be summed up by referring to Teddlie and Tashakkori's nine core characteristics of mixed methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010, p. 273). These are:

1. Methodological eclecticism;
2. Paradigm plurality;
3. Emphasis on diversity at all levels of the research enterprise;
4. Emphasis on continua rather than a set of dichotomies;
5. Iterative, cyclical approach to research;
6. Focus on the research question (or research problem) in determining the methods used within any given study;
7. Set of basic 'signature' research designs and analytical processes;
8. Tendency towards balance and compromise that is implicit within the 'third methodological community'; and
9. Reliance on visual representations (e.g. figures, diagrams) and a common notational system.

Several rationales have been advanced for why mixed methods is a useful research approach, particularly in the social sciences. The value of mixed methods approaches for educational research is neatly summed up by Howe (1998) who states that:

"Certain educational researchers will be made insecure by compatibilism [pragmatism] insofar as it blurs methodological lines. That is, compatibilism does not permit researchers to isolate themselves within methodological paradigms that are impervious to the challenges and contributions of alternative perspectives" (Howe, 1988, p. 15).

A review of the mixed methods literature indicates that most commonly noted reasons for using mixed methods include the following:

1. Stronger conclusions can be reached as different research approaches and methods have different strengths and weaknesses. Combining methods means that the researcher is able to compensate the weakness of one method with the strengths of another (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2008; Morgan, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006; Seifert, Goodman, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2010; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

2. The use of different methods and different ways of understanding the phenomenon of study (paradigms) can assist the researcher to reach new insights and understandings of the research topic (Howe, 1988; Jang, McDougall, Pollen, Herbert, & Russel, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Wheeldon, 2010; Wolf, 2010).
3. Some argue that using mixed methods ensures that a more complete picture or understanding is provided particularly in complex social contexts, with quantitative data usually providing the breadth of understanding and the qualitative data the depth and explanatory power (a form of triangulation). In this way, mixed methods also provide a means of triangulation (Creswell, 2009; Y. Lee & Greene, 2007; Seifert et al., 2010; Wolf, 2010).

While each of these reasons is relevant in the context of this study the third reason, making use of different methods to inform a deeper understanding of the research problem, is probably of greatest relevance. My research questions point to the need to employ a range of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative in building a capability-based social justice framework for facilitating the transition to university.

### **5.3.1 Mixed methods research design**

“A tenet of mixed methods research is that researchers should mindfully create designs that effectively answer their research questions; this stands in contrast to the common approach in traditional quantitative research where students are given a menu of designs from which to select. It also stands in stark contrast to the approach where one completely follows either the qualitative paradigm or the quantitative paradigm” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 138, citing Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

As mixed methods has become an established research methodology, a series of commonly used research designs have been documented by leaders in the field (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006, 2009). Different mixed methods research designs generally differ across four main dimensions (Creswell, 2009). Firstly, mixed methods research designs differ in terms of the timing of the qualitative and quantitative data collection, whether data will be collected in phases (called sequentially) or at the same time (referred to as concurrent or parallel). Secondly, the weighting and priority given to the qualitative and quantitative methods and

data can differ, depending on the purpose of the study and the research questions. The third dimension is that of mixing which refers to the manner in which the qualitative and quantitative data are used together and the extent to which the data and findings are integrated and used to draw inferences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 142). Depending on the design, each data set might be analysed and interpreted separately, or qualitative data might be quantified to allow for a merging of the different types and sets of data. The fourth dimension is the role of theory in the mixed methods study. In some instances (such as my study) an overarching theoretical framework explicitly guides the study and informs the kinds of questions asked. In other mixed methods studies the use of theory might be more implicit and the study more exploratory in nature (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Drawing on these dimensions in different ways, mixed method theorists have proposed a series of mixed methods designs. Creswell (2009) proposes six different designs, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe 12, and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p. 151) identify five families of mixed methods designs. After a careful review of the various mixed methods design possibilities, for this study I found the typology of designs presented by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) to be most applicable for my research. Drawing on their framework, I have used an *integrated parallel mixed design* (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 157; see also, Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006). An integrated mixed design is one in which the qualitative and quantitative methods are used in an interactive, dynamic, reciprocal, interdependent and iterative manner during all the stages of the study. A parallel design implies that the different types of data are collected at the same time, or with a small time lapse. This is contrasted to sequential designs in which collection of one type of data is completed and informs the collection of the next type of data in a sequential process (Creswell, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). A graphic illustration of a typical integrated parallel mixed design is shown in Figure 4 (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 157).



Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) note that although at the outset one selects the design that best suits the specific study and research questions or objectives the researcher must be willing to eventually generate their own design as it is not possible to provide an exhaustive typology of all conceivable mixed methods designs. As such, these authors provide the following advice for researchers:

“[T]herefore, you should look for the most appropriate or single best available research design, rather than the ‘perfect fit’. You may have to combine existing designs, or create new designs for your study” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 138).

I have heeded this advice in this study. While my study meets the criteria for being classified as an integrated parallel mixed design, I needed to add a series of unique elements and steps in order to adequately answer my research questions. The integrated parallel mixed methods design developed specifically for this study is shown below in Figure 5.

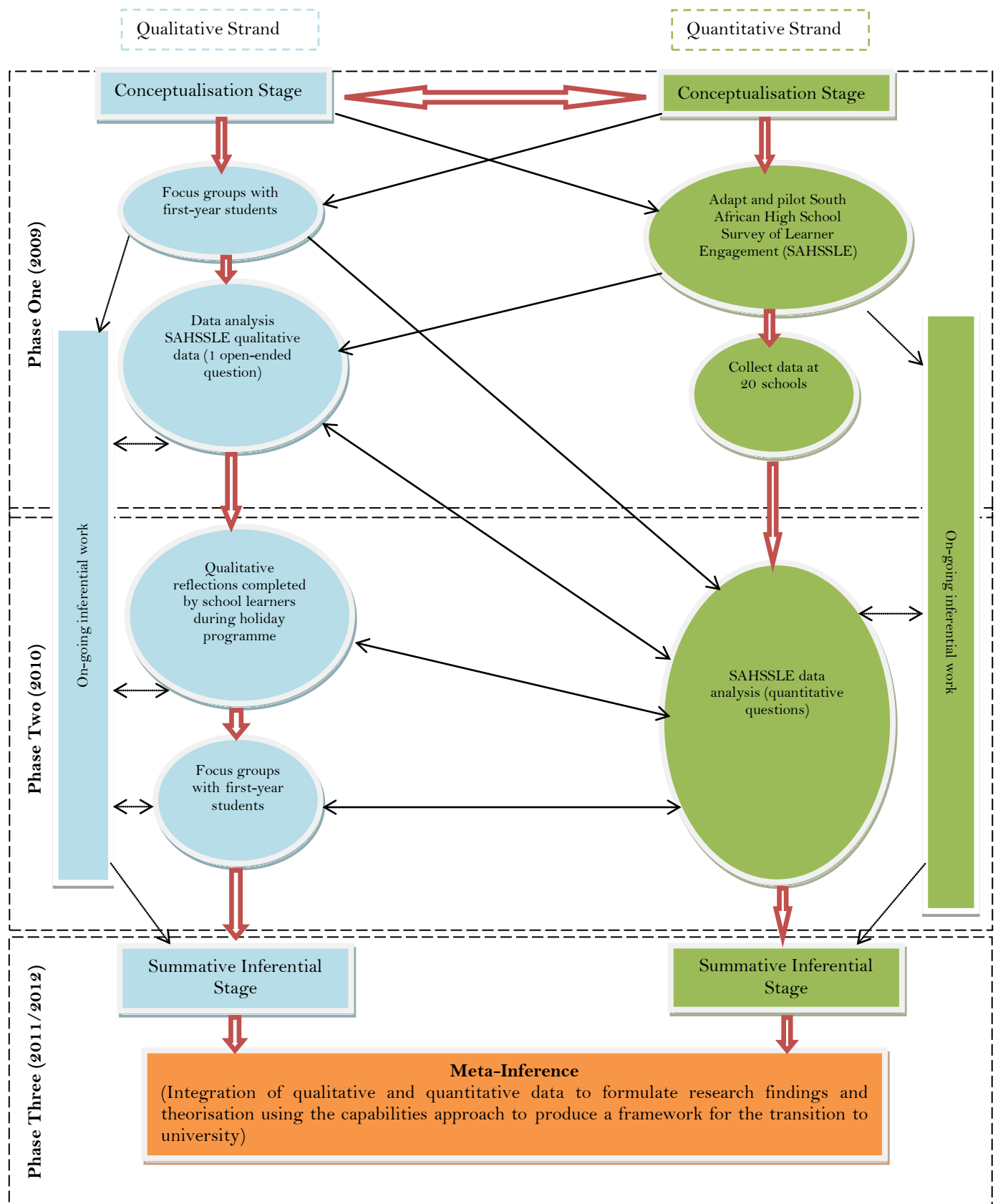


Figure 5: Illustration of the integrated parallel mixed methods research design used in this study

## 5.4 Research process and sampling procedures

In line with the overarching pragmatist paradigm underpinning the study I made sampling decisions at several points in the study. These decisions were informed by emerging research findings as well as my theoretical work. In mixed methods studies it is important to ensure that the sampling strategies for each element of the study stem logically from the research problem and research questions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 192). In addition, the various sampling methods used provided a basis for triangulation of the findings since data was gathered from different groupings of participants and at different times – so incorporating time-based triangulation and methodological triangulation (Cohen et al, 2000). The research processes and sampling procedures I made use of are outlined in the sections that follow.

### 5.4.1 School level

A representative sample of 20 feeder schools of the UFS was selected in collaboration with the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE). The sample was stratified by type of school (independent or state), language of instruction, learner gender, and location (township or suburban). Participating schools were asked to select 50 learners each from grades 10, 11 and 12, i.e. 150 learners per school, or as close to 50 as possible for small schools where there were fewer than 50 learners enrolled per grade. I provided the following specific sampling criteria to each school to guide learner selection.

- Select 50 learners per grade (or as close to 50 in instances where there are fewer than 50 learners);
- Learners within each grade should be selected from *at least* two different classes;
- Learners within each grade should represent a range of performance levels, i.e. learners that perform poorly, average and very well should be represented; and
- For co-educational schools, 25 male and 25 female learners per grade should be included.

These criteria were specified in an attempt to avoid sampling bias and the selection of what schools might have regarded as ‘ideal’ learners to participate. Detailed discussions were held with the school principals prior to data collection to explain the importance of the

sampling approach. Since schools themselves saw value in the data being collected and knew that no school names or identifying data would be shared beyond the school, it was seen by the principals to be in their interest to ensure as representative a sample of learners as possible. In this way, bias was minimised as far as reasonably possible. A total of 2816 learners from the 20 participating schools completed the largely quantitative South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement (SAHSSLE).

Following an initial analysis of the SAHSSLE quantitative data, ten of the 20 schools (ensuring representation across school type) were invited to nominate learners in Grade 11 and Grade 12 to participate in a life skills programme that I facilitated during the June/July 2010 school holidays. The programme (called Your Global Positioning System (YGPS) Workshop Series) focused on preparing learners for post school study or work, and covered topics such as, personal planning and management skills, strategies for acquiring knowledge, critical thinking, problem solving, embracing diversity, preparation of curriculum vitae and preparation for interviews for employment or admissions to university. A total of 147 learners from the ten schools submitted applications to participate in the programme 35 were selected and 33 participated (two learners did not arrive for the programme). Although the holiday programme itself was not a part of this study, I used the opportunity to collect additional qualitative data from the participating learners (see section 5.5). At this stage of the study, I was interested in working with school learners who were likely to meet the entrance criteria for university, and hence the selection process was appropriate for the research design.

Thus, at the school level, nested sampling took place at two levels working from a more general (representative) to a more personal level shown below.

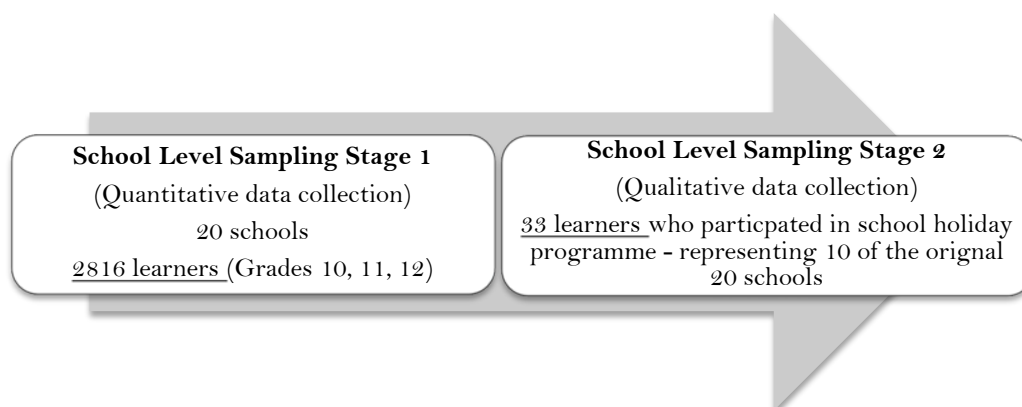


Figure 6: Visual representation of sampling process at the school level

### 5.4.2 University level

For the university component of the study my focus was on understanding how first-year students experience the transition to university in their first year of study. I worked with first-year students in the 2009 and 2010 cohorts. In September 2009 focus groups were conducted with 128 first-year students. A total of ten focus groups were held. The focus groups were conducted during tutorial classes for first-year modules. In addition to the tutorial based focus groups, four focus groups were also conducted in university residences ensuring representation of both gender and different race groupings of students. Prior to the open-ended focus group discussion, each focus group participant completed a short anonymous demographic information form. The final sample of 128 students included students from all six of the university faculties, representation of all race groups, both genders and a mix of students in residence and those living in private accommodation.

In 2010 a series of follow-up ‘focus groups’ were held with the 2010 cohort of first-year students. I have intentionally written the term focus group in inverted commas in the previous sentence as the methodology used was an adaptation of traditional focus group methodology (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Although students were free to talk amongst themselves, a discussion per se was not held. Instead, each student in the group was provided with an A3 sheet of paper and coloured wax crayons. On one side of the A3 page was space to fill in basic demographic information and a large block in which students were asked to write a description of their first month at university. On the reverse side of the page, which was blank, students were asked to draw their experience of coming to university.

Visual methodology, in the form of student drawings, was specifically included within this mixed method study as a means of enhancing the depth of inquiry and providing an additional means for students to express their experiences of the transition to university (Cross, Kabel, & Lysack, 2006). The value of visual methodologies in social and educational research has been demonstrated by several authors (for example, Cross et al., 2006; Ganesh, 2007; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Kim, 2011; Mair & Kierans, 2007). Of particular relevance to my study is the work of Mair and Kierans (2007) in which teachers created

drawings of their experience of the school accountability movement in the United States. These authors conclude that:

“[I]mages convey their own information and are to be taken seriously in relation to existing structural power relationships in which practices of education are situated...Image based research should include representation of the work done in schools, how work is done, how it is defined, who defines it and to what purpose” (Mair & Kierans, 2007, pp. 46–47).

Although the use of visual methodologies was more limited in my study, the images depicting experiences of the transition to university provided a unique insight into the student experience. I treated the visual data in the same way as the other qualitative data and each drawing was coded as part of the analysis.

As was done in 2009, the sampling strategy for the 2010 ‘focus groups’ was again done on a faculty basis via the tutorial programme. In addition, students from two residences, one male and one female also participated. A total of eight ‘focus groups’ were conducted and 142 students participated, representing six faculties, different race groups, both genders, and students living in residence and private accommodation.

Data collection and sampling at the university level thus involved two components as did the school level sampling. However, at the university level, each component was seen as separate and different students participated in 2009 and 2010, i.e. nested sampling was not used. This is summarised graphically below.

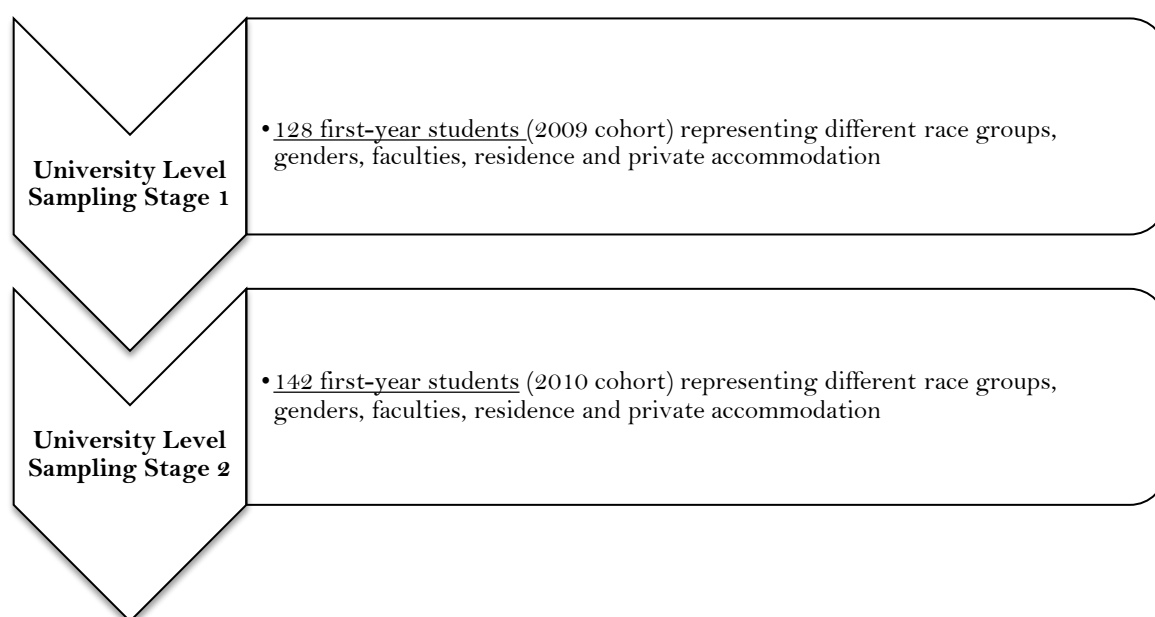


Figure 7: Visual representation of the sampling process at the university level

## 5.5 Research instruments

I used several research instruments to gather my data. A list of the research instruments used, at the school and university levels is provided in the Table below. Each instrument is reproduced in Appendices 1-5.

Table 2: Overview of research instruments used

Level of Study	Research Instruments
School level	South African High School Survey of Student Engagement (available in English and Afrikaans) ( <i>Appendix 1</i> )
	Written reflections on schooling experience and plans to attend university (from holiday programme 'Start-Up Questionnaire') ( <i>Appendix 2</i> )
	'University knowledge' questionnaire (open-ended questions) administered during the holiday programme ( <i>Appendix 3</i> )
University level	First-year student focus group question schedule and form for demographic details ( <i>Appendix 4</i> )
	Student's experience of the transition to university response sheet ( <i>Appendix 5</i> )

The South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement (SAHSSLE) is based on the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) that has been administered in the USA since 2004, and was completed by almost 300,000 high school students between 2004 and 2006 (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). In the 2007-2009 period a further 177,460 high school students participated (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009, 2010). The South African version of this survey (SAHSSLE) that I have used in my study is an adaptation of the US survey. In adapting the survey I focused on ensuring contextual relevance, changing terminology that was context specific, and the exclusion and addition of selected items that are important in the South African schooling context. Given the history of the use of the HSSSE my study was beginning from a strong base of previous testing of the instrument, and the construct of learner engagement in a high school setting. Nonetheless, to ensure the validity of the instrument for South African schools the instrument was adapted for the South African context and was piloted at two schools – one English medium of instruction and one Afrikaans medium of instruction. Appendix 6 presents the details of the piloting process. The data gathered from the two pilot schools has not been included in this thesis, but the results were analysed and published in 2010 (Wilson-Strydom & Hay, 2010). Despite the piloting process and several reviews of the final instrument, the response options for one question (Question 15) were incorrect in the final printed questionnaires. Due to the cost of printing it was not possible to reprint. Question 15 was thus excluded from the study.

My rationale for making use of the SAHSSLE as a key part of my data collection at the school level was four-fold:

1. The instrument has been widely used and tested in the US context and provides information about educational practices that can inform interventions. The value of the instrument in supporting school improvement efforts has been demonstrated (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).
2. Thus, adapting the survey for use in the South African context has value beyond my specific study and could potentially contribute towards efforts to improve the schooling system (see Section 2.9 for details of the many challenges facing the system).
3. The concept of student engagement, and related instruments, has been successfully used in the South African higher education context and at the UFS specifically. As such, comparable data at the university level is already available.
4. The focus of the student engagement research on effective educational practices – on what learners/students and schools/universities **do** – can be aligned with both Conley’s multidimensional model of readiness and the capabilities approach and allows for the collection of data of value from both perspectives.

## **5.6 Ethical considerations**

Since my research was partly conducted in schools, which are the property and responsibility of the FSDoE, my first ethical task was to obtain permission from the FSDoE. I approached the FSDoE at the outset of the study and formal permission was granted; please see Appendix 7 for the permission letter. In addition, I consulted with the FSDoE on the final sample of schools, representatives commented on the research instruments, and a formal report on the SAHSSLE data from the 20 schools was prepared for the FSDoE. Additional ethical considerations are described in the sections below.

### **5.6.1 Voluntary participation**

The 20 participating schools and two pilot schools were selected at the outset, and in partnership with the FSDoE. Schools thus did not volunteer to participate. However, each

school principal was also approached for permission to conduct the study at their school, and schools were free to withdraw from the study should they have wished to. Schools were provided with detailed information about the study prior to consenting to participate. None of the 20 schools I approached declined to participate. Learners participating in the study were selected by the school, and thus, their participation was also not voluntary. However, when I introduced the study to the learners at each school, they were told that their participation, in terms of actually completing a questionnaire, was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time with no consequence to themselves or their school. Completion of the survey was thus an indication of the specific learner's consent to participate in the study. No schools opted not to participate, and four learners chose not complete the survey.

The learners who participated in the school holiday programme did so voluntarily and submitted a formal application to join the programme. Parental consent forms were completed as part of the application process.

The research conducted with first-year university students followed similar procedures. At the start of the identified tutorial session or residence meeting I explained the study to the students present and informed them that their participation was voluntary. In some instances students chose not to participate and left the tutorial session.

### **5.6.2 No harm**

The research took the form of anonymous questionnaires for school learners, and focus group discussions. The focus of the questioning was on teaching and learning behaviours and experiences during the first year. It is thus unlikely that this study could cause personal harm or injury. Data collection times were carefully arranged with schools, tutorial coordinators, and residence heads so as to minimise disruption to formal learning, in order to minimise any potential harm to learner or student performance due to time out of classes.

### **5.6.3 Anonymity and confidentiality**

No learner or student names were recorded on the SAHSSLE surveys or during focus group discussions. Learner participation (excluding the holiday programme participants) was thus anonymous. The learners who participated in the holiday programme did record

their names on the two open-ended questionnaires they completed since these were submitted both for my research purposes and as part of their formative assessment processes. However, no names have been included in the data files used during the analysis. Individual learners were assigned numbers. As such, all learner inputs have remained confidential during the course of the study.

At the school level, I was able to identify a set of questionnaire responses from a specific school based on barcodes on the individual questionnaires. This was necessary in order to provide the school with an individual report on their specific results. However, results at the school level were treated confidentially in all public reporting. Schools were assigned a number from 1-20 in all final reporting, both to the FSDoE and in this thesis.

## **5.7 Approach to data analysis**

The careful management of data is a critical component of conducting good mixed methods research. In ensuring quality of data management and data analysis it is necessary to observe the relevant protocols related to each of the methods used (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009; Wolf, 2010). The following sections briefly outline how I managed and processed the qualitative and quantitative data sources.

### **5.7.1 Managing the quantitative data**

The quantitative data collected using the SAHSSLE was optically scanned, loaded into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), thoroughly cleaned and then analysed using SPSS. The statistical analyses of the quantitative data were carried out working with the whole sample of 20 schools as well as by school type and taking learner demographics into account. I have used descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and cross tabulations to provide an overview of educational practices, learner engagement, and aspects of readiness across the participating schools. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Independent Samples t-Tests, and Chi-Square Tests were used to explore differences in learner engagement across school types and different groupings of learners. This was an important part of understanding conversion factors (see section 4.5). Statistically significant differences between groups do not, necessarily, imply that the difference in the means is of practical significance as statistical significance is also influenced by sample size (Pallant, 2007). With large samples, even relatively small differences between groups can become

significant. For this reason the Effect Size (or strength of association) of the difference between groups was also calculated.

Effect size provides an indication of the relative magnitude of significant differences – an indication of practical significance (Pallant, 2007, p. 208). The use and interpretation of effect sizes is not without difficulty, and several authors have written about how effect size should be calculated and reported (Brown, 2008; Coe, 2012; Ferguson, 2009; Levine & Hullett, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2010; Prentice & Miller, 1992; Vacha-Haase & Thompson, 2004). In this study I have made use of Eta Squared for assessing the effect size of significant differences between mean scores across school types (when conducting independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVAs), and Cramer's V for Chi Square analyses (categorical data). These are both effect sizes based on strength of association indices and provide an indication of the percentage variance attributed to a particular variable (Barnette, 2006; Ferguson, 2009; Levine & Hullett, 2002). Drawing on the influential work of Jacob Cohen in the area of effect sizes and statistical power, estimated cut points have been provided to indicate whether an effect size is small, medium or large. For the eta squared statistic values of less than 0.01 are regarded as trivial effects, 0.01 – 0.05 are small effects, 0.06 – 0.13 are medium effects, and 0.14 and greater are large effects (Barnette, 2006; Pallant, 2007). When interpreting Cramer's V, which takes account of degrees of freedom, slightly different cut scores are defined depending on the number of categories included in the analysis. For two categories, less than 0.01 is a trivial effect, 0.01-0.2 is a small effect, 0.3-0.4 is a medium effect, and 0.5 and higher is a large effect; for three categories, less than 0.07 is a trivial effect, 0.7-0.20 is a medium effect, 0.21-0.34 is a medium effect, and 0.35 and above is a large effect; for four categories, less than 0.06 is a trivial effect, 0.06-0.16 is a small effect, 0.17-0.28 is a medium effect, and 0.29 and above is a large effect (Nandy, 2012; Pallant, 2007).

While these cut points are useful in providing an indication of the practical significance of differences found, and they are widely used in published research, several authors, including Cohen himself, caution against using these as absolute guidelines, particularly for social science research where the context of the data should also be considered (Barnette, 2006; Nandy, 2012; NSSE, 2009; Prentice & Miller, 1992; Vacha-Haase & Thompson, 2004). In this study I report effect size statistics to provide an indication of practical significance. However, I do not see these as the final word on the relevance of findings. In the context of the educational practices assessed in this study, even small differences – for example in the extent to which learners ask questions or do written

tasks – are likely to be important in the context of university readiness. The value of using mixed methods is also important here, as the qualitative data provides additional perspectives that assist with the interpretation of the quantitative data within my particular study context.

### **5.7.2 Managing the qualitative data**

All focus group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. As the researcher, I conducted and analysed all the focus groups. A research assistant was employed to do the transcriptions. The visual data (student drawings) was scanned and saved as image files. All the qualitative data – image files, transcriptions and qualitative responses recorded on questionnaires – were managed and analysed using NVivo 9.1 qualitative analysis software. I made use of several rounds of coding, starting with open coding in which I identified emerging themes. A series of thematic codes were generated, specifically drawing on the capability framework for understanding the transition to university and Conley's multidimensional model of university readiness. All data sources were analysed using the same codes and I carefully checked and cross checked the coding several times to ensure consistency and accuracy of the coding process. This allowed for an integrated exploration of the responses of learners and students across qualitative data sources as is demonstrated in the upcoming results chapters (see Chapters 7 and 8).

## **5.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to present a theoretical and practical account of my research design and methodology. My rationale for the positioning of the study within a pragmatist research paradigm was presented, together with a rationale for the use of mixed methods. As discussed in the chapter, pragmatism requires the researcher to make use of the most appropriate methods for answering specific research questions and is focused on finding actionable answers to complex real world problems, and as such, places premium on research that is socially relevant. I described the research methods used, sampling procedures, research instruments, and my approach to data management and analysis. It was my aim to demonstrate that my methodology provided spaces for “respectful listening and understanding” (see quotation at the outset of the chapter, Greene, 2008, p. 20). In the

coming chapters I present my findings, with an explicit focus on sharing and understanding the perspectives of the school learners and university students I worked with.

## Chapter 6: Introducing the Research Participants

“Our future aspirations turn on what we take to be possible for ourselves. Individual lives come to accommodate their social chances in the ‘game’ of life which is not fair” (Walker, 2006, p. 58).

### 6.1 Introduction

The value of using a mixed methodology rests (amongst others) on the depth of analysis and incorporation of multiple perspectives that this methodology allows. One of the challenges, though, is that the inclusion of multiple perspectives and participants creates a complexity of research design that can at times be confusing for those not closely involved in the study. For additional clarity, in this chapter I introduce the research participants, first the school learners and thereafter the first-year university students. Section 5.4 above described the sampling procedure used at both the school and university levels. This chapter extends section 5.4 by providing an introduction to the research participants in each sampling phase. My aims are, firstly, to describe the demographic profile of the school learners and first-year students who participated in each of stage of the study, and, secondly, provide an account of the context in which these young people live and go to school. I demonstrate the inclusion of a broad based sample, including representation of the diversity of students, schools and learners typical in the South African context, and the Free State region in particular. Information about the context of research participants’ lives outside of school is provided to situate the research participants within the realities of their day to day situations, the importance of which is emphasised by the capabilities approach.

### 6.2 Learner sample

As was shown in Figure 6, sampling of school learners took place in two linked phases (nested sampling). The rationale was to work from a broad understanding of the schooling experience and educational practices to an in depth analysis of learners’ experiences, aspirations and understandings of university. The demographic profile of the learners (and their schools) participating in each stage is presented in the coming sections.

### **6.2.1 Learner sample stage 1 (n=2816)**

In total, 20 schools and 2816 learners participated in the SAHSSLE phase of the study. Table 3 below provides a summary of the types of schools included in the sample. The redress of the vastly unequal resourcing of schools during the apartheid era has been a priority of government since 1994 (see Section 2.9). One of the mechanisms for tackling these inequalities has been the introduction of the classification of schools into five poverty quintiles, with quintile one representing the poorest schools and quintile five the least poor. The quintile score for each school is calculated from national census data for the school's catchment area, and takes into account income, unemployment rate and level of education (literacy rate). On the basis of the quintile into which the school falls, state allocation of funding per learner is determined, with lower quintile (i.e. poorer) schools receiving a larger funding allocation per learner than higher quintile schools.

Even though the quintile system has been regarded as an important step in working towards redress, it has also been criticized, often by schools themselves (Kanjee & Chudgar, 2009; Motala & Sayed, 2009). Being based on census data for what is spatially defined as the schools' catchment area, the quintiles do not adequately take account of the actual socioeconomic status of the schools' learners, many of whom travel long distances to attend school and so do not live within the spatially-defined catchment area. Research published by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has shown that while the quintile system is fairly accurate at identifying the most poor (quintile 1) and the least poor (quintile 5) schools, schools in the middle groupings are often incorrectly classified (Kanjee & Chudgar, 2009). These authors call for an exploration of alternative quintile classifications taking particular account of the learner population and the actual resources schools have access to.

Despite the range of schooling contexts and resource levels of the 20 schools in my sample (see Table 3) all schools either fell into quintile 4 or 5 (i.e. could be seen as relatively well-resourced schools). However, my experience of working with these 20 schools highlighted the vast disparities in terms of school resourcing and also the socioeconomic status of the learners. Thus, in line with Kanjee and Chudgar's (2009) suggestion to focus on school resources, and in order to provide a better indication of school type or context of the 20 schools in this study, the geographic location of the school and the annual school fees were used to create categorisations of school context for the purposes of this specific study.

I identified and defined three school types as follows:

- **Suburban higher socioeconomic context (Suburban HSC):** Suburban schools where annual school fees are more than R5, 000.00. In most cases these are ex-model C schools that are located in relatively affluent suburban areas. These schools typically cater for learners who come from upper middle-class socioeconomic environments.
- **Suburban lower socioeconomic context (Suburban LSC):** Suburban schools where annual school fees range from R1, 500.00 to R5, 000.00. In many cases these are also ex-model C schools but are located in less affluent areas and typically cater for learners who come from lower middle class socioeconomic environments. Schools in this grouping also contain a relatively large proportion of learners who travel from homes in surrounding townships to attend better resourced suburban schools.
- **Township:** Schools that are located in township areas and where annual school fees are less than R1, 500.00.

Table 3 shows the 20 schools (ordered by school number) in terms of the school type, language of instruction, provision of boarding facilities, quintile and annual school fees at the time of data collection (2009). My school sample thus consisted of seven township schools, nine suburban HSC, and four suburban LSC. The vast disparity in annual school fees provides a useful indication of the socioeconomic context in which the school and its learners function. Three independent schools were included in the study. I have not treated independent schools as a separate category of schools due to differences across the three schools as shown by the school fees charged and also based on the time I spent working in the schools. It was thus more meaningful to include these three independent schools within the three school types identified above.

Table 3: Summary of school characteristics

School Number	School type	Language of instruction	Provides boarding facilities	Quintile	Annual school fees (2009)
1	Township	Afrikaans	No	5	R550.00
2	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	Afrikaans	Yes	5	R8,400.00
3	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	English	Yes	5	R13,358.00
4	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	English	Yes	5	R16,120.00
5	Suburban – lower socioeconomic context	English	Yes	5	R4,000.00
6	Township	English	No	4	R300.00
7	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	English	No	Independent	R13,863.00
8	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	English	Yes	5	R11,200.00
9	Suburban – lower socioeconomic context	English	No	5	R3,300.00
10	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	Afrikaans	No	5	R6,930.00
11	Township	English	No	4	R200.00
12	Suburban – lower socioeconomic context	English	Yes	5	R3,000.00
13	Township	English	No	4	R360.00
14	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	English	No	Independent	R20,735.00
15	Township	English	No	4	R220.00
16	Township	English	No	5	R400.00
17	Township	English	No	4	R1,300.00
18	Suburban – lower socioeconomic context	English	Yes	Independent	R5,000.00
19	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	English and Afrikaans	Yes	5	R11,700.00
20	Suburban – higher socioeconomic context	Afrikaans	Yes	5	R8,350.00

The 2816 learners in the sample were distributed across the three school types as follows.

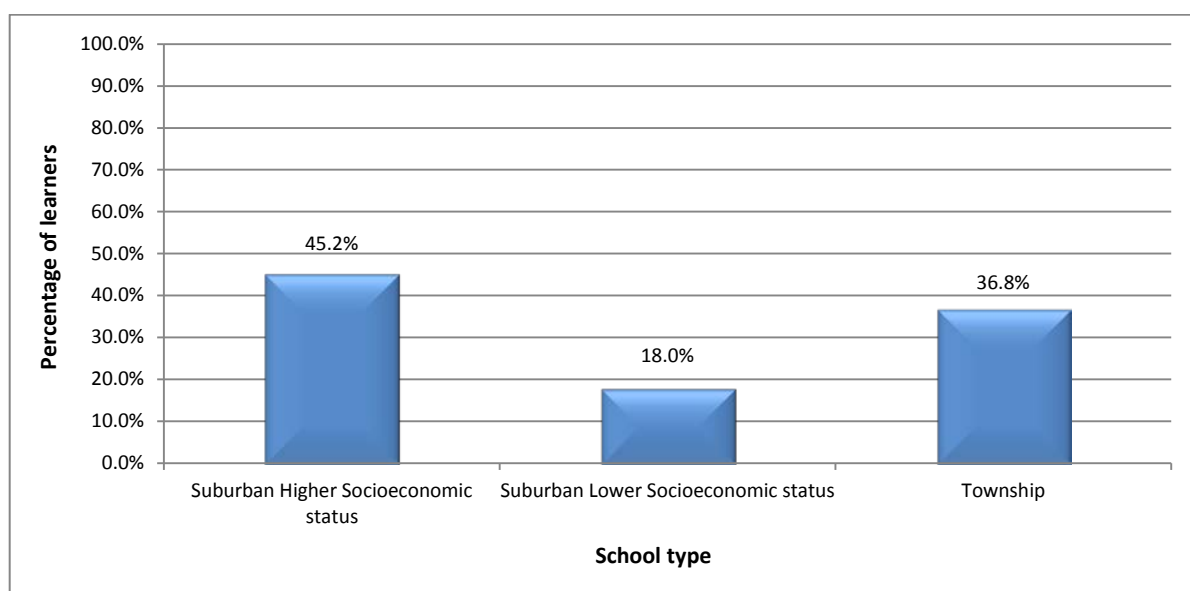


Figure 8: Distribution of learner sample by school type (n=2816)

With respect to the current grade of the participating learners, Figure 9 shows a roughly even distribution across the grades, although the number of participants did decrease slightly from Grade 10 to Grade 12.

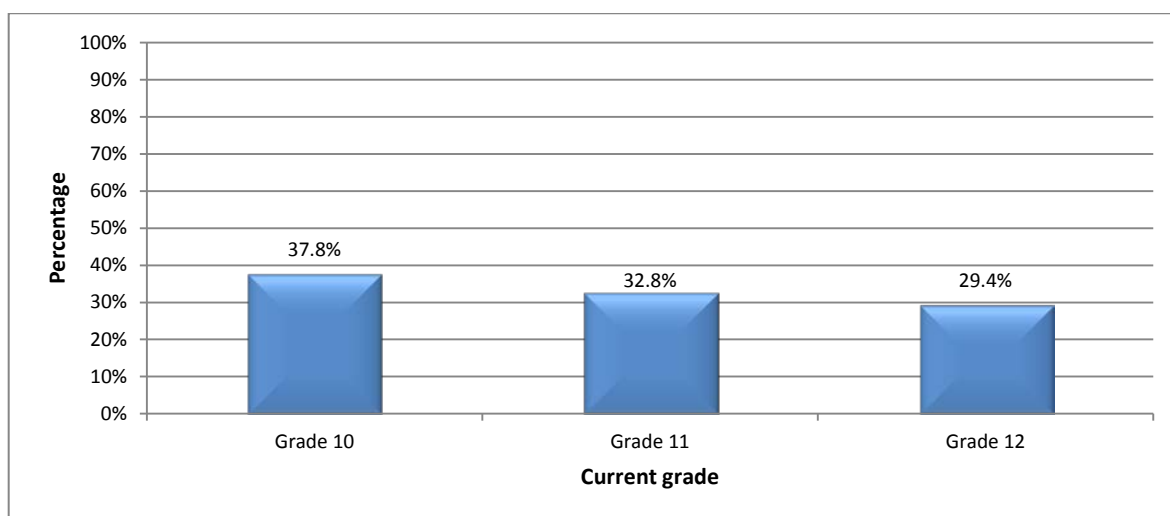


Figure 9: Learner sample by grade (n=2816)

The majority of the learner sample (77.7%) was learning in an English medium of instruction environment and 22.3% in Afrikaans. Yet, only 11.6% of the sample reported that English was their home language. The most widely spoken home language of the sample was Sesotho (35.0%), followed by Afrikaans (24.8%). Thus, the majority of the learners were learning in a language other than their mother tongue.

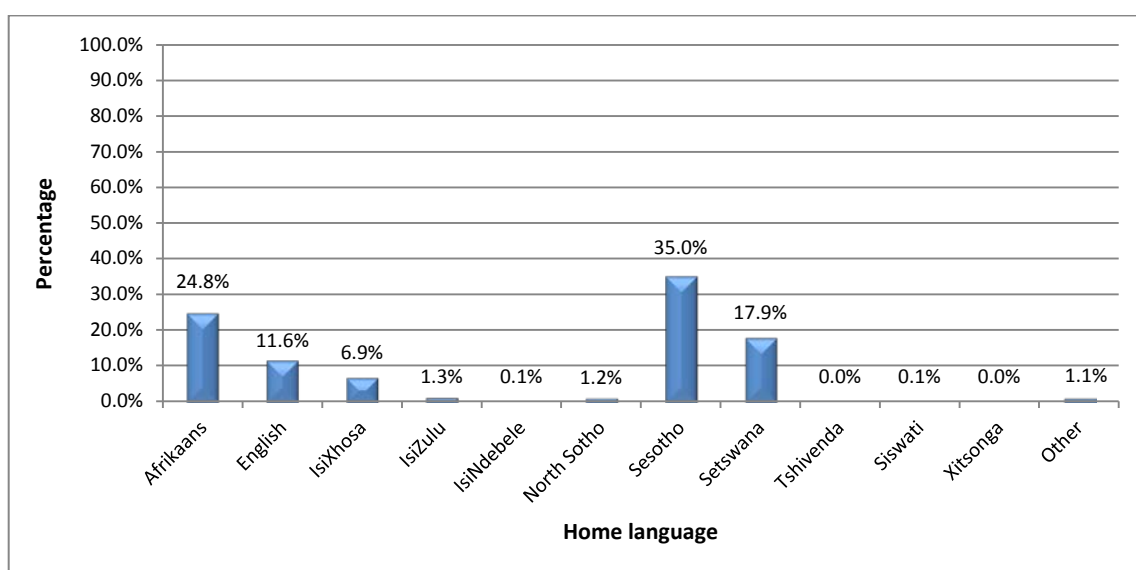


Figure 10: Learners' home language (n=2816)

The sample consisted of slightly more female learners (54.3%) than male (45.7%). Black African learners accounted for just under two thirds of the learner sample and White learners for just under a quarter, as shown below.

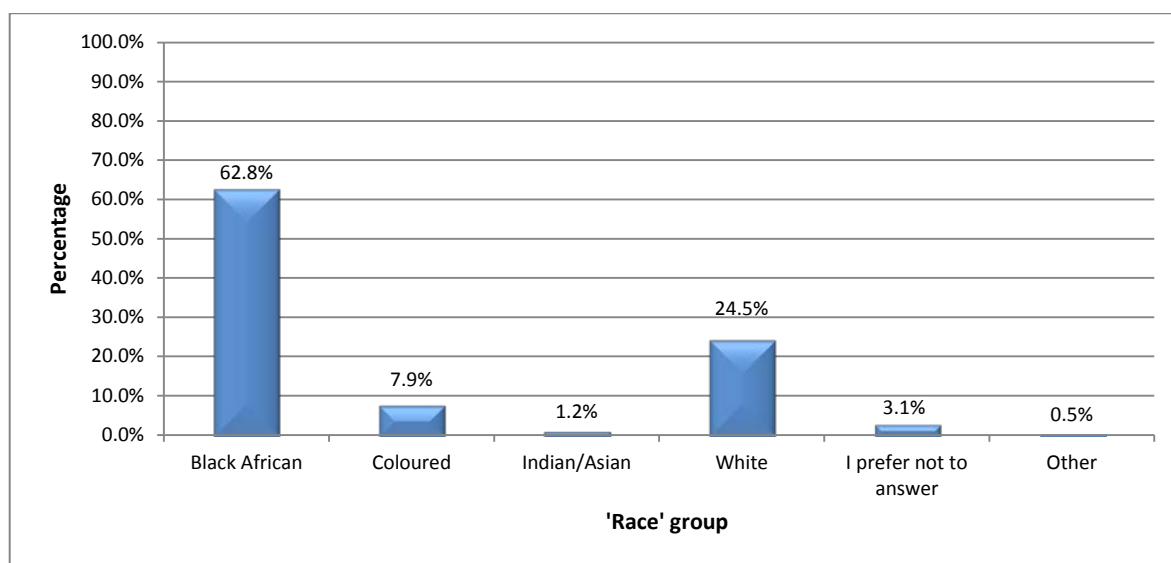
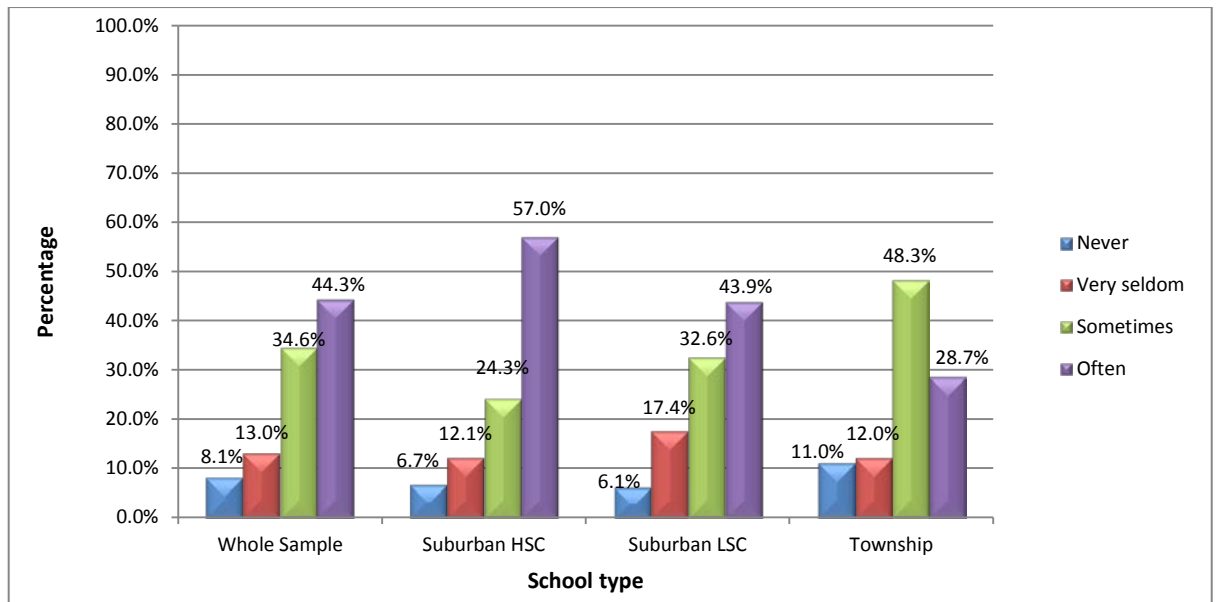


Figure 11: Learner sample by 'race' group (n=2186)

While the school type classification provides a proxy for socioeconomic context, additional questions regarding socioeconomic context were included in the SAHSSLE; namely: regularity of eating breakfast, time spent travelling to school (and mode of transport), time spent caring for family members, time spent working for pay, and time spent doing chores at home. Together, these questions provide important information about the participating learners' lives.

Figure 12 shows how basic nutrition (in terms of eating breakfast) differs across the socioeconomic context in which learners find themselves. While 57% of the learners attending suburban HSC schools often eat breakfast, only 29% of township learners often eat breakfast. These differences across schools types were found to be statistically significant, (Chi-Square test,  $p=0.00$ ), with a small effect size (Cramer's  $V = 0.164$ ).



**Figure 12: Regularity of eating breakfast by school type**

The SAHSSLE questionnaire also included a series of questions about activities learners are engaged in outside of the formal school day. Learners were asked to estimate how many hours per week were spent on each activity. The results, by school type are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: How learners spend their time outside of the formal school day by school type**

Activity	School Type	Number of hours per week (% of learners choosing each option)					Average number of hours per week
		None	1 or fewer	2-5	6-9	10 or more	
Practising sport or playing musical instruments	Suburban HSC	27.8	14.1	28.8	16.8	12.5	3.95
	Suburban LSC	41.6	20.5	25.4	8.7	3.8	2.39
	Township	40.2	22.1	24.1	7.2	6.4	2.48
Working for pay	Suburban HSC	72.1	9.2	9.6	5.1	3.9	1.30
	Suburban LSC	76.5	7.6	9.1	4.7	2.1	1.05
	Township	69.2	12.0	8.3	6.1	4.4	1.39
Doing volunteer work (not for pay)	Suburban HSC	58.4	24.7	13.1	2.5	1.4	1.16
	Suburban LSC	50.1	24.8	17.0	4.2	3.8	1.71
	Township	53.1	22.5	14.5	5.1	4.7	1.74
Exercising	Suburban HSC	9.9	26.0	36.2	18.0	9.9	4.23
	Suburban LSC	14.1	39.1	29.1	11.3	6.3	3.18
	Township	14.0	36.5	29.7	11.3	8.5	3.40
Watching television and/or playing video games	Suburban HSC	8.0	26.3	34.8	17.2	13.7	4.49
	Suburban LSC	3.0	18.2	40.3	22.3	16.1	5.28
	Township	5.5	21.5	33.6	19.8	19.6	5.17

Activity	School Type	Number of hours per week (% of learners choosing each option)					Average number of hours per week
		None	1 or fewer	2-5	6-9	10 or more	
'Surfing' the internet or chatting online	Suburban HSC	15.3	28.9	27.7	15.9	12.1	3.94
	Suburban LSC	22.4	25.0	24.3	17.4	10.9	3.74
	Township	40.5	19.9	15.9	14.5	9.2	2.92
Talking on the phone (including cell phones)	Suburban HSC	6.4	49.5	26.7	10.3	7.1	3.18
	Suburban LSC	8.2	49.3	23.8	10.7	8.0	3.16
	Township	15.8	49.0	18.4	10.7	6.1	2.73
Socialising with friends outside of school	Suburban HSC	6.9	17.7	41.6	18.9	14.9	4.96
	Suburban LSC	7.5	23.1	41.4	17.9	10.1	4.45
	Township	10.9	29.6	32.3	16.2	11.0	4.07
Travelling to and from school by taxi	Suburban HSC	80.2	13.1	4.0	0.6	2.2	0.57
	Suburban LSC	48.3	30.8	11.0	4.3	5.6	1.69
	Township	69.5	21.4	3.9	2.2	3.0	0.85
Travelling to and from school by bus	Suburban HSC	82.7	9.8	3.8	1.5	2.2	0.60
	Suburban LSC	62.4	16.0	12.2	4.2	5.1	1.54
	Township	86.8	8.1	2.5	0.9	1.7	0.43
Walking to and from school	Suburban HSC	66.4	23.1	6.7	0.9	2.9	0.89
	Suburban LSC	58.1	26.4	9.8	2.3	3.4	1.22
	Township	14.1	54.9	10.6	5.3	15.1	2.93
Taking care of family members (ill parents, younger siblings, grandparents etc.)	Suburban HSC	63.9	18.7	10.3	3.4	3.7	1.28
	Suburban LSC	54.7	19.6	13.5	6.3	5.9	1.87
	Township	44.3	19.0	14.0	9.4	13.3	2.86
Doing chores at home (preparing food, cleaning, washing clothes etc.)	Suburban HSC	16.7	38.0	31.3	9.0	5.1	2.97
	Suburban LSC	10.2	32.2	36.5	11.5	9.6	3.79
	Township	7.9	24.1	38.8	13.4	15.8	4.58

One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the significance of the mean differences between school types shown in Table 4. The differences across the school types were significant in most cases as is shown in Table 5. The effect size of the differences was small, except for time spent walking to school which had a medium effect size.

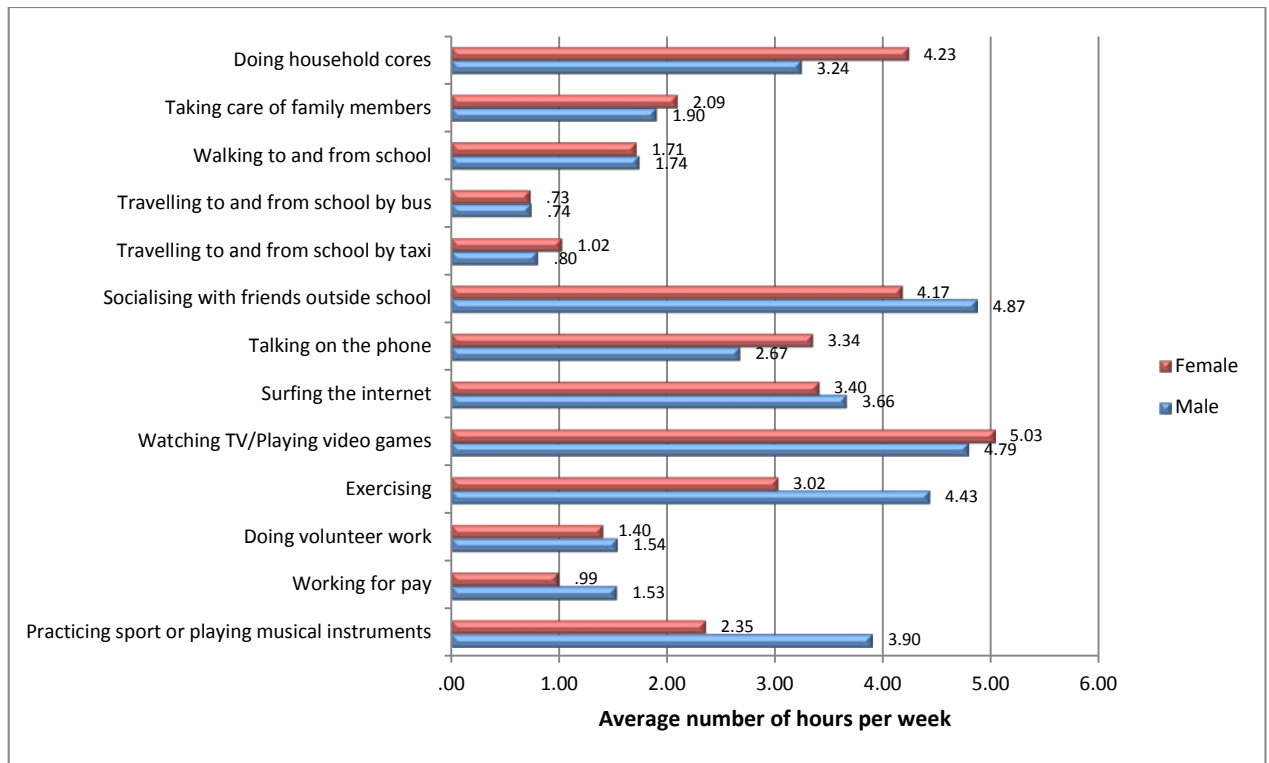
Table 5: Results of one-way ANOVA comparing time spent on activities outside the formal school day across school types

Item		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Effect Size (Eta Squared)
Practising sport or playing musical instruments	Between Groups	1466.906	2	733.453	69.344	.000	0.05 (small)
	Within Groups	27870.552	2635	10.577			
	Total	29337.458	2637				
Working for pay	Between Groups	37.540	2	18.770	2.654	.071	n/a
	Within Groups	18935.963	2677	7.074			
	Total	18973.503	2679				
Doing volunteer work (not for pay)	Between Groups	211.321	2	105.661	17.371	.000	0.01 (small)
	Within Groups	16070.330	2642	6.083			
	Total	16281.652	2644				

Item		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Effect Size (Eta Squared)
Exercising	Between Groups	542.936	2	271.468	28.384	.000	0.02 (small)
	Within Groups	25144.187	2629	9.564			
	Total	25687.123	2631				
Watching television and/or playing video games	Between Groups	344.645	2	172.322	16.469	.000	0.01 (small)
	Within Groups	27592.604	2637	10.464			
	Total	27937.248	2639				
'Surfing' the internet or chatting online	Between Groups	583.602	2	291.801	24.699	.000	0.01 (small)
	Within Groups	31083.588	2631	11.814			
	Total	31667.190	2633				
Talking on the phone (including cell phones)	Between Groups	120.510	2	60.255	6.794	.001	n/a
	Within Groups	23085.509	2603	8.869			
	Total	23206.020	2605				
Socialising with friends outside of school	Between Groups	433.687	2	216.843	22.132	.000	0.01 (small)
	Within Groups	25963.417	2650	9.798			
	Total	26397.103	2652				
Travelling to and from school by taxi	Between Groups	403.306	2	201.653	45.799	.000	0.03 (small)
	Within Groups	11522.549	2617	4.403			
	Total	11925.855	2619				
Travelling to and from school by bus	Between Groups	396.140	2	198.070	49.961	.000	0.03 (small)
	Within Groups	9986.644	2519	3.965			
	Total	10382.784	2521				
Walking to and from school	Between Groups	2328.878	2	1164.439	158.142	.000	0.10 (medium)
	Within Groups	18960.392	2575	7.363			
	Total	21289.270	2577				
Taking care of family members (ill parents, younger siblings, grandparents etc.)	Between Groups	1360.460	2	680.230	72.374	.000	0.05 (small)
	Within Groups	24793.977	2638	9.399			
	Total	26154.437	2640				
Doing chores at home (preparing food, cleaning, washing clothes etc.)	Between Groups	1396.223	2	698.112	75.901	.000	0.05 (small)
	Within Groups	24300.376	2642	9.198			
	Total	25696.600	2644				

Thus learners at township schools spend significantly more time than learners from the other school types caring for family members, doing chores at home and walking to school. Learners from suburban HSC schools spent significantly more time practising sport or musical instruments and socialising with friends outside of school.

Further analysis was done to consider possible differences between how female and male learners spend their time outside of formal schooling. The results are shown graphically below.



**Figure 13: How learners spend their time outside of formal school by gender**

Independent samples t-tests were used to assess the significance of the difference in the average time spent on each activity, by gender. The results provide further background information for understanding the lives of the learners participating in this study.

**Table 6: Results of Independent Samples t-test comparing time spent on out of school activities by gender**

Item	Gender	N	Mean	Mean difference	t	Significance (2-tailed)	Effect Size (Eta Squared)
Doing household chores	Male	1058	3.24	-0.983	-7.693	p=0.000	0.02 (small)
	Female	1266	4.23				
Taking care of family members	Male	1059	1.90	-0.184	-1.391	p=0.164	n/a
	Female	1264	2.09				
Walking to and from school	Male	1041	1.74	0.027	0.225	p=0.822	n/a
	Female	1231	1.71				
Travelling to and from school by bus	Male	990	0.74	0.011	0.125	p=0.900	n/a
	Female	1240	0.73				
Travelling to and from school by taxi	Male	1057	0.80	-0.219	-2.420	p=0.160	n/a
	Female	1243	1.02				
Socialising with friends outside of school	Male	1064	4.87	0.700	5.357	p=0.000	0.01 (small)
	Female	1269	4.17				
Talking on the phone	Male	1047	2.67	-0.667	-5.338	p=0.000	0.01 (small)
	Female	1246	3.34				
Surfing the internet or chatting online	Male	1057	3.66	0.260	1.793	p=0.073	n/a
	Female	1261	3.40				

Item	Gender	N	Mean	Mean difference	t	Significance (2-tailed)	Effect Size (Eta Squared)
Watching TV/Playing Video games	Male	1070	4.79	-0.238	-1.758	p=0.079	n/a
	Female	1261	5.03				
Exercising	Male	1065	4.43	1.407	11.123	p=0.000	0.05 (small)
	Female	1253	3.02				
Doing volunteer work	Male	1052	1.54	0.137	1.320	p=0.187	n/a
	Female	1279	1.40				
Working for pay	Male	1074	10.53	0.537	4.958	p=0.000	0.01 (small)
	Female	1293	0.99				
Practising sport or playing a musical instrument	Male	1065	3.90	1.547	11.365	p=0.000	0.05 (small)
	Female	1265	2.35				

In sum, the following gender differences were found:

- Female learners spend statistically significantly **less** time than male learners:
  - Playing sport or musical instruments
  - Working for pay
  - Exercising
  - Socialising with friends
- Female learners spend statistically significantly **more** time than male learners:
  - Talking on the phone
  - Doing chores at home

It is also important to have a sense of the levels of education of parents/guardians so as to better understand the broader educational context in which the learners function. Relatively large numbers of learners (n=868) did not provide a response to this question. Parents' levels of education are shown in Figure 14 on the following page.

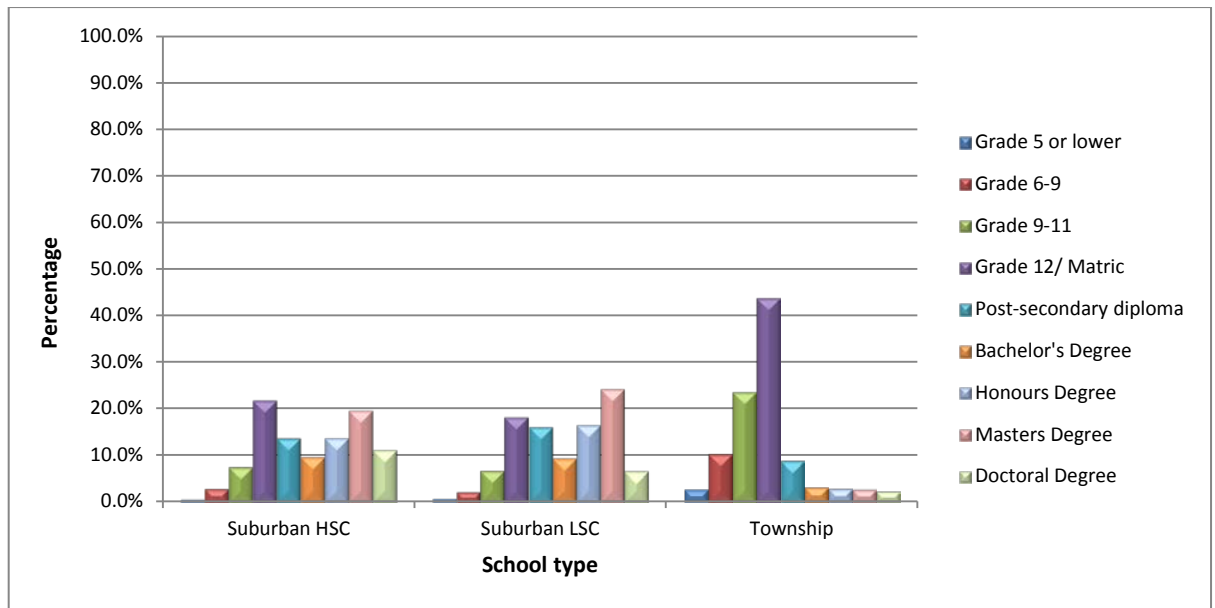


Figure 14: Parents/Guardians' highest levels of education by school type

The difference in the family's education background across the three schooling types is highlighted in the figure above. These differences were statistically significant (Chi-Square test,  $p=0.000$ ) and the effect size (Cramer's  $V=0.311$ ) was marginally under the level defined for large effect size. While 11% of learners at suburban HSC schools reported that their parent/guardian had a doctoral degree, only 6.5% and 2.3% of learners at suburban LSC and township schools respectively reported having a parent/guardian with a doctoral degree. At the other end of the educational spectrum, only 11.2% (suburban HSC) and 9.8% (suburban LSC) of learners reported that their parent/guardian had not completed grade 12/matric. This can be compared to 36.3% of the learners at township schools. At township schools, it is most common for parents/guardians to have a matric, with very small proportions having completed any post-schooling qualifications. As such, learners from this context who enter university are likely to be first generation students.

The majority of learners, across school types, reported that the ranges into which most of their school marks fall were the 50-59% and 60-69%. The largest proportion of learners reporting marks of 70% and higher were learners enrolled in suburban HSC schools. Although this data does not allow for an accurate calculation of AP score which would be needed to identify how many of the learners in the sample actually qualify for university, a crude cut off point of a minimum of 50% for most school marks could be used as a proxy to identify qualifying for university entry since it is very unlikely that students

who score below 50% for most of their subjects would be able to meet the minimum entry criteria for either mainstream or extended programmes. Using this crude measure, a total of 16.3% of the learners across the whole sample are unlikely to qualify for university. When considered by school type, 12.1% of suburban HSC, 17.9% of suburban LSC, and 20.3% of township school learners are unlikely to meet the minimum criteria for entering university. Yet, almost all learners in the sample, across school types, reported that one of the reasons for going to school was that they wished to attend university (91.9%).

### 6.2.2 Learner sample stage 2 (n=33)

Ten of the original 20 schools participating in my study were invited to nominate learners in Grades 11 and/or 12 to apply for the life skills programme that was offered during the June/July 2010 vacation (see section 5.4.1). Applications were received from eight of the ten schools and 147 learners applied. A total of 35 learners were selected to participate in the programme.<sup>51</sup> Two selected learners did not arrive on day one of the programme, leaving a final sample of 33. Just over half of the 33 participants were female (58.0%), two thirds were in Grade 11 (66.67%) and one third in Grade 12. One of the learners was white, one coloured and 31 black. The representation of the learners per school and school type is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: School representation of learners in sample two

School Number	School Type	Number of applications received	Number of learners participating
5	Suburban LSC	6	4
6	Township	20	4
7	Township (Independent)	3	0 (2 learners were selected but did not arrive)
8	Suburban HSC	3	2
9	Suburban LSC	17	6
11	Township	56	4
13	Township	24	6
16	Township	18	7
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>147</b>	<b>33</b>

<sup>51</sup> A maximum of 35 learners could be accommodated within the funding constraints for the holiday programme.

The selection criteria for participation in the holiday programme included the identification of the top academic performers per school as well as a consideration of personal reflections written as part of the application process. Based on the most recent school marks available that were provided by the learners in their application forms (and stamped as correct by their schools), all of the selected learners would qualify for university entry, some into mainstream programmes and others into extended degrees. All but one learner indicated that they planned to go to university. One learner was unsure, the reason being that her mother was a street vendor and she did not think that it would be financially possible to attend university. Of the 33 learners, 40% reported that their parent(s) had been to university, while, a much larger portion, 63.3%, noted that they currently had a sibling or close relative at university.

### **6.3 Student sample**

Sampling at the university level also took place in two phases. Each phase was separate and different participants were involved. The demographic profile of participants in each phase is presented in this section.

#### **6.3.1 Student sample phase 1 (n=128)**

In September 2009, ten focus groups were held with students participating in tutorial programmes for selected first year courses. A total of 128 students participated. Of these students, 61.72% were female and 38.38% male. Most (74.22%) were black, 24.22% were white and 1.56% coloured. Approximately two thirds (66.4%) of the students were living in a residence on campus. Participating students represented all seven of the UFS Faculties.

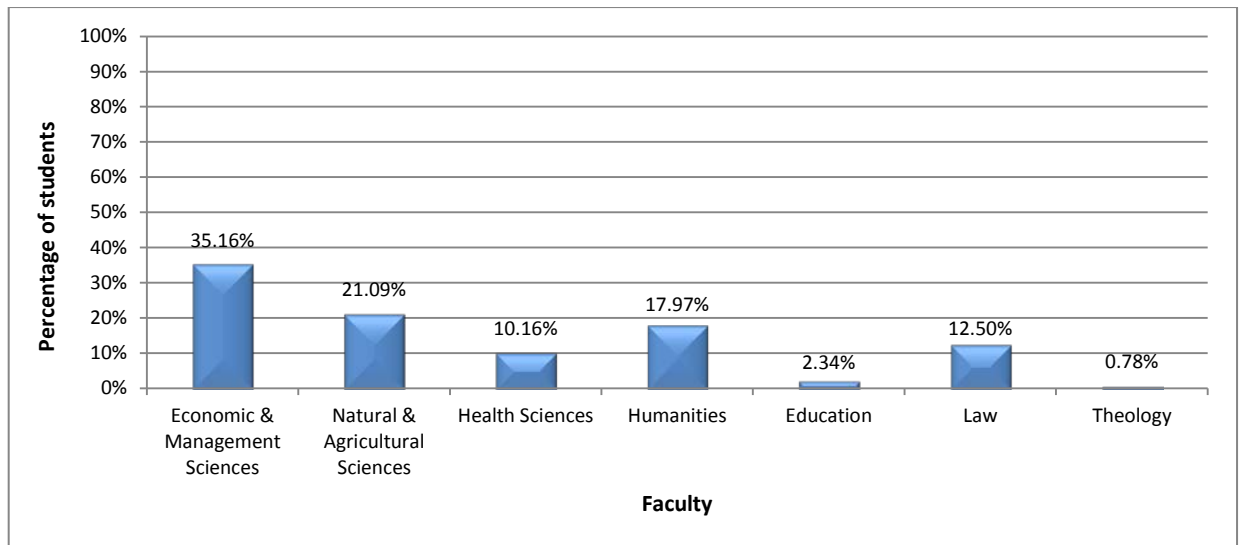


Figure 15: 2009 Student sample per faculty

The participating students were asked to indicate the type of high school they attended. A simplified version of the school classifications presented above was used as students were, in most instances, not able to provide an indication of their annual school fees. As such, the following schooling categories were used: ex-model C (usually suburban and would include both higher and lower socioeconomic contexts), township or rural schools, and independent schools. There was one student in the sample who was home-schooled.

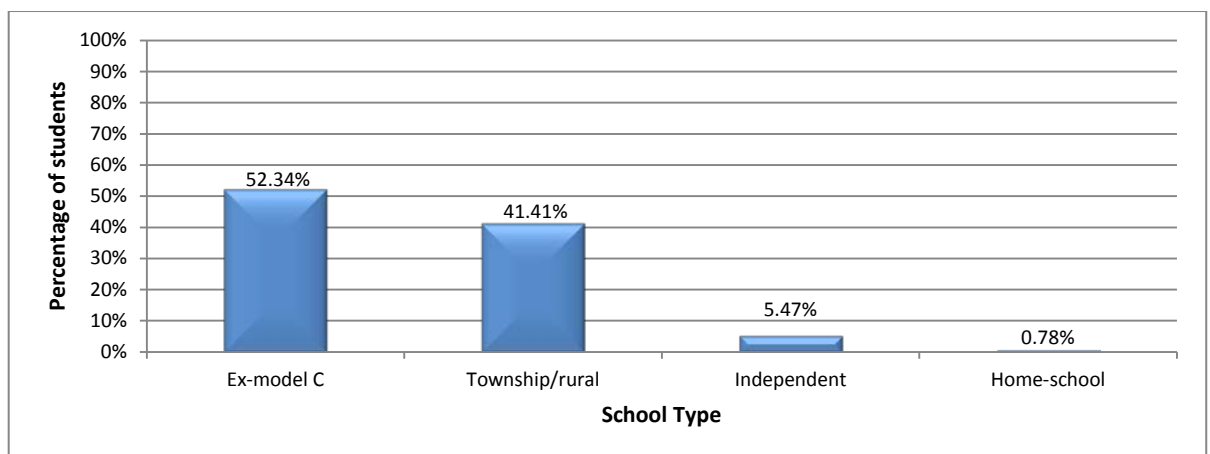


Figure 16: 2009 Student cohort by school-type

### 6.3.2 Student sample phase 2 (n=142)

During 2010, additional ‘focus groups’ – using visual methods – were conducted with 142 students during tutorial sessions for selected first-year courses. Just over 60% of the students were female and 38.6% were male. Most of the students in the phase two sample reported that they lived in residence on campus (70.7%). With respect to race, half of the sample (52.8%) were black, 38.7% white, 5.6% coloured and 2.8% did not provide a response for their race grouping. The students represented all Faculties except for the Faculty of Theology. This is not considered to be a sampling limitation since the Faculty of Theology is a very small faculty at the UFS. The Faculty representation is shown in Figure 17.

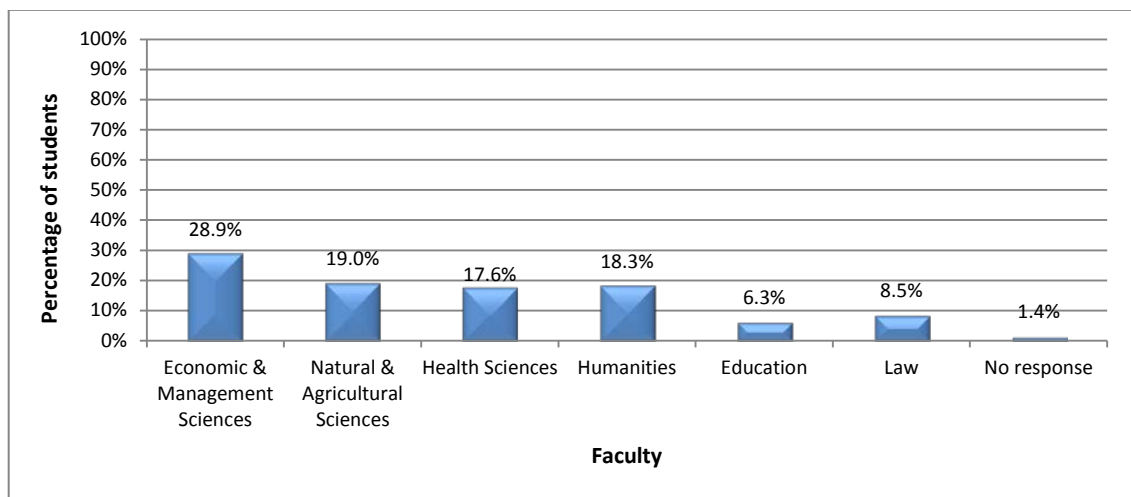


Figure 17: 2010 Student cohort per faculty

The type of high school the students who participated in Phase 2 attended showed similar patterns to those of Phase 1 students, although the proportion of independent schools was slightly higher and the proportion of township/rural schools was slightly lower.

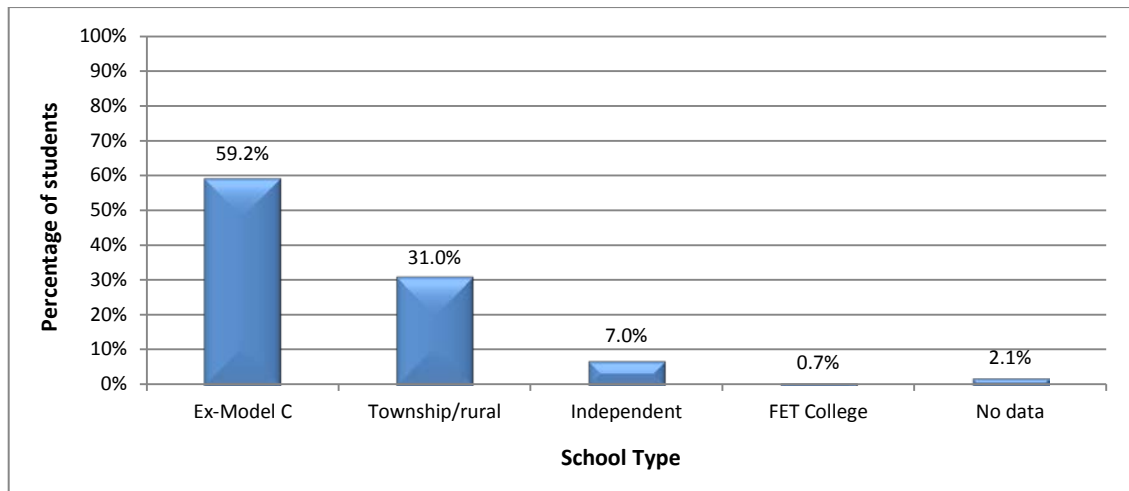


Figure 18: 2010 Student cohort per school type

### 6.3.3 Additional student data analysed

As already discussed, I collected student engagement data from 20 schools in 2009 as part of the data collection for my study. Student engagement data was also collected in 2009 at the UFS by the Directorate for Student Development and Success (SDS)<sup>52</sup> as part of an unrelated study. I have used this secondary data – together with the focus group data for understanding the university side of the humpback bridge. As such, the 1069 first-year students that completed the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) also make up an in-direct part of my student sample. Of the 1069 students in the UFS student engagement sample, 35% were male and 65% female; 30.6% were African, 59.2% white, 5.2% coloured and 0.8% Indian or Asian. The sample was thus biased in favour of white and female students. Just under one quarter (24.3%) were registered for an extended degree programme, 60.7% for mainstream studies and 15.0% did not know what type of qualification they were enrolled for. A total of 41.4% of the students reported that they were first generation students (neither parent had been to university).

## 6.4 Conclusion: Summary of participant introductions

In this chapter I focused on introducing the research participants – both school learners and university students. My aim with this introduction was to demonstrate the

<sup>52</sup> Now part of the UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning

inclusion of a broad-based sample that included representation of different races and genders, socioeconomic contexts and schooling backgrounds. In addition to the demographic information presented about the participants, I also sought to provide an initial picture of the lives of these participants. This was done by considering how learners and students spend their time outside of the formal education setting, as well as indications of parents' levels of education to better understand the broader educational context in which the participants are placed. Given the challenges of the current quintile classification of schools, I grouped the 20 schools participating in my study into three specially defined groupings, namely: suburban higher socioeconomic context, suburban lower socioeconomic context and township.

The chapter highlighted both the diversities and similarities of learners and students participating in the study. The participants represent a range of schooling and socioeconomic contexts as well as areas of study. Almost all the school learners in the sample (in their final three years of schooling) indicated an interest in attending university and all the university students were in their first year of study at the time of data collection. As such, this sample provides a solid basis for exploring the interface between school and university in a manner that ensures that both sides of the humpback bridge are understood. The descriptive profiles of learners provide an initial indication of the impact that socioeconomic context has on the lives of learners, and hence on their preparation and readiness for university. For example, the data showed that township school learners spend more time each week travelling to and from school (mostly walking), and a lot more time doing chores at home and caring for family members than learners from either of the suburban groups of schools. These issues will be picked up in some detail in the coming chapters. Gender differences were also highlighted in this section, most notable being that female learners spend on average 3.83 hours per week on household chores compared to male learners who only spend about 2.92 hours per week on household chores. Female learners also spend more time caring for family members and less time exercising than male learners. These differences are likely to impact on the well-being of learners.

In sum, in this chapter I have presented a descriptive overview of the learners and students that participated in the study – sample by sample – in order to show both the breadth and depth of sampling and to provide an initial picture of lives of my research participants. In the coming chapter data across samples is analysed and presented in the form of a descriptive and analytical tapestry showing the interface between school and university from the perspective of learners and students.

## Chapter 7: Results – Investigating the School-University Interface and Transition Experiences

*It's like getting thrown into the deep end of life...without a life jacket! (focus groups, 2009).*



Drawing 1 (white female first-year student, EMS, 2010)

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter presenting my results, I set out to investigate the transition to university and the interface between school and university from the perspective of learners and students. It is my aim to present a richly descriptive and analytical picture of learner and first-year students' experiences of the interface between school and university. As such, this chapter is focused on research questions 1 and 2, namely:

1. How do first-year students at the UFS experience the transition to university in their first year of study?
2. How do learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 from local UFS feeder high schools experience the process of preparation for and access to university?

For clarity purposes and in order to investigate transition experiences and the interface of school and university at the depth required, this chapter focuses specifically on presenting the voices of students and learners, and does not make reference to the capabilities-based social justice framework that was introduced in Chapter 3. In Chapter 8, I interpret my analysis of transition experiences and the interface between school and university from a capabilities perspective. The findings detailed here are based on an integrated analysis and presentation of my quantitative and qualitative data, as is good practice in mixed methods research (Bazeley, 2010; Howe, 1988; Jang et al., 2008; Wolf, 2010). In presenting the voices of the participating learners and students I have included many quotations. The quotations are presented as given by the learners and students – I did not correct for spelling and grammar as errors in these areas are a component of my data (see section 7.3.1.3 that focuses on language competency and confidence). Both learners and students were free to participate in Afrikaans or English. Where Afrikaans quotations have been used I have presented the English translation in the body of the chapter with the original Afrikaans shown as a footnote.

While analysing the SAHSSLE data I was struck by the differences in responses of learners from English medium of instruction schools compared to Afrikaans medium of instruction schools within the suburban HSC group (which is where all the Afrikaans schools, bar one are found). For this reason I have presented the suburban HSC data by language of instruction in this and the coming sections. Within the suburban LSC group of schools there were no schools making use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction. One township school was Afrikaans medium, but the responses of learners from this school followed the same trends as the responses of English language of instruction learners at township schools. Interestingly, in general, the responses of learners at township schools tended to be more positive than responses by both suburban HSC and LSC schools – despite the fact that the township schools were much more poorly resourced. The difference in resourcing is not only evident in the annual school fees charged, but is intensely experienced when spending time in the different schools.

The chapter begins with an analysis of transition experiences, as presented by first-year students. Drawing on the literature presented in Chapter 2, I then use Conley's multidimensional model of university readiness as the organising framework for presenting

the data focused on the interface between school and university. I also refer to student engagement concepts and theory where relevant.

## 7.2 Transition to university experiences


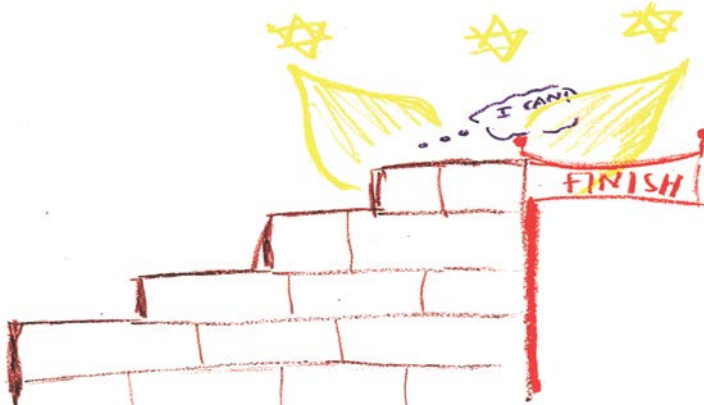
The qualitative research conducted with first-year university students was specifically focused on understanding how students experience the transition to university and how they experienced their first few months at university. In this section my aim is to present the view of students regarding how they experienced the transition to university. These experiences will be interpreted from the perspective of readiness for university in the following section. Prior to coding the qualitative data for Conley's four dimensions of readiness open coding was done and the following emergent themes were identified.

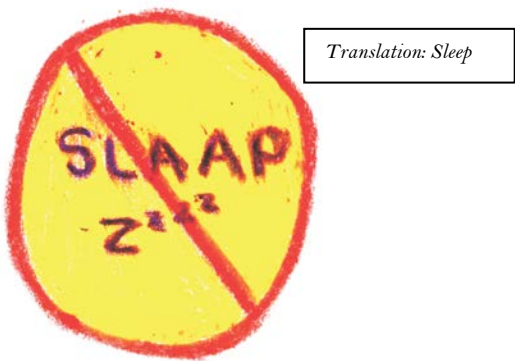
Table 8: Summary of emergent themes in student transition to university descriptions and drawings

Transition to University Experiences - Emergent themes (in alphabetical order)	Number of instances identified	Illustrative examples (quotations and drawings)
Confused, lost or scared	110	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I was really scared at first, never knew what was going on. I would say I was a bit confused” (black female first-year student, NAS, 2010).</li> <li>“During the first month everything was uncertain. I was scared and frightened of what lay ahead”<sup>53</sup> (white female first-year student, EMS, 2010).</li> </ul>
Diversity experiences (positive and negative)	73	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“socially it uplifted me because you get to meet different kinds of people and you get to learn new languages from that” (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010).</li> <li>“you would see white people all sitting in one row and then all the black people in different rows” (focus group, 2009).</li> </ul>
Financial challenges	19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I'm always cash less, but I think it teaches to save cash” (black, male first-year student, EMS, 2010).</li> <li>“I pay for my own studies so I have an idea about what it is to stay at university and how expensive it really is”<sup>54</sup> (focus group, 2009).</li> </ul>
Fun, happy, enjoyable, exciting	53	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I was excited, thrilled, especially the night before I came to campus. My first month was full of fun activities, social events, and exploring the University of the Free State. I was having so much fun I didn't even see the first month come to an end. It really was an amazing experience” (black male first-year student, EMS, 2010).</li> <li>“When I first got here I was scared as I didn't know what to expect and another part of me was very excited. The first month was awesome. Rag, inters, athletics and meeting new people was a great experience” (black female first-year, EMS, 2010).</li> </ul>

<sup>53</sup> Original Afrikaans: *Die 1ste maand was alles maar onseker. Ek was bang en skrikkerig vir wat voorle.*

<sup>54</sup> Original Afrikaans: “ek betaal vir my eie studies so ek het ‘n idee wat dit is om op universiteit te bly en hoe duur dit regtig is”

Transition to University Experiences - Emergent themes (in alphabetical order)	Number of instances identified	Illustrative examples (quotations and drawings)
Independence (learning to become independent)	61	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“The thought of leaving home and moving into hostel terrified me. I never imagined that I would leave home. I was so scared” (coloured female first-year student, EDU, 2010).</li> <li>“The freedom to come and go without question and the thought of missing a class without blinking an eye was also something to get used to. But it taught me self-discipline and responsibility” (white female first-year student, HUM, 2010).</li> </ul>
Looking towards the future	24	 <p>(Black male first-year student, EMS, 2010)</p>  <p>(Black female first-year student, EMS, 2010)</p>
Orientation experiences (positive and negative)	35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Lots of parties, phew” (focus groups, 2009).</li> <li>“RAG was torture while you’re enjoying it!” (focus groups, 2009).</li> <li>“I think the manner in which it [orientation] is done...obviously we understand that there must be a certain level of pain for us to know that we’re not used to this environment, but don’t these people realize that I, I was a matriculant last year and a matriculant was taken to be something that was very wise and mature, and now I know nothing?” (focus group, 2009).</li> </ul>
Quality of teaching at university	39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“If the module is such a joke that you don’t even need to attend class to pass, then really, how much effort do they [lecturers] put in?” (focus groups, 2009).</li> <li>“What I mean just now about the lecturer, it’s like he’s clever but he’s not meant to teach...(AGREEMENT)...I, I mean that certain people are made for somethings. He’ll excel when he’s in his office and doing research” (focus groups, 2009).</li> <li>“The lecturers I must say are quite good they know there work but at times cannot explain the work fully and you’d find that some of us became lost because of this” (black male first-year student, EMS, 2010).</li> </ul>

Transition to University Experiences - Emergent themes (in alphabetical order)	Number of instances identified	Illustrative examples (quotations and drawings)
Residence versus commuter students	92	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“It sometimes feels like the students who stay at res have everything and the other students have nothing. At res you always have someone to ask if you don’t know something. The university should do more for those who live off-campus” (focus groups 2009).</li> <li>“Whenever you have time, study, because you know when you get to res, they’re going to call your downstairs for more res activities...(AGREEMENT)” (focus groups 2009).</li> </ul>
Spaces in large classes	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I once thought of giving up when I was exposed to big halls (lecture halls) with lots of people, thought I would not cope” (coloured female, first-year student, NAS, 2010).</li> <li>I...I...I hate going to class...sitting on the floor...whereas at school you knew this was my desk...(LAUGHTER)...you know when you come from break, this is my desk...(LAUGHTER)...I always sit there and now you have to run to every class and...[SIMULTANEOUS SPEECH]...umm...there’s not enough space (focus groups, 2009).</li> <li>“I remember full classes – not enough space to sit and also the classes were huge compared to school” (focus groups, 2009).</li> </ul>
Tired	25	<div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Translation: Sleep</p> </div> <p>(White female first-year student, HSC, 2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“During Mondays you know we have house-meetings until twelve or whatever and then you get to your room and then you sleep and then you try to wake up at five...and you’re tired! (LAUGHTER)” (focus groups, 2009).</li> <li>“Stage Door is, is during lecturer periods and you’re just so tired. Like me, first time we’re writing a chemistry test every single Wednesday. So we practice until twelve at night on a Tuesday, I haven’t done my homework because my practicals ended at nine o’clock in the evening on Tuesday and after that I have to go to Stage Door until twelve. After that I’m just tired, I can’t study” (focus groups, 2009).</li> </ul>

## 7.2.1 Confused, lost and scared

The most commonly noted theme in the descriptions and drawings of the transition to university was that of being confused, lost or scared – see Drawing 1 presented at the start of this chapter. This is not unexpected since university is a new and unknown experience for

most students, and evidence of this response to the transition is commonly noted in the literature (see section 2.2). Additional illustrative examples of this theme are provided below. These examples also point to the need to build the confidence of students entering university.

*I was confused because there is a huge different between high school and university and the way things are done here, there is no much formality as in high school and Yoh! I got lost on my way to class because I could not remember where it was and that went on for like a week but eventually I got used to it. (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010).*

*Sometimes I was confused and felt lost. It took me a while to understand this world (university) and to be part of it. I once thought of giving up when I was exposed to big halls (lecture halls) with lots of people, thought I would not cope. It was just too much for me but never give up. Got advise which lifted me up. (coloured female first-year student, NAS, 2010).*

*I remember being worried about how will I cope with university pressure, whether will I make it in the end. I remember being lost not knowing where my classes are at. But it was a nice experience in entering this new world. (black male first-year student, NAS, 2010).*

*The first month of university was a big adjustment. I was not really sure how things work and the work was so much more than at school. In the same breath, it was the best time of my life and very exciting<sup>55</sup> (white male first-year student, Law, 2010).*

*For this first month at tertiary I am confused of what is expected from me, I struggle to understand the way in which content are delivered. It is hard for me to compete to my level best, I did not know that there are other modules except the one I wanted to specialise with and that make me underperforming and I really get more confused because I think of the bursary will be cancelled. (black male first-year student, 2010, EDU).*

*I faced the most scary thing I have never faced before, and that was being here. I didn't know what to do, I was shy to ask for help to other people. Its never easy facing the world alone (black female first year student, HUM, 2010).*

In addition to demonstrating examples of students who are confused, lost and scared, a careful reading of these quotations also shows that this confusion and fear is sometimes related to the physical space of the university (getting lost), and other times is referring to

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<sup>55</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *Die eerste maand van universiteit was 'n groot aanpassing gewees. Ek was nie lekker seker gewees hoe dinge werk nie, en die werk was soveel meer gewees as skool. In die selfde asem was dit van die beste tye in my lewe en baie opwindend.*

the university system (how things work). This distinction has important implications for interventions which need to explicitly include a focus on learning one's way around campus as well as helping first year students to make sense of the new university system in which they need to function.

### 7.2.2 Financial challenges

It was surprising that financial issues were only noted in 19 instances since experience working with students, as well as literature, shows that many students face financial challenges when entering university. Also of interest was that most of the references to financial difficulties were made by male students. Examples of references to financial challenges included:

*I find that most people from the school you come from disadvantaged backgrounds and they have like financial aid for their studies, which just pays for their studies and when they get here they have to pay R1000 extra, R4000 for registration, making it difficult for them to come to school...So I think they should be more considerate to disadvantaged students and cut off all the extra things that they need to pay for registration and all those things (focus groups 2009).*

*Yes, it is not only university fees and accommodation, I mean you still need your books and you must buy your food and other stuff en there is a lot of other things that happens that people don't always take into account and this causes problems.<sup>56</sup> (focus groups 2009).*

*Frustration, no accommodation, no money, clueless, crying, hard work at Rag, challenges with academics, city from rural (black male first-year student, NAS, 2010).*

*It took me some time to master my finances, time management and responsibilities (black male first-year student, EMS, 2010).*

*I did find it hard in a way that it was living far from home and the things around campus are expensive so I was always hungry and that was my biggest challenge (black male first-year student, EDU, 2010).*

*I got financially broke quite often (black male first-year, NAS, 2010).*

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<sup>56</sup> Original Afrikaans text: Ja, dit is nie net universiteits gelde en verblyf geld, ek meen jy moet nog steeds jou boeke en goed koop, jy moet jou kos en goed koop en daar is baie ander goed wat gebeur wat mense nie altyd in account vat nie wat problem veroorsaak

### 7.2.3 Dealing with diversity

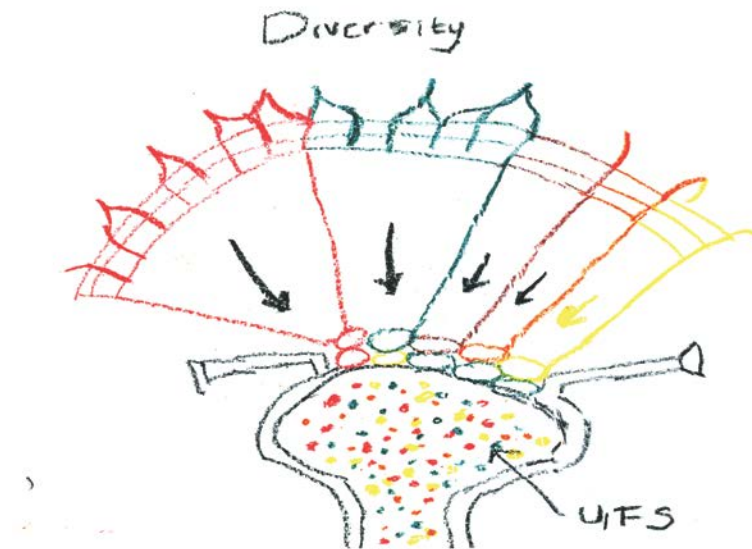
Table 8 showed that there were 73 instances in which experiences with diversity were mentioned by first-year students during focus groups, in descriptions of the first month at university and in drawings of the transition experience. It is important to note that this data was collected in the two years following the infamous ‘Reitz incident’<sup>57</sup> on campus and this may have influenced the responses of students to some extent as the institution was still dealing with the effects and implications of the video. For some students encountering diversity at university, sometimes for the first time, was a positive experience; while for others it was negative. Several students also reported coming from a school environment where differences between learners was no longer an issue and then being surprised and unsettled that diversity was still an issue at university, particularly diversity related to race and also language.

*“I’m from Kimberley so there’s not that much differentiation between black people and white people.... So when I came here and there’s Rag and there’s the opening of the new SRC is welcoming them in and you see the division. It’s so distinct, like when a white person goes on stage, the other half of the Rag Farm starts screaming and shouting for him but when a black person gets on stage, the other half also starts. So for me, that was shocking and...it really, I wasn’t prepared for that when I came here” (focus groups, 2009).*

Consider the following three student drawings which each present a different experience of diversity.

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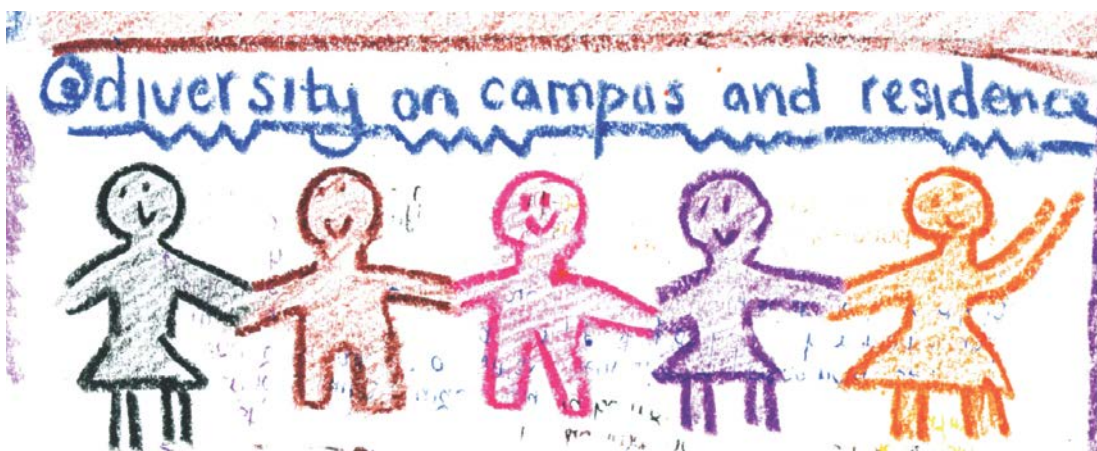
<sup>57</sup> The Reitz Incident refers to a racist video that was made by students living in Reitz residence, expressing their resistance to racial re-integration in the UFS residences. The video humiliated UFS cleaning staff who were required to participate in various initiation rites, which included the apparent urination in a concoction they were required to drink. The video caused institutional, national and international outrage and led to a national investigation into transformation and social cohesion at public universities in the country. The national investigation brought to the fore the extent to which racism (and other forms of discrimination) remain alive at South African universities (Ministry of Education, 2008).



Drawing 2 (white male first-year student, HSC, 2010)



Drawing 3 (black female first-year student, NAS, 2010)



Drawing 4 (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010)

Drawing 2 shows visually how the student experienced the diversity of people being concentrated in the relatively small space of the university. It is unclear from the drawing whether this student experienced this concentration of difference as positive or negative. In drawing 3 the frustration of a black female student is evident as she quite dramatically shows how black and white students separate themselves during the orientation and RAG week. This drawing, done by a 2010 first-year student, echoes the quotation at the beginning of this chapter taken from a focus group with first-year students in 2009. In drawing 4 a very different experience of diversity is presented with this black female student showing how she made friends with students of different colours. The smiles on the faces of the students imply that this was a positive experience.

The results from two items in the SAHSSLE focused on diversity experiences whilst at school help to shed some light on the somewhat contradictory responses of students to diversity. When asked if they had talked to a learner of a different race or culture, only 38.7% of the 2759 learners who completed the item reported doing this ‘often’, while 9.8% noted that they had ‘never’ talked to or worked with a learner of a different race or culture. Similarly, when asked if they had talked to or worked with a learner who was different in terms of religion, political opinion, family income or personal values, 39.3% of the 2726 learners completing the item indicated ‘often’ and 7.7% ‘never’. The results by school type are shown in Figure 19 and Figure 20 below.

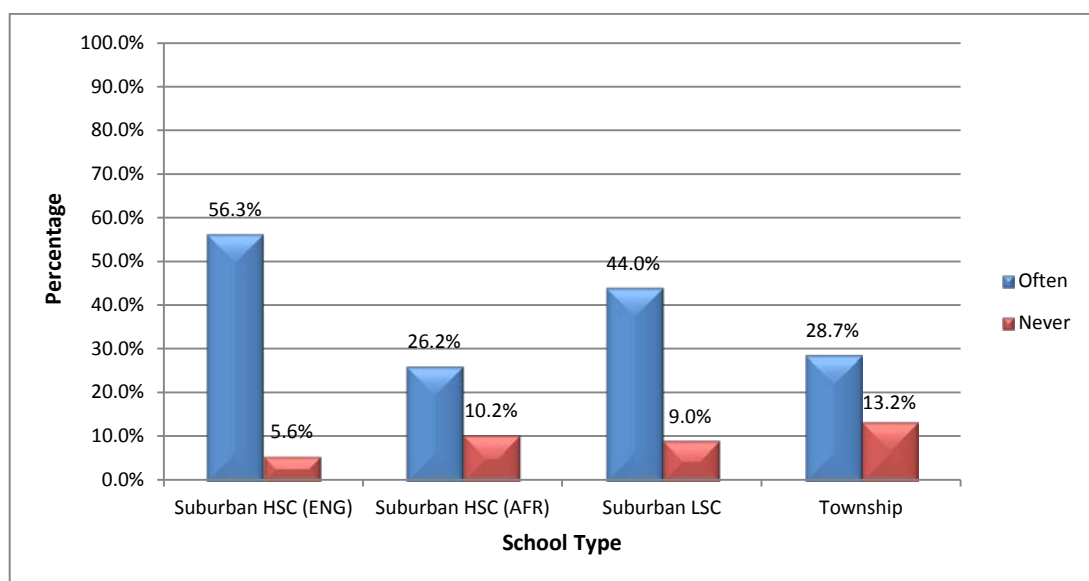


Figure 19 “Talked to or worked with a learner of different race or culture” by school type

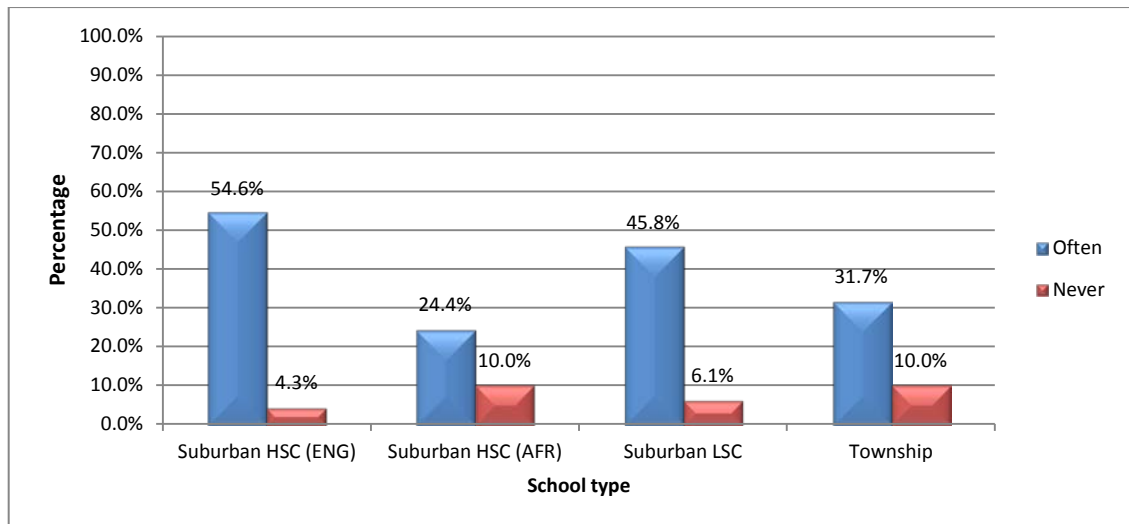


Figure 20: “Talked to or worked with a learner who is different in terms of religion, political opinion, family income, or personal values” by school type

For both items focused on experiences with diverse peers, the differences between the school types was statistically significant (Chi Square Test,  $p=0.000$ ), but with a small effect size (Cramer’s  $V = 0.155$  and  $0.141$ ). Figures 17 and 18 highlighted that it is learners at township schools and suburban HSC (Afrikaans) schools that have had the least experience with diversity. In both cases, less than one third of the learners within the school type have often encountered diverse peers. Since the UFS draws students largely from township schools and suburban HSC (Afrikaans) schools, it is perhaps not surprising that diversity remains a major challenge.

In many instances positive or negative experiences regarding being in a diverse environment were expressed in relation to language issues. Consider the following illustrative examples of students who found the multilingual environment difficult to adapt to:

*I don’t know, but for me it was a total social adjustment because I’m English so to come to a majority Afrikaans place umm, was very difficult at first, no one wanted to talk to me because I was English so that’s also quite a massive culture-shock and that was for me the biggest adjustment, was the Afrikaans (focus groups, 2009).*

*My classes were in English but all my hostel – I lived in the hostel – so all of my hostel friends were Afrikaans and so I was the only English girl out of eighty-five first-years so it was rough (focus groups, 2009).*

*But apart from that, I think for me, because I come from an Afrikaans school, I was brought up in an Afrikaans home so my home language is Afrikaans. So, I come to university, we get forms, I have clearly and explicitly said I want to study in Afrikaans. Now I get my book and my counselling in English...have nothing against the English children, really, but it is not so difficult for them because they come from an English school, they grow up in an English home, they study further in English, so for them it is one giant breeze. Yes, they do still struggle with things they do but not as much as we do because I must now go and sit and translate from English to Afrikaans.<sup>58</sup> (focus groups 2009).*

*I also have this lecturer, she, she...she's like Afrikaans, nè, she speaks net a little bit of English. She reads everything, like she explains everything and then she just starts Afrikaans and.../in English class/...(LAUGHTER)...and I'm sitting there and I'm thinking OK, that's a big Afrikaans word. I'm not good with Afrikaans, I understand just a bit and I just sit there and I think 'yessie, I'm in an Afrikaans class here'. So it would be better if they get like really good English.../lecturers/...ja...[SIMULTANEOUS SPEECH]...because she just goes to Afrikaans and I'm thinking 'yessie, I came to the wrong class!...(LAUGHTER) (focus groups 2009).*

*Socially it was worse because it was my first time meeting with different people with a different language. It was a terrible month in all (black male first-year student, NAS, 2010).*

A smaller number of students noted positive responses to the multilingual environment, for example:

*socially it uplifted me because you get to meet different kinds of people and you get to learn new language from that (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010).*

*I think we should all learn another language, even the basics because really I think we have a multicultural nation and we have to, you have to speak Afrikaans, English and Sotho. I think...(focus groups, 2009).*

The responses by several students emphasised just how difficult it is for students to confront their biases and learn to appreciate diversity. Consider the statement by the student below that clearly shows her difficulty in coming to terms with functioning in a diverse environment, and is also an example of how race and language become intertwined in discussions about diversity.

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<sup>58</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *But apart from that, ek dink vir my, want ek kom uit n' Afrikaanse skool uit, ek is in n' Afrikaanse huis grootgemaak so my moeder taal is Afrikaans. So ek kom universiteit toe, ons kry vorms, ek het duidelik en uitdruklik gesê ek wil in Afrikaans swat. Nou kry ek my boek en die voorligting in Engels en niks teen die Engelse kinders nie regtig, maar dit is nie vir hulle so moeilik nie want hulle kom uit n' Engelse skool uit, hulle word in n' Engelse huis groot, hulle swat verder in Engels so vir hulle is dit een groot breeze. Ja, hulle sukkel nog steeds met goed wat hulle doen maar hulle sukkel nie so erg so ons nie want ek moet nou gaan sit, Engels na Afrikaans toe vat.*

*and I mean he, he's giving EBE [Business English], it's a language and he can't even speak English. I mean for me in Afrikaans I really need someone to like help me with English because I want to improve my English but now this person's telling me you don't need to attend class and he's just, and then he's speaking about 'comfortable'... (LAUGHTER)... okaaaay, I'm sorry...ja and the thing also, the guy that gives us EBE, it's a black guy so no, but it's like OK, no, you, they speak umm, softer, but it's like he doesn't, like she said, he doesn't pronounce it correctly and he's like or he doesn't know how to pronounce it so he speaks softer so you don't hear it. You understand, so it's like you don't hear him half the time (focus groups, 2009).*

A white male student noted that

*Residence life was nice for a week, but integration resulted in about 60% of all first years moving out.<sup>59</sup>*

In contrast, a white female Health Sciences student described her first month at university as

*OUTSTANDING!!! Made many new friends of different races and cultures!<sup>60</sup>*

And in a similar vein, a black male EMS student remarked that

*I was amazed to see many students with different backgrounds.*

#### **7.2.4 Living in residence versus commuting**

Another theme that was noted in many instances was that of the implications of being a resident or commuter student. Commuter students (students who do not live on campus) tended to express frustration that they did not receive the same level of support as students living in residence did. Students living in residence also sometimes made similar comments, noting the value of the additional support that they received, especially during the first couple of months at university.

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<sup>59</sup> Original Afrikaans text: "Die koshuislewe was vir 'n week lekker, maar integrasie het my omtrent 60% van alle eerstejaars in die koshuis laat ontrek".

<sup>60</sup> Original Afrikaans text: "UITSTEKEND!!! Baie nuwe vriende gemaak van verskillende rasse en kulture!"

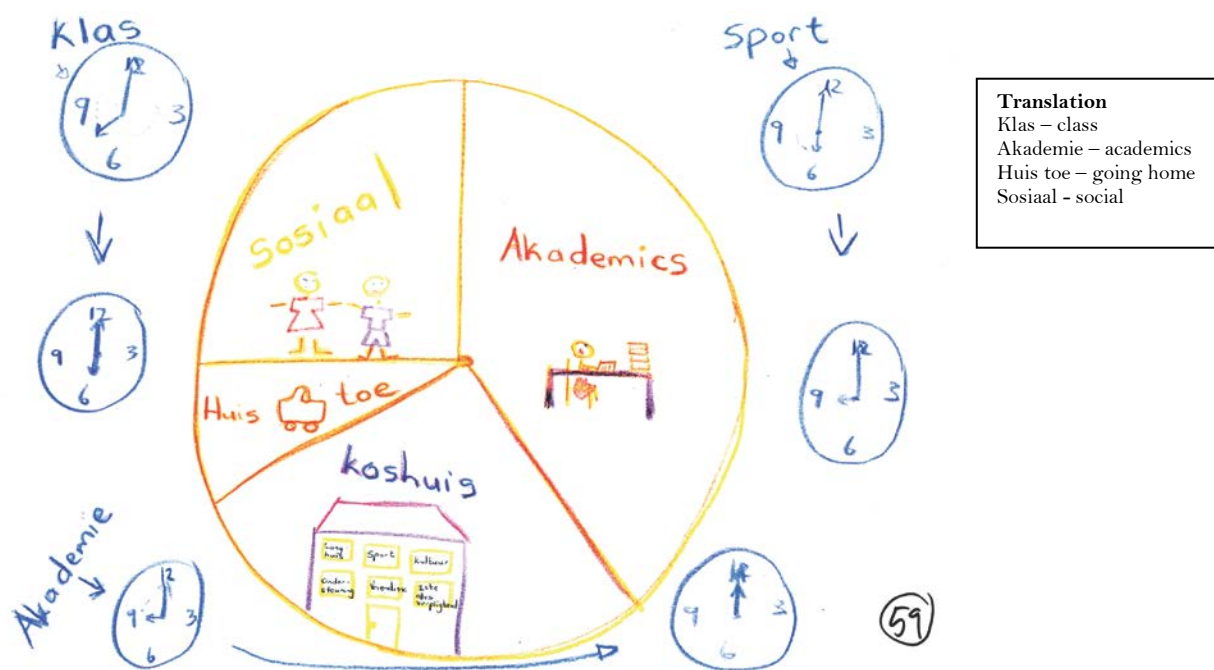
*It's a scary experience because if you live in a hostel you have seniors and stuff, I didn't, I didn't get in a place in a hostel so I had to do everything myself and that was scary because you don't know where that class is and that class and if you ask someone they're like 'why don't you know?' but that was scary for me...like why can't we have someone that, a mentor for each hostel, you can ask that person why, where's that, how does this happen. All those things because it's really scary to come here and like, OK I have class in that place but I don't have any idea where it is so ja...(focus groups, 2009).*

*Confused - didn't quite know where all my classes were. Excited - everything was new. Supported - being in a hostel helped. Independent - I was in control of my own studies and other activities (white female first-year student, EMS, 2010).*

However, being in residence was often presented as a double-edged sword, with students noting that they found the support helpful and enjoyed meeting new people, but that the many compulsory residence activities were exhausting and made academic work difficult. These tensions were most vividly expressed in the student drawings.



Drawing 5 (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010)



Drawing 6 (white male first-year student, Law, 2010)

### 7.2.5 Summarising students' transition experiences

This section has presented student experiences of the transition from school to university. Based on the qualitative data that formed the basis of this section, on the whole, students seem to find the experience to be one of confusion, being lost, and for some students scary. While students in residence are provided with additional support in making this transition, the extent of compulsory activity required of first-year residence students also seems to work against facilitating the transition, especially for students struggling to come to terms with an increased academic load (see section 7.3.3 below). Surprisingly few students made reference to difficulties with finances during their transition. The section provided additional detail on students' experiences of diversity during the transition. It was shown that for some students entering a more diverse environment was a positive experience, while for others it was more difficult. Some students also found that diversity was more acceptable in their school environment compared to university and this made their transition experience challenging. In the specific context of the UFS, which has a parallel language policy which allows students to study in either English or Afrikaans

classes, issues of diversity and the difficulties experienced in coming to terms with diversity were sometimes intertwined in discussions about the language of instruction.

### 7.3 Readiness for university

Having considered students' descriptions of their experience of the transition to university, my investigation now turns to focus on the interface between school and university, in terms of readiness. The analysis is structured according to Conley's multidimensional model of readiness as this provides a useful lens through which to consider the various dimensions of this interface. The qualitative data collected from school learners and university students was coded using Conley's four dimensions of readiness. In Figure 21 below I provide a visual reminder of Conley's model, showing the number of instances of each dimension that emerged from the qualitative data. The dimensions of readiness most referred to by the learners and students were academic behaviours and university knowledge.

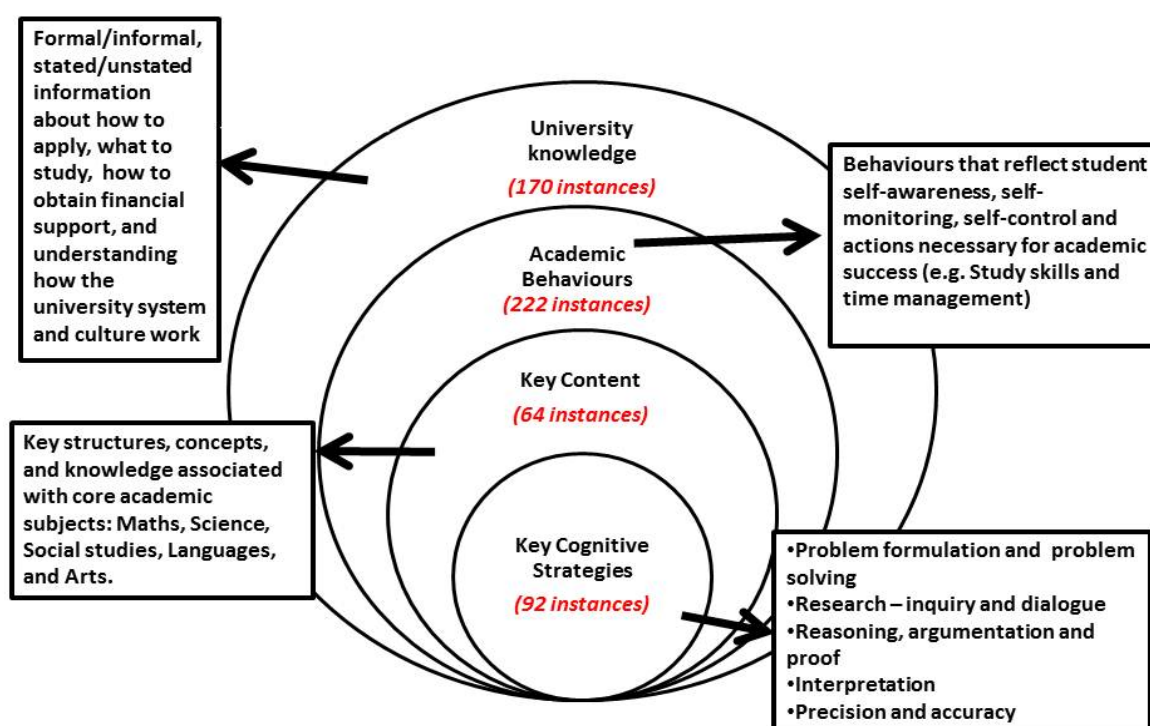


Figure 21: Conley's multidimensional model of university readiness showing qualitative data counts

In addition to the analysis of the qualitative data, there are a series of specific items in the SAHSSLE data that align closely with these four dimensions of readiness. In the sections below I present the results, dimension by dimension, and so present an emerging picture of the interface between school and university in terms of learner/student readiness for university. The emerging picture is a collage of quantitative data, the words of learners and students, and visual images drawn by first-year students.

### **7.3.1 Key cognitive strategies**

The readiness dimension of key cognitive strategies refers to the extent to which learners/students have developed their capabilities with respect to problem formulation and problem solving, inquiry and dialogue (being able to discuss and debate issues), being able to engage in sound reasoning practices, formulate an argument and understand how to back up or ‘prove’ their argument. Students entering university also need to be able to interpret information and arguments and understand different points of view. Conley reminds us that “students can demonstrate their capabilities only if they are fully challenged and stretched beyond their comfort zones” (Conley, 2010a, kindle edition). From a student engagement point of view, the importance of active learning, academic challenge and academic engagement are most relevant in this area of readiness (Kuh et al., 2005a, 2005b; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

#### ***7.3.1.1 Understanding key cognitive strategies using learner/student engagement data***

The learner/student engagement instruments ask a series of questions focused specifically on cognitive strategies used and developed at school and university. Figure 19 presents the response of learners to a series of statements about learning. Levels of engagement of learners in Afrikaans medium of instruction schools appear to be somewhat lower than at other schools. For example, only 59.4% of Afrikaans language of instruction learners reported that their teachers engage them in classroom discussions compared to 80% of English learners at suburban HSC schools and 85% at both suburban LSC and township schools. Similarly, Afrikaans language of instruction learners reported being less

curious to learn new things, were less likely to enjoy discussions with no simple answer and did not like working on problems that are difficult and require a lot of thinking.

These statements about learning are all important in the context of readiness since curiosity, creativity, engagement in discussion, and tackling complex problems are all important cognitive strategies that learners will be required to put into practice when at university.

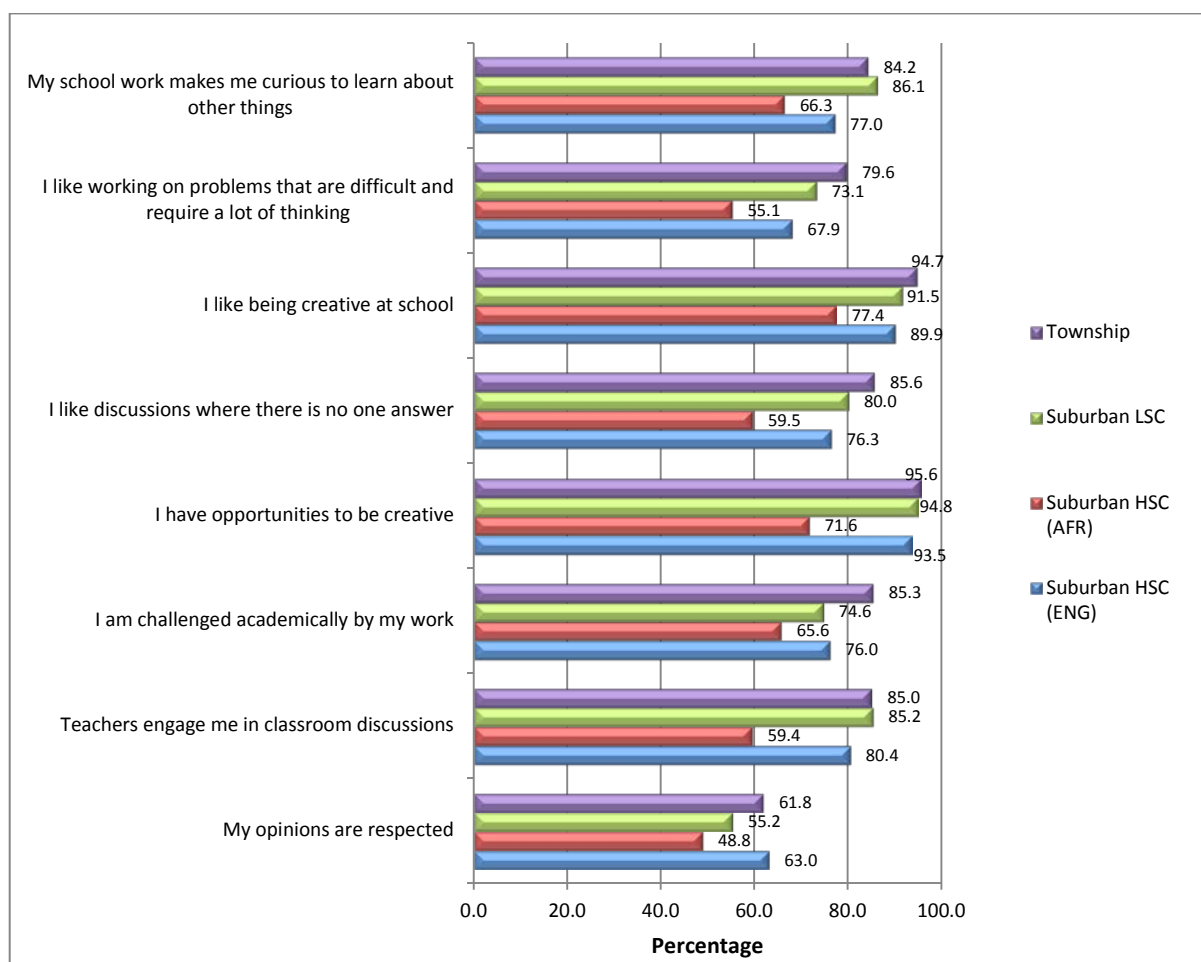


Figure 22: Percentage of learners per school type who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with statements about learning

All of the differences between school types shown in Figure 22 are statistically significant (Chi-Square test,  $p=0.000$ ). The effect size of the differences is small to medium in all cases (Cramer's  $V$  ranges from 0.076 to 0.195). An analysis by gender showed no significant difference in response between male and female learners, except for two items where female learners were more likely to agree/strongly agree, namely: 'Teachers engage

me in class room discussions” and “I have opportunities to be creative” (Chi-Square test,  $p=0.05$ ). For both, the effect size was small (Cramer’s  $V = 0.079$  and  $0.076$ ).

Similar findings are evident in the learner responses to a series of questions about how often they engage in various learning activities known to be educationally effective (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh et al., 2007, 2005a).

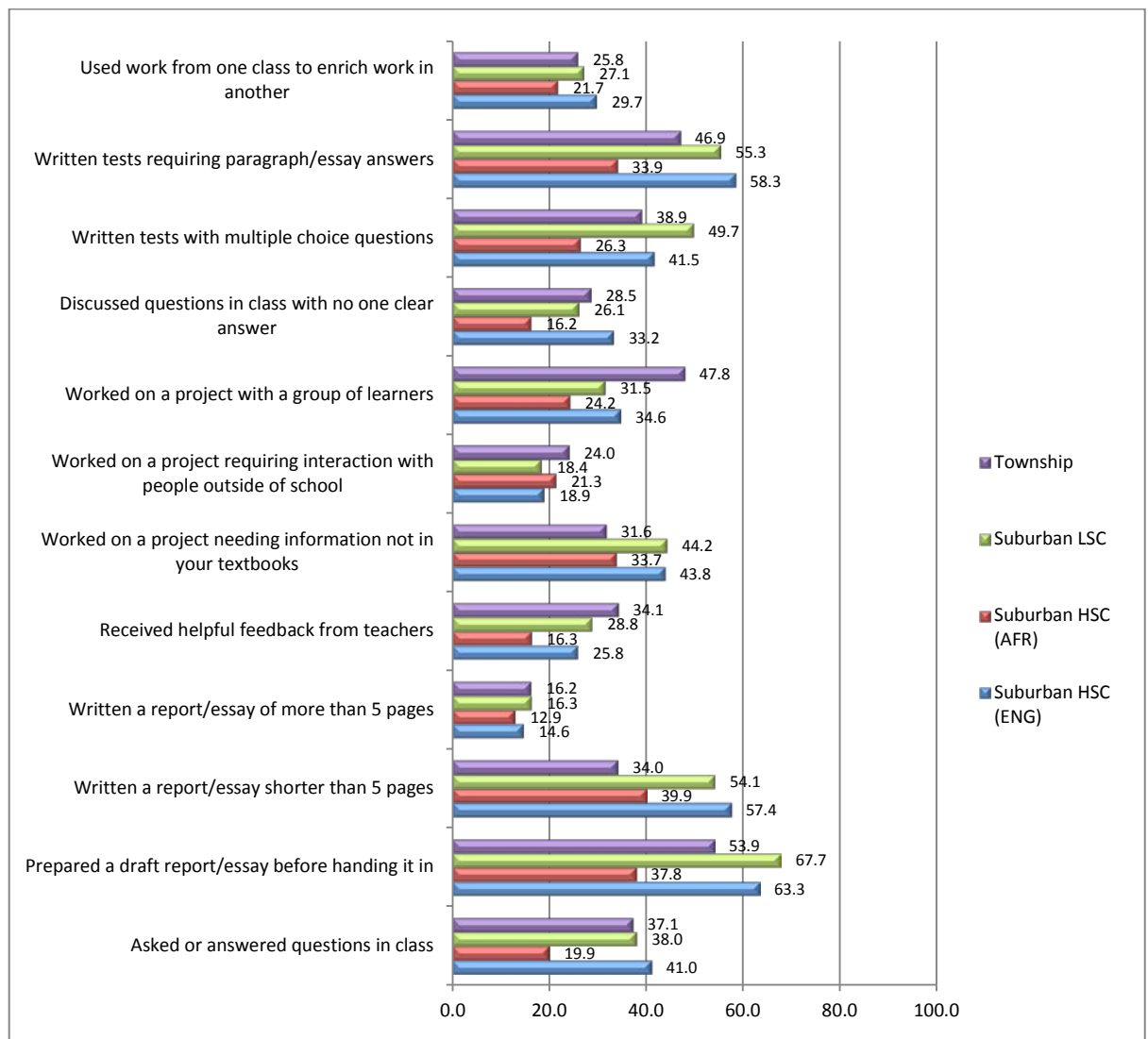


Figure 23: Percentage of learners per school type who reported ‘often’ doing the listed learning activities

Once again, Afrikaans medium of instruction learners were much less likely to report ‘often’ engaging in educationally effective activities. On the whole, learners from English

suburban HSC schools and suburban LSC schools were more likely to engage in the set of effective learning activities included in the SAHSSLE survey. Learners at township schools appear to engage in group work more often than learners at the other school types, with 48% of learners reporting that they do this ‘often’ compared to only 32% at suburban LSC schools, 24% at Afrikaans suburban HSC schools and 35% at English suburban HSC schools. Afrikaans learners appear to be much less likely to ask questions in class compared to learners from all the other school types. Learning to question and engage in academic debate is an important aspect of cognitive readiness for university so it is likely that these learners will find the transition to an environment in which more critical thinking is needed to be difficult (as was seen to some extent in the qualitative data presented in the previous section). Only 19.9% of learners from Afrikaans suburban HSC schools reported ‘often’ asking or answering questions in class, 37.1% of township learners ‘often’ ask or answer questions, 38.0% of suburban LSC learners do, and 41.0% of English suburban HSC students ‘often’ ask or answer questions in class.

These differences in response across school type were all statistically significant (Chi Square Test,  $p=0.000$ ; and two items  $p=0.002$ ), and the effect size for all was small (Cramer’s  $V$  ranged from 0.056 to 0.135). When considered by gender, girls were significantly (Chi Square Test,  $p=0.000$ ) more likely to report doing the following often:

- Prepared a draft report/essay before handing it in (Cramer’s  $V=0.181$ , medium effect size)
- Written a report/essay shorter than 5 pages (Cramer’s  $V=0.098$ , small effect size)
- Written a report/essay of more than 5 pages (Cramer’s  $V=0.087$ , small effect size)
- Worked on a project needing information not in your text book (Cramer’s  $V=0.113$ , small effect size)
- Worked on a project with a group of learners (Cramer’s  $V=0.112$ , small effect size)
- Written tests with multiple choice questions (Cramer’s  $V=0.188$ , medium effect size)
- Written tests requiring paragraph/essay answers (Cramer’s  $V=0.147$ , small effect size).

In comparison to the roughly 40% of learners who report ‘often’ asking questions in class, only 13.8% of first-year students at the UFS reported that they ‘often’ or ‘very often’ asked questions in class or participated in classroom discussions. Thus, on this one measure of engagement, school learners demonstrate higher levels of engagement than do university students. This lack of engagement in the university classroom was also mentioned by students in the focus group discussions. For example, students reported that at university they were ‘just a number’.

*Here it seemed like the lecturers were just concerned with the first five rows, everyone else was not really involved with the class (focus groups, 2009).*

*It also felt as if I was now actual just another person on campus, when at school everyone knew me by name. At school I was a NAME, but here I am only a NUMBER!<sup>61</sup> (white female first-year student, HSC, 2010).*

*Ja, and you can’t ask questions because there’s so many people and then there’s like ten people who wants to ask a question and then... (focus groups, 2009).*

*At school the teachers gave you personal attention, but here the classes are too big for individual attention. At school I was a big fish in a small sea and now I am a small fish in a big sea<sup>62</sup> (white female first-year student, HSC, 2010).*

*Nobody knows you and where I come from everybody’s like, every teacher knew you, like they’d know if you’re not in class or something so now nobody knows you. You just come in, you’re just another person.../you’re just a number/... (LAUGHTER AND AGREEMENT FROM OTHER STUDENTS) (focus groups, 2009).*

Returning to the data presented in Figure 23, there are four learning activities that are of particular importance for understanding readiness in terms of key cognitive strategies. These include:

1. Writing tests requiring paragraph and essay responses,

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<sup>61</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *Dit het ook gevoel asof ek nou net eindlik nog 'n mens op kampus is, waar almal op skool my geken het. Op skool was ek a NAAM, maar hier is en net 'n NOMMER!*

<sup>62</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *Op skool het onderwysers persoonlike aandag aan jou gegee, maar hier is die klasse te groot vir individueel. Op skool was ek 'n groot vis in 'n klein see en nou is ek 'n klein vissie in groot see.*

2. Working on a project in which information needs to be sourced from beyond school textbooks,
3. Writing reports or essays of more than 5 pages, and
4. Preparing drafts of reports or essays prior to handing them in.

Each of these activities helps learners to develop cognitive skills that are essential for the capacity to engage in problem solving, inquiry and interpretive activities. Across all the school types very few learners report ‘often’ completing writing tasks of more than 5 pages (between 12.9% and 16.3% of learners) and there are little substantive difference across school type. Learners attending English suburban HSC schools and suburban LSC schools were more likely than both township school learners and Afrikaans suburban HSC learners to prepare drafts of their written work, to work on projects in which information needed to be integrated across sources and to write tests that required paragraph or essay responses. This implies that readiness for university is likely to be affected by the type of school the learner attended.

At the first year university level, students that completed the SASSE responded as follows with respect to ‘often’ or ‘very often’ doing related learning activities:

- Making a class presentation (8.9%)
- Preparing two or more drafts of a paper or assignment prior to handing in (47.0%)
- Working on a project that required integration of ideas or information across different courses (39.2%)
- Working on an assignment or project that required integration of information from various sources (68.3%)
- Working with other students during class (45.8%)
- Working with other students outside of the class to prepare group assignments (56.0%)

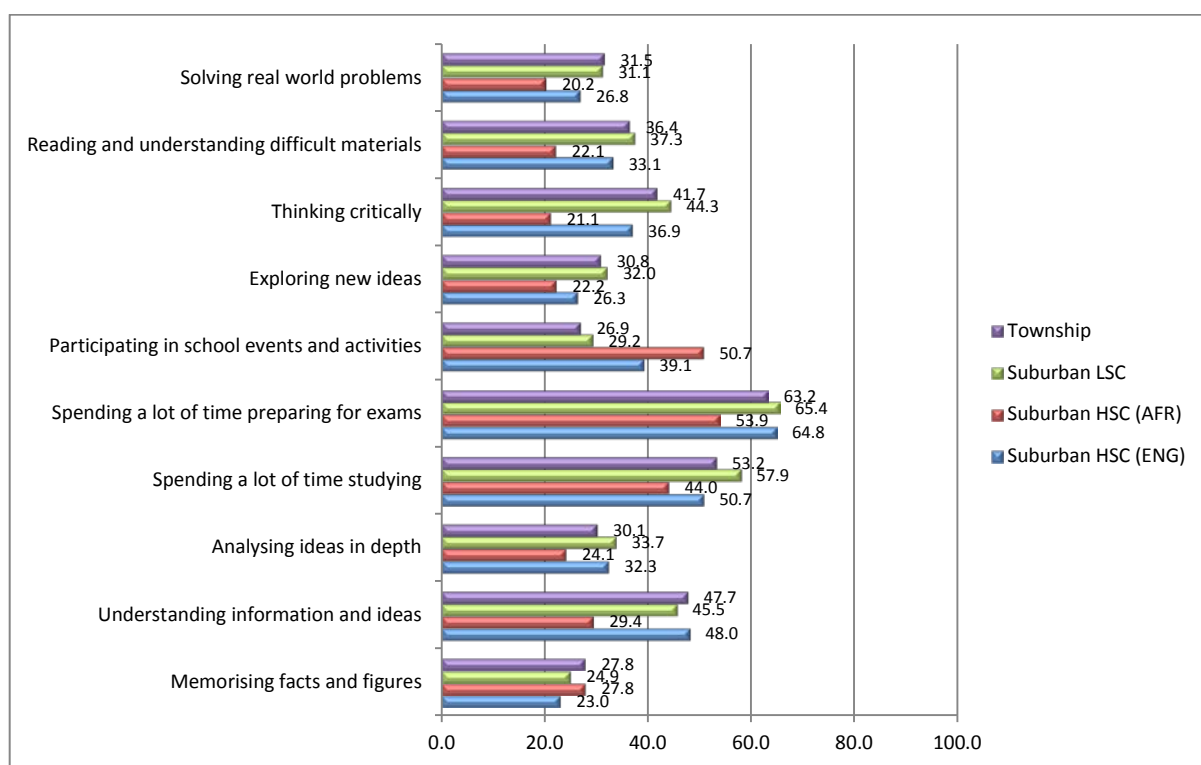
Thus, there is some evidence of a gap between what students are expected to do at high school and what they are expected to do in their first year at university.<sup>63</sup> While on average, 56% of high school learners reported that they ‘often’ prepare a draft of their work, 47% of first-year students note that they often prepare two or more drafts of their work

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<sup>63</sup> Note that I am not arguing that the extent of learning engagement noted by the first-year students is the ideal. This data is being used as an indication of what happens during the first year at the UFS and so provides a basis for comparison with what happens during the last three years of high school.

before submitting. Only 38% of high school learners reported that they had worked on a learning activity requiring the integration of information from sources other than their textbooks, a total of 68% of first-year students report that they ‘often’ or ‘very often’ have to do this.

Figure 24 shows the response of learners to a series of questions about the emphasis their school places on different approaches to learning. From a learner engagement as well as a readiness perspective, ideally schools should place a lot of emphasis on solving real world problems, thinking critically, exploring new ideas, analysing information or ideas in depth, reading and understanding complex materials and ideas and somewhat less emphasis on memorising facts and figures, preparing for examinations and participating in school activities (although each of these is also important and does need to be part of schooling pedagogy). Figure 24 shows that across school types, the greatest emphasis is placed on preparing for examinations. While exam preparation is important, it is concerning that so much more weight seems to be placed on this activity compared to other more active and, arguably, deeper learning activities such as exploring new ideas and solving real world problems. On the positive, simple memorisation of facts and figures appears to be emphasised relatively less than the other learning activities listed.



**Figure 24: Percentage of learners per school type who reported that their school emphasises the listed activities ‘very much’**

With respect to statistical significance, six of the items showed significant differences between the groups (Chi Square test,  $p=0.000$ ), in all cases the effect size was small (Cramer's  $V$  ranged from 0.087 to 0.135). When analysed by gender, no significant difference was found for two items (memorising facts and figures; and solving real world problems). Male learners were significantly more likely to report that their schools emphasised participating in school events and activities (Chi Square,  $p=0.002$ ; Cramer's  $V=0.079$ ). For all the remaining items, female learners were significantly more likely than male learners ( $p=0.000$ ) to report that their school placed emphasis on active and deep learning activities (Cramer's  $V$  ranged from 0.089 to 0.130).

University students were also asked to respond to a similar question in the SASSE survey. First-year students reported that the courses they were studying at the UFS placed 'very much' emphasis on learning activities as follows:

- Memorising facts, ideas or methods (32.4%)
- Analysis of ideas, experiences, or theory (18.2%)
- Synthesis or integration of ideas, information or experiences (18.3%)
- Making judgements about the value of information, arguments or methods (13.7%)
- Application of theory to practical problems or new situations (27.5%)
- Spending a lot of time studying (29.8%)

Comparing the responses of the first-year students and the high school learners then, it appears that high schools are actually placing greater weight on active and deep learning activities than the UFS is in the first-year of study. While on average only 25.9% of high school learners reported that their school emphasised memorisation 'very much', a total of 32% of first-year students felt that their university courses emphasised memorisation 'very much'. A total of 30.1% of high school learners felt that their schools placed 'very much' emphasis on analysing ideas in depth, only 18.2% of first-year students reported this level of emphasis in their university courses. Since the items on the SAHSSLE and SASSE are not identical, and we also need to take into account the different context in which school learners and university students are functioning, it is necessary to be careful of drawing too many comparisons between high school and university with respect to emphasis on effective educational activities. Nonetheless, it does seem reasonable to conclude here that both the

schools and the UFS should be placing greater weight on educational activities that will enhance cognitive readiness.

### 7.3.1.2 *Qualitative responses*

The qualitative data collected from students and learners provides additional depth of understanding and so assists with the interpretation of the quantitative data presented above. First-year university students commonly made reference to the fact that they experienced the cognitive demands of university to be at a different level from what was expected at school.

*I don't know, with these new systems they bring into the schools, you don't learn how you now learn at university. You learn so that you, you can still do well because in the exams and tests there are so many case studies and all these sorts of things and that does not allow you to learn the work as you need to learn it now and this was a big adjustment for me. Now you need to know all the work just to get through... In the beginning it was really difficult for me at university not to feel like I am writing a lot but actually nothing because that is what you do at school. You wrote like these pages full and waffled and actually said nothing and now at university you need to state facts and your answers must really carry weight to get marks and it was a big adjustment for me to learn to stay with the facts and not waffle to make up your marks and that is what OBE let me know, because you can.../ you could get away with that/...yes, you just needed to apply well and not really say 'this is the answer'<sup>64</sup> (focus groups, 2009).*

*So the gap between what you were taught at school and what was expected from you at school and what is expected from you in your first term of varsity, it's like two completely different worlds and I think that often demotivates students to study something because hey, I used to be good at English and now I'm failing...(AGREEMENT)... You go home with your marks and your parents are like 'what happened...are you pregnant or something?'...(LAUGHTER)... 'why are you failing, why are your marks bad?' And they don't understand that all of a sudden it's on a different level. The teachers, you knew them for long, you could talk to them, if there was something you could go to them afterwards (focus groups, 2009).*

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<sup>64</sup> Original Afrikaans text: "Ek weet nie, met hierdie nuwe stelsels wat hulle in die skole inbring, dan soos dit, jy leer nie hoe jy nou leer in universiteit nie. Jy leer so dat jy, jy kan nog steeds goed doen want daarso is in eksamens en toetse is daar so baie gevalle-studies en al hierdie goeders en dit laat jou nie toe om die werk te leer soos jy dit nou moet leer nie en dit is n' baie groot aanpassing vir my gerwees. Jy moet nou al die werk ken om net te kan deurkom.... In die begin was dit rêrig vir my moeilik op universiteit om nie te voel ek skryf baie maar eintlik niks nie want dis wat jy opskool gedoen. Jy het soos hierdie bladsye vol geskryf en gegorrel en so maar dan eintlik niks gesê nie en dan op universiteit moet jy feite noem en jy moet rêrig jou antwoorde moet soos actually gewig dra vir jou om punte te kry en dit is n' huge aanpassing vir my gerwees om te leer om net by die feite te bly en nie te gorrel en so jou punte optemaak nie en dit is wat OBE het my dit laat doen want jy kon.../jy kon weggom daarmee/...ja, jy moes sommer net so toepassing goed doen en niks rêrig 'dit is die antwoord nie'..."

There were three main areas in which the difference between requirements at school and university were noted, namely: being critical and formulating an argument, being able to integrate theory and practice, and having skills of academic writing and referencing. The first set of student quotations presented below show how students felt under-prepared with respect to critical thinking and being able to formulate academic arguments.

*At school you just write it, you just basically copy and paste. Here at varsity you must be critical (focus groups 2009).*

*To argue your point, to prove it, sometimes I'm not always a hundred percent sure which point I should prove and then I sit there and I spend half an hour just trying to think what am I going to write... The reading is not so bad because I enjoy it so I just go through it at the speed of light. Then I sit here and I've got all this info, now... What to do with it... I mean we did get a crash course on paragraph and essay writing but now you've got to sit and think which points do I want to prove, how am I going to argue those points and that takes a while... (focus groups 2009).*

*At school you used, you read a poem, OK, there you go. They didn't expect any, any insight from you, they didn't expect you to go any deeper. At varsity they want you to go and read it and then to go question everything. Remember at school they tried to make you think critically but they don't always succeed all that well because they try to make you think critically within a rigid framework which doesn't work. Think critically means you throw all my ideas away. At varsity they want you to think critically – take this thing and examine every part of it. Do you agree with it, do you not? (focus groups 2009).*

*Here it's more like understanding of the work rather than knowing the words. In high school it's more knowing the words, they just test you if you know OK, the words and how well you know them but they don't understand the understanding of the words so you get, like in Biochemistry we got things that were the same, that we had in high school but now they are testing our understanding, OK, this does this and this and this, not that just is... (focus groups 2009).*

Differences between school and university with respect to the amount of theory that needs to be covered as well as the integration of theory and practical work was noted by students, for example:

*a lot of theory, it's mostly theory work... and it gets confusing. You remember things from the subject and then... (focus groups 2009).*

*Because you come to university and then that is what it is, it is integrating theory with practical because that it was we will need to do outside one day. That is what*

*you are going to do in your work, you are going use theory and practical and that is what the teachers need to teach us more<sup>65</sup> (focus groups 2009).*

Challenges specifically related to academic writing were also expressed, for example

*I think the biggest problem is umm, at the beginning of the year we started to do academic writing and we didn't do it at school so we're struggling. I really struggle with academic writing... < Ja, the referencing, the paraphrasing and that we didn't do at school that much (focus groups, 2009).*

*I mean we did get a crash course on paragraph and essay writing but now you've got to sit and think which points do I want to prove, how am I going to argue those points and that takes a while...(focus groups 2009).*

*I think the biggest problem is umm, at the beginning of the year we started to do academic writing and we didn't do it at school so we're struggling. I really struggle with academic writing...*

*I think it's the referencing...*

*Ja, the referencing, the paraphrasing and that we didn't do at school that much (focus groups, 2009).*

Several of the learners at school in their open-ended responses in the SAHSSLE raised concerns about the cognitive demands of their school work which they felt was too low, i.e. level of academic challenge at school was insufficient for several learners. Learners making these comments could be placed into two groups – those who argued that government had lowered the standards of schooling with all the changes introduced into the system and those who argued that the school system did not provide any space for thinking critically or for putting forward different interpretations or ideas. Examples of learners' words from each of these two groups follow.

Learners who argued that government was lowering the standard at school made statements such as the following:

*I believe that educational standards have dropped, due, to neglect from 'Government' (white male, Suburban HSC, 2009).*

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<sup>65</sup> Original Afrikaans text: “Want dan kom jy op universiteit en dan dis wat dit is, dis teorie integreer met prakties want dis wat ons eendag buite gaan doen. Dis wat jy in jou werk gaan doen, jy gaan teorie en prakties waaroor jy gaan werk en dis wat onderwysers meer vir ons moet leer”.

*The government makes pupils stupid & ignorant by lowering our standards of education & it makes us too dependent & lazy. (Asian female learner, Suburban HSC, 2009).*

*Certain schoolwork isn't challenging enough. S.A has to raise its levels of education if it once to compete with the world in certain areas. There should be certain courses for advanced work. If someone is more intelligent, don't subject him/her to low grade levels! (white male learner, Suburban HSC, 2009).*

The following quotations provide examples of responses in which learners argue that the schooling system does not support thinking in new and different ways.

*School is irrelevant, it promotes indoctrination and the stripping of one's identity. you will only get 90% in school if you think in the way they want you to. Any unusual content in projects is disregarded even though the project itself is of a high standard. Christianity is shoved down our throats and teacher's get too personal if for instance, you do not share their religious beliefs. (white female learner Suburban LSC, 2009).*

*At my school I have a problem with the teachers on the case of listening to the views or ideas, they only want them to say what they want and don't listen to your views. (black female learner, township, 2009).*

A similar view was expressed by students in one of the focus group discussions.

*At school you were much more constrained and you thought in a little box<sup>66</sup> (focus groups 2009).*

Thus, this section has demonstrated various challenges that learners and students expressed in the area of cognitive strategies. In the following section, a final aspect related to cognitive challenge is addressed; that of language competency and confidence.

### **7.3.1.3 Language competency and confidence**

*It literally gets lost in translation...(LAUGHTER) (focus groups, 2009).*

A final aspect of relevance in the context of key cognitive strategies is that of language competence and confidence. Without adequate levels of competence in the language of instruction at university, students are unlikely to be in a position to either develop or make use of the key cognitive strategies discussed above. Several students raised

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<sup>66</sup> Original Afrikaans text: "in skool was jy baie meer ingeperk en jy het in 'n boksie gedink"

language related issues in the focus groups and also in the written descriptions of their first month at university. Often the challenge noted by students was due to the fact that they were learning in a language other than their home language and so were not as competent in using the language as they needed to be. For example

*A language of education was also challenging course I was not really used to speak English only (black male first-year student, NAS, 2010).*

*At many of these rural schools, they can take their own language as 1<sup>st</sup> language and then English as FAL [first additional language] – this is a big mistake. How can they cope with the course-load of university if they can't even understand and speak proper English? (focus groups, 2009).*

*“I think they [school] didn't prepare us well – why, because everything they did they, if they do something like social studies they always translate it into Tswana so things become simpler, but now...now we don't have Tswana” (focus groups, 2009).*

*It is a very, very difficult subject, really, cos they use, they don't use normal English. They use this high order English and I was like ‘oh my word’! And I come from a very, very academic top school and I couldn't do that English because it was too hard. I had to ask my mother to help me to translate it so that I can just pass the subject...(LAUGHTER)... (focus groups, 2009).*

The final quotation in the set above begins to point in the direction of the second theme that emerged when analysing the student responses related to language issues. In addition to overall competence in the language of instruction, several students made reference to the fact that the type of language being used was often difficult to understand, and related that the context in which language was being used was not always clear. These challenges take us in the direction of epistemological access (see Chapter 2: where it was argued that students need to understand and engage with the construction of knowledge within different disciplines and come to understand the language of the discipline itself). Consider the following examples of students' comments. In the first two quotations the students are reflecting on the fact that while they may understand the language of instruction, they do not understand the specific language being used, which is noted to be at a different level.

*Umm, didn't you feel that the language use in the textbook that they now have is at a completely different level compared to your comprehensive tests and how the high school textbooks were? (focus groups, 2009).*

*I think like, especially when you talk about English, if it could be like bigger, broadened it at high school because I think at the end of the day, whatever module you're doing whether it's Medicine or you're doing Biology, at the end of the day if you don't know how the question is asked \_\_\_\_ (UNCLEAR) and it's asked in English, if they ask you do this and you can't do it or you do that instead, you see it's gonna screw you over because you don't know what the question is... how it's being asked basically so English should be our main thing in high school. Even when we get here we should all do English in our first year... the broadened version of English where they ask you where did you get stuff instead of just doing an adverb, you know (focus groups, 2009).*

*Ja, it's the interpretation of the questions. I mean me, myself have a problem with that, to interpret correctly what they ask of you. I mean you can read it and to me and to him it means different things, it's like 'nee, lees weer' [no, read again]... (LAUGHTER)... you understand? (focus groups, 2009).*

*Because they sometimes used such big words and they use university concepts that we don't understand yet, I mean, now they say this and that and then at the end you have no idea what the first thing was because it is all university concepts, they don't explain the concepts that are important<sup>68</sup> (focus groups, 2009).*

The quotations above are examples of students who are having difficulty understanding the type of language used at university, or, in the words of one of the students – the big words or university concepts. In the final quotation below the student reaches a point where s/he understands the context in which language is being used and understands “how they want me to perform, how they want me to understand”- this is an example of emerging epistemological access.

*The system here...umm...the language, like you...it was kind of difficult for me, like I had to make sure that if I read this thing, I must know the spelling is correct. If I want to say something, I'll prepare myself before saying it to someone so that someone won't laugh at me when I make a mistake or something, ja. But now...ja, it's a bit easier cos I'm used to the system, I understand lectures, ja, I understand how they want me to perform, how they want me to understand, that's better (focus groups, 2009).*

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<sup>67</sup> Original Afrikaans text: “Umm, het julle nie gevoel dat die taalgebruik in die handboek wat hulle dit nou het, is op n' heeltemal ander vlak as wat julle begripstoetse was en op as wat die hoërskool handboeke was”

<sup>68</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *Want hulle gebruik partykeer sulke groot woorde en hulle gebruik universiteits konsepte wat ons nog nie verstaan nie, ek meen, nou sê hulle ja, nee, en hierdie ding en hierdie ding en hierdie ding en gaan op die ou einde hierdie wees maar jy het nie n' idee wat is die eerste ding eers nie want dis alles universiteits konsepte, hulle verduidelik nie die konsep eintlik wat belangrik is...*

These quotations, and especially the final one, also provide some insight into how insecure students feel when they are not confidently able to make use of language in the university context. One of the students above explained how she needed to turn to her mother to help with translation so that she could just pass the subject, and the student in the final quotation above worries about someone laughing at him/her should they make a mistake when saying something. Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that the notion of language competence and confidence needs to be incorporated within Conley's dimension of key cognitive strategies since without language competence and confidence students are unlikely to reach a stage of readiness with respect to the cognitive demands of university.

### 7.3.2 Key content

Conley (2005a) argues that being ready for university requires that a learner develops the key structures, concepts and knowledge that are associated with core academic subjects such as, mathematics, physical science, social studies, languages and other arts subjects. Importantly, while school marks provide some indication of the mastery of content, schools do not always focus on teaching the key structures, concepts and knowledge that Conley is referring to (Conley, 2005b, 2007a, 2008b, 2010a). This argument is important in the context of epistemological access where it is argued that students at university need to be aware of the processes of knowledge construction within a university setting – the building blocks of which are key disciplinary structures, concepts and knowledge (Boughey, 2005; Jacobs, 2009; Morrow, 2009a). Conley (2010b, p. 13) sums this up as follows,

“key content knowledge consists of the big ideas of the academic disciplines, organised into a structure that enables learners to understand and retain this information....students do not need to know everything before they go to college, but they do need to master a strong set of foundational knowledge and skills very well.”

The NBT Mathematics Test briefly introduced in section 2.6.1 provides one way in which universities are seeking to assess the extent to which entering students have mastered key mathematics content. On the NBT website it states that the Mathematics Test attempts “to determine how well relevant mathematical concepts have been understood and can be applied.”<sup>69</sup> The poor results of students at the UFS, and nationally, have highlighted the extent of the lack of readiness with respect to mathematics key

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<sup>69</sup> [www.nbt.uct.ac.za/?page\\_id=59](http://www.nbt.uct.ac.za/?page_id=59)

content. For example, in 2010, only 8% of the students nationally who wrote the NBT Mathematics test performed in the proficient band (Prince, 2010). The performance of UFS students with respect to NBT Mathematics is lower than the national average, with only 3% of the students enrolled at the UFS Bloemfontein campus performing at the proficient level in 2010 (Wilson-Strydom, 2010c). Since standardised tests are not available for other key subject areas there is no conclusive evidence regarding readiness in other disciplines, however, anecdotal evidence from lecturers points towards similar difficulties in other disciplines.

Although the student engagement instruments did not include specific questions about key content knowledge, several of the first-year students made reference to their readiness in this area during the focus group discussions and in their descriptions of the first month at university. The following set of quotations shows examples across various subjects, including English, Drama, Chemistry, and Mathematics.

*I've never failed a language in my entire life at school and I came here and my first English test – oh hell (focus groups, 2009).*

*I got a distinction for English and I failed most of my tests in English so...it's really scary...(focus groups, 2009).*

*My school academically, I don't think it prepared me that well cos I remember the first few lectures of Maths, the guys from rich schools...they knew everything what was going on cos they'd done it the year before they came here so academically my school didn't prepare me well (focus groups, 2009).*

*even today I'm still struggling with Chemistry. I took Chemistry at school and I got sixty percent for Chemistry and I'm still struggling with it (focus groups, 2009).*

*I also think that umm, like the work here is like a lot harder, like a lot more difficult to understand, so like \_\_\_\_\_(UNCLEAR). I'm studying Drama so I think that Drama, the subject that they teach at school from Standard 8 till Matric, they should do it more based on the work we're doing now cos now I did Drama at school but it means like almost nothing to me cos it's not anything like we're doing now...(focus groups 2009).*

*I think, mostly in most cases like she said, it's a matter of 'no, you did this in high school'... (AGREEMENT)...or 'you already understand it' or 'you should've looked at it before you came to class'. Even though you looked at it, you still don't get the concept of what is going on in that particular thing (focus groups 2009).*

In addition to the difficulty of finding that a subject that one performed well in at school was now much more difficult, and in some instances “not anything like we’re doing now”, some students also pointed to the fact that the content they had learnt at school was sometimes seen as incorrect once at university.

*I think as well, ah, school to a certain extent it does give you that background knowledge of a specific subject but then you get, you know, when you go into some lectures and they say, they tell you what you had in high school was...was, you know, the wrong thing and this is how you do it. I don't think, I don't think they should be doing that at school level, I think they should be just building a foundation, not like the, a foundation whereby we can build on it. Not a foundation whereby you scrap when you get to varsity and you learn something completely new because what you learn at school, it sticks in your mind and everything (focus groups 2009).*

*Oh ja, in my major umm, we were doing something, I think it was inventory or something, so we had a specific way of doing it in high school and that's was the way we did it in the umm, common papers and so when we get to our lectures, we had all done it that way, like as part of our homework and then the lecturer told us 'OK, now this is not how you do it, according to the \_\_\_\_ (UNCLEAR WORD) financial reporting standards, you do it this way and this way so whatever way you learnt in school, you can just forget about that and you know, learn how to do it this way (focus groups 2009).*

In their open-ended responses in the SAHSSLE some of the school learners made reference to difficulties in properly understanding the content being covered at school. In the two quotations below, the learners describe how they do not have sufficient time to cover their mathematics and science in sufficient depth and as a result to not properly understand the key concepts. These learners are likely to find that they are not ready for university in the dimension of key content knowledge should they follow mathematics or science focused courses.

*There is not enough time to finish all the work. A bunch of work is rushed and not covered, in Science and Maths<sup>70</sup> (white male learner, suburban HSC, 2009).*

*In Maths we learn something new every day, but we don't get time to practice and time to properly understand. The same with Science, this is why we do so badly<sup>71</sup> (white male learner, suburban HSC, 2009).*

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<sup>70</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *Daar nie genoeg tyd is om al die werk klaar te kry nie. Klomp werk work af gerammel en nie behandel nie. Skeinat en Wiskunde.*

<sup>71</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *In Wiskunde leer ons iets nuts elke dag, maar ons kry nie oefen kaans en kaans om dit behoorlik te verstaan nie. Selfde met Skeinat, dit is hoekom ons so sleg doen.*

A final challenge that impacts negatively on readiness for university in the dimension of key content knowledge is the challenge of absent and poor quality teachers. In section 2.9 I briefly discussed the many challenges in the South African schooling sector. One of the challenges was that of the quality of teaching that many learners receive, particularly at poorer schools. The final three quotations in this section – two of these quotes are taken from students and one from a school learner – highlight these challenges.

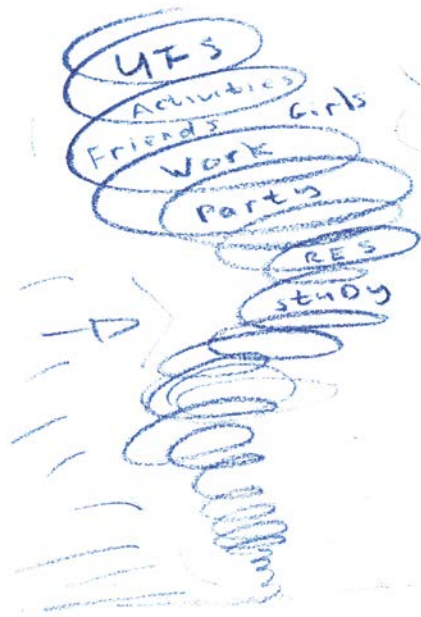
*“and when I was, I was doing Grade 12, my Physics teacher left June, and since June to December, we had no teacher (focus groups, 2009).*

*In our school we have problems like the shortage of teacher which is wrong. We don't have the life-Science teacher, the bad thing about this is that, since our teacher left on march we haven't learn anything the problem is that we write the exam without learning something (black female learner, township, 2009).*

*“But worse, my English teacher was always drunk...He was always drunk, he never taught us, nothing, he was always drunk. Serious...serious! Grade 10 to Grade 12, always drunk...ja” (focus groups, 2009).*

### **7.3.3 Academic behaviours**

Academic behaviours refer to a range of self-management skills that must be mastered by students in order to be successful in a higher education learning environment. As is expressed in Drawing 7 on the following page, an important part of self-management is managing the ‘whirlwind’ of the first few months at university.



Drawing 7 (black female student, EMS, 2010)

The academic behaviours dimension of readiness includes behaviours such as time management, study skills, working in study groups, setting goals, self-awareness of academic strengths and weaknesses, and persistence when academic tasks are challenging (Conley, 2010b). Also important in the South African context, with respect to study skills, is the ability to confidently use a computer for learning (see student responses below). Although the development of many of these academic behaviours is related to maturity, Conley (2010b) reminds us that these skills can also be systematically developed during the high school years so that students have these skills in place by the time they enter university and so have a greater chance of success. Unfortunately, for many students, this is not the case. As was noted above (section 7.2), the area of academic behaviours was the dimension of readiness most commonly noted by learners and students in the qualitative data. For many students coming to terms with the fact that they are now independent and responsible for their own lives and learning was a major challenge. Making sense of this new personal role is a key aspect of the academic behaviours that students need for successful study at university level. The examples below show a sample of the responses of students related to being independent, disciplined and having to be responsible for themselves and their own choices.

*I academically experience change because here you are given work and there is no one to pressure you, that when I realised that I have to be responsible as I am now :-)* (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010).

*It was also very tiring and fun even though I had to learn how to make good choices fast* (black male first-year student, EMS, 2010).

*Everything was something I did by choice* (white male first year student, Law, 2010).

*The thought of having freedom was great feeling but when reality sets in, it was another thing* (black male first-year student, EMS, 2010).

*It's all about responsibility, that's what you learn – responsibility* (focus groups, 2009).

*You know discipline; if you don't have discipline then I'm sure you'll never make it. If you don't have responsibility, you'll never make it and you must begin to prioritise* (focus groups 2009).

*That's when you realise that you're, that I'm actually alone here – everything is you, you. You know, you don't have no teachers there, your friends there, you just have to like, depend on yourself* (focus groups, 2009).

*And especially because class isn't compulsory<sup>72</sup>, I mean it's at school your mom made you get up and go to school, you had no choice. Here when you get up a bit lazy or you had a late night last night or something like that, you just don't get up cos nothing's gonna happen* (focus groups, 2009).

*And also, you know...umm, the lecturers they don't care, like...umm...back in high school if you were failing the teacher would make sure to find out what's wrong with...umm, your studying and your techniques but here... they really don't care...(LAUGHTER)...(focus groups, 2009).*

Many students expressed a lack of readiness with respect to their study skills. In particular, students made much reference to the volume of work they suddenly faced at university, and the fact that they were now in large classes with less opportunity to ask questions if they did not understand. The first three quotations below are illustrative

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<sup>72</sup> The UFS introduced compulsory class attendance in 2010 and 2011.

examples showing students' difficulty coping with the volume of work and the second three quotations refer to the challenge of large and impersonal classes.

*Lots of stress with high work load and first year activities (white male first-year student, EMS, 2010).*

*My first month at university was very confusing. Although you are continually warned about the increase in the volume of work it was still very intimidating to think you had to complete it and come through. Lecturers are not concerned much about what marks you get and everything becomes your own responsibility<sup>73</sup> (white male first-year student, HSC, 2010).*

*And the amount of work we have to study for a test.../I know, I know/...I mean in Matric I had to study ten pages for like a semester test, now I have to study sixty pages for a semester test and you only have two days so I think...we had to...we had to force ourselves to read faster ...(AGREEMENT)...and to read fast but still remember what we read because there is so much work that we need to learn<sup>74</sup> (focus groups, 2009).*

*It was hard to pay attention – I was used to much smaller classes where you could ask questions. You feel that you can't ask questions in class, the other students will just laugh at you... Yes, there's no spoon-feeding here at university (focus groups, 2009).*

*The first big shock of class and...huge classes. I was sitting at the back and it's this huge class and this dude in front is yap, yap, yap...Ja, I remember that whole time concentrating cos I was so used to the thirty minute classes of school and it's fifty minutes so after twenty minutes I was like 'are we leaving now?'...(LAUGHTER)...(focus groups, 2009).*

*In terms of what she said about [lecturers] not caring, I think it also comes... I mean like, there are hundreds and hundreds of people in the same class. It's not like she, the lecturer gonna check up on you If you know you have a problem it's up to you to go up to the lecturer and tell them, listen, I have a problem here...(focus groups 2009).*

The third aspect of academic behaviours that was very commonly noted by students was that of learning to manage one's time. For students in residence this was partly about

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<sup>73</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *My eerste maand op universiteit was baie deurmekaar. Alhoewel mens aanhoudend gevaarsku word oor die toename in volume van werk was dit nog steeds baie intimiderend om te dink mens moet dit vooltooi en deur kom. Dosent is baie min gepla oor watse punte jy kry so alles word jou eie verantwoordelikheid.*

<sup>74</sup> Original text in Afrikaans and English: *And the amount of work we have to study for a test.../I know, I know/...I mean in Matric I had to study ten pages for like a semester toets, now I have to study sixty pages for a semester test and you only have two days so I think...we had to...ons moes onself dwing om vinniger te lees...(AGREEMENT)... en vinnig te lees maar dat ons steeds onthou wat ons geleë het want dis so baie werk wat ons moet leer*

trying to balance academic and residence activities and responsibilities. For many students the fact that they had to manage their own time was a challenge.

*Tired! The transition was not really easy as I had to learn to motivate myself and plan my time properly. There as also so much to learn and grasp in so little time (black female first-year student, NAS, 2010).*

*I think, I think varsity is all about time-management...(AGREEMENT FROM OTHER STUDENTS)...if you manage your time well and you stick by your, your time whatever you call it, timetable you make then you'll be fine. I mean if you tell yourself alright, this is time I'm going to study, then you'll be fine and this is the time for friends, you'll be fine...(focus groups, 2009).*

*At high school you have a fixed timetable where you know you've got this at this time. And so you come to university but it's an enormous amount of time and then you have to learn how to group this time in such a way that you can set up enough time for your friends, to study and to keep up with your work. So for me it was a learning experience. I learnt how to manage my time; I learnt how to deal with certain instances because now there is not that barrier. You know in high school you used to this, this, this, this...enclosed space, now you're exposed to so many other factors. With freedom comes a lot of responsibility, you know being away from your parents <sup>75</sup>(focus groups, 2009).*

*Longer class and longer hours of class... (focus groups, 2009).*

As noted in the introduction to this sub-section on academic behaviours, the use of computers was an academic behaviour that was explicitly noted by some students as an area in which they were not ready for university. Consider the following quotations and drawing.

*I was so stupid because I didn't know how to use a computer. I didn't enjoy university the first month. I also didn't understand lectures in classes. I find that everything is difficult and I can't do it (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010).*

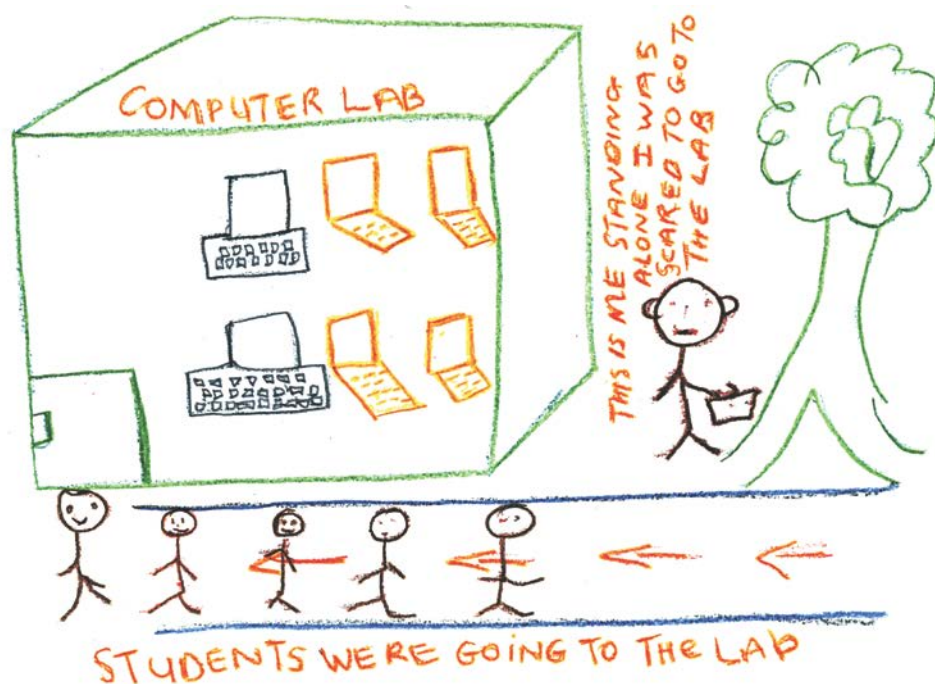
*You don't even have access to the computer.../you see/...it's another story...minus five marks when you don't type work and you're expected to do it and it's not considered that many people haven't had access to computers...(AGREEMENT FROM STUDENTS)...as well as, ok fine, we have theory books that we can read before that but it's a total different story to be in front of a computer cos then...you're*

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<sup>75</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *Langer klas en langer ure klas...*

*expected to work, you don't know where what is and how what works ... (focus groups 2009).*

*In high school it wasn't compulsory for us to type-in our assignments, but now we have to type-in our assignments but it is something that we're not used to (focus groups 2009).*



Drawing 8 (Coloured female first-year student, HUM, 2010)

These difficulties are not surprising when we consider that 30.5% of school learners completing the SAHSSLE at township schools reported that their schools do not emphasise the use of computers for school work at all. Afrikaans medium of instruction suburban HSC schools place the greatest emphasis on using computers, with 25.7% of learners from these schools reporting that their schools emphasised computer use 'very much'. The differences shown in Figure 25 are statistically significant (Chi Square,  $p=0.000$ ; Cramer's  $V=0.140$ ). Interestingly, female learners were more likely to report that their schools emphasised the use of computers than male learners (Chi Square,  $p=0.000$ ; Cramer's  $V=0.092$ ).

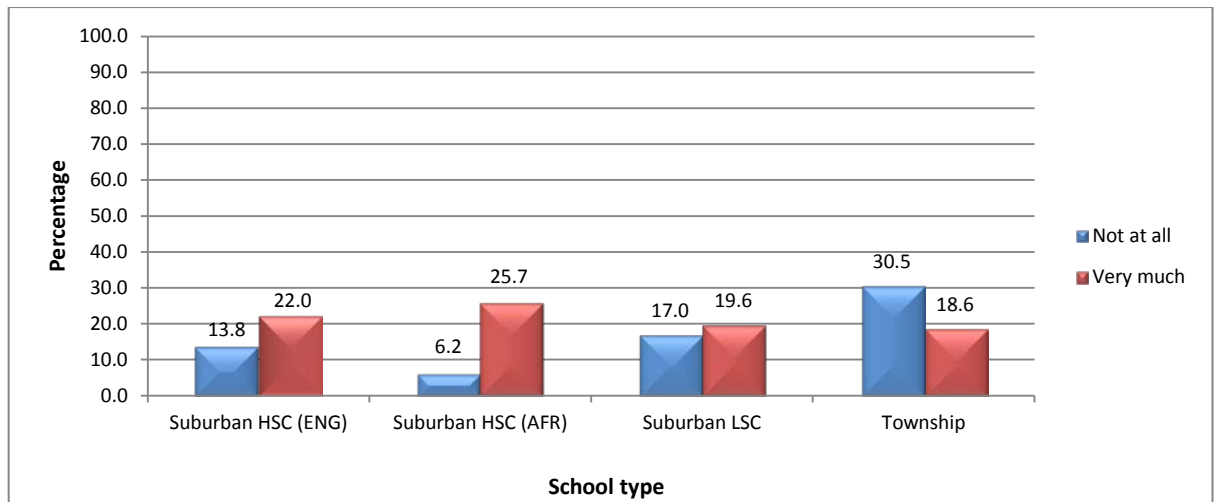


Figure 25: Extent to which schools emphasise the use of computers for school work

In contrast, 41.3% of students selected 'very much' for the SASSE question about the extent to which the UFS emphasises the use of computers for academic work. Only 5% of the SASSE respondents' selected 'very little' emphasis of the use of computers.

#### ***7.3.3.1 Academic behaviours at school and university***

The student engagement research instruments are particularly helpful for investigating readiness in terms of academic behaviours because many of the questions included in the instruments focus on learner and students' academic behaviours. Figure 26 provides a visual summary of how much time school learners report spending on different learning activities per 7 day week, per school type and Table 9 shows the significance of the differences across school types.

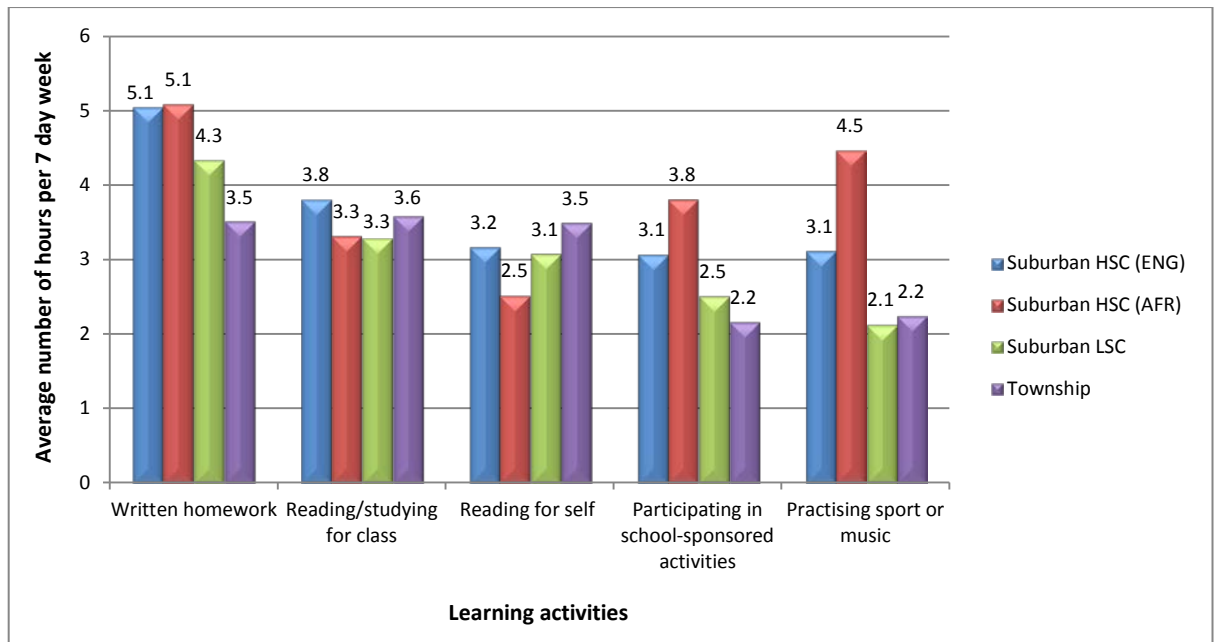


Figure 26: Average number of hours learners, per school type, report spending on learning activities per 7 day week

Table 9 shows that there are significant differences in the time learners reported spending on four of the five learning activities.

Table 9: Results of one-way ANOVA comparing time spent on learning activities across school types

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Effect Size (Eta Squared)
Time spent on written homework	Between Groups	144.599	3	48.200	51.905	.000	0.05 (small)
	Within Groups	2527.666	2722	.929			
	Total	2672.266	2725				
Time spent reading or studying for class	Between Groups	8.664	3	2.888	3.572	.013	n/a
	Within Groups	2174.064	2689	.809			
	Total	2182.729	2692				
Time spent reading for yourself	Between Groups	44.242	3	14.747	14.844	.000	0.01 (small)
	Within Groups	2639.628	2657	.993			
	Total	2683.870	2660				
Time spent participating in school sponsored activities	Between Groups	145.398	3	48.466	31.042	.000	0.03 (small)
	Within Groups	4174.902	2674	1.561			
	Total	4320.301	2677				
Time spent practising sport or playing musical instruments	Between Groups	291.800	3	97.267	61.073	.000	0.06 (medium)
	Within Groups	4195.018	2634	1.593			
	Total	4486.818	2637				

From Figure 26 it is evident that learners in all three categories of suburban schools spend more time per 7 day week doing written homework than do learners in township schools. However, learners in township schools reported spending the second largest amount of time reading or studying for class. Significant differences were also found by gender for time spent on each of the learning activities. The results of t-tests done to assess differences by gender are shown in Table 10 below. Female learners spend significantly more time than male learners doing homework and reading, either for class or for themselves, while male students spend significantly more time than female learners participating in sports and other school activities. In all cases the effect size or magnitude of the differences was small.

Table 10: Results of independent samples t-test comparing time spent on learning activities by gender

Item	Gender	N	Mean	Mean difference	t	Significance (2-tailed)	Effect Size (Eta Squared)
Time spent on written homework	Male	1101	4.57	-0.444	-3.737	p=0.000	0.01 (small)
	Female	1302	5.01				
Time spent reading or studying for class	Male	1089	3.70	-0.547	-4.969	p=0.000	0.01 (small)
	Female	1288	4.25				
Time spent reading for yourself	Male	1061	3.16	-0.654	-5.323	p=0.000	0.01 (small)
	Female	1289	3.82				
Time spent participating in school sponsored activities	Male	1079	3.57	1.130	8.618	p=0.000	0.03 (small)
	Female	1280	2.44				
Time spent practising sport or playing a musical instrument	Male	1065	3.90	1.547	11.365	p=0.000	0.05 (small)
	Female	1265	2.35				

Across the sample, adding the average time spent doing written homework and reading/studying for class together shows that, on average, school learners report spending about eight hours per week on learning activities outside of class time. This is remarkably similar to the reports of UFS first-year students who note that they spend on average 8.6 hours per 7-day week (outside of formal class time) preparing for class. This suggests that in terms of time spent on academic work outside of the formal classroom, school learners are preparing adequately for university. However, what these numbers do not tell us is what type of learning activities students are engaging in during these eight hours, anything about the types of learning activities being done during these eight hours or the quality thereof.

As such, these estimations of time spent on various activities should be seen as providing only a crude measure of engagement in effective educational practices.

Figure 27 summarises how important learners regard each of these activities to be. It is interesting to note the extent to which Afrikaans medium of instruction learners prioritise spending time on school sponsored activities and practising sport or a musical instrument. The differences by school type shown in Figure 27 were statistically significant (Chi Square Test,  $p=0.000$ ) except for participation in school sponsored activities. The effect sizes of the differences were small to medium (Cramer's V ranged from 0.90 to 0.17).

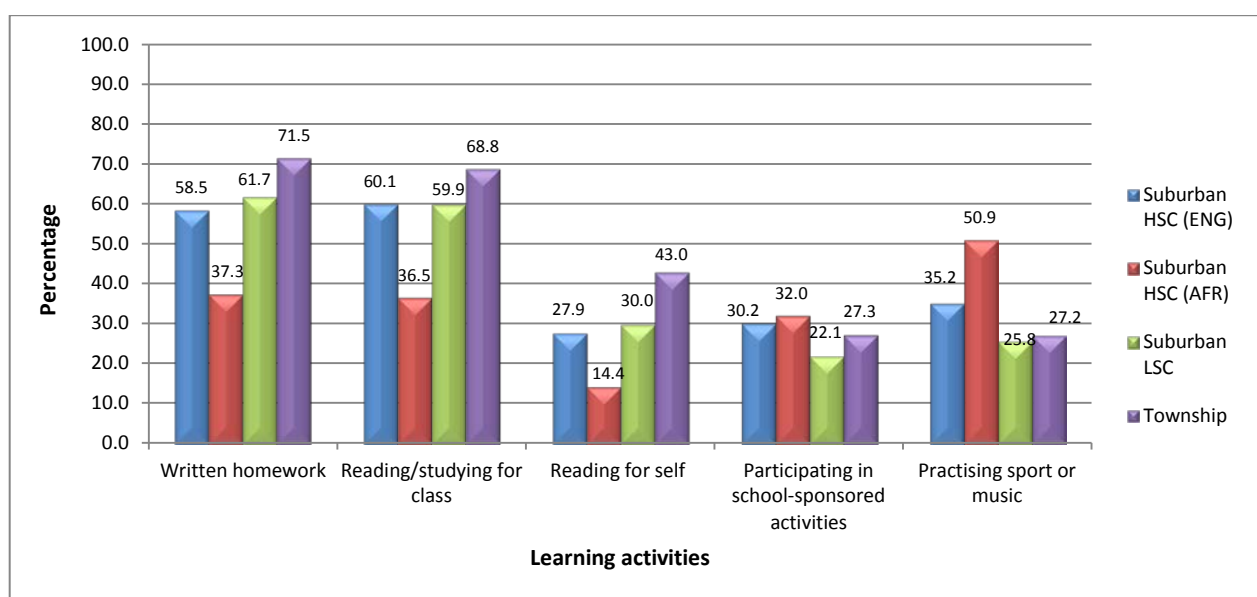


Figure 27: Percentage of learners reporting that learning activities were 'very important' or 'top priority'

Excluding learners at Afrikaans medium of instruction schools, on the whole, learners report that they see doing written homework and reading or studying for class as very important activities. It is also promising to note that 43% of the township learners reported that reading for one's self was very important or top priority. For learners in Afrikaans language of instruction schools, practising sport and/or musical instruments is of greatest importance and outweighs the importance of written homework and reading/studying for class. These findings might point to problematic learning cultures in these schools, which might influence how these learners make the transition to the university environment. Gender differences were also found regarding the importance learners accord to these activities. In all cases the difference in responses between male and female learners was

statistically significant (Chi Squared test,  $p=0.000$ ) and effect sizes were small to medium (Cramer's  $V$  ranged from 0.11 to 0.19). Female learners placed greater importance on written homework and reading activities, while male learners placed greater importance on participation in sport and other school activities.

I have noted the importance of providing a good balance between academic challenge and a supportive learning environment at various points in this thesis. To better understand the extent of academic challenge at schools, learners were asked questions about the number of their classes that they found academically challenging and the number of classes during which they put in all the effort they could. Figure 28 shows the percentages of learners, per school type who noted 'most' or 'all' of their classes. The majority of learners reported that they put effort into most or all of their classes. As with the previous findings, learners in Afrikaans medium of instruction schools report putting in less effort than learners at the three other school types. Approximately a third of learners, across school types, reported that they found 'most' or 'all' of their classes academically challenging. The differences across school types shown in Figure 28 are statistically significant (Chi Square test,  $p=0.000$ ) with a small effect size (Cramer's  $V=0.11$  and 0.13). Significant differences were also found by gender (Chi Square test,  $p=0.000$ ; Cramer's  $V=0.07$  and 0.12) with female learners reporting that they put more effort into their studies than male students.

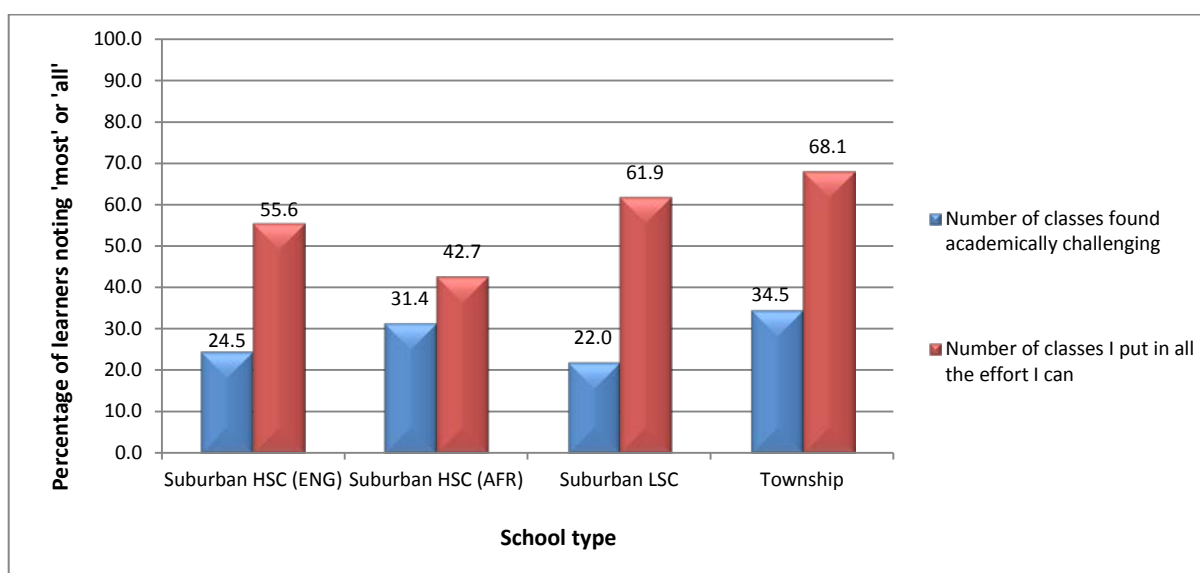


Figure 28: Extent of academic challenge and effort in the classroom

The SAHSSLE survey also included a series of questions related to feeling bored at school. Learners at township schools were least likely to report that they were bored at school with 22.8% stating that they were never bored – compared to 8.2% at suburban HSC and 7.3% at suburban LSC schools. These differences across school type were statistically significant (Chi Square test,  $p=0.000$ ) with a medium effect size (Cramer's  $V=0.18$ ). There was no significant difference by gender. Across all school types it was most common for learners to report that they were bored once in a while. The highest levels of boredom were reported at suburban HSC schools where 26.2% of the learners noted being bored every day. In the open-ended question at the end of the SAHSSLE one learner stated that:

*“I’m not as lazy as I seem. School is just boring ☹️”(coloured female learner, suburban HSC, 2009).*

The most commonly cited reason for being bored at school was because the learning material was not interesting and also not relevant. Quite a large proportion of learners also reported that they were bored because there was no interaction with the teacher during the class. Learners at township schools were less likely to find the learning materials to be uninteresting compared to learners at other schools. The differences across school type for the following reasons were statistically significant (Chi Square Test,  $p=0.000$ ): material wasn't interesting, material wasn't relevant, and no interaction with the teacher. The effect size for the difference across school types for the item, material wasn't interesting, was slightly below the cut off for a large effect size (Cramer's  $V=0.28$ ), the other two had small effect sizes (Cramer's  $V=0.13$  and  $0.11$ ).

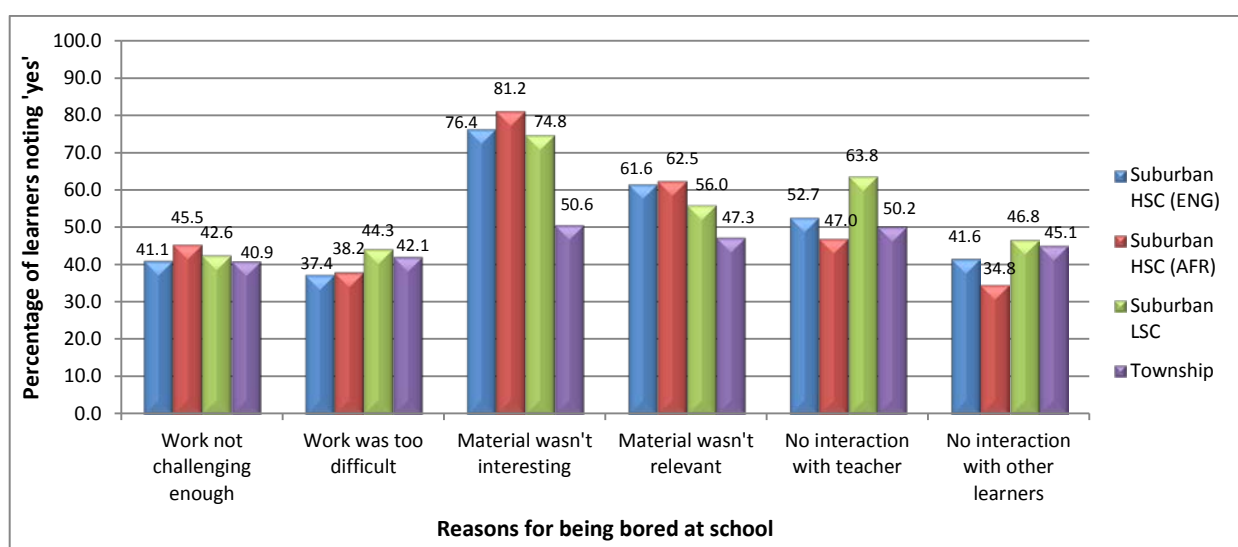


Figure 29: Percentage of learners indicating 'yes' for possible reasons for being bored

There was little difference between male and female learners with respect to reasons for being bored. The only reason that showed a significant difference was “work was too difficult” with female learners being more likely to report that they were bored because they found the work to be too difficult (Chi Square test,  $p=0.000$ ). The effect size was small (Cramer’s  $V=0.09$ ).

Finally, when asked whether they were generally excited about their school work, learners from different school types provided differing responses, as shown in Figure 30. The difference across school types was significant (Chi Square Test,  $p=0.000$ ), with a medium effect size (Cramer’s  $V=0.23$ ).

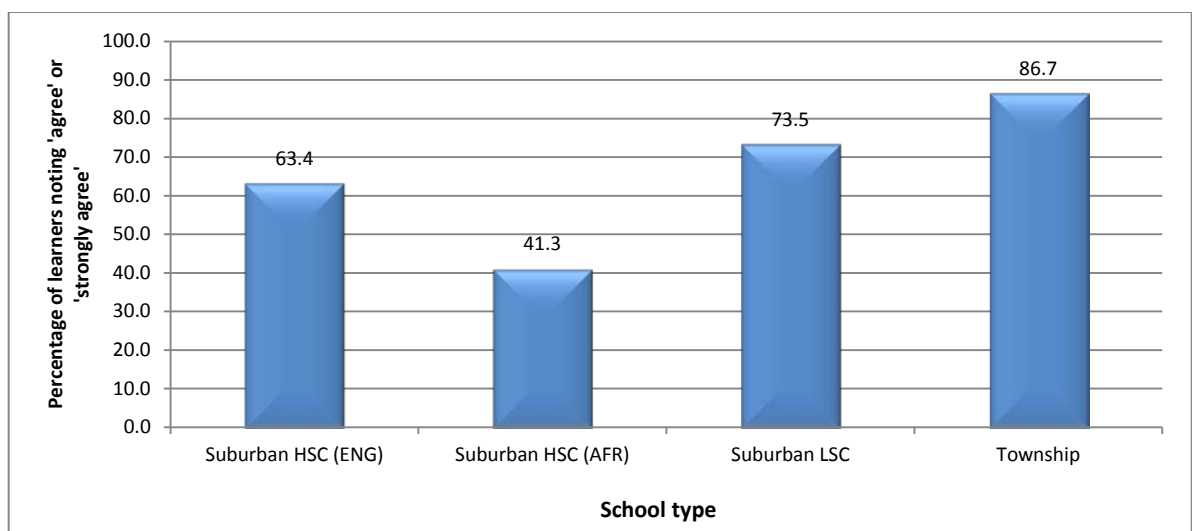


Figure 30: Percentage of learners reporting that they are generally excited about their school work

Learners attending Afrikaans medium of instruction, suburban HSC schools were least likely to be excited about their school work, while learners at township schools were most likely to be excited about their school work. This more general finding is supported by the results regarding how learners report spending their time and the importance they accord to various learning activities. From a university readiness point of view, learners who show little excitement about their work are likely to be less motivated to build and enhance their academic behaviours whilst at school.

### 7.3.4 University knowledge: Views across the humpback bridge

*there is no manual to tell you this is what you should expect (focus groups, 2009).*



Drawing 9: (black male student, NAS, 2010)

The notion of a humpback bridge was presented in section 2.2 as a helpful analogy for conceptualising the transition to university. In particular, the humpback bridge analogy draws attention to the divide that must be crossed between school and university and the fact that it is not always possible to view the other side of the bridge. Several of the students, when asked to draw their experience of the first month at university drew pictures that invoked similar analogies. While no student drew a humpback bridge per se, several students highlighted the disjuncture between school and university and the need for a crossing of this disjuncture. Considering Drawing 9 above, the student represented the divide between school and university as a river which had to be crossed without even the help of a bridge. Drawing 10 below presents another visual image of the divide between school and university. In this instance the divide is specifically related to time available for studying, as well as support from parents, with one side of the divide (school) being a happy and sunny picture and the other (university) an unhappy and stormy one.



Drawing 10 (black female first-year student, EMS, 2010)

Although Drawing 11 does not include a bridge, the idea of not knowing what lies ahead (at the other side) is emphasised by this student in her drawing showing a long and winding road towards becoming a Kovies, and a question bubble in which she wonders what lies ahead, “what’s up there?”



Drawing 11 (Black female first-year student HSC, 2010)

These three examples of students' visual representations of the transition to university thus lend further support to the argument made in earlier chapters for understanding both sides of the humpback bridge currently joining school and university.

#### **7.3.4.1 *Learner expectations of university***

*You hear Psychology or Sociology – you know nothing (focus groups, 2009).*

What do school learners – who may or may not have seen over the humpback bridge – expect of university? Consider the following quotations taken from learner's descriptions of what they expect university to be like. I have included five quotations taken from the written 'University Knowledge' questionnaire that the 33 learners participating in the holiday programme completed. These extracts are long, but provide a clear indication of the humpback bridge at work, and hence are worth quoting at length. Only the first student is a first-generation student, the other four students had one or both parents who attended university as well as a sibling or close family member that is currently at university. As I noted earlier, all of these students – based on their school marks at the time of data collection – were likely to meet the minimum admission requirements for entry to the UFS, some into mainstream programmes and others into extended degrees.

*I expect that the university is a place where people come and learn many things about the life. In university and I expect university to be where people come and have the information about their study's and I expected it is like living in a different place where by you are going to find new friends, new life and is like your are growing up again but you are developing new things in life and sometimes it is hard to develop new things in life. I expect university to be like everything is there for me things like the metrials that I am going to use on my study's and I expect that all the money are there for me when I work hard on my studys. I expect university is a place where people are been controlled in a equal way no matter what. No matter what you are white or black because in the eyes of God we are all equal (black male learner, township, 2010).*

*Well firstly I don't know the subject by name, but I think you only do one subject and you time table is settled refering to your subject. The finances also go with the subjects. In University you only do theory and no practical...They is a campus for learners who stays far from school. In most campus you cant do things your own way, they are rules. In classes your not forced to do your work at that time, you can do it at your own time but have to submit in the due date (black male learner, suburban LSC, 2010).*

*From what I hear from most people I expect at university to be very busy where every Friday a party is thrown. I expect life at university to be a eat or get eaten kind of life where nobody does not care for you unless you do. That life at university is like survival series where you have to use all material available to you as effectively as possible within the period of time available to you. University to be nothing like High School. instead of a principal standing in front of us in the assembly telling us how disappointed he is that many children take their school work seriously and telling us that we should work hard, to be careful about the people we call friends and to respect our teachers and parents. in university if you want a rope they will give it to you without asking why and they will watch you as you hang yourself with your actions and they will also be there when you regret the choices you have made and when you fail your first year they will just kick you out without mercy. Life at university should be a fast one where is either you do things perfectly or you do not do them at all as lectures are not afraid of putting a zero on your script. they value of time at university is very essential, you have to make sure that you hand all the project and assignments given to you regardless of how many tests or exams you had to study for, on time or you will just simply fail. University is do or die!!! (black female learner, township, 2010).*

*What I expect in university like academics, I think university don't have theories, having no practical Application everything is contaminated [?] on marks, there only formal test that are written only and which are going to be recorded, the finances, the money is going to be needed when going to university. When you go to university maybe you have a bursary, the government will give you money that you can spent while you are in university. Residence life, you have bursary You can Study at university and they will provide you with money, you will be eating free food with no charges and they will give you money to use it on your needs. Focus while you are in class do what you Supposed to do, do your business have a Confident on everything, demand to succes in life. University there are no friends you are alone no one is going to help you. You have to be productive work hard for your own. I expect university to be like at school, do your word therally, Submit it on time. And the lecture should treat children equally (black female learner, township, 2010).*

*Academics: I expect university to be very challenging, classes to have a massive number of students and lectures at night. Most work is self-study and if you miss a lecture, it won't be easy to catch up. No one really cares if you attend lectures or not, it's your own responsibility. It seems like a "lonely world" and using time productively is vital. There isn't really that "closeness" with lecturers that you'd get with high school teachers. Social: There are alot of social activities and self discipline is very important. Finances: It seems to me that one has to use money very wisely, as money will be needed often. Managing one's finances might come handy, although it might be quite difficult. Residence life: I expect it to be very awkward, at there'll be different girls from different backgrounds. it is also an opportunity to make life-long friends. it's going to be difficult at first, especially for someone who hasn't lived in a hostel before, as mommy won't be around to help you out. independance begins here (white female learner, suburban HSC, 2010).*

Various themes about university knowledge, or lack thereof, can be identified from these quotations. For example, one learner anticipates that everything he needs will be available and “money are [sic] there for me”, and another that she will be provided with money, “will be eating free food with no charges and they will give you money to use it on your needs”. Several of the learners appear to be aware that they will be required to take responsibility for their own work and lives and that this would be different from school. A sense of fear and expectation of loneliness is expressed in the quotations, with one learner going as far as to note that “they will watch you as you hang yourself with your actions” and “they will kick you out without mercy”. One learner feels that “there are no friends you are alone no one is going to help you”, and another expects to find university a “lonely world”. On a more upbeat note, there is an expectation of a party being thrown every Friday, the making of life-long friends, and one learner looks forward to meeting new friends and encountering “new things in life”.

Overall, these quotations highlight the diversity of contextual skills and awareness (or university knowledge). Except for the last quotation where the learner appears to have a relatively good sense of university knowledge, it is not difficult to see why these learners would find the transition to university to be a difficult, and most likely, a confusing and frightening process (see section 7.2.1).

In the SAHSSLE learners were asked questions about how regularly they talked to their teachers about career goals and also about applying to and going to university. Given the overall low levels of communication with teachers about careers and university, it is not difficult to understand the expectations of university quoted above. These results are shown in Figure 31 and Figure 32. The differences across schools were statistically significant (Chi Square test,  $p=0.000$ ) with small effect size (Cramer’s  $V=0.12$  and  $0.14$ ). There were no significant differences with respect to gender.

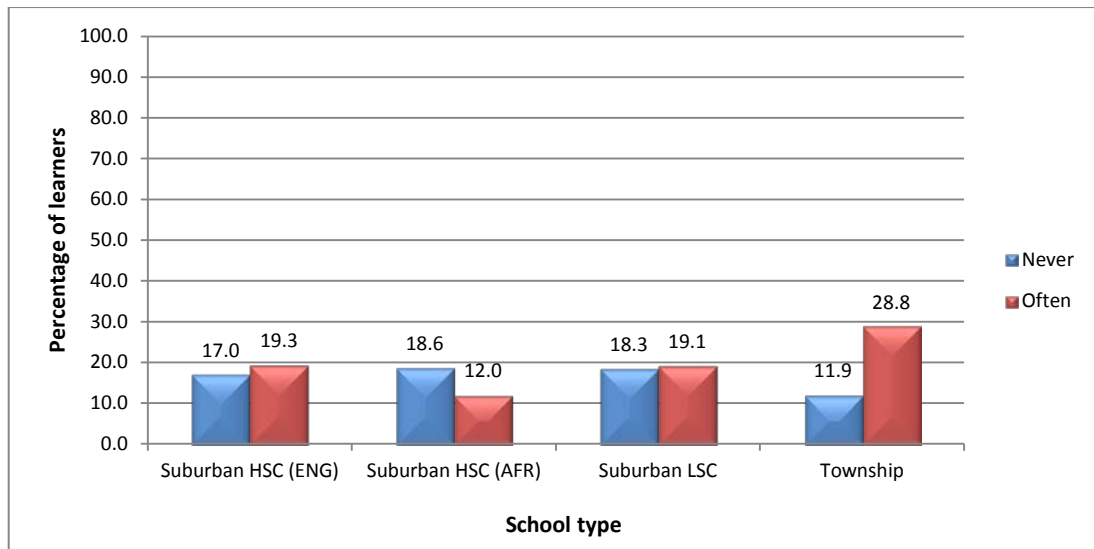


Figure 31: Talked to a teacher about career goals

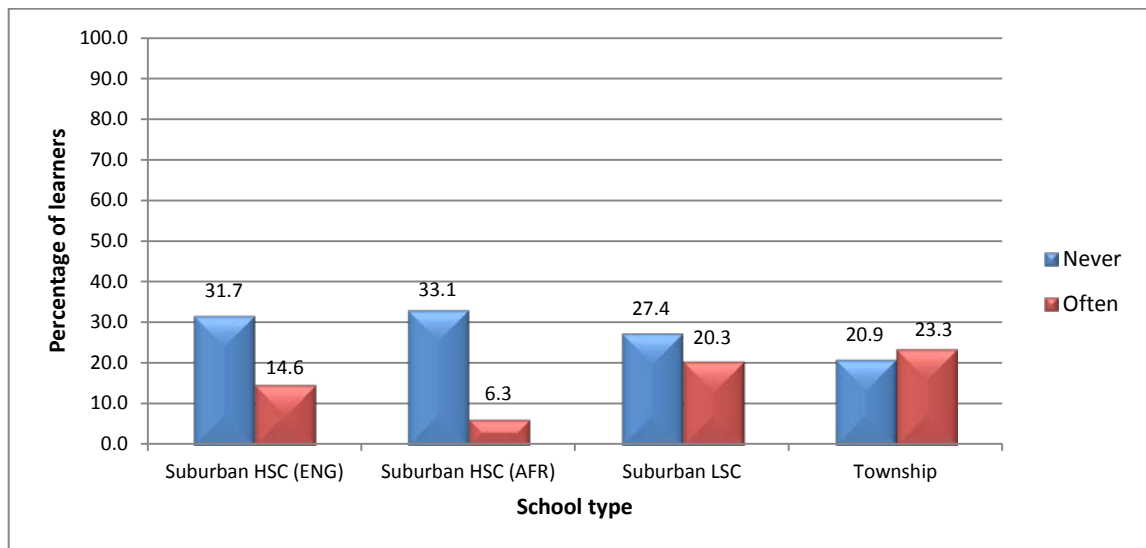


Figure 32: Talked to a teacher about how to apply to university

In completing the SAHSSLE open-ended question, one learner made specific mention of the lack of information at her school, stating:

*“I would like to say that in our school we are not given that much information about varsities” (black female learner, suburban LSC, 2009).*

Several learners used the open-ended question space to ask specific questions about university and these questions also highlight the lack of information about university available for learners at high schools, for example

*I would love to find out how much marks do you need to for the best university of your choice?(black female learner, suburban LSC, 2009).*

*I need to know how to apply in the university. What subject should I do if I want to do a course of being a judge in the court (black learner, no gender given, township, 2009).*

*Would it be possible for me to qualify for university?"(black male learner, township, 2009).*

#### **7.3.4.2 Subject choices**

Concerns were commonly raised by first-year university students regarding the lack of information that was provided to them at school with respect to subject choices and the implications of this for further study, as well as information about university more broadly. These experiences were not the same at all schools, as shown in the quotations below. At some schools it appears that quite a lot of information and support is provided about subject choices and about further study options. These differences did not seem to be linked to the school type (as per my three school classifications), but rather to teachers and/or school principals who went to extra lengths to provide this information. In general, most students reported having little, if any, meaningful support in terms of choosing careers. For example,

*No, we once had a career exhibition programme but then they didn't really explain much, they just gave us pamphlets and then that was it. They didn't really explain what kind of score we want and everything...(focus groups, 2009).*

*They said 'what do you like doing?' and I told them, well I like cooking...(LAUGHTER)...and I like reading and then they told me, 'OK you can be a journalist or a chef'...(LAUGHTER). So that was my career counseling (focus groups, 2009).*

*I went umm, they didn't really have a specific person you can go talk to but they said if you want career guidance, you can go to your principal. I went there and I asked him, 'I'm confused, I need help, warrah, warrah', I explained to him. He was like 'no man, go there and do whatever you like'...(LAUGHTER)...that's sort of...very helpful! (focus groups, 2009).*

*I also think that umm, they don't promote, like they focus specifically on certain.../careers/.../faculties/... like Law, Doctor. We always, you know...[UNCLEAR DUE TO SIMULTANEOUS SPEECH]...and they don't really give you a broader view of 'listen, this is also available, this is also...' but they don't and then you only find out halfway in your first year, so like 'oh my gosh', but there's actually this and I always wanted to do that, why don't I swap and then you change and it's another transition and it's a lot of work.../and you must catch-up/...(focus groups, 2009).*

With respect to choice of subjects at school, the results showed that in some cases learners have little or no say over the subjects they do at school and in others there is a lot of autonomy granted to learners and their parents in making subject choice decisions. Of particular concern to the first-year students with whom I worked in this study was the confusion over the difference between doing mathematics or mathematical literacy at school and the implications of this for entrance to university. The students in my 2009 sample were the first cohort of school learners to have gone through 12 years of the outcomes based National Senior Certificate curriculum and so were the first group of students to enter the university with mathematical literacy.<sup>76</sup>

*There was no relevant information that was given to a learner. That ok, if you want to be a nurse you have to study this subject, if you want to be a, an accountant you have to do this. We just had to think for ourselves (focus groups, 2009).*

*OK, what happened at our school was that ahh, the teachers made that decision based on, based on a learner's ahh, marks. No parents were involved and the learner was not given a choice, just the teachers made that decision to say 'OK, you will be doing Commerce and you will be doing Science', which served as a disadvantage to others because they wanted to pursue their dreams but they couldn't (focus groups, 2009).*

*At our school they held a meeting with all the Grade 9 children and their parents before they needed to choose and they said, 'OK, these are the possible subjects, these subjects together with give exemption, these will not. I mean a university exemption, these do not give you a university exemption and they only half, because it was new names the explained to us what they meant in terms of what it was in the old system. It was explain just like that to us and told us what was needed for what types of courses and they went through it with us and with our parents'<sup>77</sup> (focus groups, 2009).*

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<sup>76</sup> The difficulty of subject choice at school, particular decisions regarding Mathematics or Mathematical Literacy have become even more important since 2009 when I did my initial work with students. As of 2012, a student entering the UFS must have passed Mathematics to enter either the Natural and Agricultural Sciences Faculty and the Economic and Management Sciences Faculty. This means that learners who opt to study Mathematical Literacy at school limit their further study options dramatically.

<sup>77</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *By ons het hulle n' vergadering gehou met al die Graad 9 kinders en hulle ouers, voor hulle moes kies en toe het hulle gesê 'OK, hier is al die moontlike vakke, hierdie vakke saam gee vrystelling, hierdie gee nie'. Ek bedoel n' universiteitse*

*In my school our principal said 'you, you're in the Science class and you, you be in the Tourism class...(LAUGHTER)...and you, you're in the Accounting class'. You didn't have a choice what to do, even if you know your parents and tell the principal that 'no Sir, I want to do, be an accountant or I want to be what', he'll tell you 'if you don't like it in my school, jy moet gaan'...(LAUGHTER) (focus group, 2009).*

*I think also the varsity should make it a point and illustrate how the importance of having Maths in high school (focus groups, 2009).*

*It was Maths or Maths Literacy so I decided to do, I wanted to do Maths but then in the commerce class, there was only three of us who wanted to do Maths so they just decided 'ag man, you guys cannot do Maths because you're gonna mess up the timetable what what what...(LAUGHTER)...just do Maths Literacy'...(LAUGHTER)...then you get to varsity and you cannot do some other subjects because we didn't do Maths in high school and it's not like we chose to do umm, we didn't want to do Maths literacy, we wanted to do Maths (focus groups, 2009).*

Thus, overall, the quantitative and qualitative data presented in this section on university knowledge has highlighted the difficulty that most learners getting ready to embark on the journey to university have seeing over the humpback bridge. Not only are learners often provided little information about what to really expect at university, but their choices and opportunities are constrained by decisions, often made by others, regarding subject choice as well.

## **7.4 Acceptance of mediocrity or failure**

Given the complex personal, social and intellectual demands first-year students face, and the many challenges impacting on the transition to university highlighted in the previous sections of this chapter, the obvious question to be considered is how students cope with the humpback bridge challenge and their generally poor levels of readiness for university? My focus groups with first-year students pointed to a concerning coping mechanism that I have called an acceptance of mediocrity or failure. In my analysis of the first-year student data I found 58 instances related to an acceptance of mediocrity or failure. Consider the following:

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*vrystelling, hierdie gee nie vir jou n' universiteitse vrystelling nie en dit net half, omdat dit nuwe name was, vir ons verduidelik wat beteken dit soos wat is dit in die ou bedeeeling. Net so vir ons verduidelik en gesê wat het jy nodig vir wat tipe kursusse en hulle het soos my ons ouers en met ons dit deurgegaan*

*I think when you come here, they tell you...first of all, forget about the A's you got in high school, kiss them goodbye. I think everyone's just so comfortable with failure...[LAUGHTER AND AGREEMENT FROM GROUP]...it's just ok, you know, I failed so what...It's not, it doesn't motivate you to work harder cos in high school, everyone got 70's and then you get 50%. Obviously its gonna, you gonna feel like I have to be a failure (focus groups, 2009).*

*We were checking our marks last week and this [ ] guy said, 'did you fail? Welcome, welcome to the family!' ....[LAUGHTER] (focus groups, 2009).*

*When we come here it's completely different to high school and you have to start, like she said, from the really really beginning and...there's nobody there to help you start, you're all on your own and nobody wants to help. Everybody's telling you 'if you don't understand it, next year you'll understand it. Next year you will do it over' (focus groups, 2009).*

*People go with the mentality that I've got forty percent, I'm safe. No matter how much I fail but with a forty percent I know I'm safe (focus groups, 2009).*

*Ja, ja, but you know what my parents told me, as long as I just pass. So I do work hard to, to pass my subjects but not as hard as I did in school cos in school I studied like to get 80%, now it's really above 50 cos above 50/60 and up costs you my social life and everything is important to me cos I have to socialise and I have to study so I just...I just want to pass, just want to pass this year and next year I'll work harder (focus groups, 2009).*

These responses provide a different perspective for understanding the national trends in undergraduate student performance stated at the outset of this thesis. Without appropriate support structures that seek to break down the traditional humpback bridge and replace it with a more appropriate and effective mechanism for crossing the gap between school and university, it appears that students might cope with their lack of readiness by constructing a university world in which mediocrity or failure is the norm. As was argued in earlier chapters (see for example sections 2.6.22.7), research shows that institutional expectation of success is a critical factor in student performance (Bowen et al., 2009; Kuh et al., 2005a), yet first-year students report that:

*all the lecturers in the first week just told us statistics of who is going to fail, it's very demotivating (focus groups, 2009).*

*In one of our classes the lecturer said, 'look to your left and now look to your right, only one of you is going to pass (focus groups, 2009).*

*The first time I entered my Soc class, the lecturer told me 10% of you are gonna pass and then every time I study soc I just have that thing he said in my mind. I'm not gonna pass soc....ag, I'm not (focus groups, 2009).*

*There are lecturers that are going to say, uh man, when you do [the course] the third time around you'll pass it. So that brings you down, it really does bring you down (focus groups, 2009).*

*At school you could ask a question, here the lecturer won't answer you, he just says 'come back next year! (focus groups, 2009).*

*But at least if they tell you, study hard, you'll make it, study hard. They must not discourage us..[AGREEMENT FROM GROUP]....(focus groups, 2009).*

Are university lecturers, and in this instance particularly those who work closely with first-year students, complicit in constructing this discourse of mediocrity or failure? Given the large classes often faced in first-year programmes, together with the poor levels of preparation of students exiting a troubled school system, perhaps the discourse of mediocrity and failure also provides a safe haven for academic staff. One might speculate that lecturers use such 'scare tactics' in an effort to ensure that their students are aware that they need to work hard in order to succeed, when in effect the opposite outcome is reached. Further, specifically focused, research is needed to properly unpack and deconstruct this discourse. Nonetheless, targeted intervention is needed to undermine this discourse of mediocrity in the interest of access with success.

## **7.5 Conclusions**

In this chapter I have sought to present the results of relevance to my first two research questions. In presenting the results I intentionally made use of the 'voices' of the students and learners themselves. This was done by including quotations from focus group discussions and written responses, as well as drawings done by first-year students. The analysis of the qualitative student data focused on reflections on the transition to university pointed to a series of emergent themes. These included (in order of importance) being

confused, lost or scared; being in residence on campus versus commuting; coming to terms with issues of diversity, becoming independent, having a fun or exciting time, the quality of teaching at university, experiences of orientation (mostly within university residences), being tired (also mostly within university residences), looking towards the future, financial difficulties, and the challenge of adapting to large classes. On the whole, students – irrespective of their schooling background – tended to find the transition process to be difficult to negotiate.

The chapter then moved on to consider readiness for university, using Conley's four dimensions of readiness, as the basis for investigating the interface between school and university. With respect to readiness in terms of key cognitive strategies, the results showed that learners at school engage in more active learning in the classroom than at university where classes are large. Many students found the experience of becoming one student among many (or becoming a number) when they had been known individually at school to be difficult. The focus on written work at school level was well below what was required of first-year students and it is likely that cognitive skills of argument formulation that are essential in the writing process would need specific attention once students enter university. The section pointed to the need for both schools and the university to focus more attention on educational activities that have been demonstrated to enhance cognitive readiness for university level work.

With respect to readiness in the area of key content, major gaps in preparation for university were noted. The poor results of UFS students (as well as students nationally) in the NBT Mathematics test was provided as one example of a lack of key content knowledge in the area of mathematics. Several of the first year students made reference to their difficulty with subject content at university, despite having performed well in the same subjects at school. These results thus support the findings of the research on epistemological access as well as Conley's work where the emphasis is not on measurable performance in key subjects, but rather on the extent to which school learners and students really understand the key knowledge structures and concepts that underlie specific disciplines. It was also argued that language competence and confidence play an important role in the achievement of readiness in the area of cognitive strategies and key content.

The area of academic behaviours was the most commonly noted challenge with respect to readiness. Students focused on their difficulties with self-management – learning to be disciplined and becoming independent and responsible for their own learning. The

majority of students expressed concerns about their study skills and found it particularly difficult to come to terms with the volume of work expected at university. Also difficult for many students was learning to manage their time effectively in a context where they were now responsible for their own learning as well as other basic activities such as preparing food, washing clothes etc.

The final section on readiness focused on understanding learners and students' contextual skills and awareness, or their university knowledge. In this section I returned to the metaphor of the humpback bridge and demonstrated how students also made use of analogies that highlighted the disjuncture between school and university. The detailed quotations showing school learners' expectations of university highlighted the lack of university knowledge, even for learners who came from families where parents and/or siblings had been to university. The difficulty of seeing across the humpback bridge was confirmed. The results also highlighted the general lack of communication with teachers at schools about career goals as well as information about going to university.

The quantitative and qualitative data was also analysed by school type and by gender. Interesting and important results emerged (and will be built on in Chapter 8). In particular, I found that learners in Afrikaans schools tended to be poorly prepared for university in many respects and that the emerging evidence might imply concerning learning cultures in these schools. For example, Afrikaans learners reported the lowest incidence of teachers engaging them in classroom discussions; these students were less curious to learn new things, did not like questions with no simple answer and did not like to work on problems that are difficult and require a lot of thinking. Given the importance of these sorts of learning activities at university, this group of students is likely to find adapting to university requirements difficult, irrespective of their actual school performance (marks). This finding supports arguments made in earlier chapters about the need to understand readiness for university as much more than measurable performance – such as school marks and admissions tests results. With respect to gender differences, while Chapter 7 showed that female school learners had more household responsibilities (such as chores and caring for family members) than male learners which might influence their well-being as well as their educational performance, the results in this chapter imply that female learners are likely to find the transition to university to be easier than male learners with respect to academic preparation. It was noted, amongst others, that female learners were more likely to report that their teachers engaged them in classroom discussions, that they have

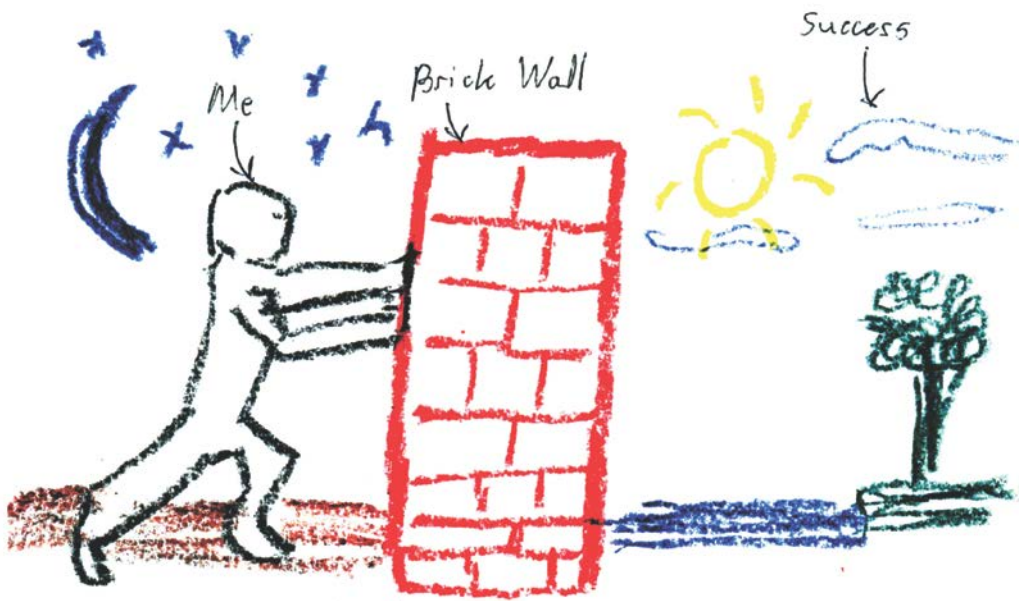
opportunities to be creative at school, that they work on projects requiring integration of information from multiple sources, and that they prepare written work more often.

Given the readiness challenges that both emerged from and were confirmed by the empirical results, I ended the chapter by asking how first-year students cope with this difficult transition. Although further research would be needed to confirm this, it appears from the qualitative student data that students come to accept mediocrity or failure as a coping mechanism. I argued that students, and lecturers, appear to be constructing a university world in which mediocrity and failure is becoming the norm and is to be expected. These findings thus provide a different perspective for understanding the problematic institutional and national trends of low student throughput and success. As such, the importance of placing debates about university readiness and the transition from school to university within an explicit emphasis on access for social justice was again highlighted.

## Chapter 8: Theorising the Transition Experience from a Capabilities Perspective



Drawing 12: (white female first-year student, HSC, 2010)



Drawing 13: (Black male first-year student, EMS, 2010)

## 8.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 presented the transition experiences of school learners and first-year university students and as such addressed my first two research questions. The focus of this chapter is on research question 3; how can experiences of the interface between school and university be theorised using a capabilities-based social justice framework?

As explained in Chapter 4, at its core, the capabilities approach is about understanding what people are effectively able to be and to do; and what this means for their well-being. Consider drawings 12 and 13 on the previous page. These two drawings place in stark contrast the capabilities of two young people entering university in 2010. For one student, a world of opportunities are visible and await, for the other, a brick wall hides any vision of what might be in the future and stands between the student and possible success. These two drawings represent two very different lives, with different 'beings and doings'. How are we to interpret this from a social justice point of view? What can be done to break down the brick walls that limit some students' chances of success?

In this chapter I set out to show how and why the capabilities approach helps us to respond to such questions by providing a different way of thinking about the complex transition experiences presented in Chapter 7. The chapter begins by returning to the ideal theoretical list of capabilities for transition to university proposed in Table 1. The ideal theoretical list was proposed based on existing work on capabilities in higher education (Flores-Crespo, 2004; Hart, 2008; Walker, 2006) together with the extensive literature review of research in the area of access to university (see Chapter 2). In this chapter I further develop this list by integrating the findings of my empirical research. In particular, I seek to adapt the ideal list into a more pragmatic list that provides a basis for proposing interventions in support of students making the transition to university (Robeyns, 2003b, p. 71). Applying my proposed pragmatic capabilities list, I then return to the larger capabilities framework for conceptualising the transition to university introduced in Figure 3, with the aim of filling in the details, such as identifying the conversion factors that appear to have most influence on students' capabilities to make a successful transition, as these provide starting points for formulating interventions.

## **8.2 Capabilities and/or functionings**

I have reflected on my understanding and use of the term capabilities at different points in this thesis (see sections 1.6.1 and 4.1.1). At this point it is important for me to return to the tension between capabilities and functionings, as two sides of the same coin (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 25), closely related, yet explicitly different concepts. Wolff and de Shalit (2007, p. 63) remind us that “[F]unctionings are more or less observable; capabilities are not, at least in any straightforward manner.” For Sen, capabilities can be likened to opportunities available to a person, while functionings refer to achievements or outcomes (Sen, 1999, 2009). Nussbaum’s use of the concept of capabilities differs in that she distinguishes between combined capabilities (opportunities as in Sen’s use of the term) and internal capabilities (trained and/or developed traits or abilities) (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21). Internal capabilities are likened to personal powers needed for the achievement of desired functionings. The notion of personal powers takes into account the social, economic, familial and political conditions that influence what personal powers can be developed and by whom, and also how these personal powers can be put into action towards the achievement of functionings or outcomes. Walker (2006, p. 128) argues that the notion of capabilities includes both opportunities and “skills and capacities that can be fostered”. This understanding of capabilities is not unlike Sen’s (1985a) notion that capabilities refer to the ability to achieve, or potential. In this sense potential forms the basis of opportunity. In the sections that follow, my focus on capabilities for the transition to university is mostly on capabilities as “skills and capacities that can be fostered” in the interest of expanding opportunities. The key questions are then what capabilities are most important to support the transition to university, and once these have been identified, how universities and schools can work towards fostering the development of the capabilities for all learners.

## **8.3 Transition to university capabilities**

As noted in earlier parts of this thesis, my intention to formulate a capabilities list for the transition to university is underpinned by my commitment to identify ways in which schools and universities can work towards building a more accessible bridge between school and university, such that increasing access is more likely to lead to success. In this section I interrogate the ideal-theoretical list of capabilities for the transition to university presented in Table 1. Drawing on the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in Chapter 7, I reflect on each of the nine proposed capabilities. While the data provides support for the

importance of all nine, some capabilities emerge as of greater significance than others, and so point in the direction of a refined, pragmatic capabilities list (Robeyns, 2003b, pp. 70–71) for the transition to university.

The discussions below focus on the data gathered from all research participants. It is not my intention in interrogating the ideal-theoretical list of capabilities to make comparisons across school type, gender or other variables. These differences will be brought into the discussions in the section on conversion factors. Part of my analysis processes included coding the qualitative data (open-ended responses, focus group transcriptions, and drawings) in terms of the nine capabilities in the ideal theoretical list as one means of identifying the capabilities that learners and students deem important. Note that the line of questioning did not include specific questions about these nine capabilities. Instead, through questions about how the transition to university was experienced, it was possible to begin to identify the “skills and capacities” (capabilities) that learners and students described that had assisted them or created barriers when not yet developed.

The table on the following page shows the number of instances in which each capability was identified in the qualitative data. This ‘quantification’ of the qualitative data should be seen as a guide only to understanding the relative importance and relevance of each capability since in some instances the data implied the achievement of the capability, in others it showed that the capability was needed but not developed and in others, either supporting or hindering factors were identified. In many cases a combination of these was evident. It is thus not possible, nor helpful, to try to ‘quantitatively’ use the qualitative coding to understand the nuances of these capabilities or to rank their importance. Nonetheless, it is useful to show that all nine capabilities did get mentioned by learners and students, and some rather more often than others. The capabilities that were most commonly referred to in the qualitative data were: learning disposition (262 instances), practical reason (241 instances), educational resilience (220 instances), social relations and social networks (146 instances), and respect, dignity and recognition (133 instances).

Table 11: Summary of qualitative analysis in terms of the ideal-theoretical capabilities list

Capability	Definition	Number of instances identified
1. Practical reason	Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about post-school study and career options.	241
2. Educational resilience	Able to navigate the transition from school to university within individual life contexts. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints. Having aspirations and hopes for a successful university career.	220
3. Knowledge and imagination	Having the academic grounding needed to be able to gain knowledge of chosen university subjects, and to develop methods of academic inquiry. Being able to use critical thinking and imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives.	106
4. Learning disposition	Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having the learning skills required for university study. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.	262
5. Social relations and social networks	Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems or tasks. Being able to form networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.	146
6. 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. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning.	133
7. Emotional integrity	Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning.	81
8. Bodily integrity	Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the school and higher education environment.	35
9. Language competence and confidence	Being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction.	54

In the coming sections I review each of the nine capabilities identified for the ideal-theoretical capability list for the transition to university. For each capability I provide an interpretation of the capability on the basis of my empirical findings and present an argument for why, or why not, the capability should be included in my pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university. In doing so, I have been mindful of the five criteria Robeyns (2003a, p. 70-71) specified for developing a capabilities list (see section 4.4.1 and Table 13), namely: explicit formulation, methodological justification, sensitivity to context, different levels of generality, and exhaustiveness and non-reduction.

### 8.3.1 Practical reason

In the context of the transition to university, the capability of practical reason is focused on whether high school learners and students entering university are able to make meaningful decisions about post-school study and career options. As such, this capability falls within the area of university knowledge discussed at length in sections 2.6.2 and 7.3.4. The importance of university knowledge, and the lack thereof for many of the school learners and first-year students in my sample was highlighted in section 7.3.4. The analysis of the qualitative learner and student data showed that this domain of university readiness was the second most commonly noted of Conley's readiness dimensions. Similarly, the qualitative coding in terms of the capabilities list presented in Table 11 shows that the capability of practical reason was noted second most frequently. Despite the importance learners and first-year students accorded to this capability, only 19.8% of the learners that completed the SAHSSLE reported often talking to a teacher about career goals, while 16.5% have never discussed career goals with a teacher. Given that the learners were in Grades 10, 11 and 12 – the final three years of high school – these findings point to a lack of opportunity to develop the capability of practical reason that underpins a successful transition. Even less support was provided in the area of information about applying to university, with 28.3% of learners never discussing this topic with their teachers. Only 16.1% of the learners have often discussed applying to university with their teachers. In some cases learners may receive this support from their parents or family members, but for first generation students the information provided at school is of critical importance.

Reflections on the challenge of making subject choices at school was a clear theme emerging from the qualitative data – for learners who were provided adequate information and support and for those who were not. Relevant quotations were presented in section 7.3.4.2, and an additional example is shown below.

*There was no information in my school. I chose...umm, the subject myself. I knew that when I had to be, when I go to Grade 10, I had to choose the subject that I think I can manage, that's all. Then I chose...umm, business subjects...yeah, till, to Grade 12 but still in Grade 11, I had to change others, they were mixed...it was only from, I had to decide for myself, for myself that I'm going to do, umm, Biology, Economics, Business Economics – it was mixed, there was no relevant information that was given to a learner. That ok, if you want to be a nurse you have to study this subject, if you want to be a, an accountant you have to do this. We just had to think for ourselves (Focus groups 2009).*

Making the choice between mathematics and mathematical literacy was commonly noted by students since this choice had major implications for their direction of study at university. Many students were unaware of this until they reached university. From a capabilities point of view, of particular relevance is the fact that in many instances, even where learners did have information or had a clear sense of study direction, their school determined their subject choices. Thus while it is quite common for university preparation interventions to provide information to school learners about subject choices, my data shows that this is insufficient when contextual conditions limit what is possible. Even in cases where learners had the personal skill and capacity to make informed choices, their opportunities were limited by teachers and principals who ultimately determined what study directions learners could follow once they entered university. Several quotations supporting this finding were presented in section 7.3.4.2, including the example of the learner who wished to study mathematics and was told by her school principal that she would “mess up the timetable” since most other learners had selected mathematical literacy.

It was most common for students to reflect on lack of information and support regarding subject and career choices at school, but there were also instances of similar remarks about choices made at university. The quotation below provides an example.

*Sometimes the people that work for the university nè, they're not as clued up as you think. Some of them are not even studying that specific thing and maybe they don't know anything about it. Even at admin when you go register for your modules, the people that give academic advice, my subjects were messed up because the people that were there, they gave me like the wrong information. So I ended up doing second year modules in my first year, it was back and forth. It's the first time I'm doing some of my first-year modules that I was supposed to do and some of the courses are actually written off and I wrote exams on them because I wasn't given proper advice (focus group, 2009).*

Research findings reported in the literature review as well my own empirical work highlight the importance of developing the capability for practical reason in the context of transitioning to university. The findings reported in Chapter 7 and above point to the challenge that many learners and first-year students face in developing the capability for practical reason. Often this challenge is more a result of contextual influences than individual skills and capacities. As such, efforts to foster the development of this capability

need to turn attention to the conditions of possibility underpinning the capability at both school and university levels.

Nussbaum (2000, 2011) also includes practical reason in her list of 10 capabilities (see section 4.4 for details). Although Nussbaum's list has a far wider reaching purpose and scope than the specific capabilities list I am proposing, it is useful to return to Nussbaum to better understand the importance of practical reason in the context of accessing university. Nussbaum argues that the capability of practical reason (and affiliation) plays a distinctive role in the context of the other capabilities by being of importance to the development and organisation of all the capabilities. She explains as follows,

“What is meant by saying that the capability of practical reason organises all the others is more obvious: the opportunity to plan one's life is an opportunity to choose and order the functionings corresponding to the various other capabilities” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 39).

In other words, if a student entering university was able to develop the other transition to university capabilities and so master all the domains of university readiness, but was not in a position to make meaningful choices about what to study, how to plan their programme of study, or about their future career options then the achievement of the other capabilities would not lead to an outcome the student had reason to value. The fictional example given earlier (see section 4.1.1) of the young man who completed an accounting qualification as the instruction of his father even though he wished to pursue his passion and talent for painting is an example of a student who had developed the capabilities for the transition to university, but could not put into action the capability of practical reason due to the influence of his father. Similarly, the young woman who was not able to take mathematics due to the timetable concerns of the principal might be capable of making the transition to university, but did not have the capability of practical reason and as a result instead of making an independent choice about what to study, her options were constrained by the actions of the school principal. Thus, in agreement with Nussbaum (2011), it seems reasonable to argue that the capability of practical reason – defined as being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about post-school study and career options – could be seen as a foundational capability (or in the terms of Wolff and de-Shalit, a fertile functioning) for ensuring a successful transition to university.

### 8.3.2 Educational resilience

The resilience demonstrated by many of the learners and students who participated in this study is remarkable. Examples abound of learners and students making progress with their education despite overwhelming constraints in their personal contexts, at their schools, and in the broader social, political and economic environment in which they live. Chapter 7 included examples of students who described absent or drunk teachers, examples of sexual misconduct at schools, unemployed parents, lack of books, poor decision making regarding subject and career choices, lecturers telling them they are likely to fail and so on. The research on schooling in South Africa (see sections 1.2.3 and 2.8) together with the generally high levels of poverty and unemployment also attest to the resilience of the young people who do indeed successfully transition to university, and ultimately complete their university qualifications, despite the high levels of drop out in the first year and the low proportion of students who actually graduate (Bloch, 2009; Chisholm, 2004b; Council on Higher Education, 2010; Scott, 2010; Scott et al., 2007). The quotation below provides a further example of a student's resilience.

*Well for example, I never \_\_\_\_\_(UNCLEAR) cos when I came here in Bloemfontein two years back, I came here to this university but I've already applied \_\_\_\_\_(UNCLEAR – NAME OF ANOTHER INSTITUTION) but I didn't have the information...I was requiring for the degree that I wanted to study, ja and then I found out that I don't qualify to do that degree so I decided to go over to ahh, the College and then I studied the whole two years at the College, I did my National Certificate there then it was still like high school, it wasn't giving me that challenge.../ja/...but then after that, after my National Certificate I came to the university where I found more challenges, I feel like I can run away...(LAUGHTER)...it's good for someone who wants to do something with his life.../yes, yes/...if you know where you may want to go, if you know the direction that you want to take in your life then I think it's ahh, very much alright [last word unclear, sounds like 'alright'] (focus groups 2009).*

This example, and several of the other quotations presented in Chapter 7, highlights the role of individual agency in resilient responses of learners and students. Yet, examples of learners and students who show resilience, often in the face of very difficult situations, is not, necessarily, sufficient to ensure successful and just outcomes of university education. Without having several of the other capabilities included in the ideal-theoretical list, it is unlikely that educational resilience (as defined here) will be achieved. Instead, I contend that we should see the achievement of educational resilience as the functioning (outcome) that

demonstrates a successful transition to university. Consider again the proposed definition of educational resilience in the context of transitioning to university,

Being able to navigate the transition from school to university within individual life contexts. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints. Having aspirations and hopes for a successful university career.

Being able to navigate the transition from school to university, negotiate risk, persevere, be responsive to opportunities and have aspirations for successful university study is dependent on several of the other capabilities listed in the ideal theoretical list. It is unlikely that a student would successfully navigate the transition or be responsive to opportunities and constraints without some degree of the capability for practical reason, learning disposition, language competence and confidence, and others. As such, the pragmatic list of capabilities for the transition to university does not include educational resilience as a capability. Instead, educational resilience is positioned as the outcome of a successful transition (see Figure 33). In my original formulation of the framework (see Figure 3), I defined the outcome or achievement as a ‘successful transition to university and success in the first year of study.’ The revised formulation proposed here, based on the functioning/achievement of educational resilience, is a more clearly defined and precise outcome, whilst still allowing scope for the values of individual students to be incorporated.

### **8.3.3 Knowledge and imagination**

The capability of knowledge and imagination is closely related to Conley’s readiness dimensions of key content, and to a lesser extent, key cognitive strategies (Conley, 2008a). Essentially, this capability is about the academic foundations needed when entering university and encompasses both content knowledge as well as an understanding of methods of inquiry in different subject areas. As such, the capability for knowledge and imagination is also closely related to the concept of epistemological access discussed earlier. First-year students need to have a sound content grounding as well as be able to understand the knowledge structures and language used in the disciplines of study. The extensive literature supporting the importance of this capability was discussed in Chapter 2. Further support for the inclusion of the capability in a pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university is provided by my empirical data, where many students made reference to their

difficulties with subjects at university that they had not had trouble with at school (see section 7.3.2). The poor performance of students in the NBTs – nationally and at the UFS specifically – places further emphasis on the importance of the capability for knowledge and imagination.

The second part of this capability is being able to use critical thinking and imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives. Figure 24 showed that learners report that schools place relatively little emphasis on solving real world problems, reading and understanding difficult materials, thinking critically, exploring new ideas and analysing ideas in depth. Even more concerning was the fact that the responses of first-year university students in the SASSE implied that the UFS was placing even less emphasis on critical thinking, analysing ideas in-depth, synthesis or interpretation of ideas, information or experiences, and making judgement about the value of information or methods.<sup>78</sup> As such, it appears unlikely that students entering university would have had sufficient opportunity to develop the capability of knowledge and imagination whilst at school, and are then also provided with little opportunity to develop the capability during their first-year. The inclusion of the capability for knowledge and imagination is thus particularly important in facilitating a successful transition to university.

### **8.3.4 Learning disposition**

The importance of the capability of learning disposition is demonstrated by the SAHSSLE results as well as the large number of instances in which both learners and students made reference to challenges faced in this area. A total of 262 instances of relevance to the capability of learning disposition were found in the qualitative data. Most often the comments made by learners and students referred to learning skills required for university, although the other components were also mentioned. Considered in terms of Conley's model of multidimensional readiness, this capability falls across the domains of academic behaviours and key cognitive strategies.

The first component of the learning disposition capability is that of curiosity and desire for learning. The importance of a desire for learning is also highlighted by Barnett

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<sup>78</sup> I collected my data in 2009 and 2010. Since this time the UFS has put in place specific interventions that seek to overcome this challenge. Particular examples include an institution wide curriculum review as well as the new compulsory core module – UFS 101 – for all first year students. It is too early to reflect on the impacts of interventions such as this.

(2007a, 2007b) in his theorising about a student's will to learn. He describes the importance of the will to learn as follows,

“‘Will’ is the most important concept in education. Without a will, nothing is possible. At any level of education, a pupil, a student cannot make serious progress unless she has a will to do so. Unless she has a will, a will to learn, she cannot carry herself forward, cannot press herself forward, cannot come successfully into new pedagogical situations” (Barnett, 2007b, p. 15).

Drawing on Barnett, learning dispositions can be seen as an expression of a student's will to learn (Barnett, 2007b, p. 101). A will to learn is the foundational learning disposition on which the others must build. The SAHSSLE data showed that almost all of the high school learners participating in the study wished to attend university, and most learners reported that their school work made them curious to learn new things and that they had opportunities to be creative in their work (see Figure 22). The vast majority of high school learners noted that they liked to be creative and that they liked discussions that did not have one clear answer. The exception in all of these cases was for learners at Afrikaans suburban HSC schools, where my findings point towards a possible undermining of the will to learn. On the whole though, it appears that learners exiting the school system have been afforded, at least some, opportunities to develop a curiosity and desire for learning out of which the will to learn in a university context could emerge. A cautionary note is needed here though; the *will* to learn should not be confused with the *confidence* to learn (see 8.3.7).

In the theoretical formulation of the capabilities list for the transition to university (see Table 1), ‘having confidence in one's ability to learn’ was included in the definition of learning disposition (see also, Walker, 2006, p. 128). However, as I progressed with the analysis it seemed more appropriate to rather incorporate the notion of confidence to learn in the definition of the capability for emotional integrity (see below). There were three main reasons for this decision. Firstly, the capability for learning disposition already contains several dimensions and was at risk of becoming overly complex and so lacking in clarity. Secondly, since the notions of the *will* to learn and the *confidence* to learn are related but importantly different, I was concerned that the one notion might subsume the other if both were incorporated within the same capability. Thirdly, learners and students placed a lot of emphasis on learning skills as a major area of difficulty during the transition to university. A more clearly defined definition of learning disposition encompassing the will to learn and the skills to learn provides a tighter formulation of this capability. I return to the issue of confidence to learn in section 8.3.7.

As noted above, the majority of the qualitative data coded to this capability included responses of learners and students who felt poorly equipped for university in terms of study skills. First-year students reported that the cognitive demands of university differed from school in three main areas, namely: formulating an argument and/or critique, being able to integrate theory and practice, and having the skills of academic writing and referencing (see section 7.3.1.2). The volume of work at university compared to school was also regularly described as a challenge by first-year students. The data presented in section 7.3.1.1, where high school learners' responses on the SAHSSLE were compared with the responses of first-year students who completed the SASSE, pointed to a gap between school and university with regards to writing requirements and learning activities demanding the integration of information from sources other than textbooks. The concept of learning skills also incorporates the student's ability to be an active learner. The SAHSSLE includes several items specifically related to active learning such as items about group work, project work and learning activities that require engagement with people or information outside of the school context. Overall, relatively few learners reported often engaging in these sorts of active learning activities (see Figure 23).

In sum then, both the theoretical and empirical evidence point to the importance of building learning disposition, here defined to encompass both the will and the skills to learn.

### **8.3.5 Social relations and social networks**

The capability for social relations and social networks draws attention to the significance of being able to work in groups, having networks of friendships, a sense of belonging and being able to form relationships of mutual trust. As was discussed in section 2.3, the importance of social networks and support has received much attention in the literature on first year experience, first generation students as well as minority students in various contexts (for some examples from different contexts, see Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 2007; Krause, 2005; Krause et al., 2005; Mann, 2001, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Shouping & Kuh, 2002; Tinto, 1975, 1999; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Yosso, 2005). The role of social relations and social networks was also a theme that emerged quite strongly from the students' descriptions of their transition

to university (with the fourth largest number of instances identified for this capability). In some instances students reported that it was their social networks and support systems that helped them to make it through the challenging transition while for others a lack of social networks was regarded as a key difficulty. Responses in this area also differed between students who were living in residence and those who not, with the former being more likely to report that the social network of the residence played an important role in their transition. The first two quotations below provide examples of students who entered university having had helpful social networks in the past.

*mm, I had lots of friends who are, who in varsity when I was doing my Matric.../ja/...like ahh, even my family and people who are around my family were in varsity so I used to go to Pretoria, the University of Pretoria, just to go there...it was... I knew the environment (focus groups, 2009).*

*Ja, for me I was actually lucky because when I was going to Grade 10, uh, my uncle who's a teacher, so when I was going to Grade 10 my mother set up a meeting with me and my uncle so my uncle asked me what I wanted to do and I was like 'ah, I want to do Maths Literacy and things like that but when my uncle told me, he was like 'if you do Maths Literacy it's like going to be a problem when you go to varsity' and he told me about things like points, like if you do Maths Literacy, the points, if you take the real Maths, your points are going to be much higher than when you're going to be coming from Maths Literacy. So I think my uncle actually helped me because I knew what I wanted because I told him I want to do Commerce but at school we had a choice between Commerce subjects without the real Maths so he just told me, 'take the real Maths and don't do the Maths Literacy' (focus groups, 2009).*

It is difficult for a university to influence the social networks of learners before they enter and it is more likely that the capability for social networks and relations prior to university should be seen as a social conversion factor. However, the value of creating opportunities for first-year students to build new social relations and networks was highlighted by the data and this does fall within the university's realm of influence. This appears to be pivotal for students who do not live on campus in residence (which at the UFS is the majority of students). Consider the following examples.

*Ja, it's different because sometimes you get first-year, first few months you maybe thinking about high school, it was great...(LAUGHTER)...it was really great there and you start missing your friends. First time I was home for the holidays, you just talk to your friends, you just feel you guys are distant because you went there and the other one went there, then you just have to start all over, afresh. (focus groups, 2009).*

*I'm lucky, I have the Judiciary Council to go to if I need to know something but all the other first year B(Comm.)Law students etc have no one to go to. Most faculties should have senior students who can be there for first-years. Like those senior students can give you their number and you can phone them if you need to know something (focus groups, 2009).*

*It sometimes feels like the students who stay at res have everything and the other students have nothing. At res you always have someone to ask if you don't know something. The university should do more for those who live off-campus... Yes, those people often just come to class, go to the library and then go home. They also can't take any evening classes because of transport problems so these people are often the loners who know nobody (focus groups, 2009).*

*Socially I suffered a bit in the beginning since I knew no one in Bloemfontein, most of my classmates had gone to other universities and the friend-making process had to start all over again (white female students, HUM, 2010).*

Given the prominence accorded to social relations and social networks in supporting students during the transition and the first-year, together with the emphasis that many students placed on this capability, it can be concluded that this is capability would be of value in a pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university.

### **8.3.6 Respect, dignity and recognition**

This capability has two overarching and closely related dimensions. Firstly, each individual student should be treated with respect and dignity and be accorded recognition for who they are – by themselves, other students, and by the university itself. Secondly, students need to be able to treat others, who may or may not be different from themselves, with respect and dignity and be able to recognise and value diversity. These two dimensions are both of critical importance in fostering this capability. If learners and students have the capability to respect others, to treat them with dignity and to recognise injustice then the first dimension is more likely to be realised. Consider the following remark made by a first-year student during the 2009 focus group discussions.

*“what I feel is that when you come to varsity we are numbers, we are all equal. You went to different schools, different backgrounds, but when you get to varsity, we are all equal. So we can blame the school system all went want, we can blame the past,*

*but we are all equal. Same resources, same lecturers, same everything – we are equal. And that’s what I like about varsity” (focus group, first year student, 2009).*

This quotation provides an example of a student who is not yet capable of recognising difference and, in particular, the varying contexts from which students come and within which students live their lives. This student is likely to find it difficult to understand and respect other students who are different from themselves; for example are perhaps are not able to spend as much time learning as s/he is or do not have money to purchase textbooks, or are not able to join in social events due to lack of money. The contradictory responses first-year students provided with respect to diversity in terms of race and languages were presented in the previous chapter (see section 7.2.3) and highlight the different degrees to which students entering university have the capability for respect, dignity and recognition. The results also showed that schools were not providing sufficient opportunity for learners to develop this capability with only just over one third of the 2759 learners who participated in the study reporting that they often worked with a learner who was different from them in terms of race, culture, political opinion, family income or personal values. This trend was particularly marked at Afrikaans schools and township schools, both of which constitute major feeders to the UFS. Given the growing diversity of the student body at the UFS (see Chapters 1 and 2) as well as the concerning extent of injustice and overall poor levels of transformation across the higher education sector as a whole (Ministry of Education, 2008) the importance of creating space for school learners to develop the capability of respect, dignity and recognition is of particular urgency.

The trend towards acceptance of mediocrity and failure that was shown in Chapter 7 is further evidence for the importance of building this capability in the interests of student success (see section 7.4). Learners and students need to recognise their own potential and come to respect themselves as learners/students. Without this the discourse of mediocrity and failure is likely to find fertile ground for growth as students’ confidence in themselves is undermined. This is particularly important in the context of the transition to university and during the first year where it is, to some extent, expected that students will experience some uncertainty and confusion (see section 7.2.1). While first-year students are entering a new domain and stage of life and so need to adjust, the transition is likely to be more successful where students have a sense of confidence in their ability to learn (see capability of learning disposition), in other words, recognise their own potential (Arendale, 2010; Astin, 1993; Bernstein, 2000; Conley, 2005a; Harvey et al., 2006; Johnston, 2010; Krause et al., 2005; Upcraft et al., 2005). Upcraft et al (2005) identify the importance of treating first-

year students with dignity and respect as one of the eleven key principles of good practice in the first year (see section 2.3). The quotation below is an example of a high school learner who is not able to recognise his own potential, and does not see himself as worthy of respect. What are the implications for this learner in terms of educational opportunities after school?

*i really don't feel good about myself as a I am not proud to be me (Black male learner, township school).*

Another example of the importance of fostering this capability was the learner who stated that “they will watch you as you hang yourself with your actions” and “they will kick you out without mercy”. The implications for confidence, as well as for the capability of respect, dignity and recognition of the self are highlighted by this learner. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the many examples of students who reported finding the transition to university difficult because they were ‘just a number’ (see section 7.3.1). Ensuring that high school learners have opportunities to develop the capability for respect, dignity and recognition of themselves and of others is thus a valuable capability to include in the pragmatic list.

### **8.3.7 Emotional integrity (Emotional health and reflexivity)**

The role of emotion, of learners/students and teachers/lecturers, in educational contexts has been convincingly demonstrated by educational researchers (see for example, Boler, 1997; Zembylas, 2002, 2003). In the context of the capabilities approach, the capability for emotional integrity refers to the extent to which learners and students are free from anxiety or fear that diminishes learning. Given this context specific understanding of emotional integrity, it is proposed (and this is supported by the quotations below) that this capability be renamed as ‘emotional health and reflexivity’ when used in the context of the transition to university. The relatively smaller number of learner/student responses of students that fell into this category were almost all related to the confusion and fear students entering a new environment commonly felt. The details of these responses were shown in section 7.2.1 where I described transition experiences.

The capability of emotional health and reflexivity, in the specific context of the transition to university, should also take account of learners’ and students’ confidence or lack thereof, and the impacts this has on learning. Having confidence in one’s ability to learn

is crucial (Barnett, 2007b; Bernstein, 2000; Conley, 2008b, 2010b; Kuh et al., 2007; Smit, 2012; Walker, 2006). The importance of confidence as a basis for learning has been strongly emphasised by Bernstein (2000, p. xx, kindle edition) in his work on pedagogic rights. Bernstein defines three pedagogic rights that are necessary for democratic (or socially just) education practice. The first of these rights is what Bernstein (2000, p. xx, kindle edition) calls the right to individual enhancement, which is defined as “the right to the means of critical understanding and new possibilities” without which “neither students nor teachers will have confidence, and without confidence it is difficult to act” (Bernstein, 2000, p. xxx, kindle edition). In a similar vein, Barnett (2007b, pp. 110–111) notes that self-belief or self-confidence underpin a student’s learning dispositions. He argues that,

“Given that higher education is a process in which the student is constantly being stretched, and taken into new and strange places, self-doubt is always liable to break in. There is a continuing task, therefore, on the part of the educator in bolstering the student’s level of self-confidence” (Barnett, 2007b, p. 111).

Many of the first-year student quotations related to learning skills and transition experiences showed an underlying lack of confidence. A general lack of confidence was also highlighted in the learners’ descriptions of their expectations of university (see section 7.3.4.1) where a sense of fear appeared in each quotation, although expressed differently by different learners. A few additional examples are given below to further highlight the importance of incorporating confidence within the definition of the capability of emotional health and reflexivity. The last quotation provides an additional example of a student lacking confidence due to the lack of familiarity and belonging she felt (cf. 8.3.5).

*I faced the most scary thing I have never faced before, and that was being here. I didn't know what to do, I was shy to ask for help to other people. Its never easy facing the world alone (Black female first year student, HUM, 2010).*

*I was so stupid because I didn't know how to use a computer. I didn't enjoy university the first month. I also didn't understand lectures in classes. I hope that everything is difficult and I can't do it. (Black female student, EMS, 2010).*

*You are so confused in the beginning. You don't know where to go and then the first shock you get is the type of work you need to do<sup>79</sup> (focus groups, 2009).*

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<sup>79</sup> Original Afrikaans text: *Jy is so deurmekaar in the begin. Jy weet nie waar om te gaan nie en dan die eerste skok wat jy kry is die tipe werk wat jy moet doen (Focus groups 2009)*

*Varsity is not a play-ground. Lecturers were nothing like my highschool teachers. They were fast and there was too much to study. It felt like just a lot for a small brain like mine (Black female student, EMS, 2010).*

*I remember being worried about how will I cope with university pressure, whether will I make it in the end (Black male student, NAS, 2010).*

*My first month was terrible because I was not familiar with such a big school and everything was so complicated and modernised. I did not feel very welcome. I felt like I was lost or in another planet (Black female student, EMS, 2010).*

This section has argued for the value of including emotional integrity (reframed as emotional health and reflexivity) in the pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university. In a similar vein to the capability of practical reason, emotional health and reflexivity might also be seen as a foundational capability needed for the realisation of other capabilities. In particular, the capability of learning disposition – the will and the skills to learn – depends on learners and students having developed confidence in their ability to learn. Drawing on his work with teachers and schools, Zembylas (2002, p. 208) reminds us that “we need to recognise the emotional complexity of schools.” So too, should we consider the emotional complexity of universities, and in the context of this study, the emotional complexity of making the transition from school to university.

### **8.3.8 Bodily integrity**

Relatively few students made specific reference to issues of bodily integrity. This was the capability where the fewest instances were found in the qualitative data, only 35 instances across the range of qualitative data. The responses that were made by students tended to be related to physical experiences during the orientation week, such as being sunburnt and physically exhausted. Some examples include,

*RAG was very much fun, I enjoyed, I did Chicken Run every time they were looking for someone, I went and did Chicken Run, I sold Ritsems...but I got so badly sunburnt even the psalms of my hands were red. The last two days I wore gloves, long-sleeved jackets. Everybody just stared at me cos I'm sweating here but I can't move in the sun (focus groups, 2009).*

*For me, it's first-years Athletics. They made us stand the whole time and we won so, that was nice but the standing wasn't nice (focus groups, 2009).*

Where school learners made reference to issues of bodily integrity they were most often referring to bullying, corporal punishment at school, drug use, as well as sexual misconduct. For example,

*to chase away learners who bully other learners at school the principal should banish them from coming to school (black female learner, township school, 2010).*

*Here at school we have a lot of crimes e.g fighting, bullying and jumping outside lot of smoking and selling daga's e.g Joints (coloured male learner, township school, 2009).*

*Another thing it is that I would also like to change the way we are punished at school because the beating is not nice (black female learner, township school, 2010).*

*The teachers of our school are very abusive, They still hit us (black male learner, township school, 2009).*

*Some of teachers Drinking Beer in school and other beat us when we are not guilty (black male learner, township school, 2009).*

*And also teachers are having affairs with students and they are also smoking and swearing infront of us which is wrong, our parents don't do that, they dont respect us as learners (black female learner, township school, 2009).*

These are very concerning remarks, and show evidence of criminal activity at schools. This is not an unknown phenomenon in the South African schooling context. While limits to bodily integrity should be treated with extreme seriousness across all spheres of social life (including schools and universities), such issues are not specifically related to the transition to university and hence I have not included this capability in my pragmatic list that is intentionally more narrowly focused. Instead, corporal punishment, drug use and abuse, and sexual misconduct should be dealt with by the relevant authorities.<sup>80</sup> While bodily integrity is a capability that should be fostered for all learners and students, this

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<sup>80</sup> The reports that were prepared for the Free State Department of Education included these findings, without identifying information (such as the school name), as per ethical requirement. In addition, the individual school reports shared with the individual school principal also made mention of such findings where relevant, and with careful attention paid to ensuring that no information such as grade or gender of learner was provided to ensure that learners' confidentiality was respected.

capability is better seen as a general capability of relevance across the entire education system, and, indeed, as Nussbaum argues, at a societal level. As such, this capability (formulated as a standalone capability) is not specific to the transition to university – the focus of the pragmatic capabilities list I am proposing. While the capability for bodily integrity, plays a valuable role in Walker's (2006) capabilities list for higher education as a whole, I have not included it in this pragmatic list in the interest of ensuring the formulation a very specific and defined focus on the transition to university.

### **8.3.9 Language competence and confidence**

The final capability included in the ideal-theoretical capabilities list for the transition to university that I proposed in Chapter 4 was that of language competence and confidence. This was an additional capability not originally included in Walker's list of capabilities for higher education. My inclusion of language competence and confidence was supported by the work of Wolff and de-Shalit (2007) who added the capability of language competence in their capabilities list that extended the work of Nussbaum to philosophically and empirically explore the concept of disadvantage. Further, there is much evidence in the transition to university literature as well as the literature on student success, epistemological access, and the first-year at university that emphasises the importance of language competence (see Chapter 3). The theoretical relevance of this additional capability has thus been established. In this section I argue that my empirical findings also support the inclusion of this capability in a pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university.

Considering my analysis of the qualitative data, a relatively smaller number of learners and students made direct mention of language competence and confidence (54 instances) compared to most of the other capabilities. Three main themes emerged where language was specifically referred to in the context of the transition to university (see sections 7.2.3 and 7.3.1.3). The first related to the multilingual environment of university, which for some students was difficult to adapt to, and for a few others, was a positive experience. The second focused on the difficulty of learning in a language other than one's home language or mother tongue. Thirdly, several students described their difficulty with coming to understand the type of language used at university. The insecurity of students

who did not feel comfortable in the language of instruction was evident in many of the quotations presented in section 7.3.1.3.

Perhaps even more telling than the students' reflection on language related challenges is the generally poor quality of language used in written qualitative responses of both school learners and students.<sup>81</sup> As noted earlier, the quotations used as examples in this thesis have been presented in their original form, without spelling and grammar corrections. Several examples of poor language competence can be seen in the preceding quotations. A few additional examples are shown below. The first three are taken from my school learner data, and the second four from first year university students.

*Our school doesnt have any oppertunitiyes so many of use fail to understand anything (Black learner, no gender given, township, 2009).*

*Getting educated is what I want, my Future come First and my education is my First Priority. Sometimes things be difficult at school and Iam working hard to achieve my goals. and i try so hard to be perfect and work on the subjects I strangle on like mathematics and I enjoy school and teacher's company and they have a lot of care For us and I work hard because I want a bursary to go to varsity (Black female learner, township, 2009).*

*I would like to expand my studyies at UFS as best as I can but I did apply late per the cose that I would like to continue with. So I have like to do Social working to help other with they problem as one of my vision and I am sure I choose cose with is base am faculty of human resources (Black female learner, township, 2009).*

*My first month in tertiary I as confused because I could not help fast for accomodation because I come from afar Kroonstad so it was hard for me to adapt living with other students who had accomodation and I did not have it because they said it was booked or fully occupied, and also for lessons I got lost a lot of times, when I needed to get to lecturer room of the place would be moved to another place, so yes it was and people where friendly here in the university help me a lot to get the right information and venues here, so yeh, I had a tough times adapting the life of tertiary and socialising with people, but I think now I have adapted enough to survive (Black male first-year student, EDU, 2010).*

*I was the most difficult month on my life. I stuggle lot in my academic and able to make new friend. It was difficult to balance academic life. I found send end give up. In term of social I found so few problem in terms of cultural differences (Black male first-year student, EMS, 2010).*

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<sup>81</sup> This is also supported by anecdotal feedback from lecturers and my own engagement with students and recent graduates.

*It was exciting to be at the university level of which in my life I have never thought of being to further my studies up the university – because I knew I would not manage to pay fees for this standard. But fortunately God provides always (Black female first-year student, EDU 2010)*

*For this first month at tertiary I am confused of what is expected from me, I struggle to understand the way in which content are delivered. It is hard for me to compete to my level best, I did not know that there are other modules except the one I wanted to specialise with and that make me underperforming and I really get more confused because I think of the bursary will be cancelled (Black male first-year student, EDU).*

These examples, together with the performance of UFS first-year students, as well as first-year students nationally, in the academic literacy test of the National Benchmark Tests highlight the importance of building the capacity for language competence and confidence. The National Benchmark Tests results for the UFS specifically have shown consistently over the three years that the tests have been administered (2010, 2011, and 2012) that only approximately 30% of first-year students are proficient in academic literacy.<sup>82</sup> As such, the importance of including the capability of language competence and confidence is clear.

#### 8.4 A pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university

Summarising the arguments made in the preceding sections of this chapter, I thus propose the following pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university.

Table 12: Pragmatic capabilities list for the transition to university

Capability	Definition
1. Practical reason	Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about post-school study and career options.
2. Knowledge and imagination	Having the academic grounding needed to be able to gain knowledge of chosen university subjects, and to develop methods of academic inquiry. Being able to use critical thinking and imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives.
3. Learning disposition	Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having the learning skills required for university study. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.
4. Social relations and social networks	Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems or tasks. Being able to form networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.
5. Respect, dignity and recognition	Being able to have respect for oneself and for others as well as receiving respect 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

<sup>82</sup> UFS Institutional Data

Capability	Definition
	dialogue and debate. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning.
6. Emotional health and reflexivity	Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn.
7. Language competence and confidence	Being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction.

The overall purpose of developing these capabilities among high school learners and students entering university is to build the educational resilience needed for a successful transition to university. In this context educational resilience is defined as being able to navigate the transition from school to university within individual life contexts; being able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically; to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints; and to have aspirations and hopes for a successful university career. The seven capabilities making up the list encapsulate existing knowledge about factors impacting on the transition to university and provide a framework that accommodates the perspectives of learners and students that emerged from my data. This list provides a possible guide for action, and while encompassing the various dimensions of readiness that Conley identified, also goes further due to its roots in an explicit social justice agenda that takes the well-being of individual students as a starting point. As such, this list provides the basis for a normative framework for understanding what is needed for access to university in order to strive towards more just outcomes that take the well-being of individual students into account (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009b). The preceding discussions about each of the capabilities also highlighted the manner in which this list allows for a focus on both the agency of the student as well as contextual factors that may, or may not, limit this agency.

The seven capabilities included in the list provide a basis for a different language for talking and thinking about the transition to university in a manner that overcomes the deficit model language of under preparation and at risk students (Smit, 2012). The capabilities language also takes us beyond, but still incorporates, the traditional focus of access research on measurable performance as a basis for predicting success. As such, a capabilities approach to access and the list of capabilities identified as important moves the debate forward by focusing on the creation of opportunity for a successful transition and the removal of barriers (at personal, social, political, economic, environmental levels) to opportunity. The agency of students is thus recognised and valued, but not in a naïve manner that assumes that agency can be exercised without contextual influences, both

positive and negative. The capabilities approach draws attention to the ways in which contextual factors support or hinder students' agency and resultant opportunities. In addition, as will be shown in my concluding chapter, these seven capabilities have the potential to open up specific possibilities for actions to facilitate the transition from school to university.

Returning to Robeyn's (2003b, pp. 70–71) five criteria for developing a capabilities list, in the table below I present a summary and final word of explanation regarding the value of the list, and the methodological soundness thereof.

Table 13: Application of Robeyn's (2003b) criteria for developing a capabilities list

Criteria	Description (paraphrased from Robeyns, 2003b, pp. 70–71)	Application in the context of this study
1. Explicit formulation	The list should be explicit, discussed and defended.	In Chapter 5 the list was explicated, discussed and defended from a theoretical standpoint, while in this chapter the capabilities were further explained and defended based on the voices of learners and students who are the focus of the list.
2. Methodological justification	The methods used for generating the list must be explained, scrutinized and defended as most appropriate for the specific issue.	My methodology has been explained at various points in this thesis, and defended as the most appropriate methodology. Of particular importance was the positioning of the study within a pragmatic paradigm using a mixed method research design that allowed for the incorporation of multiple perspectives of both learners and students, with data gathered over time to ensure consistency. In addition, the research instruments were specifically chosen and developed for their relevance to the topic of transitioning to university, but were not specifically designed according to the capabilities list proposed such that the views of learners and students could emerge rather than be primed in the direction of the list through the line of questioning used.
3. Sensitivity to context	The level of abstraction of the list should be appropriate for the context for which it was formulated. The list should speak the language of the debate with which one wants to engage.	By explicitly aligning my work on the capabilities list with key theories about the transition to university and student engagement in learning at school and university levels I was able to ensure that the list speaks the language of the debate in the area of access to university. In addition, I used Walker's (2006) list of capabilities for higher education as my starting point, thus firmly locating the work within the field of higher education specifically. In proposing the final six capabilities, I have returned to the definitions of each in a reflexive manner to ensure that the final definitions presented are a clear expression of the capability in the specific context of transitioning to university.
4. Different levels of generality	When being developed for empirical application or to underpin policy or intervention, then two stages are needed. The first stage involves drawing up	As noted in Chapter 5, this criterion was of particular relevance in the context of this study. I followed the two stages proposed by Robeyns, starting with an ideal list and then refining this to present a more pragmatic list that is particularly targeted to the

Criteria	Description (paraphrased from Robeyns, 2003b, pp. 70-71)	Application in the context of this study
	the ideal list, unconstrained by methodological, socioeconomic or political feasibility. The second stage focuses on drawing up a pragmatic list that explicitly takes these constraints into account.	realities of the contexts in which it will be applied. This aspect of the list is even further developed in the final chapter where I draw links to possible areas in which schools and university can work towards fostering the development of these six capabilities.
5. Exhaustiveness and non-reduction	The capabilities listed should include all the important elements relevant to the issue at hand. Each capability should not be reducible to the other, although there may be some overlap.	The list of six capabilities proposed here incorporates the important elements of Conley's Multi-dimensional model of university readiness, as well as the key tenets of student engagement theory and practice. These theoretical perspectives were verified by the empirical data and the list encapsulates all of the themes that emerged from my learner and student data. In my defense of each capability presented in this chapter I have explained the value of each and, where a particular capability could be reducible to others (such as emotional health and reflexivity), the capability was not included. There is some overlap between the capability of learning disposition and respect, dignity and recognition particularly with respect to the concept of confidence. However, this overlap has been explained, and does not entail overlap across all dimensions of these two capabilities, hence the inclusion of both. The capability of educational resilience was shown to encapsulate the other capabilities, and was thus removed from the capabilities list and rather positioned as the outcome of a successful transition to university.

## 8.5 The role of context: Identifying conversion factors

The capabilities list for the transition to university provides the basis for proposing a normative framework for what a successful transition to university requires and so provides an entry point for formulating interventions. The other key idea within the capabilities approach that is important in the context of this study is that of conversion factors. In section 4.5 I presented a theoretical argument for a focus on conversion factors (factors that impact on a person's ability to convert resources into opportunities or capabilities), in this section I draw on my empirical findings to identify conversion factors that play a role in the context of the transition to university. The notion of conversion factors draws attention to the point at which agency and context come together in the capabilities approach and so provides a mechanism for researching the interaction between individual agency and contexts. The key question then becomes "Do some people [learners and students] get more opportunities to convert their resources into capabilities than others" (Walker, 2005, p. 109). The following three sections draw on Sen (1999, p. 71) and Robeyns's (2005, p. 99)

work on conversion factors to present an analysis of the personal, social and environmental conversion factors that impact on the transition to university capabilities (see section 4.5 for theoretical details).

### **8.5.1 Personal conversion factors**

The notion of personal conversion factors encompasses individual (personal) factors that impact on the development of capabilities and the achievement of valued outcomes (functionings), such as physical condition, intelligence, health status and so on (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999). As noted earlier, personal conversion factors in the form of academic performance (taken as a measure of ability – particularly in the context of systems based on meritocracy) have tended to be the focus of much of the research on readiness for university. While measures of ability, potential and competence are important for the transition to university, a focus on these factors alone does not present the full picture and does not take account of social justice challenges so prevalent in the domain of access to higher education. As such, my focus in this study was more specifically turned to social and environmental conversion factors as a point of entry to identify the ways in which injustices are manifested.

Nonetheless, one additional personal conversion factor that emerged strongly from the data was that of home language. Learners and students who needed to function in a language of learning that was not their home language, or was not a language that they felt confident in experienced a range of difficulties when entering university (see section 7.3.1.3). The provision of targeted support for students not learning in a language that they feel confident with is thus critical to better facilitate the transition to university.

### **8.5.2 Social conversion factors**

Social conversion factors are closely aligned with the sociological concept of social structure. Included in the realm of social conversion factors are policies, social norms, family norms, patriarchy, gender roles, power relations and so on. Several important social conversion factors emerged from my data. Perhaps the most striking was the type of school that a learner attended, with the most challenges identified for learners in Afrikaans HSC schools and learners attending township schools. Across the board, learners at Afrikaans HSC schools reported much lower levels of engagement in effective educational practices, poorer levels of motivation for learning, and fewer opportunities to engage with diversity of

ideas and people. In many instances these differences were statistically significant (see Chapter 7). Learners emerging from such an educational background are likely to find the transition to university difficult, despite their personal ability and academic performance (marks) at school.

Socioeconomic context – measured by school fees and type of school in this study – was also an important social conversion factor for the transition to university. In particular, the influence of socioeconomic context was seen in the comparisons across schools types in how learners spend their time outside of the formal school day. The data showed that learners at township schools (typically the poorest socioeconomic context) spent significantly more time than learners at other school types walking to schools, caring for family members, and doing chores at home; and significantly less time engaging in educational enrichment activities such as volunteer work, exercise and sport, playing musical instruments and participating in cultural activities. Learners from this socioeconomic context generally came from families where parents' level of education was low, and many are or would be first generation university students. The data also showed that learners from lower socioeconomic contexts often lacked supportive social networks that could assist them during the transition. Lastly, the proxy measure for nutritional status – regularity of eating breakfast – showed that learners in the lower socioeconomic context environments (both township and suburban LSC) were less likely to regularly eat breakfast. Although this is a crude measure of nutrition and well-being; research has shown the importance of breakfast in the context of educational performance (see for example, Mahoney, Taylor, Kanarek, & Samuel, 2005; Taras, 2005).

The final group of social conversion factors that emerged as relevant to the transition to university were those related to gender. Interestingly, gender as a conversion factor appears to operate in conflicting ways. When considering activities outside of school time the results showed that female learners spent more time than male learners doing household chores and taking care of family members. This implies that female learners have more responsibilities in the home compared to male learners, which could have a negative impact on their educational performance and success. However, in contrast, the results related to engagement in effective learning activities at school showed that in some areas, most notably academic behaviours, female learners tended to be better prepared for university than male learners. For example, female learners spent more time on educational activities such as writing and doing homework and across several items were statistically significantly more likely than male learners to report that their schools placed strong

emphasis on active and deep learning activities. Female learners were statistically significantly more likely than male learners to report that their schools placed emphasis on using computers for learning. The data did not allow for a more nuanced focus on gender issues – as this was not a particular focus of the study – and more research would be needed to better unpack these patterns. Nonetheless, it does appear that gender is an important conversion factor that operates in different ways in the home and school contexts.

### **8.5.3 Environmental conversion factors**

Factors related to geographical locations and climate conditions are examples of environmental conversion factors. In the context of this study, environmental conversion factors were of less significance than social conversion factors were. Nonetheless, the results did point to the impact that living on campus as opposed to commuting had on the lives of students. In most cases, students who had a place in residence reported better support systems and an easier process of forming friendships and social networks. As noted above though (see section 7.2.4), living in residence was also associated with greater experiences of time pressures and tiredness due to the many compulsory first year activities for residence students.

With respect to school learners, geographic location also had an impact on learners' lives in various ways. For example, the results showed that living and attending school in a township meant spending more time than other learners walking to school. The phenomenon of many learners living in townships but travelling long distances to attend better resourced suburban LSC schools was also noted, with these learners spending a significant amount of time each day in taxis.

## **8.6 Conclusion: A capabilities framework for facilitating the transition from school to university**

In this chapter I have presented my theorising underpinning the proposed capabilities list for the transition to university, together with a reflection on the conversion factors that appeared most salient for learners and students, drawing on the empirical data. In this final section of the chapter I attempt to bring all of these aspects together to present a framework for understanding – with the aim of facilitating or improving – the transition from school to university. To do so, I have returned to Figure 3 in which I presented a stylised

representation of a possible capabilities framework for the transition to university and adapted the stylised framework based on the results of this study. My focus has been on presenting a clear and more specific understanding of the factors affecting the transition to university and influencing the extent to which capabilities are fostered or not. The framework draws on my empirical data as the basis for clarifying and presenting a more detailed and specific account of the dimensions of transition identified in Figure 3.

Even when more clearly understood, aspects of the transition to university remain outside of the field of influence of both schools and universities. It is thus necessary to identify specific points of intervention where schools and universities can have an impact and so work towards fostering the seven transition to university capabilities in order to improve the transition experience and outcome for diverse students. Possible points of intervention by schools and/or the university are shown in red in Figure 31 and the details are discussed in my concluding chapter. Intentional interventions that seek to foster the seven capabilities for the transition to university, taking into account the conversion factors identified, have the potential to break down the walls (see drawing 13) that limit the opportunities for success for many students.

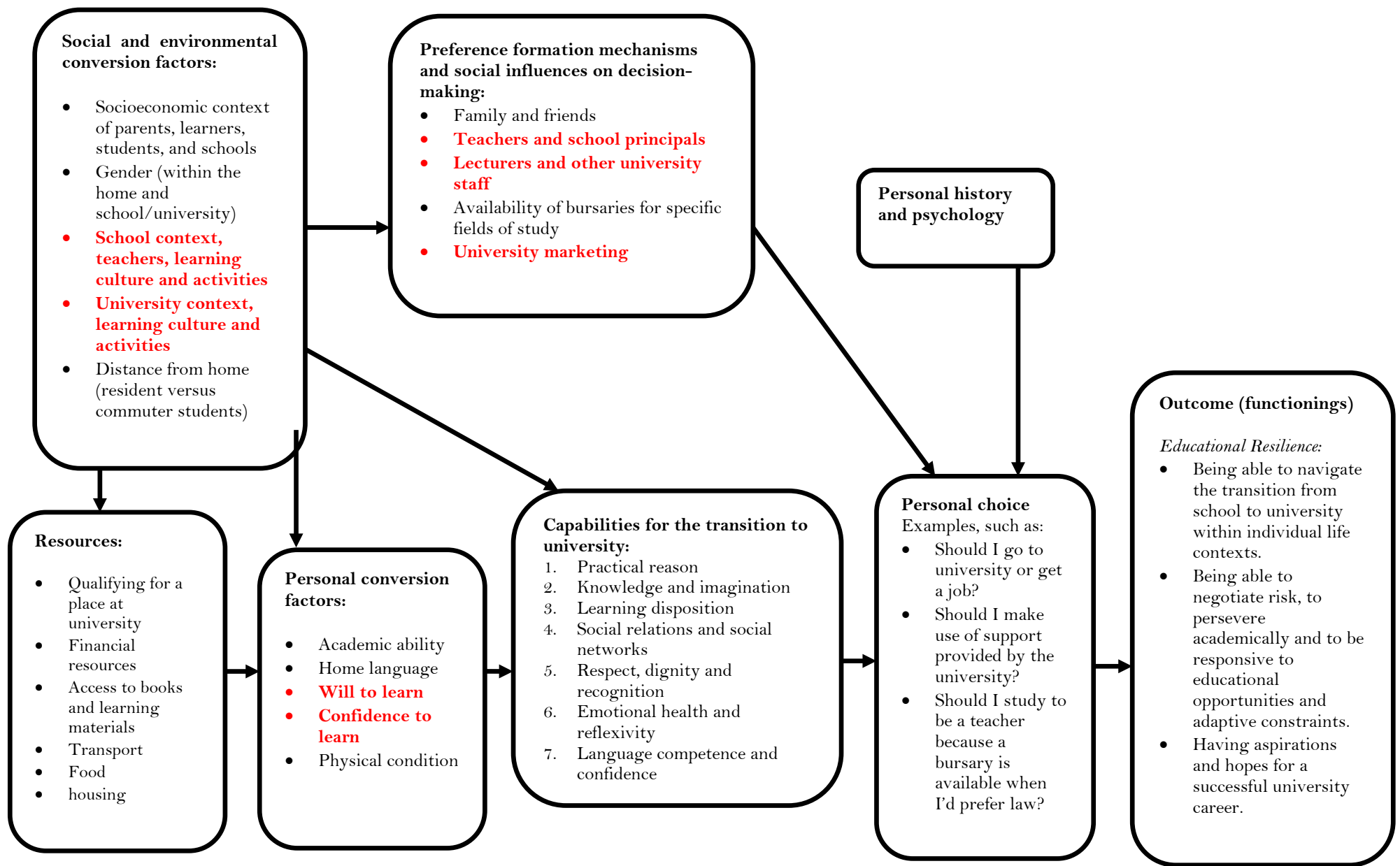


Figure 33: Capabilities framework for the transition from school to university

## Chapter 9: Reflections, Conclusions and Way Forward

“What moves us, reasonably enough, is not the realisation that the world falls short of being completely just – which few of us expect – but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate” (Sen, 2009, p. vii).

### 9.1 Introduction: Summarising the logic of the study

My starting point in conceptualising this study was the observation (argued in Chapters 1 and 2) that despite the progressive post-apartheid higher education policy context and the significant gains that have been made in broadening access, the South African higher education environment remains plagued by a host of injustices. In particular, my focus was on accessing university and the fact that increased and broadened access, in many instances, does not lead to success for large numbers of students. I argued upfront that much of the research on access to university has tended to focus on either schooling or the first year at university, but seldom both. Relatively little specific attention has been given to the transition itself. Using the UFS and a group of 20 local feeder schools as my case study, I have sought to understand the transition from school to university from the perspective of high school learners and students entering the UFS. In line with Sen’s quotation at the start of this chapter, I believe that the injustices inherent to the transition to university for many students are remediable and should be eliminated. As such, it was necessary to firmly locate this study within a social justice framework.

Given the complex theoretical terrain of social justice, and the tensions inherent when applying social justice frameworks in higher education (see Chapter 3), I needed to step back and consider key theorists whose work has been applied in an education context – in particular the work of John Rawls, Iris Marion Young, and Nancy Fraser. Chapter 3 provides a short account of their work, an application of this work to access issues together with a brief critique of each in terms of my specific topic. On the basis of this analysis and critique, I argued that the capabilities approach, as advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides the most useful theoretical starting point, or normative framework, to explore the transition to university from a social justice stand point. In Chapter 4 the key tenants of the capabilities approach were introduced in some detail, together with a review of how the approach has been applied in (higher) education settings. While I do not wish to

repeat the details, it is useful to briefly restate the main concepts of particular relevance to my study.

The capabilities approach takes as the starting point the well-being of individuals and asks about the extent to which people are able to be and do what they have reason to value being and doing (as opposed to measurable access statistics that count enrolment numbers of students from different demographic groupings). Functionings are akin to outcomes and refer to the achievement of being and doing what one has reason to value. Capabilities, closely related to functionings though distinctive, refer to opportunity freedoms, or the freedom an individual has to enjoy the functionings necessary for their well-being. When we consider issues of justice or injustice we cannot merely ask whether different people have achieved the same outcome, but rather, whether different people have had the same opportunities to achieve the outcome (see section 4.1.1 for illustrative examples). Agency is central, together with notions of choice. However, agency is not given primacy to the extent that social structures, institutions and contexts are insufficiently accounted for. I argued in Chapter 4 (see section 4.5) that it is the manner in which the capabilities approach foregrounds agency together with the interaction of agents and social contexts that I found particularly useful for my work. The conceptual device used within the capabilities approach for bringing structure and agency together is the notion of conversion factors.

Personal, social and environmental conversion factors impact on the extent to which a given individual is able to make use of available resources to create capabilities and functionings. As such, the capabilities approach emphasises agency and choice, but also draws our attention to the fact that the opportunity freedoms (capabilities) of individuals/agents are qualified and constrained or supported by social arrangements. My focus has thus been on understanding the agency of both high school learners and first-year university students, together with the social and institutional conditions of possibility that might either enable or constrain their capabilities for making a successful transition to university. To do this it was necessary to identify the capabilities that are needed when making the transition from school to university.

Identifying the capabilities important in the context of transitioning to university involved a two stage process carried out according to the five criteria for developing a capabilities list specified by Robeyns (2003). The first stage was theoretical in which an ideal-theoretical capabilities list (see Table 1) was proposed drawing on Walker's (2006) higher education capabilities list and integrating the theory and research on access to

university that was reviewed in detail in Chapter 2. This ideal-theoretical list of nine capabilities was then interrogated on the basis of my empirical data in order to propose what I have called a Pragmatic Capabilities List for the Transition to University (see Table 12). The pragmatic list consists of seven capabilities that should be fostered in the interest of promoting a more socially just approach to university access.

This chapter now turns back to the four research questions that have guided the study. I consider each in turn and reflect on what has been learnt through this study, and hence, why this research is of value for both theory and practice in the area of university access.

## **9.2 Reflections on and answers to the research questions**

Since research questions one and two were the focus of Chapter 7 and research question three the focus of Chapter 8, I have devoted greater attention in this chapter to research question four about possible interventions; merely summarising the main arguments and answers to questions one to three. My work on transition to university experiences was located theoretically in the work of David Conley who proposed a multidimensional model of university readiness, as well as the field of learner/student engagement that draws our attention to engagement in effective educational practices, so providing a lens for researching how education occurs at schools and universities (see Chapter 2 for details).

### **9.2.1 Research question one**

*How do first-year students at the UFS experience the transition to university in their first year of study?*

In order to understand the transition experiences of first-year students at the UFS I worked with a sample of 128 first-year students in 2009 and another 142 first-year students in 2010. My samples included students of both genders, from different race groups, across faculties, from different schooling backgrounds, and some students living in campus residences and others not. Qualitative research methods, including focus groups, written reflections and drawings were used. Chapter 7 (see especially section 7.2 and Table 8)

presents in detail how students described their experiences of coming to university. When collecting the qualitative data I specifically made use of open-ended questions in order to allow the students' voices to emerge without priming in a particular direction. In the following two sections I present an overview of the main findings focused on students' transition experiences and their readiness for university.

#### **9.2.1.1 *Emergent themes***

Eleven emergent themes were identified in my analysis of the qualitative student data. These were as follows (in order of most to least often mentioned)

- Confused, lost or scared
- Residence versus commuter students
- Diversity experiences (positive and negative)
- Independent (learning to become independent)
- Fun, happy, enjoyable, exciting
- Quality of teaching at university
- Orientation experiences (positive and negative)
- Being tired
- Looking towards the future
- Financial challenges
- Spaces in large classes

The most commonly occurring theme was that of feeling confused, lost and scared. As noted in Chapter 7, this finding was not unexpected since students are entering a new and unknown environment and this challenge has been well documented in the literature. Closer scrutiny of the quotations revealed that these feelings of being scared and confused were experienced in relation to space (the physical landscape of the university) and the university system (how things work). This distinction is important when thinking through interventions (see 9.2.4). For many students leaving home for the first time, part of their confusion and fear had to do with being forced to learn to become independent. This was well summed up by the student quotation presented at the outset of Chapter 7, "It's like getting thrown into the deep end of life...without a life jacket!" This experience was

manifest in a variety of ways, from the difficulty of learning to cook one's own food to the freedom of university where it is one's own responsibility to attend classes and do the required work. Independence is also an important component of Conley's academic behaviours readiness dimension and I will return to this issue below (see 9.2.1.2).

Students living in residence commonly made reference to the support networks provided by residence structures during the first few months of university. This support helped students to overcome their feelings of fear and confusion. Several students who did not live in residence remarked about the comparative lack of support they experienced as well as their difficulties meeting people and making new friends. While residences were important in helping students adapt to university, many students lamented the extent of compulsory activities for first-year students which were exhausting and detracted from their academic work. Achieving a better balance between social and academic activities for first-year students in residence is recommended to improve the transition experience as well as students' chances of academic success in the first year.

The data related to experiences with diversity highlighted the various challenges first-year students experienced with respect to diversity. While it was most common for students to report negative experiences related to diversity (or lack thereof), a small number of students made specific references to positive diversity experiences, such as "getting to know different kinds of people", and "learning another language." While it was most common for students to reflect on diversity with respect to race, there were also many instances in which diversity was seen in relation to learning in a multilingual environment, with the majority of students who raised this issue noting the challenge of learning in a language that was unfamiliar as well as interacting with lecturers and students who did not speak their chosen language.

As was noted in Chapter 7, it was surprising that relatively few students made reference to financial difficulties when describing their transition to university and their first few months on campus. The financial difficulties faced by students are commonly raised by student organisations and is also well documented in the literature on the first year experience. In addition, in my data, almost all the references to financial challenges were made by male students. It was not possible to understand this phenomenon better given the nature of my data, but it is recommended that this issue be followed up further in future research.

### 9.2.1.2 *Dimensions of readiness for university*

In earlier chapters I critiqued approaches to university admissions that focus largely (or only) on measurable school grades or admissions test scores as an indication of readiness for university study. While the practicalities of needing to make admissions decisions should not be overlooked, in-depth research that provides a more nuanced understanding of readiness, beyond school grades and other measures of performance – in line with Conley’s multidimensional model of university readiness – is needed if we are to work towards more just processes of access with a greater likelihood of success. As such, Conley’s multidimensional model of university readiness was used as the basis for framing my analysis of readiness in terms of the transition to university. Following the open coding of students’ transition experiences I did a second round of coding with a particular focus on Conley’s four dimensions of readiness. The data presented in Chapter 7 on the basis of which readiness was discussed included data from both students and learners. In responding to the research questions in this chapter, my focus in this section is specifically on readiness from the perspective of students. In section 9.2.2 below the perspectives of school learners will be discussed. The table below presents a summary of Conley’s four dimensions and the findings of my study from the perspective of first-year students.

Table 14: Students’ experiences of their readiness for university

<b>Dimensions of readiness</b>	<b>Definition of dimension (Conley, 2008)</b>	<b>Main findings – students’ readiness</b>
Key cognitive strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem formulation and problem solving;</li> <li>• Research, inquiry and dialogue;</li> <li>• Reasoning, argumentation and proof;</li> <li>• Interpretation; and</li> <li>• Precision and accuracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparing the SAHSSLE and the SASSE results, it appears that high schools might place greater weight on active and deep learning than the UFS does in the first year of study. Both schools and the UFS need to devote greater attention to building learners and students’ cognitive strategies.</li> <li>• Students often noted that they experienced the cognitive demands at university to be at a different level from school expectations.</li> <li>• Three main areas in which differences between school and university requirements were noted: (1) being critical and formulating an argument; (2) being able to integrate theory and practice, (3) having academic writing and referencing skills.</li> <li>• Students found it difficult to learn in a language that they were not familiar with and this affected their cognitive performance.</li> <li>• In addition to the actual language being used, several students (home language and non-home language speakers) found the type of language being used and the context in which language was used challenging to understand. This was an example of the need to focus attention on epistemological access.</li> </ul>

Dimensions of readiness	Definition of dimension (Conley, 2008)	Main findings – students' readiness
Key content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key structures, concepts and knowledge association with core academic subjects, e.g. Mathematics, Science, Languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NBT Mathematics results of UFS students (and students nationally) show that students entering university have often not mastered important mathematics concepts needed as a foundation for their work at university level.</li> <li>Students reported that although they used to perform well in various subjects at school, the same subjects at university were now very difficult and school subjects were “not anything like we're doing now”. Examples were noted with respect to English, Drama, Chemistry and Mathematics.</li> <li>In addition, some students reported that what they had learnt at school was regarded as incorrect once at university.</li> </ul>
Academic behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Behaviours that reflect student self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-control;</li> <li>Actions necessary for academic success such as study skills and time management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The area of academic behaviours was the readiness dimension most commonly referred to by students.</li> <li>Students found the ‘whirlwind’ of the first months at university difficult to manage (see drawing 7).</li> <li>Learning to become independent, disciplined, and taking personal responsibility for their learning and their own decision-making was difficult for many students.</li> <li>Readiness challenges with respect to study skills were very commonly reported. In particular, students made reference to the volume of work and the large, impersonal classes.</li> <li>For students from poorly resourced schools, the use of computers was also a major challenge.</li> </ul>
University knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal or informal, stated or unstated information about how the university works</li> <li>How to apply, what to study, how to obtain financial support</li> <li>Understanding the university system and culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several student drawings represented, in one way or another, the divide between school and university.</li> <li>Students reflected on the lack of helpful information provided to them about university whilst they were at school. This included information about: (1) subject choices at school, (2) how to make decisions regarding study direction at university, (3) career choices, (4) what to expect at university – in terms of academics, social, and expectations of them as students.</li> </ul>

Table 14 highlights the range of areas in which first-year students reported a lack of readiness for university and supports the argument for the need to move beyond measurable performance as the main indicator of readiness. In section 9.2.3 the implications of these findings for the capabilities of young people transitioning to university will be discussed.

A further note about the applicability of Conley's module of university readiness also requires mention. Although language competence and confidence are implied in Conley's dimension of key cognitive strategies, the importance of language issues highlighted in this study point to a need to include language confidence and competence more specifically in a model of university readiness when applied in the context of the UFS – and most likely the broader South African higher education environment. This is explicitly picked up in my capabilities list for the transition to university, however, it would be useful for future work

drawing on Conely's model specifically to incorporate a stronger emphasis on language confidence and competence.

In this section I have sought to present a summary of the main findings on which answers to research question one – focused on first-year students – can be provided. In the coming section I turn to research question two to present the perspective of high school learners.

### **9.2.2 Research question two**

*How do learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 from local UFS feeder high schools experience the process of preparation for and access to university?*

Research question two draws specific attention to the other end of the humpback bridge, namely schooling. In line with my argument that school performance alone is insufficient to understand readiness for university, the focus of my research with school learners focused on educational practices at school as well as learners' expectations and understandings of university level study. As described in depth in Chapters 5 and 6, my data collection with school learners involved two nested stages. The first was the completion of the South African high school survey of learner engagement (SAHSSLE) by a total of 2816 learners in their final three years of schooling, representing 20 UFS feeder schools. The second stage involved qualitative reflections on schooling experiences and plans to attend university, as well as the completion of an open-ended university knowledge questionnaire. A total of 33 learners, in Grades 11 and 12, participated in the second stage.

Drawing on both the quantitative SAHSSLE data as well as the qualitative learner data, Table 15 presents a summary of the findings regarding learners' experiences of the process of preparation for and access to university. As was explained in Chapter 6, I made use of a school categorisation framework developed for this study, with the 20 schools classified as suburban higher socioeconomic context (suburban HSC), suburban lower socioeconomic context (suburban LSC), and township schools. A further level of classification was introduced in Chapter 7 when presenting the results. Due to the specificity of the responses of learners attending Afrikaans medium of instruction suburban HSC schools it was necessary to differentiate between the responses of English and

Afrikaans suburban HSC learners. The SAHSSLE data provided a rich basis for exploring educational practice at the school level. While I sought to present the richness of the results in Chapter 7, in this section I attempt to summarise the main points – recognising, though, that much of the value of the learner engagement data lies in the detail discussed in Chapter 7. In Table 15 I have included several references to specific figures or sections of Chapter 7 for the reader who wishes to refer back to the detail.

Table 15: Learners’ experiences of their readiness for university

Dimensions of readiness	Definition of dimension (Conley, 2008)	Main findings – learners’ readiness
Key cognitive strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem formulation and problem solving;</li> <li>• Research, inquiry and dialogue;</li> <li>• Reasoning, argumentation and proof;</li> <li>• Interpretation; and</li> <li>• Precision and accuracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The items focused on the use and development of key cognitive strategies at schools showed that, except for learners at Afrikaans suburban HSC schools, the majority of learners (commonly two thirds and more) reported that their schools placed emphasis on a range of learning activities that facilitate the development of cognitive skills (see Figure 20).</li> <li>• With respect to items focused on educationally effective practices, similar results were found with Afrikaans suburban HSC learners reporting significantly less engagement in these activities (see Figure 21).</li> <li>• Concerning was that very few learners – across school types – reported receiving helpful feedback from their teachers, and writing an essay of more than five pages (see Figure 21).</li> <li>• School learners reported doing work requiring integration of material from various sources and preparing drafts of written work prior to submission less regularly than first-year students. However, school learners were more likely to ask questions in class and to participate in class discussions than first-year students were.</li> <li>• School learners reported a greater emphasis than university students on analysis of ideas in depth and less emphasis on memorization. Despite these differences, the extent of emphasis noted by school learners was still low and likely to be insufficient to ensure cognitive readiness.</li> <li>• In their qualitative responses, several learners raised concerns about the cognitive demands of their work at school.</li> </ul>
Key content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key structures, concepts and knowledge association with core academic subjects, e.g. Mathematics, Science, Languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some learners reported difficulty understanding content being covered at school.</li> <li>• In some instances, learners felt that insufficient time was devoted to properly understanding the key concepts of Mathematics and Physical Science and that work was rushed.</li> <li>• Absent and poor quality teachers impact on the extent to which learners develop key content knowledge.</li> </ul>
Academic behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviours that reflect student self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-control;</li> <li>• Actions necessary for academic success such as study skills and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student engagement measures allowed for a specific focus on academic behaviours developed at school and those that were important at university.</li> <li>• On average, school learners reported spending about 8 hours per 7 day week on learning activities outside of the classroom (see Table 9).</li> <li>• Most learners (excluding learners at Afrikaans suburban HSC schools) reported that it was important to do written</li> </ul>

Dimensions of readiness	Definition of dimension (Conley, 2008)	Main findings – learners’ readiness
	time management	<p>homework, to read and study for class and to read for oneself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners at Afrikaans suburban HSC schools were more likely to report that practising sport or musical instruments were their top priority (see Figure 24).</li> <li>• Female learners placed greater emphasis on written homework and reading and studying for class, while male learners tended to place greater emphasis on sport and other school activities (see Table 10).</li> <li>• The majority of learners reported that they put effort into most or all of their classes (a measure of academic challenge at the schools); however, Afrikaans suburban HSC learners reported putting in less effort (see Figure 26).</li> <li>• Learners attending township schools were less likely than the other three groups to report that they were bored at school.</li> <li>• For those learners who reported feeling bored at school, the three main reasons were that the learning material was not interesting, the learning material was not relevant, and that there was insufficient interaction with the teacher (see Figure 27).</li> </ul>
University knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal or informal, stated or unstated information about how the university works</li> <li>• How to apply, what to study, how to obtain financial support</li> <li>• Understanding the university system and culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners’ written responses regarding their expectations of university highlighted the lack of university knowledge even when parents had attended university.</li> <li>• The diversity of contextual skills and awareness of what is required when at university was highlighted in the learner written responses.</li> <li>• Very few learners reported often talking to a teacher about their career goals (see Figure 29) and even fewer talked to a teacher about applying to university (Figure 30).</li> <li>• Several learners made use of the SAHSSLE open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire to ask questions about university, further highlighting the overall lack of university knowledge at high schools.</li> <li>• The choices and opportunities of several learners were constrained by the actions of others – most notably teachers and school principals who had undue influence over subject choices (particularly in the area of Mathematics and Mathematical Literacy).</li> </ul>

The analysis presented here, and in Chapter 7, confirms the value of Conley’s model of university readiness as a framework for exploring readiness from the schooling perspective. In addition, the usefulness of the learner/student engagement measures as a quantitative tool for researching educational practices at schools (and universities) was demonstrated. The results showed that while some school learners were participating in effective educational activities likely to enhance their readiness, many were not. Particularly concerning were the results from the Afrikaans medium of instruction schools which tended to show lower levels of learner engagement in effective educational practice, less interest among learners in what they were learning, and less priority accorded to academic behaviours. On the basis of these results, one can conclude that there appears to be a concerning learning culture in Afrikaans language of instruction schools. This is something

that needs to be better understood, and then addressed by the UFS (with schools) in an effort to better prepare this particular group of young people for university.

Across the board, school learners appear to have little concrete sense of what university is about. Their university knowledge remains limited. This finding was supported by the student data where students themselves reported the difficulties they experienced when entering university as a result of having a poor understanding of how universities work, and what is expected of students. In section 9.2.4, where areas of intervention are discussed, I shall return to this issue.

### **9.2.3 Research question three**

*How can these experiences of the interface between school and university be theorised using a capabilities-based social justice framework?*

The experiences of first-year students and high school learners presented in the previous two sections provide a picture of the interface between school and university. The results highlighted the many areas in which learners and students are poorly prepared for university and raised a host of issues with social justice implications. Question three asks how these results might be interpreted from a social justice perspective, in particular drawing on the capabilities approach. I have dealt with this research question in some detail since an entire chapter (Chapter 8) was devoted to this topic. In this section I aim to present a brief summary of the capabilities-based social justice framework I propose for the transition to university. My main focus, however, will be on explaining why and how this capabilities framework allows for a new and subtly different response to the many complexities inherent in broadening access.

The capabilities framework I proposed in Chapter 8 consists of two main elements. The first is the list of capabilities that are needed for making the transition to university (see Table 12). The second brings the capability list together with conversion factors and issues of personal choice to provide a framework for understanding the complex interplay of both social structures and individual agency during the process of transitioning to university (see Figure 33). As already argued, this transitioning process should take account of high school and the first year at university in an effort to breakdown the outdated humpback bridge.

Taking the well-being of students as the starting point, the capabilities framework for the transition to university asks what the outcome of a successful transition should be. Rather than defining success merely as measurable performance (such as changing enrolment demographics, credits passed in the first-year or progression to the second year of study for example) which does not take student well-being into account; the capabilities framework argues that educational resilience should be regarded as the outcome of a successful transition to university. In this context, resilience is defined as follows (drawing on Walker 2006 and my empirical data):

- Being able to navigate the transition from school to university within individual life contexts;
- Being able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically and to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive constraints; and
- Having aspirations and hopes for a successful university career.

The specific reference to individual life contexts upfront is of particular importance because this seeks to break down the tendency to see students as numbers or as members of groups even where differences between groups are recognised. In this way it is possible to move beyond the all too common deficit assumptions about the ‘under prepared student’ to take account of what the university should do to accommodate students – diverse in many ways – as valued individuals. Consider the following quotation:

“Broadly speaking, a particularly compelling and demanding feature of the CA [capabilities approach] is its refusal to measure the quality of social decisions, practices, and policies by using aggregates of people as the unit of measure. This clear shift to individual well-being has profound implications for education. Particular students, from particular backgrounds, living particular lives and holding particular values, become the major focus, *making it far less supportable to excuse away any student’s disengagement and/or failure*” (Wood & Deprez, 2012, p. 476, emphasis added).

Social justice concerns are thus fundamental to the capabilities framework proposed here. In section 7.4 I argued that one of the responses – of staff and students – to the many challenges of readiness for university was a growing acceptance of mediocrity and failure. The quotations where students describe lecturers reminding them of statistics of failure rates and fellow students welcoming them to the family following a test failure are firmly located in a deficit understanding, both *of* students and *by* students. A change in institutional focus towards building capabilities that result in educational resilience as defined above might provide fertile ground to turn the tide against the growing acceptance of mediocrity.

The seven capabilities (see Table 12) that should be fostered to facilitate the transition to university each, in one way or another, contribute to building educational resilience. In turn, this functioning/outcome of a successful transition would form the basis of an important capability needed for success in further levels of university study (c.f Walker's (2006) higher education capabilities list). The seven capabilities for the transition to university are as follows:

1. Practical reason
2. Knowledge and imagination
3. Learning disposition
4. Social relations and social networks
5. Respect, dignity and recognition
6. Emotional health and reflexivity
7. Language competence and confidence.

These seven capabilities encompass the lessons learned from my literature review of university access and the first-year at university (see Chapter 2), the capabilities literature (see Chapter 3), and my empirical data (see Chapter 7) within an overarching commitment to social justice and the promotion of the well-being of students. As I argued in Chapter 8, a capabilities list for the transition to university provides a new language for talking and thinking about accessing university. This new language incorporates measurable performance within the ambit of the capability for knowledge and imagination and learning disposition, but takes the debate in a new direction through the focus on what is needed for the creation of opportunities (capabilities) for success and the removal of barriers to the development of these capabilities. In this way, measurable performance and the broader notion of readiness for university is married with an analysis of structural constraints and the implications of this for students' well-being.

Sections 8.5.1 to 8.5.3 presented my analysis of the conversion factors that impact on how any given student is able to convert resources (such as a place at university or financial aid, for example) into capabilities or opportunities. I noted that personal conversion factors – in particular academic ability – are more often considered in research on access, but that social and environmental factors are more likely to be overlooked. However, one additional personal conversion factor that emerged strongly from my data was that of home language. Learners and students who needed to learn in a language that was not their home language experienced many difficulties and their lack of language confidence has the potential to

undermine their confidence more broadly impacting on the capabilities of learning disposition and emotional health and reflexivity (see sections 8.3.4 and 8.3.7). The importance of the will to learn and the confidence to learn were noted as integral components of the capabilities of learning disposition and emotional health and reflexivity respectively. These two concepts can also be seen as conversion factors (or fertile functionings) in that the extent to which a student has developed a will to learn and the confidence to learn will impact on their ability to convert their educational resources into successful educational outcomes.

The analysis of social and environmental conversion factors showed the impact that socioeconomic context had on learners' capabilities. For example, learners at township schools spent more time than learners from other school types walking to school, caring for family members and doing chores at home and less time participating in educational enrichment activities. These learners also came from families where parents' level of education tended to be lower than learners from other contexts, and they lacked supportive social networks that assist with the transition to university. Learners who attended Afrikaans language of instruction schools reported much lower levels of engagement in effective educational activities, little exposure to diverse peers, and generally low levels of motivation for learning. For quite different reasons, learners coming from these very different contexts are likely to experience difficulties with the transition to university, difficulties that will have an impact on their well-being as first-year students. Lastly, important conversion factors related to gender were also evident. The influence of a gendered society was seen in the fact that female learners spent significantly more time than male learners doing household chores and caring for their families. In contrast, female learners spent more time than male learners engaged in effective educational activities.

The critical lesson that the analysis of conversion factors adds is that, although resources (a place at university, financial support, access to books and learning materials, transport, food and housing) are all essential building blocks for entering university, a focus on resources alone is not sufficient to take account of the diverse lives of students entering university and the impact that their contexts have on their ability to convert these resources into capabilities and ultimately functionings. For these reasons, the stark contrast of capabilities shown in drawings 12 and 13 is easier to understand, as is the uneven and unjust outcomes of efforts to broaden access at the UFS and nationally. As will be shown in response to research question four below – these lessons provide a different lens for considering interventions to facilitate the transition to university.

#### 9.2.4 Research question four

*Based on the evidence from the research, what interventions could support efforts towards a more socially just transition for these students?*

In the introductory chapter I included a short section reflecting on my personal positioning as the researcher (see section 1.7). I noted, as the inspiration for this study, that I was committed to the cause of students entering university poorly prepared and often with little chance of success. As such, this thesis would not be complete without some consideration of possible ways that these injustices might be remedied. As noted by Sandel (2010, p. 165) “[T]he way things are does not determine the way they ought to be.” Nonetheless, the analysis and findings of this study highlight the complexity of the transition to university and should serve as a warning that there are unlikely to be any quick fix solutions or interventions. Instead, a comprehensive and long term approach is needed, rooted in a commitment to improve the transition to university in a manner that impacts positively on the well-being of students first and foremost, with measurable access gains being of secondary importance. This means that assuming a successful transition can be identified based on performance in the first year of study is limited and, as has been shown in this thesis, potentially masks areas of injustice within both the schooling and higher education sectors that impact on student well-being. In responding to this final research question I have focused on identifying what the UFS might do differently, and what the UFS and feeder schools might do in partnership. It is not my intention to formulate specific interventions in depth as this would be beyond the scope of this study, but rather to highlight areas that could be further explored by the UFS and feeder schools.

The capabilities framework for the transition from school to university presented in Figure 33 identified points of possible intervention (see red text). These have been used as the starting point for responding to this research question since my empirical evidence as well as existing research point to these sites of intervention as productive spaces to begin the process of fostering transition to university capabilities, and overcoming contextual constraints that limit the realisation of the seven capabilities and their related functionings. While Figure 33 identified various other influences on the transition experience, many remain outside the realm of influence of universities and schools, and hence cannot be a site

of productive intervention for university or schools.<sup>83</sup> Based on this study then, it is recommended that the following points of intervention be prioritised by the UFS and its feeder schools:

1. Social and environmental conversion factors:
  - a. Learning cultures and activities in schools, taking socioeconomic and cultural contexts into account; and
  - b. Learning cultures and activities in the first-year at university.
2. Personal conversion factors:
  - a. Fostering the development of a will to learn; and
  - b. Building confidence to learn.
3. Social influences on learners' decision making (preference formation mechanisms):
  - a. Actions of school teachers and principals;
  - b. Actions of university lecturers and other staff; and
  - c. Approaches to university marketing.

#### **9.2.4.1 *What could the UFS do differently?***

The starting point for the UFS is to embrace the more comprehensive understanding of access presented here, taking into account the seven capabilities identified as important for the transition to university. This approach to the transition to university and access more broadly takes account of the complexities of university readiness as a multidimensional construct and the need to ensure epistemological access for students entering the university system (see section 2.6.2.). Students experience fear and confusion in relation to the unknown physical space of the university, but more importantly, the unknown rules of the university system (university knowledge). This is particularly important for first generation students who do not have support networks that assist them to make sense of their new environment. Intentional measures need to be identified at the levels of student support, pedagogy and curriculum to ensure that students are provided with the tools to access and understand the unspoken 'rules' of the university, understand

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<sup>83</sup> This does mean that injustices that operate outside of the realm of influence of schools and universities should be ignored. It is the responsibility of universities to make such injustices known and to take the impact thereof into account. However, for pragmatic reasons, it is necessary to focus, initially, on the areas in which interventions specifically targeting the transition to university would be most likely to lead to change.

and interrogate the key knowledge structures of their disciplines (key content knowledge), and be afforded safe spaces to develop language competence and confidence. There is a need to review and improve student support structures – particularly for students not in residence. Within residences, a better balance between academic and social activities is needed so that enhancing the will and confidence to learn is foregrounded as central to residence culture.

The fact that so many first-year students at the UFS reported difficulties in relation to learning dispositions and academic behaviours, in particular study skills and learning to function independently, highlights the need for a much greater focus on student support initiatives, academic advice and mentoring. It is recommended that approaches to facilitate the development of academic behaviours be integrated into the core teaching and learning project of the university so that students have an opportunity to learn and build these skills in meaningful and authentic academic contexts. This has the potential to impact on students' will and confidence to learn – two important personal conversion factors that are currently limiting the progress of many students.

A comprehensive review of the learning cultures operating at the UFS, particularly in the first year, is needed to better understand why relatively little weight appears to be placed on active and deep learning. As was shown in section 7.3.1.1, the SAHSSLE and SASSE data analysed here indicated that high schools seem to be focusing greater attention on active and deep learning than the UFS in the first year of study. Related is the need to challenge and subvert the growing acceptance of mediocrity among students and lecturers. A lack of emphasis on active and deep learning is also likely to be undermining the will to learn among students. Consider the quotation below that shows how a student's will to learn was undermined on their first day at university.

*"I think for me it was weary, I mean wearying, you know, because you gear yourself up for your first class and then when you get there, he says, 'ah, consultation hours are 2-3 and 4-5, textbook is this, thank you very much', and then you move to another class, 'this is the module guide that we're using, go collect your copy, thank you very much'...(LAUGHTER)...move to another class and the story is the same...you know, you have looked forward to this day, this prescribed day, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February and then when that day comes...the only thing you remember is walking from class to class, 'go collect your module guides, thank you'. This was not what I expected (focus groups, 2009).*

Several of the results reported in Chapter 7 have implications for how the UFS manages the critical, but complex and sensitive issue of diversity. Section 7.2.3 presented an analysis of students' discussions and drawings reflecting on diversity. The data showed that some students encounter diverse peers for the first time at university, while others report much less acceptance of diversity on campus than they experienced at school. These student comments were supported by the data collected at the 20 feeder schools where only 38.7% of the learners indicated that they had 'often' talked to a learner of a different race or culture, and 39.3% that they had 'often' talked to a learner who differed from them in terms of religion, political opinion, family income or personal values. Even more concerning from the perspective of the UFS that draws a large proportion of students from Afrikaans medium of instruction schools and township schools was that the learners from these two school types were the least likely to have encountered diverse peers at school (see Figure 17). Language diversity was also noted as a challenge by students. On the whole, the data highlighted the difficulty many students had when required to confront their biases and learn to value diversity. Although this data was collected shortly after the Reitz video incident and since this time much effort has gone into fostering tolerance and understanding, the lack of experience with diverse peers when at school for many students is likely to remain a major challenge that the UFS needs to proactively manage during the transition to university.

Lastly, the lack of university knowledge that emerged from the student and learner data, as well as the difficulties experienced by learners and students in developing the capability of practical reason (making informed choices about study and career options) highlights the importance of an educationally intentional approach to university marketing as a significant social influence on learners' decision making. It is critical for the UFS to recognise that the marketing of a university is substantively different from marketing in a commercial sense. This is particularly important if the purpose of the university is understood from a public good perspective emphasising the intrinsic value of education in the building of just societies, rather than as simply the production of human capital to serve economic advancement (which is merely a small part of the purpose of universities). Rather than interacting with schools in an effort to 'sell' the university and increase the number of applications received, marketing efforts should focus on building university knowledge amongst high school learners and providing advice and support that enable learners 'to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about post-school study and career options' (i.e. foster the capability of practical reason). It is likely that this

would be facilitated through the development of well-defined, long term partnerships with schools from which UFS students regularly come.

#### ***9.2.4.2 What could the UFS and schools do in partnership?***

Thinking through approaches to university-school partnership possibilities must be done against the backdrop of the many difficulties currently being experienced in the South African schooling sector (see section 2.9). It is recognised that without major changes and improvements at all levels of the poorly functioning public school system many learners will exit school without being ready for university and the gap between eligibility and readiness is likely to widen. Hence universities need to focus specific attention on what they need to do differently to improve their readiness for the types of learners exiting the school system. Detailed understandings of teaching and learning practices at the school level (as was done in the study) are essential for universities who wish to understand readiness of students in a multidimensional way. Forging meaningful, long term partnerships with feeder schools would provide a basis for understanding student readiness more thoroughly, as well as a platform through which the university and its partner schools could actively seek to improve readiness.

The results of this study have indicated a host of areas that could be the focus of such partnerships. Some examples including building stronger learning cultures within schools that include much greater emphasis on written work, integration of ideas, and meaningful feedback from teachers; and a clear focus on building in-depth knowledge of key content areas – for teachers and learners. In addition, much greater and more careful attention should be paid to subject choices and the implications that different subject choices have for future study.

The current focus of the UFS schools partnership initiative on poorly performing schools in the province is important and necessary. However, in the interests of facilitating the transition to university, this study highlights the need to also establish formal, long term partnerships with schools known to be important feeder schools.<sup>84</sup> Given the

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<sup>84</sup> Institutional research currently being conducted by the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP) at the UFS has identified a list of approximately 45 schools that have consistently provided ten or more first year students. Most of these schools are regional schools – located in the Free State, Northern Cape and Eastern Cape – and they potentially provide a helpful starting point for exploring partnership possibilities.

concerning findings that emerged from learners in Afrikaans medium of instruction schools, the importance of partnerships with these schools cannot be overemphasised.

I propose that the capabilities framework for the transition to university developed in this thesis provides a unique entry point for formulating such partnerships. Since the capabilities approach asks what is needed to foster the development of capabilities so as to create opportunities for learners, the starting point of such partnerships would be quite different from interventions based on deficit understandings. The capabilities approach and the seven capabilities in the transition to university list, provides a new language for thinking and talking about university readiness, and this, hopefully, will create a space for thinking in new ways about what is needed at the high school level. This study has highlighted the complex and messy interface between school and university as well as the central role that socioeconomic context plays. This implies that the nature and focus of partnership interventions with different types of schools is likely to vary depending on the particular strengths and weaknesses of the schools and the broader social contexts in which they function.

More practically, the capabilities list could be used as a conceptual tool to guide participatory planning processes (as is emphasised in the capabilities approach) with schools through which specific opportunities and pitfalls (conversion factors) faced by learners in the schools are identified. In particular, deliberations will need to explore in detail which capabilities require particular attention for learners at a given school, taking account of the different lives of individual learners. The involvement of learners, as well as teachers and school management in the partnership planning processes from the outset is essential to ensure that the agency of all relevant actors is acknowledged and celebrated as central to the success of partnership initiatives.

Much more detailed planning and conceptualisation of this approach to formulating partnerships is needed than is possible here. Nonetheless, it is hoped that these suggestions might provide a starting point for formulating interventions based on the results of this study and focused on facilitating the transition to university in a manner that builds capabilities and contributes to the well-being of entering students. Thus, I arrive at the broad outcome I wished to achieve through this study, namely:

Given the under-preparedness of students entering the University of the Free State (UFS), how can the UFS and feeder schools work together to ensure that students are better prepared for successful higher education study?

### 9.3 Methodological reflections

Discussion of the limitations of a study is a common requirement of doctoral work. In this section I present brief reflections on my research design and methodology – its strengths, its limitations, and lessons that might be useful in the context of higher education studies. I recognised at the outset that focusing on both the schooling and university sectors was going to be ambitious. This was indeed true, and the volume of data generated by the study was tremendous and time consuming to analyse thoroughly. Nonetheless, I remain convinced of the importance of researching both sides of the humpback bridge, and believe that the additional complexity introduced was vital to better understanding the complex and messy transition process.

Positioned within the paradigm of pragmatism, I specifically sought a research methodology that would best allow me to answer my research questions. The complex integrated parallel mixed methods research design that I used (see Figure 5) created, as I had hoped, multiple “opportunities for respectful listening and understanding” (Greene, 2008, p. 20) to return to the quotation presented at the start of Chapter 5. As Green (2008, p. 20) further argued, this mixed methods design provided me a means of understanding the “multifaceted and complex character of social phenomenon” – in this case, the transition to university. Pragmatism explicitly recognises the possibilities of both the concept of a real world that exists outside our understandings, as well as the individual and social constructions or interpretations of that world (see for example, Cherryholmes, 1992). As such, this paradigmatic positioning and research design allowed me to attempt to assess types and frequency of educational practices at the school level as well as learner and students’ experiences and interpretations of these practices. Being able to juxtapose quantitative data with qualitative interpretations allowed for a richer understanding to be reached. The incorporation of visual methodology, in the form of student drawings, added a further richness and depth to the study, and also allowed for additional insights that may not have been evident from the more traditional qualitative data sources. As such, the value of a pragmatic paradigm, as well as the use of mixed methodologies to understand both the breadth and depth of school and higher education practice was highlighted by the results of this study.

These methodological strengths notwithstanding, it is also important to reflect on the limitations of the study. In particular, the following three specific methodological limitations bear mention. Firstly, as was discussed in section 5.5, despite the comprehensive

instrument piloting process, and several reviews prior to large scale printing, the response options for one question were incorrect in the final printed version of the survey. It was thus necessary to exclude the data from Question 15 from my analyses. This was a limitation in that the data that should have been collected via Question 15 would have been helpful in further exploring the extent to which educational practices in schools were helping to build readiness for university. However, since there were other closely related items that provided information about readiness, as well as the school learners' qualitative data, this limitation did not have a major impact on the quality of the study. Secondly, the survey data used in the study was self-report data about educational practices at school. Research has shown that there is always the possibility that survey respondents interpret questions in subtly different ways, or may over or under-report specific behaviours depending on their understanding of social desirability (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Krosnick, 1999; Porter, 2009). I attempted to overcome these limitations of self-report data by working with an instrument that had been well tested in other contexts; carefully reviewing the wording on the items to ensure alignment with the South African schooling context; reviewing items in terms of language difficulty; conducting a full piloting process to test the instrument which included asking learners about items that may have been difficult to understand; explaining the purpose of the study very clearly prior to each data collection session; ensuring that learners understood that their responses were anonymous to minimise social desirability biases; and lastly, by triangulating the results from the survey with qualitative data collected from learners.

A final methodological issue that requires some discussion is the extent to which the empirical results and the capabilities framework proposed are generalisable, or transferable as is more common with the pragmatic paradigm. Being based on the specific case of the UFS and 20 UFS feeder schools, the results and proposed framework bear direct relevance to the UFS itself. However, the manner in which the study was conceptualised creates the possibility for both generalisability (in some instances) and for transferability more broadly. In particular, the results of the SAHSSLE are likely to be generalisable to other schools in the South African public schooling sector because of the large sample size of learners that participated, the purposive selection of schools representing a range of different schooling contexts, and the inclusion of learners in three grades and multiple classes per school. While school-specific differences are important and should not be overlooked, it is reasonable to conclude that similar results would be obtained using a different sample of schools. As such, the findings about educational practice at the 20 feeder schools are likely to be of value to

universities other than the UFS that wish to understand readiness for university in greater depth.

When considering the study as a whole, it is more appropriate to draw on the pragmatic concept of transferability that focuses on how usable the findings are likely to be in other situations, and on what grounds this claim can be made. Although my empirical work was centred on the UFS and local feeder schools, the theoretical frameworks used for exploring access and transition to university draw on a much broader research base (see Chapters 2 and 3 for details). Examples in point are Conley's multidimensional model of university readiness, the student engagement framework, and Walker's capabilities list for higher education. It can thus be argued that the capabilities list proposed here, as well as the broader capabilities framework for the transition to university, are likely to be applicable in other contexts at least as a basis for starting context-specific discussions about access and capabilities. As such, the final outcome of the study – the capabilities framework shown in Figure 33 – can be regarded as transferable and hence potentially adds value to access research at higher education institutions and contexts.

Lastly, there are also methodological lessons that are transferable, in particular the value that pragmatism and mixed methods has for research on higher education as well as lessons regarding how the capabilities approach can be operationalised and applied to a very specific topic within the broader realm of higher education studies. This study has demonstrated one possible methodology for how the largely theoretical capabilities approach can be applied, and also demonstrated the usefulness of Robeyn's (2003) criteria for developing a capabilities list. As such, it is my hope that this study will also contribute to the growing field of higher education and capabilities.

## **9.4 Conclusion**

I thus reach the final conclusion of what has been a challenging, yet exciting and extremely meaningful personal research journey. While the findings have provided the basis for answering my four research questions as well as the formulation of a capabilities framework for the transition to university, many additional questions have emerged. The next steps in my research journey will include, amongst others, further exploration of the value of the capabilities approach for understanding the contested South African higher education arena, as well as the application and testing of the capabilities framework

proposed here. In conclusion – and as guidance for future higher education work – I end with the following quotation:

“higher education is neither neutral nor natural. It affects people’s lives, it is implicated in relations of power within society, and the way it is organised and undertaken is a function of social and historical choices” (Mann, 2008, p. 3).

It is my hope that this study will influence the choices that the UFS and its feeder schools make in the interests of intentionally seeking to foster the capabilities of potential students so moving towards a more socially just higher education environment.

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# **APPENDICES**

**Appendix 1: South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement (SAHSSLE)**

**Appendix 2: Start-up questionnaire**

**Appendix 3: University knowledge questionnaire**

**Appendix 4: Focus group question schedule 2009**

**Appendix 5: Focus groups 2010 response sheet**

**Appendix 6: Adaptation and piloting of the South African High School Survey of  
Learner Engagement**

**Appendix 7: Free State Department of Education Permission Letter**

# South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement

The following survey asks questions regarding various activities that learners do during school

Centre for Higher Education Studies  
and Development (CHESD)

University of the Free State

Tel: 051 401 9298



Please note that your answers are anonymous. You DO NOT need to write your name on the survey.  
Please answer honestly. **Please read all the instructions carefully.**

## Marking Instructions

1. Use **HB pencil** only.
2. Mark like this:
3. Do **not** mark like any of these:
4. Use an eraser to remove unwanted shading.
5. Do not make any stray marks on the form.

### ALL RESPONSES ARE STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Grade 8 9 10 11 12

1. What grade are you currently in? ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. In what grade did you start attending this specific school? Before Grade 8 ☐ ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

### 3. How many hours do you spend on average per week (Monday-Sunday) doing each of the following activities?

#### Number of hours

	None	1 or fewer	2 - 5	6 - 9	10 or more
a. Doing written homework	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
b. Reading and studying for class	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
c. Reading for yourself (books, magazines, newspapers, online articles, etc.)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
d. Participating in school-sponsored activities (clubs, sport, learner governance etc.)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
e. Practicing a sport and/or musical instrument and/or rehearsing for a performance	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
f. Working for pay	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
g. Doing volunteer work (not for pay)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
h. Exercising	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
i. Watching television, playing video games	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
j. 'Surfing' the internet or chatting online	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
k. Talking on the phone (including cell phones)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
l. Hanging out/socialising with friends outside of school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
m. Travelling to and from school by taxi	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
n. Travelling to and from school by bus	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
o. Walking to and from school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
p. Taking care of family members (ill parents, younger siblings, grandparents and so on)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
q. Doing chores at home (preparing food, cleaning, washing clothes etc.)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5

### 4. How important are each of these activities to you?

Not at all A little Somewhat Important Very Important Top Priority

a. Doing written homework	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
b. Reading and studying for class	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
c. Reading for yourself (books, magazines, newspapers, online articles, etc.)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
d. Participating in school-sponsored activities (clubs, sport, learner governance etc.)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
e. Practicing a sport and/or musical instrument and/or rehearsing for a performance	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
f. Working for pay	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
g. Doing volunteer work (not for pay)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
h. Exercising	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
i. Watching television, playing video games	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
j. 'Surfing' the internet or chatting online	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
k. Talking on the phone (including cell phones)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
l. Hanging out/socialising with friends outside of school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
m. Travelling to and from school by taxi	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
n. Travelling to and from school by bus	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
o. Walking to and from school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
p. Taking care of family members (ill parents, younger siblings, grandparents and so on)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5
q. Doing chores at home (preparing food, cleaning, washing clothes etc.)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 5

### 5. How do you feel about each of the following statements related to your school

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

a. Overall, I feel good about being in this school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
b. I care about this school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
c. I feel safe in this school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
d. I am treated fairly in this school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
e. I have a voice in classroom and/or school decisions	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
f. My opinions are respected in this school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
g. There is at least one teacher in this school who cares about me	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
h. There is at least one teacher in this school who knows me well	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
i. At this school I feel supported by				
i. Teachers	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
ii. Principal/deputy principal(s)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
iii. Counsellors	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
iv. Other adults (e.g. secretaries)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
v. Other learners	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
j. Teachers in this school want to see me succeed	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
k. Teachers try to engage me in classroom discussions	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
l. I am challenged academically by my class work	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
m. I have opportunities to be creative in classroom assignments and projects	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
n. I can be who I am at this school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
o. This school makes me feel confident about who I am	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
p. I am an important part of my school community	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
q. This school's rules are fair	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
r. This school's rules are applied and enforced consistently	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
s. If I could choose which school to go to right now, I would choose this same school again	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
t. I am involved in different activities at my school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4
u. I receive good quality teaching at this school	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4

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**6. During this school year, how often have you done each of the following?**

	Never	Very seldom	Sometimes	Often
a. Eaten breakfast in the morning	c1	c2	c3	c4
b. Asked or answered questions in class	c1	c2	c3	c4
c. Talked to a teacher about your class work	c1	c2	c3	c4
d. Made a class presentation	c1	c2	c3	c4
e. Prepared a draft of a report, essay etc. before handing it in	c1	c2	c3	c4
f. Written a report, essay etc. of shorter than 5 pages	c1	c2	c3	c4
g. Written a report, essay etc. of more than 5 pages	c1	c2	c3	c4
h. Received helpful feedback from teachers on your work	c1	c2	c3	c4
i. Attended class with all your homework completed	c1	c2	c3	c4
j. Attended class with no homework completed	c1	c2	c3	c4
k. Worked on a project during which you needed to find information not available in your textbooks	c1	c2	c3	c4
l. Worked on a project during which you needed to interact with people outside of your school (for example, conduct interviews in your community)	c1	c2	c3	c4
m. Worked on a project in a group with other learners	c1	c2	c3	c4
n. Discussed questions in class that do not have one clear answer	c1	c2	c3	c4
o. Written tests with multiple choice questions	c1	c2	c3	c4
p. Written tests with longer answers such as paragraphs, essay questions or problems that you need to solve	c1	c2	c3	c4
q. Used what you have learnt in one class (or subject area) to enrich your work in another class (or subject area)	c1	c2	c3	c4
r. Discussed your marks with teachers	c1	c2	c3	c4
s. Discussed ideas from your classes, your reading, or your homework with teachers outside of class	c1	c2	c3	c4
t. Discussed ideas from your classes, your reading, or your homework with other people outside of class (e.g. friends, family, members of your community etc.)	c1	c2	c3	c4
u. Talked to or worked with at least one learner from a different race or culture	c1	c2	c3	c4
v. Talked to or worked with at least one learner who is different from you in terms of religion, political opinion, family income, or personal values	c1	c2	c3	c4
w. Talked to a teacher in the school about career goals	c1	c2	c3	c4
x. Talked to a teacher in the school about how to apply for university	c1	c2	c3	c4
y. Been picked on or bullied by another learner	c1	c2	c3	c4
z. Picked on or bullied another learner in your school	c1	c2	c3	c4

**7. How do you feel about the following statements related to your beliefs about learning?**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. Learning is very important to me	c1	c2	c3	c4
b. I have the skills and ability to complete my work successfully	c1	c2	c3	c4
c. I try very hard when doing my school work	c1	c2	c3	c4
d. I am motivated to do my school work because I want to learn new things	c1	c2	c3	c4
e. I am motivated to do my school work because I want to go to university	c1	c2	c3	c4
f. I am motivated to do my school work because I want to get good marks	c1	c2	c3	c4
g. I am motivated to do my school work by teachers who encourage me	c1	c2	c3	c4
h. I am motivated to do my school work because I want to be successful when I finish school	c1	c2	c3	c4
i. I take pride in my school work	c1	c2	c3	c4
j. I have worked harder than I expected to at high school	c1	c2	c3	c4
k. I like discussions when there is no clear right or wrong answer	c1	c2	c3	c4
l. I like it when I can be creative at school	c1	c2	c3	c4
m. I like working on problems that are difficult and require a lot of thinking	c1	c2	c3	c4
n. My school work makes me curious to learn about other things	c1	c2	c3	c4
o. In general, I am excited about my school work	c1	c2	c3	c4
p. My marks are important to me	c1	c2	c3	c4
q. I can see how the work I do in school will help me when I finish school	c1	c2	c3	c4
r. I feel good about myself as a learner	c1	c2	c3	c4
s. I feel good about myself as a person	c1	c2	c3	c4

	None	1 or 2	Some	Most	All
8. About how many of your teachers want you to do the best that you can?	c1	c2	c3	c4	c5
9. About how many of your teachers believe that you can do excellent work?	c1	c2	c3	c4	c5
10. About how many of your classes do you find academically challenging?	c1	c2	c3	c4	c5
11. In about how many of your classes do you NOT have to work hard?	c1	c2	c3	c4	c5
12. In about how many of your classes do you put in all the effort you can?	c1	c2	c3	c4	c5
13. In about how many of your classes do you put in very little effort?	c1	c2	c3	c4	c5

**14. To what extent do you think your school emphasises the following?**

	Not at all	A little	Some	Very much
a. Memorising facts and figures	c1	c2	c3	c4
b. Understanding information and ideas	c1	c2	c3	c4
c. Analysing ideas in depth	c1	c2	c3	c4
d. Spending a lot of time studying, doing school work or doing homework	c1	c2	c3	c4
e. Spending a lot of time preparing for end of year tests or exams	c1	c2	c3	c4
f. Participating in school events and activities (e.g. sport, plays, choir etc.)	c1	c2	c3	c4
g. Using computers for school work	c1	c2	c3	c4
h. Exploring new ideas	c1	c2	c3	c4
i. Continuing to study after school (i.e. FET College, University etc.)	c1	c2	c3	c4

**15. How much has your experience at this school contributed to your growth in the following areas?**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. Developing skills needed for work when you have finished school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Writing well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Speaking well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Thinking critically	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Reading and understanding difficult materials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Using computers and the internet	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Working well with others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Being an independent learner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Solving real-world problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
j. Gaining awareness of conditions in the community outside of school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
k. Developing clear career goals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
l. Understanding the relevance of what you learn in school for life after school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
m. Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
n. Understanding yourself	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
o. Treating people with respect	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
p. Developing personal beliefs and values	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**16. Which of the following have you done during high school? (Please select either 'yes' or 'no' for each of the options)**

	Yes	No
a. Participated in community service or volunteer work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Participated in work experience programme(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Taken any additional subjects beyond what is compulsory	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Taken part in any educational activities or programme(s) offered by a local university	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Participated in an arts/drama programme(s) or project in school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Participated in an arts/drama programme(s) or project outside of school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**17. Why do you go to school? (Please select either 'yes' or 'no' for each of the options)**

	Yes	No
a. Because I enjoy being in school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Because of what I learn in class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Because of my teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Because of my friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Because it is the law	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Because I want to go to university	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Because I want to learn skills for the workplace	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Because there is nothing else to do	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. To stay out of trouble	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
j. Because my parents force me to go to school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
k. Because I like to learn new things	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Never	Once or Twice	Many Times
18. Have you ever been absent from school without a valid reason?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19. Have you ever considered dropping out of school/not completing school? If you have NEVER considered dropping out of school, go to question 21. If you have considered dropping out, please answer question 20.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**20. If you have considered dropping out of school, why? (Please select either 'yes' or 'no' for each of the options)**

	Yes	No
a. The work was too hard	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. The work was too easy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. I didn't like my school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. I didn't like my teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. I didn't see how the work I was doing was going to be useful to me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. I was picked on or bullied	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. No adults in the school cared about me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Family issues (e.g. child care)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. I felt I was too far behind in my work to successfully complete	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
j. I failed my end of year exams	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
k. Adults in the school encouraged me to drop out	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
l. My family could not afford my school fees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
m. I needed to get a job and earn money	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
n. My family did not think it was important for me to stay at school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Yes	No			
21. Have you ever been held back a grade in school?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			
22. Do you think you are in danger of being held back this year?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			
	Never	Once or twice	Once in a while	Every day	Every class
23. Have you ever been bored in class at this school?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If you have been bored in class, please answer question 24.					
If you have NEVER been bored in class, please go to question 25.					

**24. If you have been bored in class, why? (Please select either 'yes' or 'no' for each of the options)**

	Yes	No
a. Work wasn't challenging enough	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Work was too difficult	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Material wasn't interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Material wasn't relevant to me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. No interaction with the teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. No interaction with other learners	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Not at all      A little      Some      Very much

- [illegible]

Please do so in the space provided here.

**Please supply some information about yourself**

13 or younger	14	15	16	17	18	19 or older
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

English	
Afrikaans	<input type="checkbox"/>
IsiXhosa	<input type="checkbox"/>
IsiZulu	<input type="checkbox"/>
IsiNdebele	<input type="checkbox"/>
North Sotho	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sesotho	<input type="checkbox"/>
Setswana	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tshivenda	<input type="checkbox"/>
Siswati	<input type="checkbox"/>
Xitsonga	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

Black African ☐

Coloured ☐

Indian or Asian ☐

White ☐

I prefer not to answer ☐

Other ☐

Male ☐

Female ☐

Standard 3 (grade 5) or lower	<input type="checkbox"/>
Standard 4,5,6 (grade 6,7,8)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Standard 7,8,9 (grade 9,10,11)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Standard 10 (grade 12)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Post-secondary Diploma	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bachelor's Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Honours Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Masters Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doctoral Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Achievement level 7 (80%-100%)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Achievement level 6 (70%-79%)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Achievement level 5 (60% - 69%)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Achievement level 4 (50%-59%)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Achievement level 3 (40%- 49%)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Achievement level 2 (30%-39%)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Achievement level 1 (0%-29%)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

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**THANKS FOR SHARING YOUR VIEWS!**

After completing the survey, please return it to the invigilator or to your school office.  
You can contact the Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development (CHESD) at the University of the Free State (tel: 051 401 9298) should you need any further information.

## Appendix 2

# Your Global Positioning System (YGPS) Workshop Series Start-up Questionnaire

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Why did you decide to attend this workshop series during your holiday?

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3. What do you find most exciting about your school? Please explain why.

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4. What would you like to change at your school?

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5. Do you plan to go to university?

YES	NO	UNSURE
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6. Please explain your answer.

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using the table below, make a list of the 5 main skills that you hope to learn during this workshop series. For each, indicate why this skill is important to you.

Five main skills I would like to develop during the YGPS Workshop Series	Reason that this skill is important to me
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

## Appendix 3

## YGPS Workshop Series 2010 – Questions about University Knowledge

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_

YES	NO
-----	----

2. Did your parent(s)/guardian(s) go to university?

YES	NO
-----	----

3. Do you have any siblings or close relatives currently at university?

4. Please use the space below to tell me **what YOU expect university to be like**. You can think about things like academics, social, finances, residence life and so on. [There are NO right or wrong answers; I would like to understand what your current expectations are regarding university].

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

[illegible]

5. Has your school provided you with information about university and how to apply? If yes, please briefly describe what information you have been given.

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6. Do you have ideas of what you might like to study? Please list them (don't worry if you have several different ideas, this is good). For each, make a note of why you are thinking of studying this qualification.

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7. What are your three most urgent questions about **APPLYING** to university?

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8. What are your three most urgent questions about **GOING** to university?

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9. Please make a note of any other questions or comments you might have regarding information about university.

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## Appendix 4

### ***2009 Transition to University Focus Group Interview Schedule***

#### *Introduction:*

- Focus groups being conducted as part of the UFS Admissions Research Project, various components – review of admissions criteria at other SA universities, admissions testing (Language and mathematics), and focus groups. **Fokus groepe is deel van die universiteit se Toekanglikheids navorsingprojek. Daar is verskillende komponente – toetsing in die begin van die jaar, navorsing om te verstaan wat ander SA universiteite se beleid is in terme van toeganliksheids, en die focus groepe.**
- Purpose of the focus groups is to explore how students experienced the transition from school to university so that the university can put in place interventions, support structures etc to make the transition as smooth as possible. **Die doel van die focus groepe is om te verstaan hoe studente die oorgang van hoerskool tot universiteit beleef het sodat ons die regte tipe ondersteuning kan inbou in die eerste jaar.**
- Focus groups will take about 1 hour. **Die focus groep sal omtrent 'n uur wees.**
- Confidential – no names are being noted down. **Alles is vertroulik, geen name word neer geskryf nie of gebruik in die analise en report.**
- Consent for tape-recording – note that only the researchers will have access to the recording. After transcription, the recordings will be deleted. **Ons wil graag ons bespreking opneem sodat dit makliker is om die bespreking op te**

**skryf. Is almal gemalik daarmee?**

*Questions/Vrae:*

1. Did you find the transition from high school to university to be a positive experience? **Was die oorgang van hoerkool tot university vir jou 'n positiewe ervaring? Hoekom?**
2. What did you find most challenging when you arrived at the University of the Free State? Why? **Wat was vir jou die mees uitdagend in jou eerste weke/kwartaal op universiteit?**
3. What was your most memorable experience of your first few weeks at university? **Wat was jou mees gedenkwaardige ervaring binne die eerste weke/kwartaal op universiteit?**
4. Do you think your school prepared you well for university? Consider each of the following areas: **Dink jy dat jou skool jou goed voorberei het vir universiteit?**
  1. Academically (probe on language and mathematics) **(Akademies, veral taal en wiskunde)**
  2. Socially **(Sosiaal)**
  3. Advice on selecting a university and a course of study? **(Advies/raad toe jy 'n universiteit of studierigting moes kies)**
5. Did your school offer career counselling? **Het jou skool beroepsvoorligting gedoen?**

6. What support did your school provide you when you selected your subjects for Grade 12? Were you advised on university admission requirements when selecting your subjects? **Watter ondersteuning het jou skool verskaf toe jy jou graad 12 vakke moes kies? Het jy inligting of advies rondom universitiet toeganklikheids beleid gekry?**
7. What do you think your school could have done differently to make the transition easier? **In jou mening, wat kon jou skool verskilend gedoen het om die oorgang van skool tot universeit makliker te maak?**
8. What do you think the UFS could do differently to make the transition easier? **Wat kon die UV anders gedoen het om die oorgang makliker te maak?**
9. Any other comments? **Enige ander opmerkings?**

## Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP)

### Research on students' experience of the transition to University

Please complete this short form which provides basic demographic information about the participants in the research.

**You do not need to record your name.**

Question	Response						
1. Age in years							
2. Language in which you study at the UFS	Afrikaans				English		
3. Gender	Male				Female		
4. Race	Black African	Coloured	Indian/Asian	White	Other	Prefer not to answer	
5. Faculty	Economic & Management Sciences	Education	Humanities	Health Sciences	Law	Natural & Agricultural Sciences	Theology
6. Current year of study							
7. Course for which you are registered							
8. Residence student	Yes				No		
9. Name of high school you attended							
10. Year you completed high school							

11. Please briefly describe how you experienced your first month at university.

## Research Activity

On the back of this page, please **draw your experience of coming to university as a first-year student.** There are no right or wrong drawings. You can use the space to express your experience visually. Coloured crayons are provided if you would like to use them.

**Thank you very much for participating in this study, we appreciate your inputs!**

## **Appendix 6**

### **Adaptation and Piloting of the South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement**

The South African High School Survey of Learner Engagement (SAHSSLE) is based on the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) that has been administered in the United States (US) since 2004, and was completed by almost 300,000 high school students between 2004 and 2006. A slightly revised version of the survey was released for the 2008/2009 cohort. The South African version of this survey (SAHSSLE) is an adaptation of the US survey and has focused on ensuring contextual relevance, changing terminology that is context specific, and the exclusion and addition of selected items that are important in the South African schooling context. This study was thus beginning from a strong base of previous testing of the instrument, and the construct of learner engagement in a high school setting. As such, the focus of the pre-testing/piloting for the SAHSSLE was on the following elements:

- Ensuring that South African learners in grades 10, 11 and 12 understand the items (in both English and Afrikaans, depending on the language of instruction at the specific school);
- The relevance of the items for South African learners in grades 10, 11 and 12; and
- Possible effects of questionnaire translation.

At present, neither the HSSSE nor the SAHSSLE are standardized measures, but rather, instruments that provide a range of information on teaching and learning practices in schools.

#### **Pre-Testing/Piloting Research Design**

The challenge of pre-testing or piloting research instruments and processes is widely documented in the research methods literature (for example, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; DeMaio, Rothgeb, & Hess, 1998; Presser & Blair, 2004). Despite both the importance and challenges of pre-testing, several authors note that this

component of research studies is often overlooked or approached superficially (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Presser et al., 2004; Presser & Blair, 2004). In response, a range of methods for pre-testing have been developed by researchers focused on understanding the implications of different research methodologies.

The pre-testing of the SAHSSLE was done at two schools; representing English and Afrikaans language of instruction and one well-resourced and one poorly resourced school. The research procedure planned for the full study was tested during the pilot. The schools were asked to select 50 learners each in grades 10, 11 and 12 respectively. The sampling approach used by the pilot schools was the same as that used in the full study. On completion of the SAHSSLE questionnaires, a small number of learners were informally asked about their experiences of completing the questionnaire, questions that were difficult to understand and any other comments about the research instrument and research process. The SAHSSLE was completed by a total of 294 learners during the piloting.

The pilot data collected was analysed and explored to assess whether any questions appeared to be poorly answered or misunderstood. No major changes to the pilot questionnaire were needed. Three questions were slightly reworded to make the meaning clearer. The results of the pilot study were written up and have been published as a book chapter (Wilson-Strydom & Hay, 2010).

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001). *Pre-Testing in Survey Development: An Australian Bureau of Statistics Perspective*. Australia: Statistical Clearing House. Retrieved from [www.sch.abs.gov.au](http://www.sch.abs.gov.au)
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- Presser, S., & Blair, J. (2004). Survey Pre-Testing: Do Different Methods Produce Different Results? *Sociological Methodology*, 24, 73–104.

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**education**Department of  
Education  
FREE STATE PROVINCE**FAX COVER SHEET**

TO: Ms. MG WILSON-STRYDOM

ORGANISATION:	UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
FAX:	051 4446346

FROM: IM MALIMANE

TEL:	0822024790
FAX:	0865171390

NO OF PAGES:	3
DATE: 20 May 2009	

SUBJECT: APPROVAL/PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH.

THANKS



education

Department of  
Education  
FREE STATE PROVINCEEnquiries: Malimane IM  
Reference: 16/4/1/19-2009Tel: 051 404 8662  
Fax: 051 447 7318  
E-mail: malimane@edu.fs.gov.za

2009 – 05 – 19

Ms. MG WILSON-STRYDOM  
UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

Dear Ms. Wilson-Strydom

**REGISTRATION OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

1. This letter is in reply to your application for the registration of your research project.
2. Research topic: **Learner Engagement Research in Schools.**
3. Your research project has been registered with the Free State Education Department.
4. Approval is granted under the following conditions:-
  - 4.1 Learners participate voluntarily in the project.
  - 4.2 The names of all schools and participants involved remain confidential.
  - 4.3 The questionnaires are completed and the interviews are conducted outside normal tuition time.
  - 4.4 This letter is shown to all participating persons.
  - 4.5 A bound copy of the report and a summary on a computer disc on this study is donated to the Free State Department of Education.
  - 4.6 Findings and recommendations are presented to relevant officials in the Department.
5. The costs relating to all the conditions mentioned above are your own responsibility
6. **You are requested to confirm acceptance of the above conditions in writing to:**

**The Head: Education, for attention: DIRECTOR : QUALITY ASSURANCE**  
**Room 401, Syfrets Building, Private Bag X20565, BLOEMFONTEIN, 9301**

We wish you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely

FR SELLO

DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE

Directorate: Quality Assurance, Private Bag X20565 Bloemfontein. 9300  
 Syfrets Center, 65 Maitland Street, Bloemfontein  
 Tel: 051 404 8750 / Fax: 051 447 7318 E-mail: quality@edu.fs.gov.za



education

Department of  
Education  
FREE STATE PROVINCE

Enquiries : IM Malimane  
Reference no. : 16/4/1/19-2009

Tel: 0514048662  
Fax: 051 4477318

2009-06-19

Director: Motheo Education District  
Room 413  
Jubilee Building  
Bloemfontein

Dear Mr Motsetse

**NOTIFICATION OF A RESEARCH PROJECT IN YOUR DISTRICT**

Please find attached copy of the letter giving **Ms MG WILSON-STRYDOM** permission to conduct research in Motheo District. The research will be conducted with Grade 10 - 12 learners in identified schools.

Yours sincerely

  
FR SELLO  
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE

Directorate: Quality Assurance  
Private Bag X20565, Bloemfontein, 9300  
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