

# **SUCCESS STORIES OF STUDENTS AFTER ACADEMIC PROBATION**

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# **SUCCESS STORIES OF STUDENTS AFTER ACADEMIC PROBATION**

*by*

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

**MAGISTER EDUCATIONIS**  
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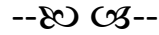
**PRETORIA**

**DECEMBER 2013**

## DEDICATION

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I dedicate this research mini-dissertation to my beloved aunt Motanyane Christina Somo, who believed in me from when I was very young; and eagerly and vehemently encouraged me to study further.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I wish to thank God for the following people and thank the people for their significant contribution to this study:

- ❖ To my supervisor Dr Suzanne Bester, working with you was a delight and most enriching experience. Thank you for your careful, critical and insightful evaluation of the drafts. Your valuable feedback was continuously positive and inspiring. I consider myself a better researcher as a result of working under your supervision.
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- ❖ To my technical editor, Mrs. Adrie van Dyk, thank you for sacrificing your time to edit this dissertation and for your excellent editing.
- ❖ To the National Research Fund (NRF), thank you for the scholarship opportunity.

*Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory. Amen.  
(Ephesians 3:20, 21a).*

## DECLARATION

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I, Charity Mokgaetji Somo (student number 23365197), hereby declare that all the resources that were consulted are included in the reference list and that this dissertation title: **The success stories of students after academic probation**, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

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C. M. Somo  
December 2013

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## SUMMARY

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### THE SUCCESS STORIES OF STUDENTS AFTER PROBATION PERIOD

*by*

**Charity Mokgaetji Somo**

Supervisor: Dr Suzanne E. Bester  
Department: Educational Psychology  
Degree: MEd (Educational Psychology)

This study focused on the success stories of students after academic probation in order to explore, understand and describe their personal perceptions, perspectives and the meanings they ascribed to academic probation. I also hoped to gain insight into the success factors that enabled the students success after academic probation. Through these insights I hoped to add to our understanding of supporting students on academic probation.

The conceptual framework for my study was based on the strength-based approach and Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college student retention. I also explored literature on the experiences of students who encountered academic failure as part of framing and understanding of the students' experiences. For the purposes of the aforementioned objectives I followed a qualitative research approach, anchored in an interpretivist paradigm. I collected data through a focus group interview with three participants. The participants were purposively selected on the basis that they themselves were placed on academic probation. With the permission of the participants the interview was tape-recorded, the recording was supported by a research field journal.

Three core themes in the data were identified namely Psychological Processes, Institutional Support Structures and Personal Support Systems. These core themes were integrated with literature and further linked to sub-themes and related themes. The results of my study found that students were enabled by four psychological processes namely attitudes and behaviours, coping behaviours, an internal locus of control and high self-efficacy beliefs to succeed. Institutional structures, including the policy on academic probation, played a crucial role in supporting the students to succeed, and it was because of personal support structures such as family and friends that students had the courage to return to their studies and make a good effort at succeeding.

As a conclusion, this study suggested that it is possible for students to rise above academic probation and persist towards academic achievement and to have positive experiences which enable them to complete their studies.

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## KEYWORDS

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- Academic probation
- Academic exclusion
- Strength-based approach
- Academic Success
- Student
- Interpretivism
- Psychological processes
- Attitude-behaviour theory
- Coping behaviours
- Internal locus of control
- Self-efficacy beliefs
- Student support
- Instrumental case study design

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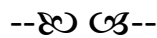
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## CHAPTER 1

### Overview and Rationale

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#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

According to the academic rules and regulations of the University of Pretoria (2012) students may reregister annually on condition that they pass a certain number of core modules as specified by the faculty of their field of study. For example, in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (NAS) students may reregister in the following academic year on condition that they pass four semester modules over two semesters in the previous year (Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Undergraduate Regulations and Syllabi, 2012). If these conditions are not met by students, they will be academically excluded from further studies. However, students who have been academically excluded are given the opportunity to appeal their exclusion. Most students take the opportunity to appeal and in some cases are successful. Following re-admittance these students are placed on academic probation.

The aim of this study was to explore the success stories of students who were placed on academic probation. The research further attempted to discover and appreciate how these students ensured success during and after the probation period. It additionally attempted to try and identify the lessons gleaned from their experiences with a view to making recommendations for future research and academic support to students on academic probation.

This study was conducted from a strength-based approach and focused on the positive aspects relating to students who have turned their academic failure around and have overcome the challenge of the probation period. Attention was paid to students' available strengths and how these were used to ultimately bring about academic success. My approach as the researcher concurs with that of Donnelly (2010) and Hewitt (2005) who emphasised that using a strength-based approach does not mean that people's difficulties are ignored. Instead it places an emphasis on how strengths may be used to improve one's situation by presenting issues in a positive manner.

Data were gathered from a strength-based approach by utilising the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and specifically the 4D cycle that is used in AI research. It is however important to note that AI as a research approach was not used in this study due to the limited scope of this study. AI is an action research inquiry that is carried out over an extended period of time, with the aim being to improve the participants' community while the inquiry is in process (Boyd & Bright, 2007). The



limited time frame of this study did not allow such an inquiry as that in AI. However, the 4D cycle of AI was suitable to this study because it is based on strength-based principles and allows for a structure in the interview process that primarily focuses on searching for the best in people, their organisations and the world around them. A full discussion of how the 4D cycle was employed in this study is provided in Chapter 3.

As a student advisor at UP, I assist readmitted students on a regular basis and have become aware of the effects that academic probation has on students and how they process the probation period psychologically. Despite psychological challenges such as anxiety, I have witnessed students making the most of their probation and becoming successfully reinstated into their programmes. This sparked an interest in me with regard to what exactly it is that makes some readmitted students able to overcome their initial exclusion and be successful once they are readmitted into their course.

On a personal level, I attach great value to affording someone a second chance to prove themselves and am of the conviction that when given another opportunity people are able to make a choice for a personal turnaround towards success. It is this professional interest combined with my personal values that motivated me to undertake this research.

## **1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to explore, describe and understand the success stories of three students after academic probation. To achieve this objective a qualitative, instrumental case study research design involving three students in the Faculty of NAS at UP was undertaken. Bean and Eaton's psychological model of student retention was consulted in an attempt to understand the psychological processes that enable students to have successful experiences.

## **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **1.3.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION**

What were the success stories of three students in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Pretoria after academic probation?

### **1.3.2 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1.3.2.1 What were the positive experiences of three students in the Faculty of NAS who were placed on academic probation?

1.3.2.2 How did these students ensure success in their studies following their re-admittance?

1.3.2.3 How can insight into the success stories of students who were placed on academic probation broaden knowledge on academic support to students?

## **1.4 RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS**

This study was designed to explore the assumptions that:

- Students on academic probation have positive experiences that enable them to succeed.
- Students on academic probation view academic probation as an opportunity to improve their studies.
- Institutional resources and support structures play an important role in the success stories of students on academic probation.
- Students on academic probation show resilience and are able to overcome negative experiences evoked by academic failure.

Throughout my study and while planning the empirical part of my research, I considered and reflected upon the above mentioned assumptions.

## **1.5 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION**

The following key concepts used in the study are clarified: academic exclusion, academic probation, strength-based approach, success and student.

### **1.5.1 ACADEMIC EXCLUSION**

Academic exclusion occurs when a student is disqualified from further studies after not meeting the minimum pass requirements for a course (Berkitz & O'Quin, 2006; Fowler & Boylan, 2010). At the University of Pretoria in the NAS Faculty, students are permitted to appeal academic exclusion twice within their study career. Should the appeal be successful, a student is subsequently placed on academic probation (University of Pretoria, Faculty of NAS Year Book, 2012). According to Cherry and Coleman (2010) some universities require students to write an academic plan of success before they are given an opportunity to be on academic probation.

In this study academic exclusion referred to students who were academically dismissed but given the opportunity to write an appeals letter in order to be placed on academic probation. Subsequent to the success of the appeal these students were placed on academic probation.

### **1.5.2 ACADEMIC PROBATION**

Each University has their own criteria of academic probation. At some universities students are placed on academic probation when they fail to meet the minimum academic standards (Kamphoff et al., 2006). The probation period can last over a semester (Cheery & Coleman, 2010; Humphrey, 2005) or two semesters (Royal & Tabor, 2008) where the students have to meet the expected standards to avoid academic dismissal (Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Humphrey, 2005; Royal & Tabor, 2008; Kamphoff et al., 2006). Furthermore, at some universities students are encouraged or required to participate in activities that are aimed to help them perform academically better (Humphrey, 2005; Kamphoff, 2006; Royal & Tabor, 2008; Preuss & Switalski, 2008).

At the University of Pretoria, in the Faculty of NAS, academic probation is considered to be a six to twelve months period during which a student has to meet certain academic requirements in order to be fully reinstated in their study programme. Students are given probation conditions that include passing stipulated modules and/or obtaining a certain number of module credits, as well as consulting with Student Affairs and/or the Faculty Student Advisor (University of Pretoria, Faculty of NAS Year Book, 2012).

In the context of this study academic probation referred to students who were conditionally re-admitted into the Faculty of NAS after submitting a successful letter of appeal against academic dismissal. These students were placed on academic probation for a period of 12 months where they had to pass modules specified in their individual probation letters. The students were also required to attend the study skills and time management workshops facilitated by the Student Support Division. Students in this research study were subsequently reinstated into their study programmes after they met these requirements within the 12 months period.

### **1.5.3 STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH**

A strength-based approach is a rejection of a medically centred approach to people's circumstances (Weishaar, 2010); it is based on the notion that it is better to address people's life circumstances from an optimistic point of view (Donnelly, 2010; Hewitt, 2005) which places people's inner strengths and abilities at the forefront of addressing their needs (Brun & Rapp, 2001; Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg & Furlong, 2004; Rhee, Furlong, Turner & Harari, 2001; Slawinski, 2008).

In this study the strength-based approach guided me to pay attention to the success stories, factors and process that enabled students' success despite the personal challenges that they encountered as a result of academic failure. Through this approach I was able to seek insight and an

understanding of the strengths, abilities, aptitudes, institutional resources and enabling relationships that allowed the students to thrive, without disregarding the difficulties they faced as a result of the probation (Donnelly, 2010). An elaborate discussion of the said approach as it relates to this study is provided in Chapter 2.

#### **1.5.4 SUCCESS**

There are multiple definitions of success within the context of academic studies (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006). Some scholars and institutions describe success according to academic achievement scores on standardised tertiary entry exams and test grades (Humphrey, 2005). It has also been described in terms of completion and graduation rates (Baldwin, Bensimon, Dowd & Kleiman, 2011; Berkovitz & O'Quin, 2006) and in accordance to the amount of post-graduation enrolments (Kuh et al., 2006). The level of student satisfaction with an institution and the learning environment is also considered by others as an important factor when defining success (Kuh et al., 2006). The most recent definitions also include appreciation of human differences, commitment to democratic values and a capacity to work effectively with people from different backgrounds in their definition of success (Kuh et al., 2006).

In this research study, success was understood as the ability of a student to meet all the requirements of their probation period within the given time of 12 months and become reinstated into their academic programme at the University of Pretoria in the Faculty of NAS.

#### **1.5.5 STUDENT**

For the purposes of this study a student referred to a person registered for a qualification at a tertiary institution, specifically at the University of Pretoria in the Faculty of NAS. This study focused on students who were academically re-admitted after appealing their academic exclusion. These students were excluded in November 2009 and were placed on academic probation from January to December 2010. This study considered them successful because they were able to meet the requirements of the probation period and could be reinstated into their study course.

### **1.6 INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE REVIEW**

In my initial review of the literature I found abundant evidence of research carried out on academic probation. In so doing, I found myself in agreement with James and Graham (2010), and Tovar and Simon (2006) that these studies are largely focused on describing intervention strategies which have been implemented to assist this group of students. For example, Demetriou (2011) and Nance

(2007) described an intervention strategy which focused on addressing the psychological difficulties of these students; Boretz' (2012) concentrated on an intervention that entailed student engagement; Cherry and Coleman (2010) described an intervention aimed at improving students' personal variables such as the ability to be responsible for their own learning; while Royal and Tabor's (2008) research considered a programme on an academic literacy course designed to assist the students. These studies' main aim was to report on the positive outcomes of the support interventions offered to students. However, they do not include descriptions and details of personal experiences of students on academic probation. Therefore, most of what has come to be known about the students' experiences is being inferred through the support provided for them.

In this research study I consulted literature on experiences of underperforming students, since students on academic probation experienced initially academic failure. However, most of this literature focused on the negative experiences of such failure without providing details on how these students overcame their failures and became successful. This inquiry was conducted from the strength-based approach; however, I included this literature to gain an understanding of the realities of students on academic probation. Understanding their negative experiences enabled me to place the students' success stories in the context of their entire reality and thereby gain a complete understanding of their experiences (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg & Furlong, 2004) versus understanding one side of their stories.

Furthermore, the inclusion of this literature served as an acknowledgement of the students' negative experiences, in order to deal with the criticism that challenged the positive psychology movement as having the intention of disregarding the unpleasant aspects of people's lives (Kobau, Seligman, Peterson, Diener, Zack, Chapman & Thompson, 2011).

## **1.7 UNDERLYING PARADIGM AND RESEARCH APPROACH**

A paradigm is understood to be a comprehensive belief system, world view, or framework that informs research field and practice (Creswell, 2007; Willis, 2007). According to Creswell (2007) there are five philosophical assumptions (paradigms) that could guide an individual's choice to conduct a qualitative study: ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical and methodological. This research study was guided by the ontological and epistemological philosophical assumptions. The former assumptions are concerned about the nature of reality and its characteristics while the latter are concerned with how we know what we know (Creswell, 2007; 2013; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013; Willis, 2007). This research study explored how students on academic probation experienced it as well as the factors and processes that enabled them to become successful in it (ontology) through their success stories (epistemology).

I conducted my research from an interpretivist paradigmatic perspective. Interpretivism is based on the beliefs that reality should be understood from the subjective views and perceptions of the individual or group under study, and that reality is constructed within the lived or worked context of the individual and group (Creswell, 2007; Goldkuhl, 2012).

Through the interpretivist paradigm I endeavoured to gain an in-depth understanding of how the students interpreted the academic probation and of what experiences enabled their success. The interpretivist paradigm allowed me to emphasise the importance of the students' voices, observations and understandings of their own reality (Creswell, 2007; Willis, 2007).

According to Willis (2007) interpretivists favour qualitative research methods because those methods allow the researcher to explore how participants interpret the world around them. Qualitative research has been described as a quest to understand how people make sense of their world and experiences (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013); it is intended to explore the subjective experiences of individuals being studied (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is also employed to investigate circumstances where relatively little is known about the phenomenon (Gray, 2009). Since there is little known and/or published about the actual experiences of students on academic probation I hoped to enhance the existing body of literature on this topic. Furthermore, through this approach I could:

- Obtain a holistic or integrated overview on what it is like to be a student placed on academic probation,
- Obtain the students' perceptions on their experiences as probation students,
- Explore how students ensured success and the reasons for the actions they took,
- Study the subjective meanings of the participant's everyday experiences with regards to academic probation, and
- Extract themes that would best portray the students' holistic experiences.

## **1.8 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

I conducted my study by applying an instrumental case study research design. Such a design is chosen when the researcher intends to gain insight or understanding into the case (Simon, 2009; Yin, 2012). A group of three readmitted students were involved as participants. Through a design of this type I could gain valuable insight from the experiences of students placed on academic probation and provide a reflective description of those experiences (Yin, 2012; Creswell, 2007).

In order to select the research participants I employed purposive sampling. Since the aim of this kind of sampling is to choose participants based on the purpose of their involvement in the study

(Babbie, 2005; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013) I chose those who would best be able to describe the experiences of students who were placed on academic probation and managed to meet the requirements of re-instatement into their programme. A list of current students who were reinstated after complying with the requirements of their academic probation at the University of Pretoria, in the Faculty of NAS, was obtained; they were contacted and invited to participate in this research study. The selection criteria for the participants are elaborated on in Chapter 3.

I employed a focus group discussion as the main method of data collection (Creswell, 2013; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013; Willis, 2007). I conducted a focus group discussion with the three research participants, with the aim of exploring the stories that enabled their success. With the permission of the participants I audiotaped the focus group discussion. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, for the purposes of data analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

As part of the focus group discussion, I employed the use of a research field journal for two purposes: to review the research process and as a means to capture observation data. The journal enabled me to plan, outline and review each step of the research process and to make observational notes on the verbal and non-verbal interactions of the research participants during the focus group discussion; see Appendix B. The data gathered through the said journal enabled me to supplement the research findings in order to provide a full picture of the experiences of students on academic probation (Silverman, 2005).

I thematically analysed the raw data through the procedural steps offered by Creswell (2007), King and Horrock (2010) and Yin (2011). As a means of triangulation I used a computer data analysis programme *ATLAS.ti* as an added data analysis tool. Thematic data analysis allowed me to assess the key words, phrases, themes and messages obtained during data collection (Creswell, 2007).

## **1.9 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER**

In a qualitative inquiry it is important for the researcher to reflect on her position so that she can limit the influence personal factors may exert on the research process (Merriam, 2009). For this reason, it became important for me to reflect on and clarify my own subjectivity at the onset of and during the entire research process (Creswell, 2013). I fulfilled two primary roles during the study, namely that of researcher and focus group facilitator. Throughout the research process, I had to constantly keep in mind that my primary role as a researcher and facilitator entailed facilitating an ethical exploration into the experiences of the students through: ethically planning the research project, facilitating a focus group discussion without imposing my perceptions on the participants and ethically reporting on the data generated.

The use of a research journal assisted me to document my reflections. As I reflected on my role as the researcher and facilitator I became aware that my perceptions of academic probation were influenced by my role as a Faculty Student Advisor (FSA). As an FSA, I am responsible for supporting students on academic probation and therefore have come to form a personal opinion on students in this situation; that most such students are able to succeed. Through my professional role I was also aware of the academic skills and resources that students often use to succeed and the support services they needed. Through the research journal I could write guidelines for myself on how to limit the possibility of unethical influence on the way I conducted this study and facilitated the focus group discussion; see Appendix B.

Furthermore, during the focus group interview I sought to act in a manner that would minimise the influence of my biases, assumptions and values; see Appendix B. I made sure that I asked questions that were directly related to the reports and comments of the participants. I also avoided swaying the discussion in the direction that I thought it should go, and remained focused on the experiences shared by the participants.

Additionally, the research supervision process enabled me to ensure trustworthy findings were obtained from the study. Member checking was also used to ensure that the interpretation of the data was accurate and that true experiences of the participants were gleaned.

#### **1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This research study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria in February, 2013. Through an informed consent form (appendix E) I made the participant fully aware of the purposes of the study, confidentiality of responses, how the results would be used, and who will have access to the data (Flick, 2009). Informed and written consent was obtained from the participants prior to their participation in the focus group; they were also made aware of their right to withdraw from participation at any point in the discussion (Flick, 2009; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013).

Protecting the dignity and rights, and preserving the wellbeing of research participants are the essential principles in ethical considerations (Flick, 2009; King & Horrock, 2010). The risk of emotional and psychological distress of the participants was limited in this study due to the positive nature of the research process. However, in order to deal with the potential harm the participants were made aware that they could access psychological assistance from student support services at no charge to them. A comprehensive discussion of how informed and written consent, voluntary



participation, no deception, confidentiality, anonymity, protection from harm and debriefing were dealt with is provided in Chapter 3.

### **1.11 MEASURES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS**

In order to conduct this research study with rigour and to describe in detail a holistic and in-depth picture of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007) the quality criteria of this study was enhanced through taking measures that ensured the credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability of the findings.

My aim was to provide a rich description of the students' experiences rather than to generalise the findings (Simon, 2009). However, the research methodology of this study was described in-depth so that other researchers wishing to conduct a similar study in their context may be able to follow the research process and obtain an in-depth picture of experiences of students on academic probation in their own context.

Furthermore, as a researcher I reflected on my personal biases and assumption and sought to limit the influence thereof on the research findings (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2009) and also conducted member checking to ensure that the research findings were a true reflection of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Measures taken to enhance the study's trustworthiness are discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

### **1.12 LAYOUT OF THE STUDY**

#### **CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE**

The opening chapter provided an overview and introduction regarding my study. The chapter included the rationale and purpose of the study, the paradigmatic perspective and my conceptualisation of key concepts. I outlined the research design and methodology, after which I concluded the chapter with a summary of ethical guidelines followed and the quality criteria to which I tried to conform.

#### **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter presented a discussion of literature on experiences of underperforming students. The strength-based approach and Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college student retention are discussed as theories that informed the study. As a conclusion to the chapter a conceptual theory of the study is presented.

### **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, the research process followed in the study is described. The research paradigm and methodology are discussed in detail; including methods of data collection, data analysis and interpretation. I also justified my choices with regard to the research questions and purpose of the study.

### **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This chapter contained a presentation and discussion of the data collected and analysed. I included a discussion of the findings of the study. Throughout I related the findings that I obtained to those reported in existing literature explored in Chapter 2.

### **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The final chapter presents the conclusions of the study. In this chapter, the research findings are linked to relevant literature as well as to the primary and secondary research questions. The challenges and limitations of the study are indicated, as well as the potential contributions of my study. Finally, the recommendations for further research and practice formulated are expressed.

## **1.13 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I provided the context of academic probation at the University of Pretoria, specifically in the NAS Faculty. I also provided the rationale and purpose of the research study and outlined the research and literature gaps in the studies of students on academic probation.

I briefly stated my research design and methodology and defined key concepts to provide the reader with the meanings I ascribed to these concepts, within the context of this study. In the next chapter I explored literature on experiences of students on academic probation as well as theories that framed this study.

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## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

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#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The initial literature review presented in Chapter 1 found that research pertaining to students on academic probation largely centres on the value and outcomes of the intervention programmes that were designed to assist these students (Tovar & Simon, 2006; James & Graham, 2010). Furthermore, James and Graham (2010) also state that studies of students on academic probation have been primarily focused on describing the factors that lead to student failure in order to “establish a profile of a typical academic probation student” (p.72). Characteristics of unsuccessful students that are described included lack of study skills, time management (Isaak, Graves & Mayers, 2006), gaps in tutoring and mentorship (Tovar & Simon, 2006), lack of preparation for university studies, poor academic adaptation (Wlazelek & Coutler, 1999), deficient motivational levels (Kamphoff et al., 2010); and an external locus of control (Demetriou, 2011; James & Graham, 2010; Tovar & Simon, 2006); lack of social proficiency and uncertain academic goals (Isaak, Graves & Mayers, 2006; Trombley, 2000) as well as negative non-academic and personal issues (Fowler & Boylan, 2010).

I have noticed that as a result of focusing on students’ deficiencies and needs it is seldom acknowledged in the literature that these students possess the potential to excel academically. Despite the lack of reports on success stories of students on academic probation Berkovitz and O’Quin (2007) found that 47% of students who chose to return to school as probationary students managed to show persistence until they graduated. In this research study emphasis was accorded to the success stories of students who were placed on academic probation and managed to meet the requirements of the probation period within the given time. Therefore, the aim was to investigate the students’ experiences from a strength-based perspective in order to explore how they were able to change their academic standing and become reinstated into their programmes.

The following section considers the literature on the experiences of students who encountered academic failure. As stated in Chapter 1, this literature reports on the difficulties encountered as a result of academic failure without elaborating much on how unsuccessful students can overcome their challenges. As indicated earlier, my rationale for including this literature was twofold: firstly it was to explore the reported experiences of students on academic probation (since they are students who encountered failure). This exploration enabled me to be aware of the challenges

faced by the students and how they responded to them. Being aware of and bearing the negative experiences in mind allowed me to place the success stories in context of the students' holistic experiences. Secondly, Kobau, Seligman, Peterson, Diener, Zack, Chapman and Thompson (2011) and Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg and Furlong (2004) suggest that an inquiry into both negative and positive experiences can lead to a complete scientific understanding of the human experience. Therefore, I included this literature because contemplation into the negative experiences of underperforming students promised to strengthen my understanding of holistic experiences of students on academic probation. This contemplation was also an acknowledgement that observing strengths does not disregard people's difficulties in a situation (Donnelly, 2010).

A discussion of how the strength-based approach and Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college student retention respectively framed the study is provided in this chapter. Adopting a strength-based approach allowed me to reframe academic probation as an opportunity for students to adapt, improve and excel in their academic work.

## **2.2 EXPERIENCES OF UNDER-PERFORMING STUDENTS**

Students' self-efficacy is considered an essential part of academic success (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005). These authors described self-efficacy as a person's self-evaluation of their competence to successfully complete a task. Self-efficacy requires the individual to be self-confident in their ability to successfully execute a task (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005). Self-confidence is important in academic achievement as it enables students to select activities out of interest (rather than fear) and to continue with those activities despite academic setbacks (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005). Students who display low self-efficacy often lack the confidence that they can meet their own expectations as well as those of their teachers and family (Baslanti, 2008), this low-confidence creates doubt in the students' beliefs that they are capable of academic achievement (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005). Neff, Hsieh and Dejitterat (2005) found that students that have low self-efficacy tend to be concerned about concealing their lack of ability versus the concern to pursue competence through the development and improvement of their ability.

Closely related to self-efficacy beliefs is the idea of the self-concept. This can be regarded as self-representation (how individuals perceive themselves), self-esteem (how individuals feel about themselves) and self-image (Zhang, Wang, Li & Yu & Bi, 2011). Baslanti (2008) and Zhang et al. (2011) postulate that underachievement is closely linked to development of the self-concept. Underachieving students tend to perceive themselves in terms of failure and begin to place self-imposed limits on their potential, with the possible outcome being that real academic progress may be hindered as a result of underachievement (Baslanti, 2008). According to Tovar and Simon (2006)

and Nance (2007), students experiencing academic failure tend to become uncertain of their academic potential and may have a diminished self-concept. This self-concept could lead students to doubt their academic capabilities and in some cases employ negative coping mechanisms to deal with their negative self-perceptions (Bartels & Herman, 2011). For example, Bartels and Herman (2011) found that students experiencing failure “are likely to utilize cognitive strategies such as self-handicapping that serves to perpetuate failure” (p.2). According to De Castella and Byrne (2013) self-handicapping is a defensive strategy employed to alter the meaning of failure by diverting the cause of the latter away from the student’s ability onto premeditated excuses. These self-handicapping mechanisms are used to protect one’s self-esteem in the event of failure (Bartels & Herman, 2011; De Castella & Byrne, 2013). Self-handicapping mechanisms include the use of self-imposed obstacles: such as leaving studying to the last minute, which allows the individual to attribute failure to factors outside of his or her control, thus protecting his or her self-esteem. However, despite the fact that self-handicapping mechanisms may alleviate other negative emotions, such as shame, for a short while they increase the odds of failure (Bartels & Herman, 2011).

Some researchers link self-efficacy to the attribute of locus of control (Judge, Erez, Bono & Thoresen, 2002); a person who attributes success to internal, stable and controllable factors is more likely to feel in control of his or her circumstances and show self-confidence and show high self-esteem (Demetriou, 2011). According to Demetriou (2011) students who believe in themselves and who feel positive about their personal ability to perform a task are more likely to put an effort to academically related situations. Jude et al. (2002) postulate that a clear connection exists between self-esteem and locus of control and that individuals who have an internal locus of control will resist the temptation to attribute success or failure to external causes. According to Demetriou (2011) students on academic probation tend to feel that they have lost control over their academic situations and therefore fail to take responsibility for their academic performance by displaying an external locus of control.

According to Neff, Hsieh and Dejitterat (2005) and Bartels and Herman (2011) students who experience academic failure may develop a general fear of failure. McGregor and Elliot (2005) conceptualise fear of failure as “the self-evaluative framework that influences how the individual defines, orients to, and experiences failure in achieving situations” (p.129). In their study which investigated the link between fear of failure and shame, McGregor and Elliot (2005) found that individuals who had high levels of fear of failure were more prone to generalise their underachievement in one aspect of their lives to their whole self. These individuals define failure as

an unacceptable event which leads to negative implications for their self-worth (McGregor & Elliot, 2005).

Authors such as Bartels and Herman (2011), Neff, Hsieh and Dejitterat (2005) and Turner and Husman (2008) found that shame is an emotional response often associated with academic failure. De Castella and Byrne (2013) postulate that feelings of shame and humiliation are triggered by self-perceptions of incompetence. Shame is understood to be the reprimand individuals feel when they have fallen short of their standards and the failure is attributed to lack of personal ability (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). According to McGregor and Elliot (2011, p. 227), “...shame is the core emotion of fear of failure” and it is a “painful, persistent and cognitively disruptive emotion (Bartels & Herman, 2011, p.8). Turner and Husman (2008) found that students placed on academic probation may encounter feelings of shame and perceptions of being a failure, especially if the failure is attributed to personal factors such as ability. Students may experience shame because they have disappointed themselves as well as personal stakeholders such as parents, teachers, bursars, etcetera (McGregor & Elliot, 2011). Feelings of shame interfere with motivation and eventually lead some students to abandon their studies and future goals (Turner & Husman, 2008). Furthermore, students who are confronted with academic failure and shame may develop fear of failure (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005). It seems that shame as a result of academic failure may have debilitating effects on students’ academic progress; students may be overwhelmed by the shame that they may not be able to continue pursuing their academic studies (Turner & Husman, 2008).

Motivation has been found to be a strong predictor of academic success (Hsieh, Sullivan & Guerra, 2007). Balduf (2009) reports that underachieving students tend to show low levels of motivation during the semester. Nance (2007) found that students who are faced with academic failure demonstrate a decline in motivation. Therefore, low levels of motivation may lead to academic underperformance and may also be the result of academic failure. Turner and Husman (2008) established that when students renew their commitment to their future goals, their motivation levels may increase and that motivation was renewed when students considered the importance of their future goals. Additionally Neff, Hsieh and Dejitterat (2005) suggest that individuals who are self-compassionate have adaptive academic motivational patterns. These individuals are able to view failure as an opportunity to learn and pay attention to improving their academic activities (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005).

Neff, Hsieh and Dejitterat (2005) investigated the relationship between self-compassion, academic achievement goals and coping with perceived academic failure among undergraduate students. In their study they found that fear of failure may be overcome by individuals who show self-

compassion. Self-compassion is described as the ability to be transparent about one's own suffering, being kind and understanding to oneself, wanting to be healthy, being non-judgmental about one's shortcomings and also possessing the ability to see one's own experiences as not unique (Neff, Hsieh & Dejjterat, 2005). Individuals who have self-compassion have a positive attitude that allows them to engage in activities out of interest rather than as an effort to protect their self-esteem (Neff, Hsieh & Dejjterat, 2005). Students who are self-compassionate will respond to failure with a sense of kindness and understanding towards their own situations "rather than harsh self-condemnation, enabling failure to be seen as a learning opportunity rather than an indictment of self-worth" (Neff, Hsieh & Dejjterat, 2005, p. 267).

This last study provided one perspective on how students who encountered academic failure may overcome experiences such as fear or fear of failure. Through my study I hoped to explore additional factors, means and processes that enabled students to overcome the affective, cognitive and psychological difficulties associated with academic probation. The focus of my study fell on success factors; however, I reflected on the aforementioned literature to support my understanding of the trials that the students on academic probation undergo, and therefore gain a holistic picture of the students' experiences.

I also included the literature to assert that focusing on people's strengths does not mean ignoring or denying their weaknesses, needs and distressing or unpleasant aspects of life (Donnelly, 2010; Kobua et al, 2011); therefore I was able to concentrate on students' strengths and successes without ignoring the aforementioned difficulties.

## **2.3 THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

### **2.3.1 STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH**

In the past few decades professionals in the field of psychology, including education (Jimerson et al., 2004; Rhee et al., 2001), mental health (Seligman, 2002), counselling psychology (Smith, 2006; Weishaar, 2010) and crisis response (Slawinski, 2006) have shifted their focus from weaknesses, deficiencies and pathology to placing an emphasis on capacity building, enhancing strengths as well as mobilising people's inner resources following crisis situations (Jimerson et al., 2004; Rhee et al., 2001; Seligman, 2002; Slawinski, 2006; Weishaar, 2010).

Similarly, positive psychology was a paradigm shift in the field of psychology from the pre-occupation with repairing disease and pathology to building the best qualities in life (Jimerson et al., 2004, Seligman, 2002). Its initial aim was to bring the building of strengths to the forefront in

treating and preventing mental illness (Seligman, 2002). According to Seligman (2002) positive psychology is concerned with the subjective experiences that contribute towards the wellbeing, satisfaction, happiness, optimism, hope and faith of an individual as well as the positive personal traits possessed by individuals such as love for their vocation, interpersonal skills, aesthetic sensibility, courage, perseverance, high talent and wisdom. It is also concerned about institutions that promote better citizenship (responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, work ethic) in individuals.

The strength-based approach is embedded within the positive psychology paradigm (Kobau et al., 2011) and therefore shares its common principles (Smith, 2006). Both the strength-based approach and positive psychology are concerned with “competencies, resources and what is right about people - their positive attributes, psychological assets, and strengths” (Kobau et al., 2011, p. e1, Smith, 2006). Positive psychology aims to examine and foster factors that allow individuals, communities and societies to thrive (Kobau et al., 2011, Smith, 2006). It is regarded as the study of optimal human functioning; it calls attention to the positive aspects of human experience and seeks to understand the sources, processes and mechanisms that lead to desirable outcomes (Coetzee & Viviers, 2007; Kobau et al, 2011; Smith, 2006).

A major characteristic of both positive psychology and the strength-based approach is resilience (Jimerson, 2004; Smith, 2006). Resilience is defined as an inner strength (Slawinski, 2006), strengths that enable individuals to face challenges in life (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2005) and the ability to successfully adapt and bounce back in the face of adversity (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2005; Jimerson et al., 2004). According to Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2005) resilience is based on the core question of “what experiences and pathways lead to positive outcomes?” (p.130). In resiliency the moral of the inquiry is to elucidate factors that enable individuals to live a positive life following challenging circumstances. Studies on human resiliency assert that given the opportunity individuals have the abilities to survive, recover or even thrive amidst difficult situations (Rhee et al., 2001). They take into consideration the personal skills, character traits (confidence, hardiness and perseverance), supportive social relationships that an individual has used in order to thrive despite tough situations. According to Rhee et al. (2001, p. 7) “the concept of thriving is important within the strength-based perspective because it reframes student problems as opportunities for adaptation and improvement”.

The strength-based approach can be conceptualised as an ideal based on the notion that despite challenges, individuals possess innate abilities and resources which enable them to cope with the challenges of life (Brun & Rapp, 2001; Jimerson et al., 2004; Rhee et al., 2001; Slawinski, 2008).



Slawinski (2008) provided the practice assumptions on which the strength-based approach was founded; these assumptions shaped the conceptualisation of the strength-based approach in this study:

- Individuals possess innate strengths and coping skills that they have developed over their lifetime;
- During crises people have the ability to connect with their past abilities, skills and strengths;
- Support systems and resources can promote a sense of coping and mastery in stressful situations; therefore I could explore institutional and relational assets that enabled students' success.
- Individuals are in control of their own bouncing back process;
- Each individual has a unique way to deal with their own situation;
- It incorporates all aspects that contribute towards wellbeing;

Jimerson et al. (2004) note that “much of the practice identifying students’ needs is based on a deficit model, which focuses on problems such as processing deficits, poor achievement, and social-emotional difficulties in order to prescribe intervention programs” (p. 10). I chose to shift from the deficit-based approach to students’ positive experiences and used the strength-based approach to facilitate an inquiry that would view students’ experiences from a half-full instead of half-empty perspective (Smith, 2006).

Using this approach, I was able to pay much attention to how participants used their strengths, abilities and inner resources to address their needs and difficulties (Donnelly, 2010; Jimerson et al., 2004). This shift in focus does not disregard difficulties, but rather places emphasis on the fact that needs and difficulties may be addressed through identifying strengths, assets and capacities (Donnelly, 2010 & Hewitt, 2005).

Through a strength-based approach I embraced a positive and optimistic philosophy (Hewitt, 2005; Rhee et al., 2001). Optimistic people tend to become creative and innovative and are motivated towards action because they believe that the situation has the potential to improve (Hewitt, 2005). According to Hewitt (2005) our perspectives on situations help us interpret the latter and our interpretations drive our interventions; a strength-based approach enabled me to acquire an optimistic view on academic probation and the abilities of students to overcome it. As a result I could launch this investigation with the hope of finding the “silver lining” in students’ behaviours and attitudes about their studies (Hewitt, 2005); and paint a much richer picture of what students are doing to overcome and succeed despite the difficulty of academic probation (Hewitt, 2005;

Rhee et al., 2001). The approach also afforded me the opportunity to promote a strength-based approach to the practice of academic based counselling (Rhee et al., 2004).

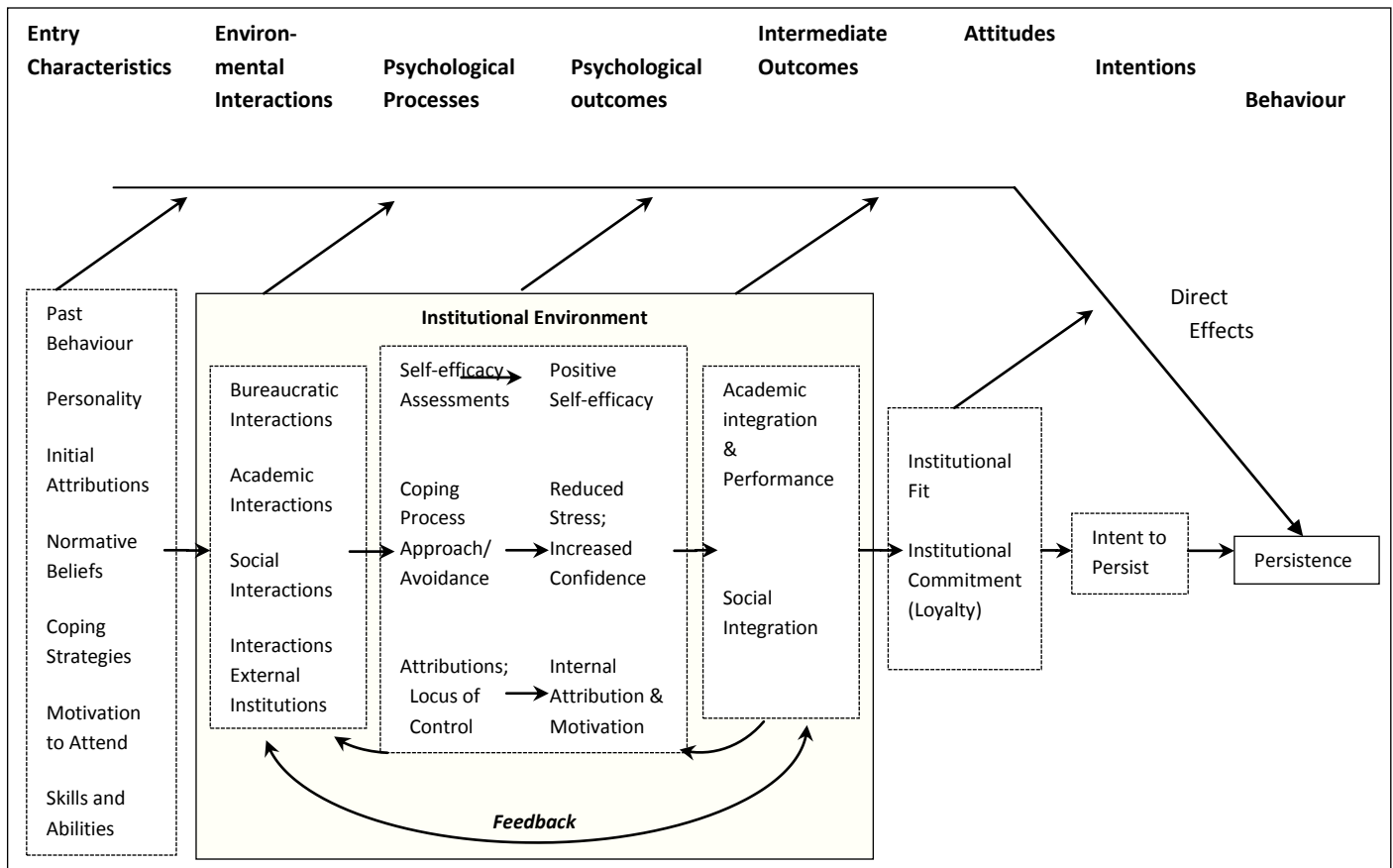
This approach also allowed me to concur with Martin Seligman that “Psychology is not just the study of weaknesses and damage; it is also the study of strengths and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best within ourselves” (Seligman, 1999, p. 1 as cited in Smith, 2006, p. 13).

### **2.3.2 BEAN AND EATON’S PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION**

Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) believe that it is psychological processes which determine social and academic integration of students. They based this view on the premise that students are psychological beings who employ individual psychological processes to make decisions to continue with their studies (2000, 2001). Social integration is measured by the interactions of students with their peers as well as faculty staff (Kuh et al., 2006). Academic integration refers to the ability of a student to comply with academic standards such as passing courses as well as ability to engage in activities that are academically meaningful (Kuh et al., 2006). Therefore, success depends on the type of interaction students engage in with peers and members of their faculty on a formal and informal basis, as well on their ability to achieve the academic standards required for their course. Kuh et al. (2006) concluded that academic and social integration are independent processes which complement each other, and are processes by which a student adjusts to college life.

Employing four psychological theories: attitude-behaviour theory; coping behavioural theory (in particular the approach-avoidance theory); self-efficacy theory and attribution theory (focusing on locus of control), Bean and Eaton (2000) developed the psychological model of college student retention. The purpose of this model is to account for the role that psychological processes play in students’ social and academic integration and ultimately their decision to persist in their studies. Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) employed Bentler’s and Speckart’s (1979) attitude’s behaviour model as an overall structure for their model. According to this model students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics which include past behaviours, personality traits, attribution style, belief systems, coping mechanisms, motivational stance and skills and abilities. Their interaction within the institutional environment encourages the development of certain psychological processes to take place. If a student is successful in the interaction with their new environment these psychological processes will result in positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy and an internal locus of control. Each of these processes, self-efficacy assessments, coping behavioural choices, and attributions, increase a student’s motivation to succeed. These psychological processes create a feedback loop whereby social and academic

integration leads back to adjustment in interaction with the new environment which in turn leads to institutional fit and loyalty, and intent to persist. The model appears in Figure 2.1 while the theories of the model are briefly discussed in the following section.



**Figure 2.1:** A psychological model of college student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001)

### 2.3.2.1 Attitude-behaviour theory

The attitude-behaviour theory links beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviours (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001) and posits that behaviour is intentional; in other words people act in accord with their intentions. According to Ajzen and Fishbein (2000) a person’s behaviour can be predicted and explained by their attitude. Bean and Eaton define attitude as “a person’s favourable or unfavourable evaluation of an object” (p. 50). These authors (2000, 2001) assert that intention precedes the behaviour; the intention is influenced by the attitude toward the behaviour and is based on the beliefs about the outcomes of the latter. In other words, beliefs about the consequences of the behaviour, perceptions about the expectations of others and beliefs about possible hindrances lead to the formation of the intention of the behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000). Since a person’s intention to act is linked to the evaluation of that situation Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) suggest that positive attitudes enable individuals to become intentional to take action whereas negative attitudes predispose individuals to engage in avoidance tendencies.

Since personal and normative beliefs lead to the formation of an attitude towards the consequences of the behaviour, which leads to intentions about the behaviour and executing it (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Bean & Eaton, 2000) my understanding is that Bean and Eaton suggest that the intentions of a student to succeed in academic activities are determined by student's personal and normative evaluations of his or her academic situation; if the evaluation is favourable the student will then have positive intentions towards the situation and as a result persist in his or her studies. For example, if an underperforming student thinks that he or she has what it takes to succeed academically he or she will experience positive perceptions about his or her studies and therefore develop positive and productive intentions, and engage in academic activities that will enable his or her success.

### **2.3.2.2 Coping behavioural theory**

Bean and Eaton (1995) discovered that there is a positive relationship between coping behaviours and academic and social integration. Coping behaviours, also termed approach behaviours, are defined as adaptive actions that are intended to minimise stress whereas avoidance behaviours are "passive practices used to avert stress" (Bean & Eaton 1995; 2000, p. 52). According to Bean and Eaton (2000) an individual responds to stressful situations in two ways; they can either choose to cope by adapting to these or they can act passively in them. Adapting to situations is enabled by coping behaviours (Bean & Eaton, 2000). According to the coping behavioural model, coping behaviour allows a person to choose activities that will help him or her adapt to difficult circumstance and deal with his or her stress; whereas avoidance behaviours lead a person to avoid activities that may assist him or her to become successful. Bean and Eaton (2000) also confirmed a negative relationship between avoidance behaviours and academic integration.

From the said behavioural theory Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) suggest that students who are able to act in a manner that decreases the occurrence of stress (e.g. attending classes, consulting with academic faculty for supplemental assistance, socialising with friends outside of the classroom) are able to adjust academically and socially. They also believe the converse of this to be true, that students who engage in avoidance behaviours, such as practices to avert stress, tend to be maladjusted. For example, in a social context people who are able to participate in activities that build relationships are able to adapt and adjust to new social situations (Bean & Eaton, 2001). The psychological model of college student retention suggests that for students to be adjusted academically and socially, they need to engage in coping behaviours (adaptive behaviours); engage in activities and form habits that will best assist them to deal with stress factors. For example, coping behaviours that could help students deal with academic deadlines involve good time management skills such as effective planning.

### 2.3.2.3 Self-efficacy theory

Bean and Eaton (2001) borrow from Bandura's (1986, 1998) definition of self-efficacy as the perceptions that an individual has of his or her ability to perform certain actions in order to achieve certain outcomes. Past experiences and observations determine an individual's perceptions of their ability to perform a task (Bean & Eaton, 2001). The person's recognition of his or her own competence determines higher aspirations of persistence, self-confidence, task achievement and personal goals (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001). These authors postulate that when self-efficacy is linked to a specific task, competence is evaluated according to the task in question and a person gains self-confidence to perform that task as he or she recognise his or her competence (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

According to Hsieh, Sullivan and Guerra (2007) studies on the relationship between self-efficacy and achievement suggest that self-efficacy is strongly associated with academic achievement. Students who perform academically well have been found to display positive self-efficacy beliefs while students who perform academically poorly have been found to display low beliefs of this kind. Baslanti (2008) posits that underachieving students often doubt their own self-efficacy and therefore do not necessarily acquire positive learning habits that are associated with academic success. Students who have positive self-efficacy on the other hand tend to be more willing to apply themselves in order to achieve their academic goals (Hsieh, Sullivan and Guerra, 2007).

Hsieh, Sullivan and Guerra (2007) describe self-efficacy as a critical component to ensure successful learning while Bean and Eaton (2001) suggest that "...self-efficacy for academic performance is a predictor of academic persistence" (p. 53) because it enables a student to gain self-confidence in his or her ability to survive or adapt (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

### 2.3.2.4 Attribution theory

Attribution is defined as the process of assigning causes to behaviour and situation outcomes (Mkumbo & Amani, 2012). Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) found Weiner's model of attribution to be useful in examining academic performance and integration. For the purposes of their model they chose to pay attention to the attribute of locus of control out of three of the characteristics featured Weiner's model. Locus of control is understood to be an individual's ability to provide internal or external reasons for past outcomes and experiences (Park & Kim, 1998). An individual may display an internal or external locus of control. The former exists when a person is able to ascribe outcomes and experiences to personal attributes; the latter describes the condition when a person ascribes outcomes and experiences to factors outside of their control (Park & Kim, 1998).

According to Park and Kim (1998, p. 197) “people attempt to make sense of their world by making attributions about their cause of certain outcomes.”

According to Bean and Eaton (2001), a person with an external locus of control is less likely to display behaviours that show effort because they do not believe they are in charge, whereas a person who possesses an internal locus of control is more likely to participate in coping behaviours because they believe that they have what it takes to be successful. Bean and Eaton (2001) perceive integration to be a function of one’s attribution towards the situation. For example, if a person believes that he or she possess the personal capacity to make friends then he or she will find it easier to participate in social activities in order to build relationships. Such people have a better chance of being socially integrated.

In their study that examined the relationship between attribution style, locus of control, and academic achievement Park and Kim (1998) found that students placed on academic probation were more likely to score lower on internal locus of control and higher on external locus of control. By implication these authors as well as Mkumbo and Amani (2012) postulate that the practical implications for these students are that their external locus of control would disable them from being high-achievers.

Bean and Eaton’s psychological model of college student retention is a theoretical attempt to explain how individual psychological processes enable a student to persist with his or her academic endeavours (Bean & Eaton, 2000). The model suggests that an individual enters the institution with psychological attributes which have been shaped by his or her past behaviours and experiences, personality traits, self-efficacy beliefs, attribution styles, self-assessments, as well as their skills and abilities (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001). These psychological attributes initially determine the way the student will interact with the environment (Bean & Eaton, 2000). After entry into higher education, students begin to interact with the institution and its staff in two main realms: academic (e.g., administration, funding offices, faculty staff) and social (e.g., interactions with peers). During interaction with the academic and social realms, students develop new psychological attributes by which to interpret and respond to the demands made by the new environment. This development is facilitated by a student’s personal self-assessments. Students assess their self-efficacy to achieve academic success and social integration, engage in coping behaviours to minimise stressful situations and evaluate the manner in which their own actions improved their academic or social situations (Bean & Eaton, 2000). These self-assessments and new psychological processes determine the general feeling that a student will have towards the institution and his or her desire to persevere through his or her studies.

Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) believe that students who are able to attain academic and social integration are those who hold positive attitudes towards their academic performance and are able to acquire positive academic habits as a result of their intentions to do well academically (attitude leads to intention which results in behaviours), choose positive coping attitudes and actions so that they are able to meet the academic expectations (approach behaviours), develop positive self-efficacy assessments and show an ability to attribute success to factors within their own control (internal locus of control).

## 2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

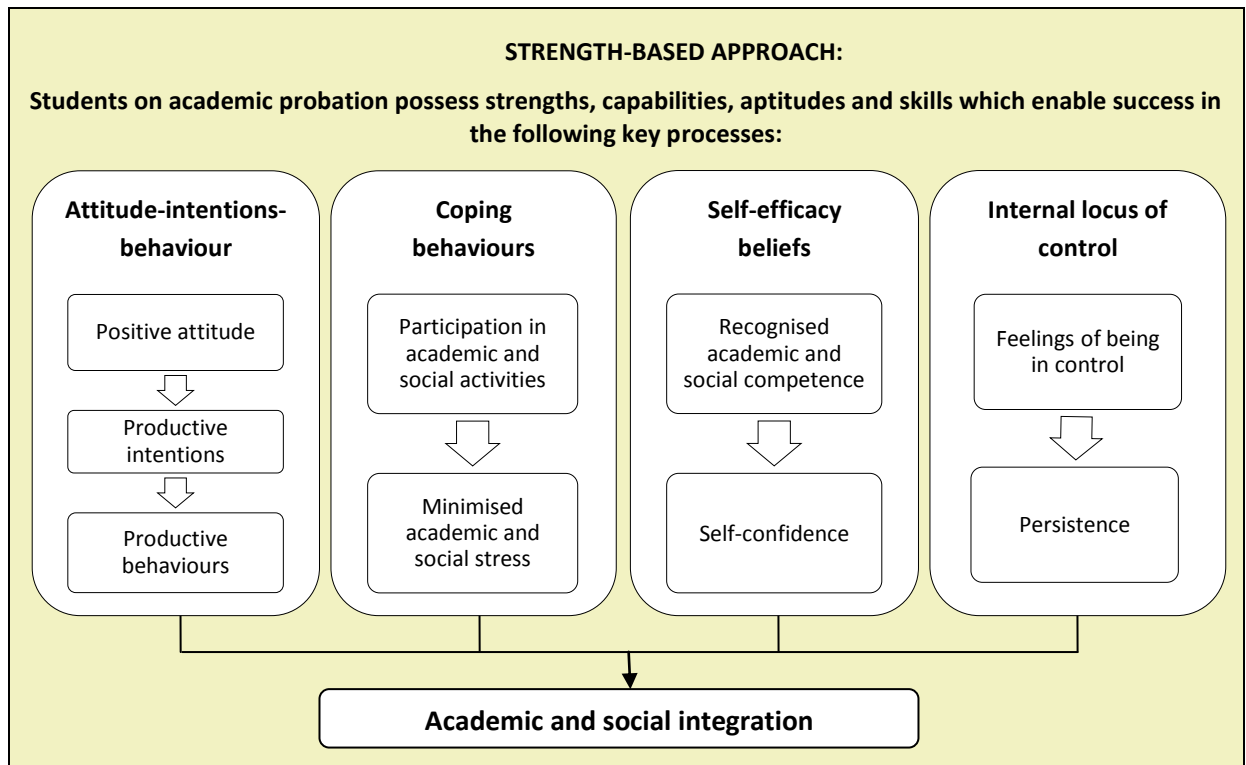
The aforementioned two theories namely the strength-based approach and Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college retention, respectively contributed towards the conceptual framework of this study. Evans, Coon and Ume (2011, p. 278) posit that conceptual or theoretical frameworks "may assist in things such as research design..., or examinations of a set of related constructs; in the development or start codes and themes...and in the utilitarian dissemination of results". According to the authors conceptual frameworks have the following utility:

- They provide an orderly, efficient scheme for bringing together observations and facts from several investigations,
- they guide understanding of phenomena - both the what and the why of the occurrence,
- they assist in summarising and linking into accessible, coherent, useful structure, and
- provide a basis for prediction.

The strength-based approach underpinned this study; the foundational belief of the study was that people have the capability and resources to deal with challenging situations. I believed that students on academic probation possessed innate competencies that allowed them to overcome academic probation which seems to be a stressful and discouraging situation. I also believed that there were available resources to support these students for success. Following these convictions, I endeavoured to explore positive stories of students on academic probation through strength-based research methodology including the research design, data collection strategies and data analysis and interpretation.

I referred to Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of college student retention with the aim of evaluating the students' experiences from a theoretical point of view. Through the model I endeavoured to frame an understanding of the processes that allowed the students to use their personal strengths, capabilities, aptitudes and skills to succeed.

Figure 2.2 provides a schematic diagram which illustrates that the core belief of this study is based on the notion that students possess strengths, capabilities, aptitudes and skills which enable academic integration. Within a strength-based approach this study attempted to frame characteristics of success through an understanding of the students' attitudes, intentions and behaviours, coping behaviours, self-efficacy beliefs and an internal locus of control which all functioned together to bring about student academic and social integration.



**Figure 2.2: Conceptual framework for key success factors that enable academic success**

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

It was important that the study focused on success factors so that the experiences harnessed to support future students on academic probation could be of a positive nature. Since there is a dearth of literature on the experiences of students who are put on academic probation, the aim of this study was to conduct an investigation that would lead to a contribution of knowledge on the topic. This knowledge could contribute towards the practice of support services to students on academic probation and enable professionals, such as the researcher, to provide insightful and well informed support for the students.

According to Bean and Eaton (2001) psychological processes play a crucial role in academic and social integration because they enable students to become integrated into university life. My experience as a Faculty Student Advisor supports Bean and Eaton's position as I have observed that



students on academic probation need to be emotionally and psychologically equipped in order to proceed through and overcome the difficulties of the probation period.

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## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design and Methodology

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#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I provide details on the study's paradigmatic perspectives and research methodology. I also present the research process and outline and describe the data collection and analysis processes. I conclude this chapter by elaborating on measures taken to ensure a trustworthy study and the ethical issues I encountered as part of my study.

#### 3.2 PARADIGMATIC PERSPECTIVES

My paradigmatic perspective was informed by the ontological and epistemological stance that I as the researcher took (Creswell, 2007; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013; Willis, 2007). According to Creswell (2007, 2013) and Willis (2007) ontology is based on the notion that reality is a subjective experience of the participant and its primary concern is to view that reality solely in terms of the participant's views and perceptions, while epistemology is concerned about how knowledge is acquired. Goldkuhl (2012) states that in interpretivism ontology and epistemology are intertwined because knowledge (understanding, meaning) is essential in the assumptions about the nature of reality.

##### 3.2.1 META-THEORETICAL PARADIGM

The aim of understanding the subjective interpretations and meanings of individuals under study is a core characteristic of the interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 2007; Goldkuhl, 2012). My aim was to understand the subjective thoughts, emotions and actions taken by the participants following their placements on academic probation. Interpretivism allowed me to place the research participants at the centre of this exploration and thus understand their reality from their point of view (Creswell, 2013; Goldkuhl, 2012). For the purposes of this study the research participants were the most critical sources of information; I therefore valued their opinions, views and perspectives they had on their academic probation.

Through an interpretivist lens I could also assess how the participants' thoughts, emotions and actions were shaped by their beliefs, meanings and intentions. An essential part of an interpretivist study is how the actions of individuals were shaped by their meanings, beliefs and intentions (Goldkuhl, 2012).

“Interpretivism is dependent on constructivist ontology” (Goldkuhl, 2012, p. 5). In other words, interpretivism understands that reality is created by individuals through action and interaction with their social world (Goldkuhl, 2012; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). Therefore, the interpretivist researcher often addresses the process of interaction among individuals as subjective meanings are negotiated socially (Creswell, 2007). Anchored in interpretivism, this research study sought to understand how students on academic probation, through their participation in their field of study, enacted their particular realities and ensured success (Goldkuhl, 2012).

According to Creswell (2013) the research questions in interpretivism are broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of the situation (Creswell, 2007). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010, p. 40) suggest that “the resulting mandate of exploratory and descriptive research questions is to describe reality in terms of what it naturally is”. For this purpose I constructed an exploratory and descriptive interview guide with open-ended questions which allowed the participants to describe their experiences and versions of reality without the hindrance of closed-ended questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

Goldkuhl (2012) states that an interpretivist study emphasises a holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon; as stated previously, an important part of this study was the understanding of how different aspects of the students’ experiences came together, to ensure that the students met all the requirements of their academic probation and were re-instated in their study programmes at the end of the semester.

### **3.2.2 METHODOLOGICAL PARADIGM**

Creswell (2007) and Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) note that qualitative research today involves a closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry, in other words, discovering how individuals interpret and make meaning out of their experiences; thus it can be explained as an inquiry attempting to make sense of the meaning individuals or groups ascribes to a social or human phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). For this reason, and based on the focus of my study, I decided to follow a qualitative approach. My intention was to understand human experience, with emphasis on positive experiences, processes and personal meaning, which cannot easily be measured in terms of quantity (Babbie, 2005).

Qualitative research aims to provide a narrative, descriptive account of an experience through the use of methods such as case study design (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). Part of the primary goal of this research was to provide a rich, thick and in-depth description of the students’ experiences

that enabled them to succeed after academic probation; therefore this approach was suitable for my study.

The inductive nature of data analysis in qualitative research enabled me to probe into the responses of the research participants on their experiences to arrive at further clarity, explanations and descriptions (Creswell, 2007; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). As sated earlier, an important characteristic of an interpretivist approach is that it situates the research participant at the centre of the inquiry (Goldkuhl, 2012); consequently, the clarity and transparency of their responses was an important feature of this study. Through qualitative research I aimed to follow up on the participants' stories with subsequent probes (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013).

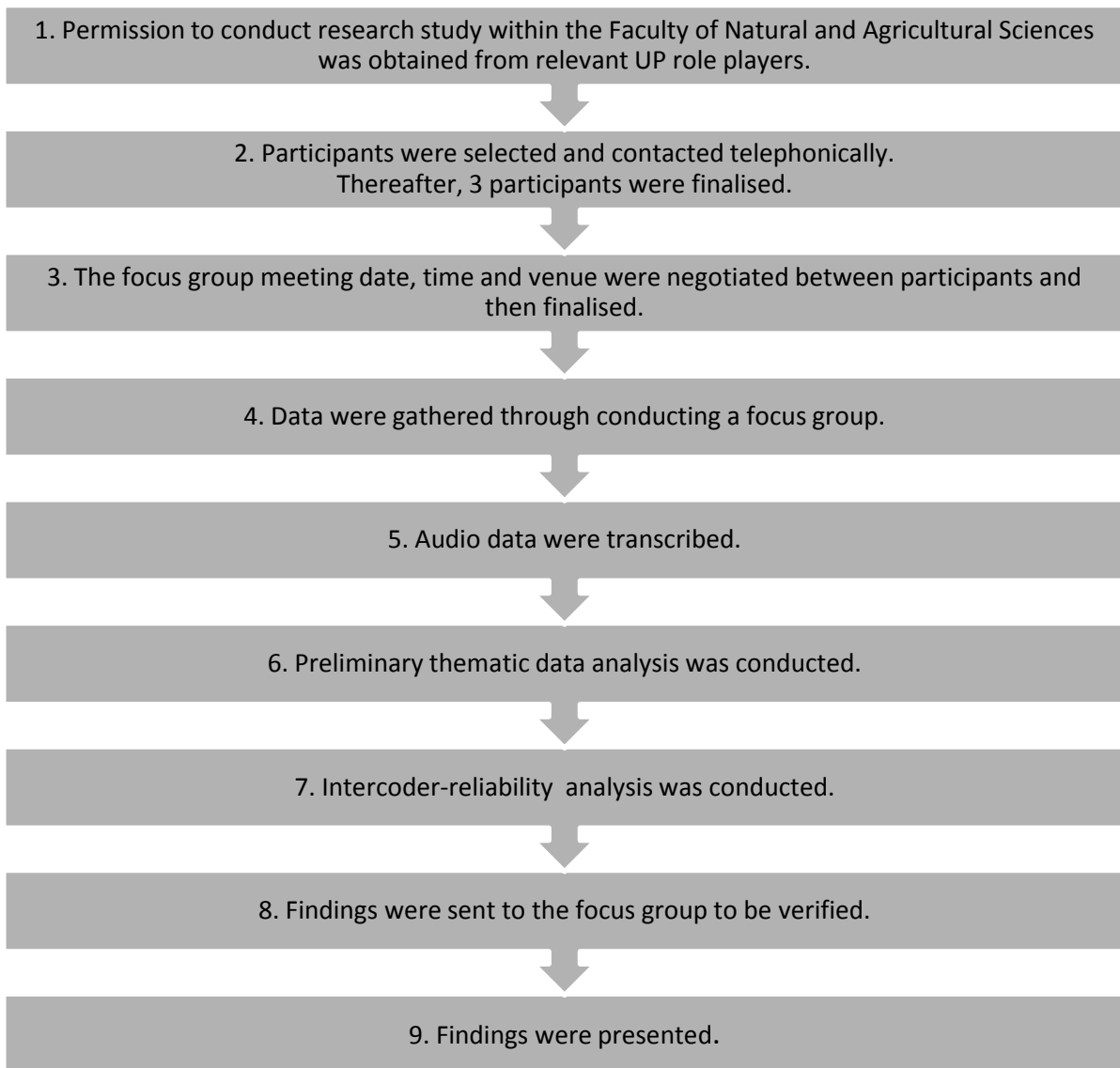
My study focused on investigating and describing the stories that enabled success without assuming that a cause-and-effect relationship would emerge from academic factors and the students' accomplishments. A qualitative approach is effective at developing a complex picture of the situation under study and "involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges" (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). Through a qualitative study I could explore the complex interactions of stories and factors that contributed towards the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007) and thereby capture various aspects associated with the experiences (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013).

### **3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Research methodology is considered to be the bridge between our philosophical standpoint (ontology and epistemology) and methods of inquiry and stands in relation to how we carry out our study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). In the following section I discuss the methods I employed in order to obtain answers about the nature of reality of students on academic probation.

#### **3.3.1 THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

Figure 3.1 indicates the steps involved in the research process and provides the reader with an overview of the process.



**Figure 3.1: Overview of the research process**

### **3.3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

An instrumental case study was employed in this research with the aim of obtaining in-depth insight into students' positive experiences during the probation period. An instrumental case study is employed when a researcher seeks to gain insight into the participants' case through engaging participants on their experiences (Silverman, 2005; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2012). According to Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) the primary purpose of an instrumental case study is to understand the unique aspects of the case. Through an instrumental case study design I was able to gather sufficient subjective data to richly portray an understanding and description of the students' emotions, psychological processes and behaviours that allowed them to succeed in their studies (Yin, 2012).

Employing any case study design had its strengths and limitations Simon (2009). Applying an instrumental case study design benefited my study in the following manners (Simon, 2009):

- I was able to conduct an in-depth investigation of students' experiences of academic probation within their context.
- I was able to document the students' multiple perspectives and explore contested viewpoints.
- I was able to further explore and understand the processes and dynamics of how they were able to change their academic standing.
- I could include observations of participants in the interpretation of the data.
- I could engage participants in the research process; they were given the opportunity to make their input in the interpretation of the data collected.
- I could take a reflective approach in the research processes, as well as the data gathering process.

According to Simon (2009), case study research has, on the other hand, been found to exhibit certain limitations. Firstly, there is concern about the uncontrolled involvements researchers seem to have in the lives of their participants. In this research study I was careful not to impose my personal stance on the participants. I carefully reflected on my personal biases and opinions so that I could limit its influence on the participants' expressions of their realities.

Secondly, case study methodology has the potential to distort the picture of the reality of situations. The data analysis of this study was conducted with dependable rigour in order to reinforce a true portrayal of the students' experiences. A full discussion of measures taken to ensure this study's rigour is included towards the end of this chapter (Section 3.4).

Thirdly, a case study is locked in time, while the people in it have moved on. The interview guide in this study as well as the focus group discussion provided the participants with enough stimulating open-ended questions to recall information and experiences that were relevant to the topic. Therefore, although the students were no longer on academic probation, they could tell their stories in an authentic manner.

Fourthly, the personal involvement and/or subjectivity of the researcher have also been raised as a concern. Since any researcher's subjectivity is bound to be part of the research frame (Simon, 2009) I addressed this by critically reflecting on my role as the researcher and focus group moderator and by seeking to act ethically throughout the research process.

Finally, case study methodology has been criticised concerning validity and usefulness with regard to generalising the study findings. The aim of this research study was, therefore, to present a rich portrayal of the students' experiences to inform practice, establish the value of the case and add knowledge to the topic of experiences of students following academic probation, rather than to generalise the findings (Simon, 2009).

### **3.3.3 SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Research participants in a case study design are chosen for their unique properties (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013) and in purposive sampling for their ability to faithfully represent the case (Babbie, 2005). Four key factors were considered when sampling the population in this study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 92):

#### **3.3.3.1 The sample size**

The authors, Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) as well as King and Horrock (2010), recommend that the ideal number for a mini focus group should be four. In this instance only three participants could be finalised for this research study due to lack of availability or willingness to participate from the pool of students the researcher was permitted to contact. This factor is noted as part of the study's limitations in Chapter 5.

#### **3.3.3.2 The sampling strategy**

In purposive sampling it is crucial to select research participants that are most useful in the purposes of the study (Babbie, 2005) and therefore purposive sampling was employed in this study in order to select participants that would best describe the experiences of students on academic probation. Individuals were contacted from a list of students placed on academic probation in December 2009. These students managed to overcome the probation period in 2010 and are currently in their final year of study.

#### **3.3.3.3 The representativeness and the parameters of the sample**

The participants were required to meet the following specific criteria:

- Participants were academically excluded from studying in the Faculty of NAS, and had appealed the exclusion in this same Faculty and in the same study course,
- Participants were subsequently placed on academic probation and had managed to complete their probation period,

- Participants were willing to unreservedly share personal experiences with focus group members, and
- Participants were available to participate in the face-to-face focus group.

#### **3.3.3.4 Access to the sample**

I was able to readily get in touch with the students participating in this research study using both email and mobile phone communication to reach them. Furthermore, the participating students and I were able to arrange an accessible venue on campus where they could meet.

#### **3.3.4 DATA COLLECTION AND DOCUMENTATION**

As stated previously I employed a focus group discussion as the main means of data collection in my study. I employed an open-ended interview guide to facilitate the focus group discussion, tape-recorded the group discussion and used my research field journal to document the verbal and non-verbal interaction of the participants. I employed the tape-recorded material as well as entries made in the research journal as part of my raw data.

##### **3.3.4.1 Focus group interview**

A focus group is simply defined as an informal discussion by a selected group of individuals on a specified topic, with the primary aim to discuss and understand meanings and interpretations of those individuals to gain an understanding of a specific issue from their perspective (Liamputtong, 2011). According to Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013), a focus group has the ability to gain in-depth research information through engaging participants on the why and how of their experience, behaviours, perceptions and beliefs. It is for the aforementioned reasons that I employed a focus group interview; I wanted to gain an authentic and in-depth picture of how the research participants experienced the academic probation, what factors and processes including emotions, thoughts, and actions enabled them to achieve success after academic probation.

The naturalistic atmosphere of a focus group discussion enhances good interaction between the research participants (King & Horrock, 2010). According to Liamputtong (2011) a successful focus group discussion is dependent on the creation of a non-threatening environment within the group where participants feel comfortable to discuss their opinions and experiences without fear that they will be judged by others in the group; and since a focus group is similar to social interaction among participants there is a high possibility that focus groups may be more comfortable and enjoyable for the research participants (Liamputtong, 2011). I hoped that a camaraderie



atmosphere would develop between the participants in this research study so that they can tell their narratives in an open, transparent and relaxed manner.

A focus group discussion provides the facilitator with an opportunity to uncover the reasons behind the participants' actions (King & Horrock, 2010; Liamputtong, 2011). My aim was to engage with, confirm, and contrast the participants' views, perceptions and beliefs during the discussion in order to obtain a clear understanding of how the participants experienced, perceived and interpreted the academic probation.

According to King and Horrock (2010) experiences of participants stated in their own words allow the inquirer to provide a true reflection of the participants' experiences. A focus group discussion provided me with an opportunity to gain rich and detailed information about the participants' emotions, thoughts, understandings, perceptions and impressions in their own words (Liamputtong, 2011). Throughout my study my aim was to provide a rich and authentic experience of students on academic probation, since little is known about their experiences (Liamputtong, 2011).

The following data collection and documentation strategies were employed to facilitate and document the focus group discussion of this study.

**(a) 4D Interview guide**

In Chapter 1 I indicated that I employed the AI 4D cycle interview structure in order to compile the interview guide for the focus group discussion in this study. Table 3.1 provides the actual interview guide of this study. The 4D cycle is a data collection process used by researchers in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Lehner & Hight, 2006; Lewis & Emil, 2010). I chose to employ the 4D cycle because AI is based on strength-based principles, grounded in the concept that all communities have in them factors that will empower them to be effective, productive and thrive, even in the face of challenges (Lehner & Hight, 2006; Lewis & Emil, 2010). This approach allows researchers to search for the best in people, their organisations and the world around them (Lewis & Emil, 2010). Through allowing researchers to explore people's success stories it gives guidance for future successes (Lehner & Hight, 2006). Briefly stated, AI is based on 5 principles (Lehner & Hight, 2006; Reed, 2007), namely the constructivist principle (the idea that our experiences of reality are based on our subjective interpretations of our experiences), the simultaneous principle (the notion that the inquiry process sets change in motion), the poetic principle (emphasizes ways in which people tell their stories), the anticipatory principle (the idea that the way people think about the future will have an impact on the way they move toward the future), and the positive principle (this principle states that a positive future can be achieved if the future is anticipated in a positive light). The 4D cycle takes

place over 4 stages namely the discovery phase, the dream phase, the design phase and the destiny phase (Lehner & Hight, 2006; Lewis & Emil, 2010).

Through the 4D cycle I could frame questions that sought to discover what gave the students life during the probation period (discovery phase), what compelled the students to act in the way they did (dream phase), what plans of action they needed to consider to implement their decisions (design phase) and the practical steps they took towards obtaining a good academic standing (destiny phase). Although Appreciative Inquiry was not employed in its entire scope, the 4D cycle principles assisted in creating an interview guide that supports the ontological and epistemological framework of this study. The 4D cycle phases enabled me to structure the interview guide in the following manner:

- The discovery phase involves appreciating “what life gave you”. In this phase participants are led to reflect on life-giving factors and what had worked well in the past so that they are able to discover the times when they were at their best. It also lays the foundation of the entire process by creating positive narratives from the experience; they were consequently encouraged to provide rich and detailed descriptions of peak experiences that enabled them to do well in their studies during the probation period.
- The dream phase concerns envisioning “what might be”. This stage addresses individuals’ ideals which impel them to act in the way they do. In this phase the students were led to explore their personal vision, motivation and goals which may have spurred them on to do well in their studies.
- The design phase focuses on participants determining what they will need to implement their envisioned future. This process is an integration of the discovery and dream phase; the students were therefore asked questions that led them to reflect on how they used past experiences to envision and ensure a future where they had become reinstated students. They were asked to consider possible resources, structures and strategies that supported them in their success.
- The destiny phase entails planning for the envisioned future where the concern is to focus on the practical steps taken to make the dream a reality. The students were asked to reflect on the specific decisions, actions and steps they took in order to achieve their dream of reinstatement.

**Table 3.1: The interview guide of the study**

PHASE	OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS
The <b>Discovery</b> phase: Appreciating what life gave you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please describe any positive thoughts you had about your probation period?</li> <li>• What were some of your best moments in the probation period?</li> <li>• Describe any good surprises you had during the period?</li> </ul>
The <b>Dreaming</b> phase: Envisioning what might be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What motivated you?</li> <li>• When did you realise you can achieve your academic goals?</li> <li>• What helped you to persevere when things were not looking good during the probation period?</li> <li>• What kind of emotional and/or psychological support did you seek? How did that support help you cope?</li> <li>• To what extent did you believe in your academic competency?</li> <li>• What were your highest hopes for your studies?</li> </ul>
The <b>Designing</b> phase: Determining what will be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What academic characteristics did you have to acquire in order to be successful in your modules?</li> <li>• What sort of academic assistance did you require to be successful and how did you obtain the help?</li> <li>• What institutional support systems enabled your success in the probation period?</li> <li>• How did the institutional resources help you cope during the probation period?</li> <li>• How did your faculty contribute towards your success?</li> </ul>
The <b>Destiny</b> phase: Planning what will be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the toughest but best decision you made that ensured the success of your studies?</li> <li>• What do you think is at the heart of your success?</li> <li>• What made the probation period work for you?</li> <li>• What was your way of life during the probation period?</li> <li>• How did your social life change following the probation period?</li> <li>• What were helpful activities that you did with your peers?</li> </ul>

**(b) Tape-recording of the focus group discussion**

The focus group discussion was tape-recorded and transcribed. With the permission of the research participants, the interview was digitally recorded so that there would be sufficient verbatim data to provide a rich description of the students' experiences. Transcribing the data precisely also gave me the opportunity to engage with the data from the onset of the data analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010), thereby enhancing my familiarity with the material.

**(c) Research journal**

I employed a field journal during the entire research process and during the focus group discussion. During the research process this journal permitted me to document the stages, processes, plans,

setbacks and reflections at each stage of the research process. As a result I was also able to use the journal to revise and review my plans during different stages.

During the data collection phase I utilised the journal to record my observations of the participants and the interaction between them, recording non-verbal aspects such as body language, speech patterns, hesitations, pauses and disruptions. I was also able to note dominant characters in the group and how this factor influenced the group dynamics. This information was used as part of the data analysis process to give a descriptive and in-depth picture of the participants' experiences (Silverman, 2005).

### **3.3.5 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

To examine the data, I followed the procedural steps of data analysis discussed by the authors Creswell (2007), King and Horrock (2010) as well as Yin (2011). Utilising this method, I sought to grasp and reveal the meaning, structure and essence of the students' lived experience (Quinn, 2002, p. 482), progressing through the following stages:

- Firstly the focus group audio recording was transcribed verbatim. All the transcribed data were evaluated and coded using similarities between specific themes.
- I familiarised myself with the data by reading the transcriptions more than once. This process enabled me to assess similarities in the data and begin to frame possible coding themes.
- After becoming familiar with the raw data, I conducted a manual thematic analysis, extracting verbatim comments that reflected positive experiences while concurrently devising codes for clustering the data under common themes.
- I then clustered these sentences under emerging common themes to establish major themes and sub-themes.
- To ensure the validity of the themes obtained in the two previous stages I conducted inter-coder-reliability thematic analysis through a computer data analysis programme known as ATLAS.ti. Analysing the data through this computer software enabled me to verify the themes emerging from the former.
- Following inter-coder-reliability analysis, I integrated the themes which emerged in the previous stages and interrelated the themes with the literature study to form major themes and sub-themes.
- I conducted participant checking by sending the major and sub-major themes to the participating students, to verify them as accurately reflecting the experiences they reported during the focus group interview.

- After participant verification I used the conceptual frameworks of this study to interpret the meanings of these themes.

### **3.4 MEASURES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Following on the data analysis stage, I sought to provide credible as well as trustworthy findings from the data obtained. In order to enhance the qualitative validity and reliability of this study, its credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were considered.

#### **3.4.1 CREDIBILITY**

Credibility was assured through the use of inter-coder-reliability, participant checking and a research journal. The use of ATLAS.ti as an inter-coder-reliability strategy enabled me to establish accuracy in the themes that emerged in this study and I intentionally and critically read through my journal seeking data that might contradict the findings; this is referred to as adequate engagement in data collection (Merriam, 2009).

To ascertain that the themes accurately described the experiences of the students I conducted participant validation by asking the focus group members to verify that the themes obtained from the data were a true reflection of their experiences.

#### **3.4.2 TRANSFERABILITY**

Transferability occurs if research findings of a study can be applied from one group to another (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Merriam, 2009). As stated previously in this chapter, the aim of the research study was to provide a rich description of the of the students' experiences, rather than to generalise findings to other contexts (Simon, 2009). However, I provided a detailed description of the participants of the study and the data was also richly and deeply described (Merriam, 2009) in order that another researcher wishing to apply the research findings of this study to their own context would be able to consider similarities between their population and the participants of this study as well as the richly described data, to make a sound judgment as regards applying the findings of this study to their own situation (Merriam, 2009).

#### **3.4.3 DEPENDABILITY**

Dependability occurs when the researcher acts consistently throughout the study by ensuring trustworthiness so that another researcher may follow the decision trail used (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). To ensure the dependability of the study, I provided a detailed description of participant

selection, research methods, research processes and the data analysis. The study's audit trail consisting of the recorded interviews, interview protocol, interview transcriptions and the research journal is available and will be kept safe at the University of Pretoria for fifteen years from the year 2013.

#### **3.4.4 CONFIRMABILITY**

Confirmability is the extent to which the researcher remained objective in the research process (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Since total objectivity cannot be guaranteed in research, the inquirer must take steps to ensure that as far as possible, the findings reported are the results of experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2009). To ensure confirmability in this study and minimise any personal biases and prejudices in the data collection, coding and analysing, I reflected on the biases, assumptions and prejudices which I brought to the study and acknowledged that they may have influenced the approach and interpretation of this study (Creswell, 2007). However, throughout the data collection and analysis processes I took cognisance of my own biases and sought to limit the influence thereof on the way in which I handled both processes. The audit trail of this research study also reinforces its confirmability.

### **3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In order to preserve the wellbeing and dignity of the participants (King & Horrock, 2010) the following ethical issues, as identified by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000); Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) as well as King and Horrock (2010) were relevant to this research study:

#### **3.5.1 INFORMED AND WRITTEN CONSENT**

Permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education to conduct the research. Informed and written permission to conduct the research study in the Faculty of NAS was obtained from the current Dean of the faculty. After obtaining the contact details I telephonically contacted potential participants and those who indicated interest received an emailed letter of informed consent to explain the research study in detail. In the letter I explained the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection, and the expectations that the research would demand of them as a participant (Drew, Michael & Hosp, 2008). I also made them aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The email included an indication of the time frame for the study (date and the duration of the focus group meeting) and the venue for the study. The participants were required to sign the informed consent letter before the commencement of the focus group.

### **3.5.2 VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Voluntary participation was communicated in the information and consent letter they received prior to participating in the research study.

### **3.5.3 NO DECEPTION**

The participants were not deceived in any manner. The purpose was thoroughly articulated in the informed consent letter and all expectations with regard to participating were explained. Participants were also made aware that due to the nature of the research question they might unwittingly recall distressing memories from their probation period.

### **3.5.4 CONFIDENTIALITY**

As confidentiality is about protecting the dignity and rights of participants and since confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed in a focus group, it was negotiated between all the participants taking part in the group. As part of the group's ground rules participants were encouraged to respect each other and to keep what was shared as part of the focus group, private.

### **3.5.5 ANONYMITY**

Codes were used in the dissemination of the findings when referring to participants. No identifying information of participants is made available as part of this research study.

### **3.5.6 PROTECTION FROM HARM**

Participants were made aware that they could access free professional support from Student Support Services should they become distressed as a result of participating in this research study.

### **3.5.7 DEBRIEFING**

At the end of the focus group meeting participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study that may have arisen during the focus group meeting. They were also made aware that they could retract or clarify statements that they had made during the focus group. I provided them with my email address for that purpose.

### 3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a detailed discussion of the study's paradigmatic perspective and research methodology. An overview of the research process was also provided. I also justified and explained my selection of the research design, sampling strategy, as well as data collection and documentation methods.

In order to address the research question, data were collected, analysed and interpreted within an interpretivist philosophical framework. Qualitative research enabled me to explore the experiences of the research participants in the form of a focus group while the AI 4D cycle research interview process enabled me to formulate a strength-based focus group interview discussion.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study I applied certain measures such as keeping a research field journal, conducting inter-coder-reliability, reflecting on my role as a researcher and focus group facilitator and leaving an audit trail. I also met ethical obligations to protect the rights and identity of the research participants.

Chapter 4 describes the data analysis and data interpretation processes.

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## CHAPTER 4

### Research findings

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#### 4.1 OVERVIEW

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the themes that emerged from the data analysis process. The discussion of the results is presented against existing theoretical evidence. A description of the core themes, sub-themes and related themes, confirmed through participant checking, is provided.

#### 4.2 SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Data were collected by means of a focus group comprising of three research participants. The focus group discussion was facilitated by the researcher, using an interview guide composed of pre-determined, open-ended questions. The focus group lasted for 90 minutes. With the permission of the participants, the focus group discussion was tape recorded. I kept a research field journal in which I made notes of observations on the interaction between the participants, the body language of the participants as well the atmosphere during the discussion.

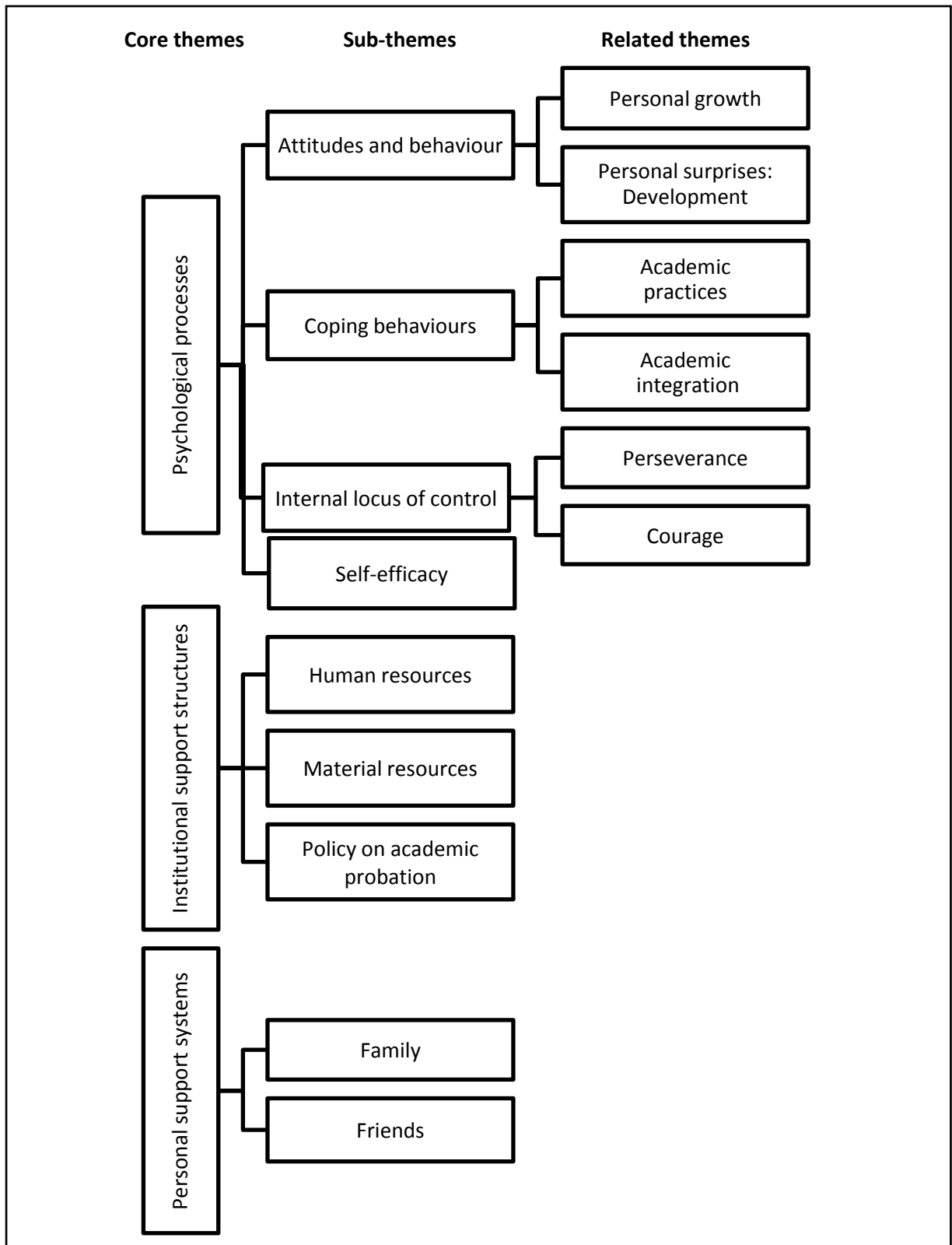
#### 4.3 SUMMARY OF DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The data collected in this study were analysed and understood within the interpretivist framework. The data analysis process is summarised here.

- The tape-recorded focus group discussion was transcribed.
- I familiarised myself with the data by reading through the transcription and highlighting points that seemed significant as well as repeated sentences.
- Emerging themes were manually identified from the raw data using coding.
- Inter-coder-reliability through utilising a computer-based thematic analysis tool was conducted.
- Core themes, from the emerging themes, were established.
- Sub-themes and related themes were established using theoretical resources.
- Participant checking was conducted.

#### 4.4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The research results are discussed in terms of core themes, sub-themes and related themes.



**Figure 4.1: Overview of research results**

#### 4.4.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Bean and Eaton (2001) stress that psychological processes are at the core of academic persistence. Psychological processes included in Bean and Eaton’s psychological model of college student

retention (2000) include attitude and behaviours, coping behaviours, self-efficacy beliefs and an internal locus of control. Similarly, the psychological processes that emerged as significant from the experiences of the participants were attitudes and behaviours, coping behaviours, an internal locus of control and positive self-efficacy beliefs. Below is a discussion of the aforementioned sub-themes as well as their related themes.

#### 4.4.1.1 Attitudes and behaviour

Bean and Eaton (2001) suggest that attitudes enable individuals to become intentional to take action towards the behaviour depending on what they believe about the consequences of that behaviour; therefore positive attitudes, which are influenced by favourable perceptions about the outcomes of that behaviour, are linked to productive intentions which lead to taking action towards that behaviour. The following sub-themes demonstrate how the participants' attitudes and intentions led them to take charge of their academic probation and become successful.

##### (a) Personal growth

The participants in this research study indicated that they chose to show an attitude of commitment and dedication to their work and acquired a work ethic of excellence. Through acknowledging the advantage of academic probation they learnt how to cope with the difficulty of that situation and as a result they acquired important educational as well as life skills. In the probation period, it became important for them to know who they were and what was of importance to them, so that they could make better personal decisions and prioritise their studies. The participants revealed that the probation period afforded them an opportunity for personal development. According to them, they realised that through the probation they became better students as well as better people. The above stated theme is reflected in the following comments:

- *I say attitude change ...and the good thing is that I applied it in other areas other than my studies and in many other areas (P2<sup>1</sup>, Appendix A1 p.10).*
- *It [the academic probation] changed my character as a person and my depth as a person (P1, Appendix A1 p.5).*
- *...I guess even your failures don't see them as failures...take them as a learning curve (P1, Appendix A1 p.15).*
- *Exploit your weaknesses, at the end of the day it (weaknesses) becomes something of a strength (P1, Appendix A1 p.15).*

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the identity of the participants in the study, codes P1, P2 and P3 are used to refer to them.

- *The social scene has obligations you know that you have to fulfil...if there was a famous DJ on Thursday night you must go and see that DJ and you also gotta to go up the social ladder that must be climbed (P3, Appendix A1 p. 15).*

**(b) Personal surprises: development**

The participants did not anticipate that they would develop both personally as well as professionally as a result of the probation period and were therefore surprised to realise their acquired strengths. Participants found that they had surprisingly benefited in the following manner:

- *For me and would say that the surprise is that how it changed my character as a person and my depth a person (P1, Appendix A1 p.5).*
- *I would say the surprise that stood out for me...is that I actually became a tutor in the very same modules that I had to repeat many times (P2, Appendix A1 p.6).*

**4.4.1.2 Coping Behaviours**

According to coping behavioral theory, such behaviour is defined as actions that are intended to minimize stress (Bean & Eaton, 1995). Bean and Eaton (2001) suggest that students who are able to act in such a way as to improve their existing situations are able to adjust socially and academically. This position rang true of the experiences shared by the participants in this research study. As a result of being placed on academic probation, the participants realised that they needed to engage in activities that would enable them to do well in their academic work. Two major themes emerged as prominent coping behaviours, which determined the participants' academic success.

**(a) Academic practices**

Academic practices such as study skills, time management and consulting with tutors and mentors are an important part of student success (Balduf, 2009; Tovar & Simon, 2006; Trombley, 2000). All participants agreed that before they were placed on probation they had undervalued academic practices that had been suggested to them as valuable. The probation period forced them to change their mind-set and to engage in those practices. They also all agreed that they were required to adapt their academic behaviours and attitudes and attempt to address their academic work differently. Humphrey (2005) found that probationary students begin to realise the advantages of simple activities such as consistent class attendance during academic probation.

During the probation, participants in this research study realised that those activities had become part of their strategy in academic achievement.

- *For the first two 2 years attending class was not that big of a deal but from your consequences the threats of academic exclusion we were forced to change our ways and try something differently and doing things that we were never doing before like attending classes on a regular schedule (P2, Appendix A1 p.3).*
- *or something that was proven to work and now you are just utilising it because mostly you just...rely on yourself and when it comes to the probation period you actually are looking for systems that actually work like attending classes or studying or how you study, study patterns you actually apply them more in that phase (P1, Appendix A1 p.17).*
- *I think sometimes it's that attitude that you don't want to react to the manual [obvious] things such as study methods, time management you prefer that you have the pressure to study... and it was that you were alone and you had to push yourself and that is a tough thing (P3, Appendix A1 p.4).*
- *Hard work is more helpful than thinking you are smart (P3, Appendix A1 p.14).*

**(b) Academic integration**

Academic integration refers to the ability of a student to comply with academic standards such as passing courses as well as the ability for a student to engage in activities that are academically meaningful (Kuh et al., 2006). It describes that state in which a student knows what to do, when to do it and how do it, in order to be academically successful. It was clear throughout the discussion that the participants became academically mature while in the probation period. This position is reflected by the following statements:

- *I limited my time with my friends (P1, Appendix A1 p.16).*
- *I mentally adapted to other (study) habits (P1, Appendix A1 p.11).*
- *Practice (working consistently hard) is more permissible in some situations (P3, Appendix A1 p.).*
- *I was like more focused on the hard word (P1, Appendix A1 p.14).*
- *As you progress your priorities change (P1, Appendix A1 p.10).*
- *You start sticking to routine (P2, Appendix A1 p.14).*
- *Be more focus or apply yourself more and it actually works and you can actually follow up through that (P1, Appendix A1 p.3).*

**4.4.1.3 Internal locus of control**

An internal locus of control motivates an individual to make the effort to perform well academically, since they believe that the situation is within their control (Bean & Eaton, 2000). The research participants' internal locus of control was displayed by their courage and perseverance; they

believed that despite the anxiety evoked by the thought of not being able to succeed they had what it takes to overcome the fear and meet the expectations of the probation period.

### (a) **Courage**

Scholars in positive psychology define courage as an emotional strength that involves the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition (Nansook & Peterson, 2006). Despite showing positive self-efficacy, the probation period was not an easy task to work through. Participants experienced anxiety over the possibility of further failure (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005). The participants indicated that to overcome the fear and excel within their own potential they had to display courage. Being courageous also meant that participants were able to persevere; to put it in their own words, they were able to “push” themselves until they were reinstated into their programmes as full students.

- *At some point I had to be fearless, being fearless you actually can work through whatever you want to do (P1, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *Just carry on through that so I had to...sort of be self-motivated and be sort of be strong be, be courageous...be...ya...self-motivated I would say and just carry on and of course be determined and focused (P1, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *I had no choice but to try and from trying I somehow achieved and from there it just kept on building and eventually it actually started believing (P3, Appendix A1 p.3).*
- *I know that sometimes you should not be fearful to accept your problems you should not shy away...try to decorate your problems in a way.... (P3, Appendix A1 p.15).*

### (b) **Perseverance**

Perseverance is characterised by the courage to persist in finishing what one starts (Nansook & Peterson, 2006). Throughout the discussion there were a few words and/or expressions that were commonly used by the students: one of these expressions is “push myself/push yourself”. The students’ attitude to compel themselves to work harder showed that they possessed the ability to challenge themselves to go further and finish their studies. Bean and Eaton (2001) found a relationship exists between attitudes, intentions and behaviours. For these students, their self-efficacy, as well as new attitudes, led them to persist in working hard with the intention of being reinstated in their programmes.

- *...it gives you a push...stop being in that comfortable zone...and work (P1, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *And it was that you were alone and you had to push yourself (P3, Appendix A1 p.4).*
- *You think to yourself that let me push a bit by myself (P3, Appendix A1 p.9).*

- *I think it was that the issue that I had to study that set everything aside and just keep on pushing (P3, Appendix A1 p.12).*
- *I feel that at that time it pushed me more even though the same things that were hindering me to stay focused were still existing it was just that thing to say that I have to carry myself to get there (P2, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *...and then you pushing yourself harder because of that negative emotion (P2, Appendix A1 p.13).*
- *there is a few circumstances that are pushing me to finish (P2, Appendix A1 p.18).*

#### 4.4.1.4 Self-efficacy beliefs

Self-efficacy occurs when past experiences and observations determine an individual's perceptions of their ability to perform a task (Bean & Eaton, 2001). The person's recognition of his or her own competence determines higher aspirations of persistence, self-confidence, task achievement and personal goals (Bean & Eaton, 2001). The participants' in this research study seemed convinced that believing in their ability to achieve their academic goals was important for their success. They all shared the thought that if you believe in yourself, you are able to convince others that you are capable of academic achievement. They also expressed the thought that by believing in yourself you are able to cope with difficult circumstances, such as academic probation. For one of the participants, positive self-efficacy developed as a result of achieving short-term success.

- *Well mostly doubted my abilities but then from the doubts I had no choice but to try and from trying I somehow achieved and from there it just kept on building and eventually I actually started believing. It gave me hope that...this is actually do-able (P2, Appendix A1 p.3).*

Contrary to the above participant's experience, another participant commented that:

- *I was more focused on the hard work more than anything so I didn't believe that much in academic performance [natural abilities]...but I could do it...I can execute it and get there." (P1, Appendix A1 p.14).*

For this participant it was the belief in the ability to work hard and achieve a good result as opposed to intellectual abilities that inspired a positive self-efficacy.

- During the discussion it was noticeable that the probation period did not threaten the participants' self-efficacy beliefs, but encouraged them to prove their competence.
- *You to just sort of wanna correct who you are and like sort of want to make it clear that I am still this kind of person I know that I can do it you just want to prove to them that I can do it (P1 Appendix A1 p.12).*

- *You have been given a chance to prove yourself and to think that you must be dependent on someone else to help you what happens if they are not there (P3, Appendix A1 p.9).*

All the participants believed and/or developed the belief that even though they had failed the previous semester, they still had what it takes to be academically successful. According to Bean and Eaton (2001, p. 53) “....self-efficacy for academic performance was a predictor of academic persistence”.

#### **4.4.2 INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT STRUCTURES**

According to Kuh et al. (2006), important features of institutional structures and processes include institutional size, faculty-student ratio, and responsiveness of faculty staff, resources, policies, decision making approaches and its mission. The participants in this research study found that institutional support structures and resources significantly contributed to their positive experiences during the academic probation. A special feature that emerged in the discussion is that participants perceived the academic probation policy as a positive institutional support structure. They expressed the thought that being granted the opportunity to be on academic probation instead of being immediately dismissed showed that the university believed in them. For them, the probation period was a warning that prompted them to do better. This experience is confirmed by James and Graham’s (2010, p. 73) finding that “students who feel connected to their educational institutions are more likely to succeed.

- *...the teachers, I used to consult them, they were flexible they saw my commitment and actually gave me their time, they prescribed extra books...they were brilliant, awesome (P2, Appendix A1 p.16)*
- *To think that they [the university] have certain high criteria’s and to see them dropping on a certain global scale but still they kept our form intact...in a way I want to return the favour (P3, Appendix A1 p.16).*
- *I believe they never gave up on me...it shows they believe in you (P3, Appendix A1 p.16).*
- *Even the opportunity when they readmit you for the second time (P1, Appendix A1 p.16).*

##### **4.4.2.1 Institutional human resources**

The participants experienced faculty staff such as lecturers and tutors as helpful academic support systems. According to the participants, lecturers were flexible in their schedule and would take the time to assist with academic work. The participants also learnt how to approach lecturers that did not seem approachable in class, for assistance.



- *I think that in some way others are approachable despite what they look like in class...when you go there and they help you, it's good (P3, Appendix A1 p.17).*
- *...the tutors would even give me past papers (P2, Appendix A1 p.17).*
- *...my sources of hope was seniors actually, seniors who did the same course as I have they actually told me that hey we have been through the exact same thing and somehow they managed to (P2, Appendix A1 p.2).*

#### **4.4.4.2 Institutional material resources**

Institutional resources that made the probation period a positive experience include:

- *Financial aid (P1, Appendix A1 p.18).*
- *Making books available at the library (P1, Appendix A1 p.16,p.17).*
- *Institutional policies (such as policies on academic probation) (P3, Appendix A1 p.16).*
- *Online additional module resources (P1, Appendix A1 p.16).*
- *Sports facilities (P2, Appendix A1 p.17).*

After reflecting on the resources that assisted them to cope during the academic probation period, one student commented that “*TUKS (the University of Pretoria) offers us a lot of things but we tend to undermine these things*” (P1, Appendix A1 p.17). All the participants agreed that through the probation they learnt how to make the most of the resources that the institution offered them.

#### **4.4.2.3 Academic probation as positive**

Academic probation is for most students a daunting experience (Nance, 2007). Be that as it may, the participants in this research acknowledged academic probation as a helpful and supportive initiative by the university. For them the fact that they were allowed an opportunity to prove themselves showed that the institution believed that they could still achieve good results in spite of their recent track record. The following comments reflect this position:

- *It makes you adapt even though you had obstacles to overcome (P2, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *You got this letter because that mind set (of working hard) was just not there and they encourage us that we had to adapt (P2, Appendix A1 p.).*
- *I am guessing in a sense it actually motivates you, it gives you a push and some...I don't know...it actually highlights your fears that you might actually not make it you might not actually stay here so...stop being in that comfortable zone...and work (P1, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *So it was more of a wakeup call, to stay focused more, wake up and just get in it and be alert. (P1, Appendix A1 p.2).*

- *Sometimes it puts you in a corner where you have to. You have no choice but to think positive (P2, Appendix A1 p.1).*
- *I feel that at that time it pushed me more even though the same things that were hindering me to stay focused were still existing it was just that thing to say that I have to carry myself to get there (P2, Appendix A1 p.2).*

#### **4.4.3 PERSONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS: FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

Family support, and in particular, parental expectations, have been found to be one of the strongest predictors of student success (Kuh et al., 2006). The participants in this research study drew strength from their families and/or friends. For one participant, his family surprised him by being supportive when he actually expected them to be harsh towards his failure: *I think that going back home all hope lost I was surprised but that support because I was expecting them to be like you are crazy you are playing you are drinking alcohol but only to find out that all them were calm and they were supporting me (P1, Appendix A1 p.13).* This same participant made the decision to go back to the university and plead with student administration to readmit him, despite the fact that his initial appeal had been rejected, after he realised that the socio-economic situation at home would not improve unless he obtained his university qualification. For the participants, family members acted as positive encouragement as well as external pressure to perform.

- *My source of hope was family...ya...just to go back and to see that the situation [at home] has not changed its still like that...and then I realised that I had to up myself because all of them are watching me...I have to come back and be stronger (P3, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *...they understand the value of what I am doing and they are more invested in it and they take the time to just ask how did the test go and they ask how are you doing (P1, Appendix A1 p.13).*
- *...even though it was not deep cry [emotional], [it was] just sort of this person [the friend] believes that you can do it (P3, Appendix A1 p.12).*
- *...one of my sisters would tell me that you can go on just don't give up you will see as long as you just keep going you will get there (P1, Appendix A1 p.12).*

#### **4.4.4 PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF FOCUS GROUP**

During the focus group discussion I made a few observations about the verbal and non-verbal interactions between the research participants<sup>2</sup> in order to edify the description of the participants' experiences. Participants were fully engaged with each other's narratives, they would nod in

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix A2 p.4.

agreement of certain stories, engage with each other's stories by asking questions and discuss the differences in their experiences. I also noticed that they would pick up each other's linguistic patterns and use that to elaborate on their own experiences. The participants stayed interested in each other's stories as well as the topic throughout the discussion as indicated by the nods, smiles, laughter and exclamations they made throughout the discussion.

I noticed that the participants could not avoid talking about the fear that was induced by the potential of not being successful in the academic probation. As a facilitator I had to be careful to assist the students to tell how they overcame that fear without disregarding their experiences of anxiety.

- *...I am guessing in a sense it [academic probation] actually motivates you, it gives you a push*
- *and some...I don't know...it actually highlights your fears that you might actually not make it*
- *you might not actually stay here so... (P1, Appendix A1 p.2).*
- *That is fantastic. What gave you a source of hope? (M, Appendix A1 p.2).*
  - *and then i want to explore a little bit further about the kind of support that you got because*
  - *if you experienced fear and anxiety. It does not have to be necessarily student support do you think you got support from any other place? (M, Appendix A1 p.12).*

One of the participants (P2) remarked that it was therapeutic talking about the experiences of the probation period. All the participants found it a pleasure participating in this research study.

#### **4.4.5 PARTICIPANT CHECKING**

The thematic analysis document (Appendix A5) was sent via email to each participant to confirm, reject and/or elaborate on the emergent themes as well provide clarify in some of the statements that they made. Each research participant agreed and confirmed the themes that emerged from the data analysis. They also confirmed each statement that they made as accurate.

#### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I presented the results that I obtained in terms of the core themes, sub-themes as and related themes that emerged. I then discussed the findings of my study against the back-drop of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 will provide a brief overview of the previous four chapters and will present a summary of the research results. These results will be presented against the backdrop of the literature review in chapter 2.

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## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion and recommendations

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#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 4 I presented the results of my study and discussed the findings in terms of the core themes, sub-themes and related themes. Throughout, I related the findings of my study to the literature review discussed in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 5, I present a brief overview of the previous chapters. I present the conclusions of this study by relating my findings to the research questions formulated in Chapter 1. I discuss possible contributions of the study, as well as the limitations and challenges that I faced. I conclude by formulating recommendations for practice and research.

#### 5.2 OVERVIEW OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

In **Chapter 1** I orientated the reader regarding the study and what to expect in this mini-dissertation. I started by presenting the reader with an overview of my rationale for undertaking the study. Next, I stated the purpose of the study and formulated the research questions, indicating that my study was guided by the following primary research question: *What were the success stories of three students in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Pretoria after academic probation?* I also mentioned the underlying assumptions that I made at the onset of my study. I briefly introduced the underlying research approach and paradigm from which I conducted my research, and clarified my research design; data collection and documentation methods; and data analysis and interpretation strategies. I clarified my role as a researcher, and discussed the ethical considerations of the study, as well as the quality criteria that I strove to adhere to. I concluded Chapter 1 by providing the reader with a layout of the mini-dissertation, as an overview of what was to follow in the next chapters.

I explored literature related to experiences of under-performing students in **Chapter 2**. In an attempt to explain the literature and theories that underpin the study I explored the strength-based approach as well as Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college student retention. I commenced the study by discussing literature on underperforming students in an effort to place the participants' positive experiences in the context of their other experiences. I then discussed the strength-based approach and how the ontological and epistemological assumptions influenced the decision to embark on a strength-based study. Following this I discussed the psychological model of

college student retention pioneered by Bean and Eaton (2000). Through this model I was able to frame an understanding of personal psychological factors that enable students' academic integration. I concluded this chapter by presenting the study's conceptual framework.

**Chapter 3** entailed an explanation of the manner in which I planned and conducted my empirical inquiry. I started the chapter by explaining how interpretivism shaped the undertaking of my study. I then gave an overview of the qualitative approach, anchored in an interpretivist paradigm. I described the research methodology that I implemented in terms of my selected research design, namely an instrumental case study design. I also presented the reader with an overview of the research process.

I continued this chapter by discussing the focus group interview as my means of data collection. Subsequent to that I discussed the data facilitation and documentation methods I used during my focus group interview namely the interview guide based on the 4D cycle, the audio-recorder and the research journal. I then explained the manner in which I thematically analysed and interpreted the data. Following that I discussed the quality criteria that I adhered to in an attempt to enhance the rigour of my study and I concluded the chapter by presenting the ethical guidelines that I considered in planning and undertaking my study.

In **Chapter 4** I reported the findings of my study. The 3 core themes I identified were namely Psychological Processes; Institutional Support Structures and Personal Support Systems. In this chapter I discussed these themes together with their sub-themes and related themes. I also interpreted and elaborated on these themes, sub-themes and related themes in light of relevant literature. I attempted to highlight correlations, and also to identify and explain contradictions.

### **5.3 REVISITING SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

#### **5.3.1 WHAT WERE THE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES OF THREE STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF NAS WHO WERE PLACED ON ACADEMIC PROBATION?**

It was evident in this study that the participants in this research study were enabled by four core psychological processes to ensure success in the academic probation period; attitude and behaviours, coping behaviours, an internal locus of control and positive self-efficacy beliefs. Even though they were faced with fear of the possibility of not being able to succeed, the participants displayed courage and perseverance by choosing to believe in their own academic potential. As they achieved success they began to gain more self-confidence and continued to persevere in their

studies. Their success coupled with this self-confidence created an attitude of excellence as well as a good work ethic in them which developed them personally and professionally.

Participants in this research study acknowledged that before they were placed on academic probation they took for granted the academic skills that they had been taught in an academic literacy course, but that being placed on probation made them realise the value of those simple yet valuable skills. As a result of their probation, participants pointed out that they had to learn how to apply those skills as well as other life skills; the result is that they acquired adaptation skills through their academic probation. This study supports the findings of Bean and Eaton (1995) that there is a strong relationship between coping behaviours and academic and social integration; students who engage in activities that minimise stressful situations tend to cope better with the demands of their studies and achieve success.

Kuh et al. (2006) contend that students' attitudes and behaviours affect the degree of satisfaction they have with the institution and the commitment they will make towards the latter. Baslanti (2008) noted that underachieving students in his research study expressed positive attitudes toward the university. The findings in this study indicate that participants displayed a positive attitude towards the institution and found it a privilege to be students of the University of Pretoria. They were grateful for the resources that the university offered them within and outside of the academic probation period. Furthermore, participants appreciated the university's policy on academic probation and acknowledged it as a positive one. They believed that the university's willingness to give them a second chance to prove themselves was a sound initiative. The fact that students found institutional resources to be beneficial in obtaining success, contradicts what Kuh et al. (2006, p.54) found when they argued that "...institutional resources and reputation featured in college rankings are largely irrelevant to high quality educational experiences as measured by student engagement in educationally purposeful activities". The appreciation of resources, their gratefulness for the probation opportunity, coupled with the fact that the participants deeply value a qualification from the University of Pretoria, led them to persist and commit themselves to obtaining a qualification at the said university.

Bean and Eaton's model of college students' retention (2001) does not include the way in which social systems such as family and friends influence a student's integration into university. While not disagreeing with the traditional definition of social integration, they go further in that they define social integration as the ability to effectively interact with faculty members as well as peers (Kuh et al., 2006). The interaction with peers concerns socialising but does not extensively elaborate on social systems as a support structure. However, researchers such as Perna and Titus (as cited in Kuh

et al., 2006) have found family support to be a predictor of student success. The findings in this research study suggest that the students' morale was high because of the moral support they received from their family and friends. In other words, personal support systems such as family and friends were crucial in supporting their existing psychological processes such as self-efficacy beliefs, courage and perseverance.

### **5.3.2 HOW DID THESE STUDENTS ENSURE SUCCESS IN THEIR STUDIES FOLLOWING THEIR RE-ADMITTANCE?**

In this study participants believed unwaveringly that they were competent to be academically successful. Their internal locus of control enabled them to participate in activities that would benefit their studies (Bean & Eaton, 2000). As a result of success they began to do well in their studies; this led them to become self-confident and develop positive self-efficacy beliefs (Bean & Eaton, 2001). In turn their self-efficacy impelled them to prove to others that they are also able to achieve well academically. These findings confirm the notions that positive self-efficacy leads to self-confidence and improves an individual's level of persistence and achievement (Bean & Eaton, 2001) and that students who possess positive self-efficacy tend to be more willing to apply themselves in order to achieve their academic goals (Hsieh, Sullivan & Guerra, 2007).

Furthermore, as evidence of their internal locus of control the participants showed courage by displaying a sense of self-compassion towards their personal circumstances (Neff, Hsieh & Dejjitterat, 2005). They were able to acknowledge their own shortcomings, show sympathy towards themselves and embrace their failure as part of their human experience. As a result of self-compassion they were able to develop the necessary courage to confront the probation period. According to Neff, Hsieh and Dejjitterat (2005) individuals who have self-compassion hold a positive attitude that allows them to engage in activities out of interest rather than as an effort to protect their self-esteem. Furthermore, the participants showed a spirit of perseverance throughout their academic probation by pushing themselves to work hard despite a history of underachievement. Persistence has been found to be an important determinant in students' success in academic endeavours (Mkumbo & Amani, 2012).

Bean and Eaton (2001) also suggest that people act in response to their intentions. The intention to act is determined by the person's attitude towards the particular circumstance. The optimistic attitude towards the probation period and their intention to display competence allowed the participants to act in such a manner that enabled them to succeed, thereby displaying that positive attitudes towards a situation can lead to approaches such as seeking help from tutors and lecturers; taking advantage of institutional resources such as library books and online study materials and setting a high academic standard (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000).



### 5.3.3 HOW CAN INSIGHT INTO THE SUCCESS STORIES OF STUDENTS WHO WERE PLACED ON ACADEMIC PROBATION BROADEN KNOWLEDGE ON ACADEMIC SUPPORT TO STUDENTS?

Being academically integrated allowed these students to cope with the probation period and motivated them to persevere towards achieving their academic goals. Therefore, we can learn that academic success, even on a small scale, leads to hope and courage and can encourage students to progressively do better. Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) refer to this as the feedback loop where academic integration facilitates better interaction with the institution and in turn fosters institutional satisfaction and students' intention to persevere in their study. For the students in this study it started with their commitment to show that they could achieve academic success; following success in assessments such as class tests these students became more courageous to do better.

Based on the findings I obtained, a thought-provoking but not necessarily positive theme emerged that I would like to address as part of this study. Participants in this research study held misconceptions about Student Support Services. Student support, especially student advisors, constitutes an essential part of the intervention strategies that are aimed at students on academic probation (Demetriou, 2011; Nance, 2007; Tovar & Simon, 2006); therefore, although the theme does not contribute as a positive experience I think it is noteworthy to discuss it because it exerts a direct influence on the practice of supporting students placed on academic probation.

The infamous letter (as it was described by the research participants) of re-admission states a few conditions with which the student has to comply before they are reinstated back into their programmes. One of these is for students to visit the student support services for assistance. These services are free, as has been emphasised; however, all the research participants deliberately avoided accessing assistance from student support. As someone who works with readmitted students, I have also observed that students find it personally daunting to attend support sessions. The research participants revealed a few reasons why students would rather not access help from student support:

- *You are thinking haaihaai [no...no] psychologists eish you are thinking that those people will depress me (P3, Appendix A1 p.9).*

This student was especially concerned about having to express difficult emotions as he also stated in the discussion that although the support offered by his friends was not "deep and cry" their confidence in him gave him hope to and strength to continue.

- *I made sure that I never get to that place and then there is letter to think about ha-a you understand never found the reason why I needed to go there...I have always felt that there is nothing wrong with me (P1, Appendix A1 p.9).*

This participant was afraid of being judged because of the readmissions letter. They believed that being placed on academic probation was not an indication that there was something wrong with them and also believed the misconception that student support is only for students with whom there is “something wrong.”

- *I never attended a single one [support session] because I didn't know what I would see and thought that it's for people that have issues and some people that are worse (P2, Appendix A1 p.9).*

## **5.4 REFLECTING ON MY PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION**

### **5.4.1 WHAT WERE THE SUCCESS STORIES OF THREE STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF NATURAL AND AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA AFTER ACADEMIC PROBATION?**

In answering my primary research question, I paid attention to my findings related to the secondary research questions, as discussed in the previous section. The success stories of such students could be heard in different spheres of their lives. They experienced success academically, institutionally, personally and socially. Academically the students found academic literacy such as study skills and time management competence as enablers of success. As indicated above, they also acknowledged that it was within the probation period that they started to take these competencies seriously and employ them in their own studies. The students started to prioritise and participate in academic activities such as consulting with tutors and faculty lecturers. They experienced these resources as excellent institutional support services and were thankful that the institution offered them at no extra financial cost.

It was during the probation period that the students discovered that social relationships were a vital part of their success. Encouraging parents, siblings, home circumstances, friends, peers and mentor all played a role to improve the morale of the students following academic exclusion. It was these support systems that propelled the students to go back to the university after receiving the news that they were reinstated into their study programmes.

On a personal level, students started maturing as a result of the academic probation and gained skills and competencies that were also valuable outside of the study environment. This personal development was enabled by their internal locus of control, high self-efficacy beliefs, positive intentions that led to productive actions and the courage to persevere.

## 5.5 POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

I believe that this study contributes to our current understanding of the positive experiences of students on academic probation. As indicated earlier there are few reports on the success stories of under-performing students; therefore this research study could add value to the body of literature on this topic.

This study could also contribute to the intervention strategies that will be offered to future students on academic probation by offering a perspective that views students through their capabilities and enabling factors. A strength-based perspective allows an optimistic outlook on circumstances and in turn optimism leads to zeal and energy in the way we approach our difficulties. I hope that this study will encourage support consultants to strongly believe that students placed on academic probation have what it takes to achieve.

Following the findings of this study, further research could be conducted to evaluate probation students' perceptions of student support services. Additionally, student support services could also begin to alter their approach strategy when assisting students by placing developmental aspects at the forefront of their services.

## 5.6 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following challenges were experienced and are acknowledged below:

Due to the newly introduced ethical regulations surrounding a student's contact details, obtaining permission to access such details was a difficult process which delayed the initial progress of the study.

Since the participants of this study were students currently studying, it was difficult to finalise a common meeting date and time between the research participants due to diverse and demanding individual time tables and this prolonged the data collection process. The delaying of the data gathering process increased pressure on the completion of this study.

The number of participants in the focus group limited the scope of the research data. I had a limited pool of students that I could contact to be participants of this study and from that select few there were a limited number of them that were both willing to participate and who could fit the focus group interview into their schedule.

Since this was a strength-based inquiry, it is possible that other significant experiences of students on academic probation were marginalised. For example, I noticed that the students could not stop talking about the fear that the probation period had evoked. However, I hope that my inception of the literature on experiences of under-performing students will provide the reader with a good idea of these experiences.

It is possible that dominant personalities in the focus group steered the participants' input in a particular direction. For example, after some time, one of the participants rarely gave independent views but rather added her opinions to what had already been said. I attempted to engage her on her own opinion (without insisting that she share new views) by directly addressing her and following up on her independent comments.

As stated earlier, the entire Appreciative Inquiry research process could not be fully applied because of the limited scope of the research study and therefore only elements of it were used to enhance the strength-based epistemology of the study.

Qualitative researchers are often questioned about their subjectivity in the research process (Creswell, 2013). As stated before, through research reflectivity and input by my research supervisor I ensured that I conducted my study in an ethical manner throughout the research project and process. I did however realise that the subjective experiences I have as a Faculty Student Advisor and in providing support to students was a strong factor; one which I had to manage consistently to ensure my unbiased contribution to this study.

Audio-recordings can restrict natural interaction among the participants and between the moderator and the participants (King & Horrock, 2010). I explained the need to record the interview to the participants at the beginning of the discussion and gained their permission to record the interview discussion. To limit its distraction I placed it inconspicuously where participants would not be in constant view of it.

## **5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.7.1 FURTHER RESEARCH**

Further research could include:

- Conducting the same scope of research with a bigger group of participants.
- Conducting the same scope of research over two semesters employing the 4-D cycle as an action research methodology.

- Exploring the perceptions that students who are placed on academic probation have of student support services.
- Exploring how myths about student support services may be mitigated at a South African University.
- Evaluating the effects of family and peers support on South African students with regard to achieving academic excellence.
- Conducting action research on the effects of Appreciative Advising on students placed on academic probation.

### **5.7.2 PRACTICE**

- Faculty Student Advisors could employ Appreciative Advising to assist students placed on academic probation. This could enable them to help students explore personal and institutional resources and strengths that may help them to do well in their studies.
- Support of students on academic probation should include building and/or reinforcing their self-efficacy beliefs and the development of psychological processes such as courage and perseverance.
- The findings indicate that innovative marketing strategies could benefit student support services. These strategies could include “myth busters” about student support services and emphasising that support services are developmental, positive and sympathetic.

### **5.8 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The notion of “life as aesthetic” is a key feature of the strength-based philosophy (Ryff & Singer, 1998). It is based on the notion that people are able to live life well despite daunting circumstances. The findings of this study show that it is possible for the participants to live life beyond the bare minimum in the probation period. The positive experiences of participants in this study regarding academic probation aligns with the strength-based approach namely that there will be success amidst difficult circumstances (Perodeau, 2013).

Based on the themes obtained from the analysis I was able to conclude that participants in this study had positive experiences following academic probation. These occurred on personal, academic and institutional levels. Academic probation provided the opportunity for students to prove their academic capabilities, explore institutional resources and receive personal support from their social and family systems. A surprising and outstanding theme of the findings is the notion that student’s found academic probation to be a positive institutional policy.

The support of family proved to be critical in the success of the participants, one of the participants acknowledged that he went back to the university for the sake of his family: *...just to go back and to see that the situation [at home] has not change its still like that...and then I realised that I had to up myself because all of them are watching me...I have to come back and be stronger ya so for me it was my family* (P3, Appendix A1 p.2).

The findings in this study indicate that it is important to view academic probation, as with any other challenging situation, from a strength-based approach (Hewitt, 2005). It is evident that students in this research study possessed individual inner strengths that allowed them to cope with and rise above the difficult academic probation. They also demonstrated that it is possible to use those strengths and other resources in order to address needs (Donelly, 2010). They showed that when individuals focus on their strengths they are enabled to address their needs with self-confidence, courage and hope and it becomes possible for them to be optimistic about the future.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A1-5:**

Transcribed and analysed focus group discussion

**Appendix A1:**

Stage 1: Focus group transcription

**Appendix A2:**

Stage 2, part 1: Extracting quotes which reflected similar experiences

**Appendix A3:**

Stage 2, part 2: Creating meaning units from the extracted quotes

**Appendix A4:**

Stage 3: ATLAS.ti thematic analysis

**Appendix A5:**

Stage 4: Emergent themes (integrating stage 2, part 2 with stage 3).

**Appendix B:**

Research field diary

**Appendix C:**

Focus group interview guide

**Appendix D:**

Ethics clearance certificate

**Appendix E:**

Declaration of originality

**Appendix F:**

Letter from the language editor

**Appendix G:**

Permission to conduct research

**Appendix G:**

Consent for participation in a research project



**Stage 1: Focus group transcription**



## Appendix A2

### Stage 2, part 1: Extracting quotes which reflected similar experiences



**Stage 2, part 2: Creating meaning units from the extracted quotes**





**Stage 3: ATLAS.ti thematic analysis**



**Stage 4: Emergent themes (integrating stage 2, part 2 with stage 3)**



**Research field diary**



**Focus group interview guide**



## Focus Group Interview Guide

PHASE	OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS
The <b>Discovery</b> phase: Appreciating what life gave you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please describe any positive thoughts you had about your probation period?</li> <li>• What were some of your best moments in the probation period?</li> <li>• Describe any good surprises you had during the period?</li> </ul>
The <b>Dreaming</b> phase: Envisioning what might be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What motivated you?</li> <li>• When did you realise you can achieve your academic goals?</li> <li>• What helped you to persevere when things were not looking good during the probation period?</li> <li>• What kind of emotional and/or psychological support did you seek? How did that support help you cope?</li> <li>• To what extent did you believe in your academic competency?</li> <li>• What were your highest hopes for your studies?</li> </ul>
The <b>Designing</b> phase: Determining what will be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What academic characteristics did you have to acquire in order to be successful in your modules?</li> <li>• What sort of academic assistance did you require to be successful and how did you obtain the help?</li> <li>• What institutional support systems enabled your success in the probation period?</li> <li>• How did the institutional resources help you cope during the probation period?</li> <li>• How did your faculty contribute towards your success?</li> </ul>
The <b>Destiny</b> phase: Planning what will be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the toughest but best decision you made that ensured the success of your studies?</li> <li>• What do you think is at the heart of your success?</li> <li>• What made the probation period work for you?</li> <li>• What was your way of life during the probation period?</li> <li>• How did your social life change following the probation period?</li> <li>• What were helpful activities that you did with your peers?</li> </ul>



**Ethics clearance certificate**



**Declaration of originality**



**Letter from the language editor**





**Permission to conduct research**



**Consent for participation in a research project**