STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

by

RENDANI SIPHO NETANDA

THESIS

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PROMOTER: Dr. JM Mamabolo
CO-PROMOTER: Prof. MJ Themane

DEDICATION

The struggle to successfully complete this D. Phil in Education was characterised by several hurdles which at some stages made me feel less interested to continue with it, but I regained strength from Thomas A. Edison's assertion that although *"our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time."* Along with this quote that became my motivational source, I dedicate the achievement of this programme to the following other sources of my determination.

- The all-mighty God - Jehovah, for providing me with strength, patience and passion to learn and, more importantly, life itself.
- My mother (Mrs Nthongwa Albertina Hlako) who, since my being, have always acted as the principal source of my drive,
- My wife (Ledile 'India' Peggy), whom, without, I would have not known the purpose of life and its meaning, and
- My children (Pearl, Neo and Delight) whom, without, I would have nothing to live for.

DECLARATION

I, Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda, hereby declare that the proposal titled – **STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL -** is my original work for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies, except where the views of others are acknowledged by means of academic references techniques, both within and in the list of sources used. I am aware of what plagiarism and unethical conduct is constituted of in academia, and has circumvented it as far as possible to respect the academic community and its writing practice.

Signature 　 _(signature)_ 　 **Date** 28 March 2018

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Transcriber

Unless otherwise with relevant software, by its very nature, transcription is a time-demanding exercise and a tiring process that requires a high concentration level. I, therefore, also thank Mr Felix Sebako for helping me with the transcription. It was not a walk on the park, but he endured throughout the whole process assisting me.

God

To the Lord, Jesus and heavenly Father, Jehovah – countless of thanks for being the unpretentious cradles of my high motivational level and for your guiding spiritual words which always hark back that *"Everything Has Its Time:*

To everything, there is a season,

A time for every purpose under heaven:

…A time to plant

And a time to unpluck that which is planted…" (Ecclesiastes, 3:2)

ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the growing rate of dropout phenomenon within the ambiance of higher education and to develop a support model for lower-postgraduate students. Anchored within Maxwell's (2012) model of qualitative design, this case-study research has employed the deficit theory and the theory of transactional distance to guide the investigation. While the theoretical evidence was garnered through the application of traditional (narrative) literature review design, the empirical evidence was achieved by targeting lecturers, administrative officers and dropout students. These participants were only those who have respectively taught an advanced communication research (COM4809) module which is offered in the department of communication science as part of the honours programme, who have been involved into the administration of the module in the same department and who have dropped out of COM4809 between 2011 and 2016. Purposive selection technique was used to sample distinct units of analysis at various levels. At the first level, the University of South Africa (Unisa) was used as a case ODL university. At the second level, COM4809 was used as an ideal module to demonstrate that dropout is prevalent at an honours postgraduate level within the ODL domain. At the third level, lecturers were also purposively included into the study since they were key informants. With regard to administrative officers, a census approach was adopted to include the only two administrative officers who have been involved in the administration of COM4809 between 2011 and 2016. Dropout students were selected using snowball and purposive sampling techniques. While the purposive selection of dropout students from the given dataset (statistical information) of 219 dropouts, which was requested from the information and communication department (ICT), was used, the snowball selection method came into play when lecturers identified twenty-one dropout students from their personal records and furnishing the researcher with detailed contact information about them. However, the researcher has managed to hold focus-group interviews with a group of six dropout students and telephonic interviews with ten dropout students, summing up to 16 participants. Focus-group interviews were also undertaken with a cohort of eight lecturers while another seven lecturers have participated in the in-depth interviews. Data were analysed through the use of qualitative content analysis method, and O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) design

to analyse qualitative data was used. To ensure the credibility and dependability of findings, a triangulated approach to data collection and analysis were used. The study unveiled four major themes on dropout factors, namely: dropout factors associated with students' personal circumstances, with lecturers' personal circumstances, with institutional (academic) circumstances and with those factors which are determined by circumstances of other units of analysis (other research contexts). The study has further revealed that while the majority of factors can be controlled, others cannot. Based on the findings and the literature, an integrated honours student-centred support model (IHSCM) was developed to serve as a framework within which to understand dropouts of lower-postgraduate students in an ODL institution. Findings have demonstrated the importance of providing support services in an ODL environment and advocate for a holistic approach towards addressing attrition. The proposed model is envisaged to better expound dropout attributes, which lead students to discontinuing their studies in the ODL environment, and to assist ODL institutions to effectively address the concern. ODL institutions, which want to apply the proposed IHSCM, should do that with caution in mind owing to the fact that the model is not yet tested. Hence, it is inferable to suggest that future research should focus on its impact in the reduction of dropouts of honours students in ODL contexts.

Key words: Student dropout (attrition), dropout student, open and distance learning (ODL) institution, Higher education institution, distance education, student support intervention (services, intervention, mitigation strategy) and student support model (framework).

WRITING CONVENTIONS USED IN THIS STUDY

- A UK English has been used and it is identifiable through the use of 's' in certain words and not 'z'. For example, except in direct quotations, words such as organization, realize, recognize and finalize are written as organisation, realise, recognise and finalise.
- Acronyms, terms and references are organised and presented alphabetically in ascending order.
- Direct quotes of participants' responses are in 11-point size and are italicised.
- Each chapter begins on a new page.
- Except headings of tables and figures, all other headings are written in Arial black while 'Arial (Body CS) style is used in the text.
- Except on direct quotes of participants' responses, which were extracted to support findings and interpretations made, the font size used in this study is 12 point.
- For referencing, the table of contents is build-in 'automatic table 2'.
- Full terms are used in headings as well as in the body of the text while acronyms are used in paragraphs only.
- Headings are formatted in heading 1 while sub-headings as formatted in heading 2, heading 3 and heading 4, heading 5 and heading 6.
- Headings of tables are written in Arial (Body CS) style and 12-point size.
- Headings of tables are written on top of tables while those of figures are written beneath figures.
- Landscape orientation is used only where tables and figures do not fit into the portrait orientation page layout.
- Levels of the headings and their subheadings in the layout of every chapter range between one and six.
- Line spacing in paragraphs is 1.5.
- Numbering of headings and their sub-headings is done only up to the forth level.
- Numbering of tables and figures starts, respectively, with 1.1 for the first table and 1.1 for the first figure.

- Page numbering is 'simple plain number 2' which appears at the centre of the bottom of the page. Number formats embrace small lettered roman figures at pages after the title page and before the first chapter. All other pages are numbered in sequence from one.

- Participants are given pseudonyms. For instance, L1 refers to the first lecturer who was interviewed first, L2 for the second one. While A1 is a pseudonym for the first interviewed administrative officers, A2 is for the second administrative officers. For students, S1 refers to the first student to respond in the focus-group interviews.

- The page margins are 'normal', with top, bottom, left and right margins set at 2.54 centimetre (cm).

- The used referencing style, both within the text and in the list of sources consulted, American Psychology Association (APA) sixth edition.

- When full terms are used for the first time, acronyms are also provided in brackets.

TERMS USED INTERCHANGEABLY

- Academic institutions and higher education institutions;
- Academic success, academic accomplishment;
- Analyse and interpret;
- Approach and paradigm;
- Attrition, withdrawal, school failure and dropout, student's departure
- Black students and students of colour
- Concept, construct and term;
- Deficiencies, hurdles and difficulties;
- Distance education
- n and open and distance learning/education;
- Doctrine, dogma, belief and philosophy;
- Dropout and student
- Elements and components;
- higher education institution, school and academic institution;
- Issue and concern and problem;
- Learn and study;
- Lower-postgraduate and honours students;
- Mix and combine or integrate or blend or amalgamate;
- Module and course or subject
- On-campus, traditional and face-to-face
- Phenomena and aspects;
- Post-school system and higher education terrain
- Practice and application;
- Purposive and Judgemental
- Research design and research framework;
- Results and findings;
- Sampling and Selection
- School context and institutional context (environment)
- Secondary school and high school
- Student and learner;
- Study and research;

- Subject, module and course;
- Teacher, instructor, academic and lecturer;
- Tertiary education and higher education
- Theoretical framework, model, school of thought, theory and theoretical lens;
- Theory of transactional distance, transactional theory of distance and transactional distance theory.
- Investigate, research and study;
- variables, attributes and factors;
- underprepared and unprepared

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APA - American Psychology Association

CEM – Cultural Ecological Model

CHS – College of Human Sciences

CHSERC – College of Human Sciences Ethics Review Committee

COM4809 – Advanced communication research

DE – Distance Education

DHET – Department of Higher Education and Training

EQ – Emotional Intelligence

FETs- Further Education and Training colleges

IHSCM – Honours Student-Centred Model

HE - Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HEIs – Higher Education Institutions

HSRC – Human Sciences Research Council

ICTs – Information and Communication Technologies

LMS – Learning Management System

LPSs – Lower-postgraduate Students

L&SS – Library and student support services

NSFAS – National Student Financial Aid Scheme

ODL- Open and Distance Learning

OLSS-SAT – Student Services Self-Assessment Tool

PDP – Personal Development Planning

Q1 – Question one

RQ1: Research question one

RQ2: Research question two

SAFE – Social, Attitudinal, Familial and Environmental

SAUS – South African University System

SIP – Support Intervention Programme

SIPs – Support Intervention Programmes

SMS – Short Message Service

SPSS – Statistical Package for Social Science

SREB – Southern Regional Education Board

SSSM – Social Science Skills and Methods

TREC – Turfloop Research Ethics Committee

TVETs – Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges

UKZN – University of KwaZulu-Natal

UNISA – University of South Africa

UWC – University of Western Cape

WPPET – White Paper for Post-School Education and Training System

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Figure 1.1. Schematic representation of chapter 1 (introduction and background)
Source: Researcher's own compilation

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Across the broad educational spectrum and for many years, student dropout has been a severe concern for many students, academic institutions, governments and policy-developers. This worldwide problem has extensively infiltrated higher education institutions (O'Keeffe, 2013, p. 605) and every country (Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya, 2013, p. 1562). Effective dropout mitigation strategy requires the involvement of researchers and the expertise, experience and the decision of policy makers (Mgwebi, Kruger, Maoto and Letsoalo, 2017). Because of the degree to which it negatively affects the lives of those who have dropped out of their studies and the society at large, a range of studies emerged to respond to its invasion in an education sector, both high school and higher education domains. Jennison and Johnson's (2004) longitudinal explanatory study on dropout to ascertain the relationship between alcohol abuse and student retention serves as an epitome of earlier studies, which were undertaken to influence and to assist in policy development for tertiary education institutions on the issue of heavy alcohol drinking.

Still in this aeon, student dropout remains one of the leading topics in the field of education that has gained a renewed zeal with considerable endeavours by several inquirers. The purpose being to optimise an understanding about the attrition phenomenon, particularly attributes which lead to its occurrences, the nature of processes it undergoes, the students' behavioural patterns which result in dropouts and the time it takes to materialise.

In the widespread research, student dropout is a broad concept that has accumulated distinct labels which include, inter alia, 'withdrawal' (Dekker, Pechenizkiy and Vleeshouwers's (2009), 'departure' (Manik, 2015; University of Washington, 2016; Botha, 2016), 'attrition' (Herman, 2011; Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016), 'failure' (Valencia, 2010; 2012), non-completion (Forsyth and Furlong,), 'leaver' (University of Washington, 2016) and most expansively 'dropout' (Spady, 1970; Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner, 2007; Dekker et al, 2009; Reisel and Brekke, 2009). Although all these labels have been used in this study, constructs 'dropout' and 'attrition' have been used to a larger degree as opposed to others.

Despite it being a well-known concern with a dire long-standing history and having been characterised by several endeavours and methods to address it, student dropout continues to prevail and remain problematic for college administrators (Jennison and Johnson, 2004, p. 2). This problem occurs in spite of numerous suggested intervention programmes that are intended to deal with it.

Several studies have fundamentally dealt with dropout of students who are at an undergraduate level, yet attempts to address it at a postgraduate level have been scant. To a larger degree, while some of these studies looked into causes of student dropout, others were oriented into research models that can be used to respond to the problem. A mammoth volume of theoretical frameworks and models has been pioneered to guide studies that are focused on this phenomenon. Others were refined and advanced under the impression that the contemporary ones are not responsive to the issue and that the traditional ones are incongruous with current dropout challenges in higher education sector.

In this study, the focus is on dropouts of students who are at a lower-postgraduate level within the distance education context. Undertaking this study has been impelled by the necessity to look into the existing unresponsive student support frameworks and models. To inform the development of student support model or model for postgraduates' cohort, chapter two – '*literature: a traditional (narrative) review'* and chapter four – *'presentation, discussion and interpretation of findings',* are the means-to-an-end, exploring, inter alia, factors which lead to student dropout, challenges, which students and higher education terrain experience in teaching and learning, intervention programmes' designs and documented potential mitigation strategies. An all-encompassing purpose of this chapter is to introduce the topic about student dropout and to reflect the research vacuum to which this study wants to fill and it is accomplished by providing a clear-cut short context of the phenomenon under investigation. This chapter also provides an outline of present-day state of the problem and a review of related studies that were fixated on student dropout and student support. An important chunk of an all-purpose of this chapter is to present the structural arrangement of the study and the process it goes through, and this is expounded at the end of the chapter. Equally intrinsic in this chapter is the background from which the research problem and problem statement originated. Hence, the ensuing section

discusses the background to the study based on the contentions presented in the related research.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This section provides the background to the study, thereby discussing, briefly, the dropout phenomenon and the context of the study – the case of University of South Africa's course (an advanced communication research).

1.2.1. Dropout phenomenon

As student dropout proportion has increased in the higher education sector and existing support frameworks remain ineffective, there is a serious growing concern about findings new effective ways to cease its prevalence in the whole world. In the territory of the Republic of South Africa (RSA), education is regarded as a public good and a human right with which the country wants to foster environmental and socio-economic justice amongst its citizens. Yet, as observed by Keet (2005), education as a human right has, until recently, not able to achieve social and economic justice as anticipated. While there are many attributes which can be linked to that end, dropout has deteriorated the situation by presenting numerous socio-economic effects to both people who have dropped out, institutions of higher learning and the country in particular. If not prevented or addressed, student dropout will continue to threaten the socio-economic development of the country. An educated and qualified human capital determines the country's prosperity (National Development Plan, 2013, p. 1561). Thus, this study examines student dropout within open and distance learning institutions - a form of education mode of delivery that has been widely reported by Willging and Johnson (2004) as having received little attention and which, in standpoints held by Tello (2007), Smith-Jaggar and Xu (2010) and Xu and Smith-Jaggar (2011) has been severely affected by dropouts when analysed in parallel with conventional on-campus institutions.

The effects of dropout concern are plenty and varied. Poverty and inequality are some of the examples of negative effects that dropout challenge leads into within the society. While the South African government department of higher education and training

attempts to eradicate poverty and to minimize the inequality ratio amongst the citizens, thereby expanding access to higher education (Roy, 2007, 908; Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013), the challenge remains that most of the students entering the higher education level are from educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged families and this, as Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009, p. 99) put, presents further challenges for universities to ensure an improved student retention and completion proportion. Thus supporting students whose family backgrounds are educationally and socio-economically deprived becomes important to ensure an increased success rate and waning dropout proportion because, as posited by Tinto (2014, p. 6), access that is not accompanied by support intervention is not an opportunity. Besides poverty and inequality, the consequences of dropout encompass an increased unemployment percentage (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2008), increased crime level in the society (Berlin and Sum, 1988; Tas et al, 2013); illegal jobs (Tas et al, 2013, p. 1562), such as the involvement of dropouts into drugs dealings (Mensch and Kandel, 1988), human trafficking; and, most notably, loss of finances incurred by funding institutions for students who have dropped out (Letseka and Maile, 2008; Mills, 2015). Highly complex even further, while dropout leads to an alarming gruesome proportion of unemployment in the society, it is also influenced by unemployment itself. In line with this assertion, Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux and Truscott (2016, p. 1) contend that dropout is determined by, among other repertoire of variables, an increase in unemployment rate in the country.

Many support intervention programmes have been put into place to promote student retention, success and to curtail the ubiquity of student dropout in higher education. However, irrespective of different support interventions put into place in the higher education sector, student dropout has been an alarming incessant problem, resulting in many students failing to complete their studies (Thomas, 2002, p. 46; CHE, 2013, p. 27; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013, p. 6). For instance, 35 % of students in South Africa are unable to complete their programmes within the period of five years because of the dropout problem, among other factors (CHE, 2013, p. 15). In order to eradicate the dropout problem or even to minimise the challenge, higher education institutions, particularly universities have developed student support intervention programmes to help their students to accomplish their academic goals (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 6; Thomas, 2002, p. 46). This

can be seen as a form of response to the South African National Plan's (NP) demand that the South African University system must find out attributes which lead to academic failure and success (Fraser, Killen and Killen, 2005). As part of an essential academic research discourse, student dropout has received sufficient attention over the past decades. As an example, several studies have looked into the dropout phenomenon and produced plentiful and varied suggestions of student support frameworks to explain and annihilate the pervasive concern. Some of the identified existing epitomes to this end include frameworks and models developed by seminal proponents who have authored on the same phenomenon, such as, among others, Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), Bean and Metzner (1985), Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) and Wingate (2007). These frameworks are discussed in expansion underneath chapter two of this study – 'literature: a traditional (narrative) review' as part of the theoretical lenses which have guided this study.

The act of curbing the dropout problem has made researchers to explore what causes it and who needs support intervention. Comparing the dropout of students from face-to-face higher education institutions and that of open and distance education institutions, Tello (2007) has found that open and distance education has higher student dropout proportion than traditional face-to-face higher education institutions. This purports that there is a need for an integrated and responsive student support model in open and distance institutions, which should be designed to address the variety of students' needs. In the view held by Bartram (2009, p. 313), an identification of students' needs helps the institution to determine the appropriate type of support intervention needed and the correct method through which to provide it. There is a sufficient academic debate on the dropout phenomenon in the literature, which has abundantly focused on attrition at the undergraduate level of study, yet very few studies were focused on attrition at the postgraduate level (Kritzinger & Loock, 2012, p. 12; CHE, 2010; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007; Koen, 2007; 2015).

This study is contextualised within open and distance education and uses the University of South Africa's lower-postgraduate course (an advanced communication research) as a case. The ensuing section below provides as an overview of the study setting.

1.2.2 Study context: University of South Africa and an advanced communication research

The design of this research was a case study. A case-study design has been assigned different descriptions in the literature. Yin (2014) describes it as a research design that is based on a single or many cases to explore a real-life, existing context and which, as Creswell and Poth (2017) added, embraces the use of multiple sources to garner the mass of data. An understanding held in this study regarding the definition of 'case-study design' was aligned to Stake's (2005) and Thomas's (2015) standpoint which argued that it is the choice which inquirers make on the research phenomena to study about, and it is not determined by the research methods and methodological paradigms. Similarly, this case study is defined by dropouts of honours students in the landscape of open and distance learning, and not the methods or methodologies with which to study the problem.

This section provides an explication on the context within which to study student dropout at an honours level in the context of open and distance learning institution. It explains the type of ODL institution (University of South Africa) and the selected module (an advanced communication research) which this investigation has focused on.

1.2.2.1 A case university: University of South Africa

This study is contextualised within the lower (honours) postgraduate level and investigates student dropout from a honours course to inform the development of an effective support framework for students who are studying with open and distance education institutions to combat the problem. The focus of the study is limited to open and distance learning institutions and exemplifies the ubiquity of the dropout concern with an illustrative case of an honours module offered at Unisa. The prime objective of this study is to explore and explain the dropout phenomenon with a goal to generate the responsive student support model. Unisa is part of the South African university system that is comprised of 25 public universities. The system is classified into the University of Technology, traditional and comprehensive universities. The University of Technology refers to all South African universities, which are concerned with vocational diploma programmes that subsume, among others, Vaal University of

Technology, Tshwane University of technology, Durban University of Technology, Central University of Technology and Cape Peninsula University of technology. While traditional universities teach degree programmes which are theoretically based, the category of comprehensive universities is an intermediate subsystem which entails those universities that are mandated by the South African higher education and training department to teach both vocational and theoretical programmes. Examples of traditional universities include the University of Limpopo, University of Pretoria, University of Stellenbosch, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Cape Town and University of the Witwatersrand. Unisa forms part of the comprehensive subsystem that consists of seven universities, which offer vocationally oriented diplomas and theoretically oriented qualifications. These incorporate higher education institutions such as University of Venda, University of Johannesburg, University of Zululand, Walter Sisulu University, East London University and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. Unisa is pronounced the oldest higher distance education institution across the globe and hugest open and distance education environment in the entire Africa (University of South Africa, 2016f). It strives to realise its visionary intent of being *"the African university in the service of humanity"* and has seven colleges - namely, accounting sciences, Education, Law, Economic and Management Sciences, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Science, Engineering and Technology and Human Sciences (University of South Africa, 2015d). The college of Human Sciences has three schools. These are, to mention them, the School of Social Sciences, the School of Humanities and the School of Arts. Communication Science in which an advanced communication research course is taught is one of the seven departments that constitute the School of Arts is part of the latter. In the next section, the brief background about the case module used to exemplify the prevalence of the attrition concern in open and distance education is given.

1.2.2.2 A case module: an advanced communication research

An advanced communication research (COM4809) honours module is a self-directed module that is offered at a fourth-year level as part of the Bachelor of Arts Honours in an Integrated Organisational Communication programme. The Programme is offered at the national qualification level 8 and consists of 120 credits. COM4809 is an introductory research module for novice students who have gained some insights into

the communication theories and methods in the field of communication science. It imparts students with research skill to enable them to understand the context of research and its processes, in terms of the theoretical models, research questions, data collection and analysis methods (University of South Africa, 2015e). It is offered in the department of communication science as part of the honours degree integrated organisational communication or media studies qualification. Although studies on student dropout rates of qualifications at Unisa are available (DISA, 2014; IEASA, 2009), a qualitative research focused on dropout of students who were registered for COM4809 honours module could not be sourced. This study has focused on dropouts who left the module between 2011 and 2016.

1.2.3 Research problem

The increasing student dropout rate in the South African post-school system, particularly among blacks (HRPULSE, 2013, p. 1), is a danger to the future of South Africa (Letseka and Maile, 2008). Student dropout for online courses is between 25% and 40% more than that of face-to-face academic institutions that is between 10% and 20% (Parker, 2003; Xenos, 2004). Although the dropout problem for undergraduate students in higher education system is broadly discussed in the literature (CHE, 2010), dropout of postgraduate students in higher education institution, including the open and distance learning (ODL) environment is insufficiently documented (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). Pearson (2012, p. 187) compared the postgraduate dropout rate in higher education with that of undergraduate and found that that the former is higher than the latter. The findings by Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007) show that while 21% of students have managed to complete their studies within the minimum stipulated time, dropout at the first-year level was found to be 25% of the entire student community. Despite several support interventions put in place to curb it, student dropout remains unabated.

Empirical evidence that indicates that many students studying honours programmes through an open and distance learning institutions drop out because of little or no sufficient support given to them during learning trajectories prevails in the literature. For example, of the total 3662 of student cohort that registered for Honours Degree at UNISA between 2010 and 2014, 1343 (37%) of them dropped out (DISA, 2014). In 2011 alone, 635 students (24.9%) dropped out (DISA, 2014). An increase in a dropout

rate results in low student success rates and the deferred accomplishment of academic goals (Simmons, 2013, p. 62; Tamburri, 2013; Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 6 and 32; Thomas, 2002, p. 46).

In the forthcoming section, the statement of the research problem is provided.

1.2.4 Statement of the research problem

Despite voluminous support interventions put into place, open and distance learning institutions continue to experience student dropout. For example, Unisa experiences a dropout problem of honours students registered for an advanced communication research course (COM4809). There were 554 honours students who were registered for COM4809 module between 2011 and 2014, and 262 of them (47.3%) dropped out (Unisa's Institutional intelligence system, 2015). COM4809 is an annual lower-postgraduate course, but many students take longer to complete it as they fail and repeat it several times and other dropping out, resulting in a low success rates measured over a period of year. So far studies have looked into the student dropout within the terrain of undergraduate level (CHE, 2010; Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007), but little attention has been given to the postgraduate level (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). Some studies examined the reasons for student dropout by focusing on both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. For example, Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos and Vergidis (2004, p. 1) conducted a comparative study between an undergraduate course (that has a high rate of student dropout) and postgraduate course that was characterised by low dropout rate. It is therefore fundamental to investigate the nature of student support models that guide universities on how they should address the dropout problem.

1.3 LITERATURE: A TRADITIONAL (NARRATIVE) REVIEW

Ellis and Levy's (2008, p. 22) view of a literature is that it is a central element of a research and serves as the groundwork on which the actual research should be built. It is an analysis and synthesis of essential information on the aspect under investigation (Randolph, 2009, p. 2). Thus in order to achieve the broad purpose of creating the base for undertaking a vital study, an assessment and integration of

pertinent information becomes a means-to-an-end. This study applied Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method to reviewing the literature. It is important in this study because it offers rigour to the review of literature that, in the exposition made by Ogawa and Malen's (1991), obliges an investigator to keep to techniques, methods, philosophies and epistemologies, which abate errors and biases during data collection, presentation, analysis, discussion and reporting (p. 267). Thus increases the credibility and dependability of findings (Ogawa and Malen, 1991).

The review of literature targeted specific types of information that contribute to answering the research questions and that has become the scope of the review. The scope of the literature review depends on several factors that embrace, among others, research questions (objectives) and key concepts that define the research problem to which the study seeks answers. In this study the scope of the literature is defined by the types of data to be collected during the actual undertaking of research after successfully building the foundation to base the research upon which, in turn, serves to indicate what types of information should be included in the review or can help find answers to the research questions. In line with this notion and using Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method to reviewing a literature, this study analyses and synthesises the following types of information:

- Types of student support interventions that ODL institutions offer. Practices of student support interventions in ODL environment,
- The nature of student support models that prevail in addressing the student dropout problem in an ODL environment,
- Support programmes' design/structure,
- Perceptions of administrative officers and lecturers on the support to students in ODL environment,
- Experiences of students on the support to students in ODL environment,
- Challenges and problems associated with ensuring student support in ODL environment, and
- Strategies for measuring student support's responsiveness in ODL.

Since universities have to device student support strategies to help student cope with the university standard of learning so that they can realise success by completing their

programmes (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013, p. 6; Thomas 2002, p. 46), it is rudimentary to investigate the postgraduate student dropout and eventually develop a framework for best practices that may help open and distance education institutions to address the problem. There is a sufficient studies that have investigated the dropout phenomenon at all educational levels in higher education landscape and they embrace, among others, the IEASA (2009), Tamburri (2013), MacGregor (2009) and Simmons (2013). Findings on dropout of doctoral students revealed numerous causes of dropout that incorporate financial constraints, students' difficulties with writing their theses, students' isolation from the academic institution and the supervisor (Tamburri, 2013) and poor student-supervisor relationship (Pearson, 2012, p. 188). The variety of implementation strategies to address the dropout problem of doctoral students exists. For instance, in Queen's University, a week-long camp to assist students to properly write their theses was established (Tamburri, 2013). Trying to curb the dropout problem and to retain students, the Concordia University gives bonuses to students who complete their degrees on time (Tamburri, 2013). Gidman, McIntosh, Melling and Smith (2011, p. 351)'s study further expose that student support is by no means an easy task to execute, but multi-faceted with many considerations that need to be made when developing student support model. As asserted by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, p. 17), support to students in post-school system is of a paramount significance in improving the success rates and currently not effective even at college level and demands interventions. The Department of Higher Education and Training further points out that support interventions are not treated as priorities even when they are implemented. Russell (2005, p. 73) contends that HEIs should develop an induction and support system in which students must undergo training so that, in addition to being aware of the available support initiatives, they can learn how to appropriately behave within the higher education system. Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2006, p. 249) postulates that universities should ensure that there is a balance between the academic demands and the student needs that requires supports.

The prominence of student support in higher education is palpable in literature. At an academic level, the development and the use of modules to support the learning needs of students is applied in the university system. The Social Science Skills and Methods module (SSSM) in the urban university serves as an epitome of such modules. Clegg

and Bufton (2008. p.437) assert that the SSSM module is meant to support various university students, on a number of social science degrees, with distinct ages, socio-economic, and academic backgrounds as well as levels of skills and competences to help them develop and expand, amongst other things, their reasoning capacities, analytical skills, vocabulary and arguments suitable for studying the university degree programme.

In addition to offering support-oriented modules, personal development planning (PDP) is also an essential form of student support at tertiary education level. Students must reflect through group discussions and other academic sessions on what they have learned and where they need improvements. Clegg and Bufton (2008, p. 437) argues that PDP helps student to attain high cognitive skills and other forms of academic skills and abilities such as to analyse, make strong arguments and even to evaluate.

1.4 ROLE OF THEORY IN THE STUDY

This study is informed by and frames its arguments within the conventional deficit and transactional theory of distance. Their role is to guide the study to explore and expound student dropout in and from higher education institutions. Following the divulged research findings established through blending the traditional deficit model and Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance, this study develops an all-encompassing model to help institutions of higher learning to respond to the widespread dropout concern. The ensuing subsections focus on introductory and explanatory overviews of these theoretical lens as well as the philosophical dimensions that they posit.

1.4.1 Deficit theory

The deficit theory is a well-propagated theory that generally provides a lens to analyse the damage, weaknesses and shortcomings and it has been widely used in the variety of fields of study, such as language (Ramos-Sanchez, 2004; Johnston and Morrison, 2007) social work (Roer-Strier, Strier, Este, Shimoni and Clark, 2005), psychology (McLean, Stuart, Coltheart and Castles, 2011) and education (Mastropieri, Scruggs

and Berkeley, 2007). The deficit model provides a theoretical framework for the analysis of the student needs by focusing on their problems and challenges, which result from their differing backgrounds (Bartram, 2013, p. 7). Given the South African context that is characterised by cultural diversity and ethnic groups, students studying through institutions of higher learning come from different backgrounds, such as environmental and family living conditions, financial, customs and norms, race, gender, age, and life style. Owing to these differences in the backgrounds, students in higher education institutions react differently to educational environments. As a result, it becomes vital for HEIs to support them in order to curtail the dropout problem. The deficit theory of education is important for this study because it provides a framework to discuss student support in the context of distance education and e-learning. Also of a special significance is Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance that has guided this study. The dogmas on which it if founded are briefly discussed below:

1.4.2 Transactional theory of distance

The aspects of the theory of transactional distance had been discussed since 1972 and constituted to what has become known as the theory of transactional distance in 1980s (Benson and Samarawickrema, 2009, p. 6; Moore, 1980). The transactional theory of distance is based on the belief that student-student isolation, lecturer-student isolation, and student-academic institution have an effect on the success rate and must be reduced through appropriate structure and dialogues to support learning contexts. Hockridge (2013, p. 142), Simmons (2013, p. 62) and Jowallah (2014, p. 189) agreeably postulate that the transactional distance theory argues that there are several hurdles between the lecturers and their students. To mitigate such hurdles, the transactional theory of distance further theorises that distance education institutions must develop effective communication strategies. The theory holds the view that an isolation or distance between students and lecturers as well as between students themselves is not geographical based. Instead, it is a psychological separation (Moore and Kearsley, 2005) which is determined by pedagogical elements – namely, course structure, dialogue between students and lecturers, and students' self-directedness (Moore, 2007, p. 101; Reyes, 2013, p. 44). In order to reduce the transactional distance, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009, p. 17) theorise that an ongoing two-communication between students and lecturers and between students

themselves is also crucial. Since this study focuses on the student support within higher education system, the transactional theory is relevant and essential in locating the study within a sound academic theoretical framework. It is also appropriate for this study because the study approaches the student support component of teaching and learning from an educational perspective and the transactional theory recognises the prevalence dropout problem in higher education terrain. As several studies conducted, this study also wants to realise a particular aim. Thus, the section to follow explicates the aim of undertaking this research.

1.5 AIM OF THE STUDY

The purpose or the aim of the research is commonly phrased in a form of statement, which is further divided into research questions (Parahoo, 2014). In line with Parahoo's assertion (p. 150), the main aim of this study is to investigate the causes of increase in the dropout rate within the ambiance of open and distance education and how best to address them.

Since student dropout is an old massive challenge affecting higher education students, yet it continues to exist regardless of plenty suggested frameworks documented in the literature, it is inexorable to quest for responsive models, which will make positive endeavours to condense the scope of its negative effects on students' accomplishment rate in higher education institutions. It is for this reason that this study has become fundamental in the field of education and as a result, has developed research questions to help garner the relevant data towards offering alternative explanations of the dropout occurrence as well as best possible practices to address it.

1.5.1 Research questions

Of a particular significance in academic studies and their methodological paradigms is the research question for which the study seeks for an answer. It is an essential element in any study (Parahoo, 2014, 150). Contradicting notions regarding how qualitative research questions should be formulated exist in the literature. For instance, Vaus (2001, p. 1s) argues that social studies ask descriptive (what?) and explanatory (why?) research questions. Guided by research problem (student

dropout), the purpose of this study and the need to develop a responsive student support model, four research questions were found imperative to drive the collection and analysis of data. These research questions are provided below along with what the study was focused on, who participants were and what each question measured.

Table 1.1: Key constructs, target populations, research questions and scales

Foci	Participants	Research questions	Scales
Student dropout	Lecturers and administrative officers	How do lecturers and administrative officers perceive dropouts of honours students in open and distance learning institutions?	Perceptions
	Students	How did former honours students experience dropouts in open and distance learning institutions?	Experience
Student support	Lecturers and administrative officers	What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of lecturers and administrative officers in ODL institutions?	Perceptions and experiences
	Students	What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of honours students who have dropped out of their studies in ODL institutions?	Perceptions and experiences

Table 1.1 (Key constructs, target populations, research questions and scales) presents the research questions which guided the collection and analysis of data and to which the study sought for answers, the target populations, what it dealt with as well as what it measured. The first column from the left contains key constructs which the study looked into, namely: student dropout and student support. The second column shows participants who were targeted. Research questions for this study are provided in the third column and column four presents each research question measured.

1.5.2 Research objectives

This study wants to explore and explain dropout of LPSs in ODL institutions by exploring attributions of dropout; experiences of students, academics and administrative officers and support interventions offered by lecturers and administrative officers. Grounded on the above broad purpose and research questions, this study has the following three objectives to achieve:

- to explore the reasons which account for dropout of LPSs in open and distance learning (ODL) environment;
- to determine the experiences of lower-postgraduate students on dropout in ODL institutions; and
- to enhance an understanding of student support systems in an ODL context and the degree to which they are effective.

In order to find answers to the research questions posed, to realise the objectives set and to ultimately achieve the purpose of this study, this research is anchored in a qualitative methodological approach as a 'means-to-an-end' to investigate the dropout facet within the scope of open and distance education.

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The concept 'methodology' in research means the way in which researchers approach the identified problem and quest for answers (Taylor, Bogdan and De Vault, 2015, p. 3). Two well established conventional methodologies in research entail quantitative and qualitative inquiries, which can be applied independently or in combination (triangulation or mixed-methods). Whereas quantitative studies use statistical data such as numbers and percentages to explain aspects investigated, qualitative studies describe patterns and trends by using words (Hancock and Algozzine, 2015; Padgett, 2016). In this study, only the qualitative methodology is employed to study the dropout phenomenon within the ambiance of open and distance learning institutions. This choice was guided by the fact that the study wanted to solicit participants' perceptions and experiences (words) and to provide the subjective reality of what they mean. As labelled by Maxwell (2012, p. viii), a qualitative research is an inductive and open-

ended study that is aimed at enriching the researcher's understanding of the following three aspects:

- The ontological issue under investigation by soliciting viewpoints and meanings, trying to understand an aspect from their worldviews,
- The manner in which those standpoints influence or are influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds as well as by their physical settings,
- The practices that are involved in changing or maintaining these aspects and their linkages.

The ensuing section provides an explanation on the adopted qualitative design for this study.

1.6.1 Research design

Research design is a prominent juncture in the research progression in which the researcher transit from asking research questions into planning about how to find answers to those questions (White, 2008, p. 98).

This study has applied Maxwell (2012) model of qualitative design that encompasses five components – namely, the goal of the study, conceptual framework, research questions, methods (data collection and analysis) and credibility (ensuring trustworthiness of findings). These components are discussed in details under the chapter on research methodology.

The forthcoming section expounds how units of analysis (the case university, the case module and academic community members) have been selected for this qualitative study.

1.6.2 Selection method (Sampling) of units of analysis

This section explains how the case university (Unisa), the honours case module (COM4809) and participants (lecturers, administrative officers and students) were selected for this study. It begins by explaining which the ideal higher education institution was.

1.6.2.1 Selection of an ODL institution

The study focused upon honours students' dropouts in an open and distance learning institution and has used Unisa as its typical context. Of the twenty-five universities available in the South African university system, Unisa was selected using purposive sampling technique because it is an ideal ODL environment from which the appropriate case module to demonstrate the ubiquity of the dropout concern in higher education and key community members who can provide the required data can be sourced to partake into the study.

1.6.2.2 Participants

As have already explicated, the study targets lower-postgraduate students (honours students) who have dropped out of COM4809 module between 2011 and 2016, lecturers who have been teaching the module within the same timeframe and administrative officers who have been involved in the administration of the module in the same period. The study uses the University of South Africa's advanced communication research (COM4809) as a case to exemplify the prevalence of student dropout problem in open and distance education parameters. For instance, 37% of students were registered for this COM4809 between 2010 and 2014, but have eventually dropped out (DISA, 2014). It is unknown as to why they dropped out. Many of studies that investigated the student dropout problem in and from higher education institutions were fixated on student dropout within the demarcation of undergraduate level, and less so on attrition occurring at a postgraduate level (CHE, 2010; Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007). Kritzinger and Loock (2012, p. 12) argued that even those that looked into student attrition within the postgraduate scope fail to pay sufficient attention to the dropouts at lower-postgraduate. This has been the reason that has driven this study and the research gap that this study wants to address. Examples of studies, which have dealt with attrition at an undergraduate level encompasses the recent study done by Tladi (2013) which looked into the dropout incidence, questing if support from lecturers has potential to curb the problem. Next, the procedure for selecting students who dropped out is explicated.

1.6.2.3 Selection of Lower-postgraduate (honours) students

Snowball selection method was applied to identify suitable honours students who dropped out. This selection method was appropriate because it was difficult to access them and such students are key informants who can share their experiences of what have pushed them to dropping out of their studies and the types of support interventions they have received as mitigation strategies as well as their perceptions upon whether such support interventions are effective or not.

1.6.2.4 Selection of lecturers and administrative officers

The corpus literature contains related studies, which have investigated student dropout and have targeted different types of participants. In a case study of three Norwegian universities, which was aimed at curtailing student dropout, Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt (2013) interviewed staff from the faculty as well as the administrative officials.

As has already been explicated on, this study also targeted lecturers and administrative officers who were involved in COM4809 module between 2011 and 2016. Lecturers were selected using the purposive sampling technique. The purpose for adopting the purposive selection approach was influenced by its advantage of allowing the researcher to include only participants who are key informants on the topic pursued. Hence, this study found it appropriate to, purposively, select lecturers who have worked on COM4809 and who can give pertinent perceptions regarding dropouts on the module and experiences on support services offered to deal with the problem.

1.6.2.5 Selection of administrative officers

No sample for administrative officers was necessary owing to the fact only two administrative officers in the department of communication science were involved in the administration of the COM4809. Inescapably essential, the entire enumeration of those administrative officers were included for participation into the study. Thus, a census approach was employed for this population.

1.6.3 Data collection methods

The data have been collected using focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students, focus-group and in-depth interviews with lecturers, and in-depth interviews with administrative officers. Three interview guides were developed for these three groups of participants – the first one was for the collection of data from students who have dropped out of COM4809 module; the second one was for the data collection from the lecturers who were teaching the selected module and the third one was aimed at collecting data form administrative officers who were involved in the administrative services on the module. The reason for using these three interview guides was stemmed from the need to uncover richer information and to ensure improved dependability and credibility of findings as well as to validate the results derived from other techniques which have been followed for the collection of data (Miller, 2011, p. 399; Netanda, 2012).

The ensuing sections - 1.6.3.1 (collection of data from students) and 1.6.3.2 (collection of data from lecturers and administrative officers) – describe data collection procedures, which have been used for each targeted group of participants.

1.6.3.1 Collection of data from students

Data were collected using focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students. These types of interviews have helped to generate various data from students, such as causes for student dropout in higher education and support interventions, which have been put into place to curb or rather, minimise the concern. The inclusion of focus-group interviews was aimed at complementing and validating findings generated by in-depth interviews with the lecturers and administrative officers. The purpose was to enhance the trustworthiness of the overall findings, which would have been divulged by the study.

1.6.3.2 Collection of data from lecturers and administrative officers

In-depth interviews were conducted with all lecturers and administrative officers who were involved in an advanced communication research module. These interviews were designed to collect data relating to the perceptions of the lecturers and administrative officers on student dropout and experiences on support services, which

are offered to at-risk students. Interview guides were developed to help guide the interview process. The laptop and tablet were used to record interviews, along with notes-taking for emerging categories.

Upon the completion of data collection process, data were, then transcribed. The upcoming section explains how the transcription of data was undertaken.

1.6.4 Data transcription

Following data collection stage, recorded interviews with all groups of participants were transformed verbatim into written words, but only salient responses, which provide answers to the research questions, were organised and structured in such a way that important information becomes extractable and interpreted.

1.6.5 Data analysis

Data analysis is a process whereby researchers organise and order the mass collected data into meaningful patterns (Aneshensel, 2002; Aneshensel, 2012) and in such a way that only the pertinent part of it is extracted (Wood and Kerr, 2010, p. 292) and interpreted. This section explicates the procedure that has been followed to analyse data collected from the three target groups of this study, namely: dropout students, lecturers and administrative officers.

1.6.5.1 Analytic framework

Qualitative thematic content analysis/categorisation was used to analyse the mass collected data and was executed through the development and the use of categorisation of themes as evident from the reviewed literature and as, according Taylor et al (2015, p. 8), guided by the developed concepts, insights and understandings derived from the patterns that would have emerged. Qualitative data in this study encompasses data collected using focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students, focus-group and in-depth interviews with the lecturers, and in-depth interviews with administrative officers, notes-taking and data collected using instruments, such as a laptop and a tablet. As have already expounded, the researcher has listened to the recorded interviews from the laptop and tablet and transcribed them to the paper. The study has adopted O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d.) qualitative analytic

design to analyse data. Six steps are inherent in O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d.) design and the manner in which they were applied is summarised below as follows:

Step 1: Organising data

The researcher has referred to the three interview guides to differentiate questions and arrange responses of the participants according to those questions.

Step 2: Determining and organising ideas and concepts

In this stage, the researcher has quested for words and phrases, which were used frequently, thoughts, which were, keep coming up and meanings prevalent in the participants' expressions regarding their perceptions on dropouts of honours students in ODL environment and experiences of support services offered in the university.

Step 3: Determining and grouping data according to themes

After finding out and arranging concepts and ideas, similar responses which were identified were, then, collated and be collapsed underneath over-arching themes. For example, this study has uncovered that, among the potential reasons, dropouts of honours students within the ODL terrain can be attributed to factors such as being unpreparedness, lack of self-directedness, and students' financial constraints. These categories were found to be related and were collapsed into an over-arching theme 'dropout factors associated with students' personal circumstances'. This theme is one of the four major themes, which were divulged in this study.

Step 4: Ensuring dependability and credibility in findings and analysis

In chapter 1, I explained the concepts dependability and credibility. In chapter 3, I showed how they were ensured in this study. Here I explained how O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) fourth step to analyse qualitative data was implemented. I checked the exactness with which the questions in the interview guide measure what they are supposed to measure, and the degree to which findings from different group of participants are consistent. For example, lecturers and administrative officers alike have cited students' workload and technological challenges as some of primary student dropout determinants. Besides, the use of triangulation in data collection sources and techniques have further enhanced the trustworthiness of findings. The

discussion on dependability and credibility in findings and analysis will be expanded further as part of the section on 'quality criteria' in 1.6.6.

Step 5: Getting the reasonable explanations for findings

As directed by the firth stage of O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) method to analyse qualitative data, the researcher has determined whether the findings were what were expected based on the related literature; whether there are major surprises in the findings; and the extent to which findings are similar or different to the assertions made in the literature. This stage was ensured by providing the synthesis of what is in the literature, the theoretical lenses adopted to guide the study and what the study has found.

Step 6: An overview of the final steps

Aligning the analysis with the requirement of the last stage of O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) qualitative analytic design, the researcher have stated why the research and its findings are significant in the context of ODL academic environment and their implications thereof.

1.6.6 Quality criteria

Ensuring quality in research, both in data collection and analysis is vital. This section on quality criteria expounds how dependability and credibility of findings, which have been unveiled, was ensured during the undertaking of this study. First, the concepts dependability and credibility are explained, drawing largely from descriptions, which were derived from the literature. Then, the table that provides an overview of how dependability and credibility have been ensured is given at the end of the section and is accompanied by additional expositions about components, which it entails, and what those components imply.

1.6.6.1 Dependability (reliability) and credibility (validity)

While 'reliability' is a quantitative concept that refers to the degree to which results become replicable and repeatable in other similar studies, which may employ the same methodological approaches, 'validity', also a quantitative concept, relates to the accurate reflection of findings from the perspectives of the participants (Ritchie, Lewis,

Nicholls and Ormston, 2013, p. 365). In the view of Richie et al (2013, p. 365), whereas qualitative concepts which are associated with the term 'reliability' are 'dependability' and 'confirmability', those that are linked to the concept 'validity' are often 'plausibility' and 'credibility'. In this study, terms, which have been largely applied to refer to 'reliability' and 'validity', are, respectively, 'dependability' and 'credibility' since this is a qualitative inquiry.

Chapter 3 explains further, how dependability of the interview guides and the credibility of the results were ensure in this study.

Next, rationale why this study was deemed worthy to be undertaken is explicated hereunder as follows:

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study has developed a student support model for honours students in ODL institutions, drawing inference largely from the findings of honours dropouts using COM4809 as an exemplary module and partly, the literature. Through the developed student support model, the study suggests best intervention practises to curb student dropout from the open and distance universities.

Reviewed literature supported the need and the significance to conduct this study. For example, while Wingate (2007, p. 395) reports that many academics and tutors do not want to provide student with supports they need other than executing the tutoring duty, Dhillon, McGowan and Wang (2008, p. 284) also reflect the significance of the study by pointing out that the documented literature on student support is relatively few. In addition to these influential views, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training for Post-school system also indicated that low success rates of students in higher education sector is attributed to inadequate academic and social supports (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 32). The wide concerns of universities on the student dropout culminated in numerous studies aimed at explaining and describing the dropout phenomenon. Dropout is studied at the variety of levels - the course, programme (certificate, diploma or degree) or university level.

This study investigates the dropouts of honours students at a course level using the Unisa's case module - [advanced communication research (COM4809)]. Lee and Choi's (2011) analysis of studies on dropout of online course has discovered that the principal focus in related studies were on dropout at a course level. Opposite to what Lee and Choi (2011) found, the practical context from which the dropout problem arises in this study revealed that 47.3% of students who were enrolled for COM4809 dropped out between 2011 and 2016 (Unisa's Institutional intelligence system, 2015). Whereas this study focuses on the lower-postgraduate level (honours level) as it has received little attention over the past decades (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12), the predating studies investigated an undergraduate level (CHE, 2010; Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007). This study is also inclined and enthused by Lee and Choi's (2011, p. 603) recommendation that future research with a more apparent and standardised definition of the concept 'dropout' should be undertaken in order to investigate student dropout in online course.

The Unisa advanced communication research is a typical epitome of distance education course that is used as a case module. The act of sending assignments to the university and receiving feedbacks from lecturers is aided by an online system called the 'JRouter'. The system allows lecturers to mark students' assignments and examination scripts online and to provide instant feedbacks to them. As suggested by Lee and Choi (2011, p. 603), the concept 'dropout' is redefined and the study is grounded on a suitable and clear definition that is case-contextualised. It was therefore significant to carry out this research at an honours level in a practical context in which the dropout occurs to respond to the preceding study.

1.8 RESEARCH ETHICS

When conducting the proposed study, the ethical principles were sternly taken into an account. This was safeguarded through what Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p.263) refer to as procedural ethics which demands a particular vetting process through which responsible research committees and directorates grant permission to carry on with the investigations in studies that involve humans. This was pivotal in this study because both the in-depth interview guides for the lecturers and administrative officers

as well as the focus-group interview guide for the dropout students are data collection instruments that include humans. The following ethics were ensured:

- participants' information privacy and anonymity ensured,
- data accuracy and integrity were taken into consideration,
- ethics approvals applied for and successfully granted,
- information sheet and consent forms were prepared and were distributed to all participants, and
- all sources used in this study were acknowledged

While here in chapter 1, I introduced research ethics as a concept and mentioned the aspects considered in this study, in chapter 3 that deals with the methodology, a full account on how ethical commendation was ensured will be provided.

1.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has adopted a qualitative methodological approach to explore dropouts of honours students who have left their postgraduate studies in open and distance learning institutions. The use of a single methodology has received criticism in the methodology-oriented inquiries, particularly by mixed-methods pundits. For instance, Turner, Cardinal and Burton (2017, p. 243) have argued that every method alone is imperfect, claiming that the methodological triangulation which, in Denzin's (2012) viewpoint, is grounded on the notion of increased comprehension of phenomena, can help preclude the potential limitation of using one methodological approach. Even though this study did not follow Turner et al' (2015) advice to mitigate the possible shortcomings of using a single methodology, numerous forms of triangulations were embedded in this qualitative study to lower the probability of limitation by amalgamating distinct groups of participants and qualitative data collection methods, namely: telephonic and focus-group interviews with students; focus-group and in-depth interviews with lecturers as well as a in-depth interviews with administrative officers.

The application of participant-oriented focus-group analysis in this study to analyse students' perspectives, which have been generated from interviews, poses a threat to

the credibility of research findings. Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Ormston (2013, p. 340) criticise this method of analysis by citing out the following three shortcomings:

- Focus-group interviews limit the researcher from exploring the phenomenon under investigated in depth, which makes the credibility of research findings less accurate,
- Data generated through interviews becomes voluminous and the participant-based method consumes a considerable amount of time, thereby tracing responses of every individual participant in the whole focus-group interview,
- Besides, the use of this method often results in inadequate attention that does not take the context of interview into account.

To avoid achieving research findings which are less credible and dependable, various forms of triangulations were ensured and explained in section 4.2.2.1 (An application of O' Connor and Gibson's six steps to analyse qualitative data) in chapter four of this study.

As for understanding responses from the context of the discussion, data collection involved jotting down both the verbal and non-verbal cues of individual participant to get closer to the true meaning exposed. To ensure in-depth understanding of the dropout phenomenon under inquiry, more time for interview was allocated – between 30 and an hour, and participants were allowed to just flow in the discussions.

Owing to the fact that some participants, particularly the staff, had limited time for participation as they indicated that they were going to various work-related meetings, much of rich information has been missed because of that.

Another limitation of this study was the use of a far less amount of dropout students as participants (small sample size). Only sixteen were interviewed so that data become manageable. Key dropout students, which could have been interviewed, were 240. Twenty-one were found using snowball sampling method, 219 from the requested dataset (statistical information from the ICT department).

1.10 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS (OUTLINE)
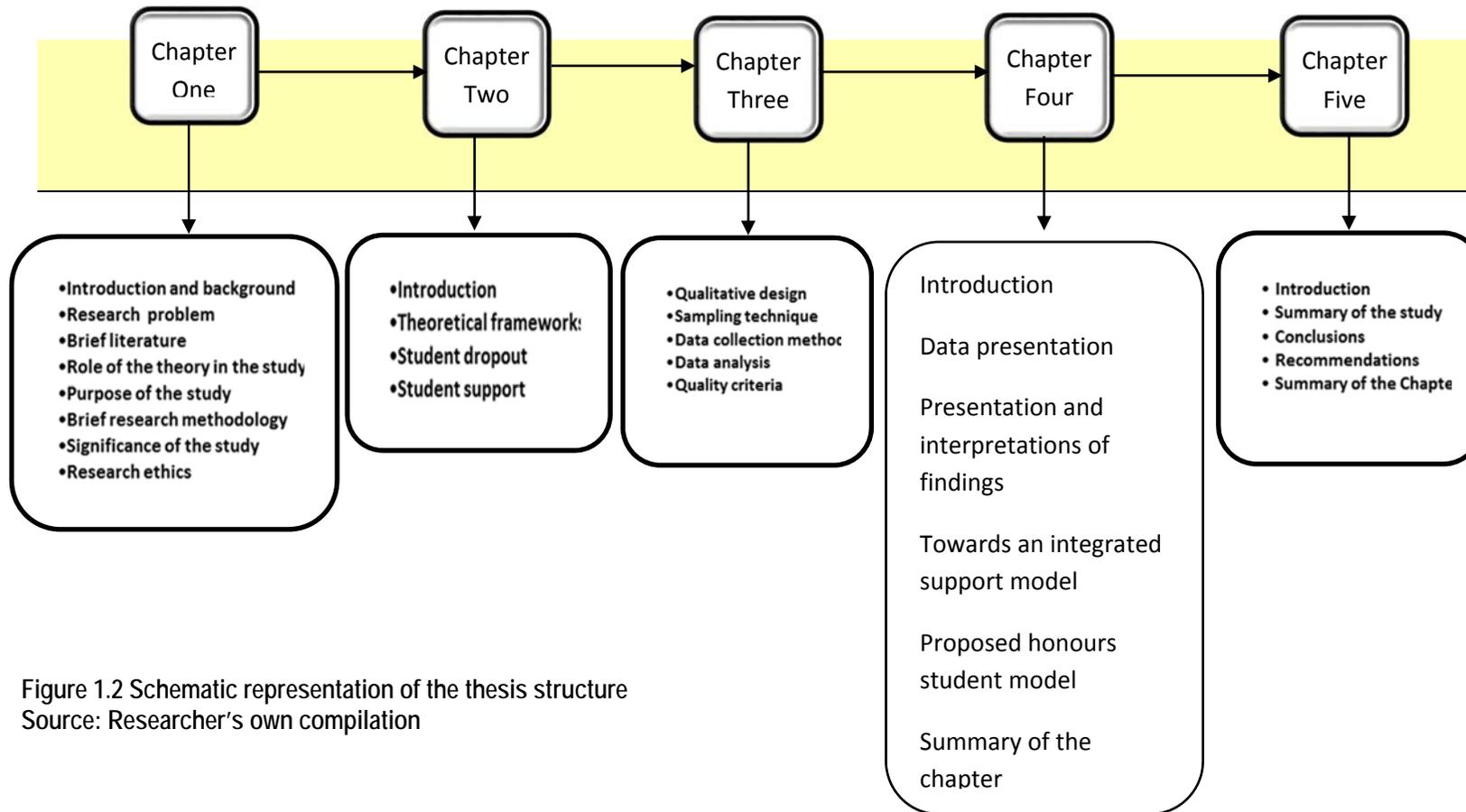
Figure 1.2 Schematic representation of the thesis structure
Source: Researcher's own compilation

This structure of the thesis provides introductory remarks for each chapter. It outlines what each of five chapters in this study deals with – namely, chapter one: introduction and background; chapter two: literature review; chapter three: research methodology; chapter four: presentation, discussion and interpretation of findings. Schematic representations of what each chapter covers are given at the beginning of each chapter and core aspects of each graphic representation are explained.

1.10.1 Chapter one (Introduction and background)

This chapter (Introduction and background) provides an explanation of the background upon which the study evolves and introduces what the study discusses in its ensuing chapters – namely, the literature review; methodology; presentation, discussion and interpretation of findings; as well as conclusion and recommendation. The background expounds the context of the study and presents the research lacuna that this study wants to fill by briefly explaining the extent of the identified problem, how it has been attempted to be curbed and how the study aims to address the research gap. The study further chronologically discusses the research problem, statement of the problem, overview of the literature review, the theoretical models (deficit model and transactional distance theory) which have been applied in this study through which to investigate the student dropout problem and their roles in this study.

Following that, the study explains the purpose it wants to achieve and the research questions to which it seeks answers. The research methodology used in this study is discussed next and it is comprised of the epistemological aspects such as, research design, sampling techniques, data collection instruments and methods employed to analyse collected qualitative data, criteria to ensure valid findings. Then, the chapter highlights the essence of undertaking this study, explicating how it contributes to the existing body of literature on student dropout. It concludes its discussion by explaining how applicable ethics-related concerns were taken into account when embarking into the research process.

1.10.2 Chapter two [Literature - A traditional (narrative) review]

The first detailed discussion starts with the literature review beneath the chapter which this study calls the 'Literature: A traditional (narrative) review'. The purpose of the literature review chapter and the rationale for its annexation into the study is to provide a theoretical foundation on which this research is built and to expose documented accounts relating to an ontological concern under investigation – the 'student dropout' phenomenon, using a case postgraduate module offered as a fourth-year course at Unisa – an 'advanced communication research' (COM4809). To achieve the purpose of this chapter, the study has employed Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method to reviewing a literature. Although Ogawa and Malen's method is that it enhances the level of credibility of garnered literature, it carries plausible shortcomings, including to only giving the outline to conduct a review of multi-vocal literatures and never focus on findings of the study (Ogawa and Malen, 1991). Moreover, it is the product of theoretical analysis of case studies and academic debates of other qualitative methodologists (p. 265). Despite its shortcomings, the method was adopted into this study because it has a potential to maximise credibility and dependability of findings by reducing bias and error through the provision of rigidity in literature reviews which is realised by sticking to methods and procedures when collecting, analysing and interpreting data, as well as sharing the unveiled findings. The definitive motive to conduct this study is to examine the dropout concern and ultimately develop a responsive student support model for (honours) postgraduates who enrol with open and distance education institutions. The chapter begins its discussion with a brief introduction of aspects it covers – namely:

- theoretical models which the study adopted,
- grounds upon which the researcher's choice of blending the two distinctive theories (deficit theory and transactional distance theory) is based,
- the general research problem (student dropout)
- the general student support research aspect, addressing the problem

Each theory is explicated in terms of its evolution, components, philosophical views, which it theorises, critiques that each of the adopted theory have received in the promulgated literature and strengths attached to it. Each section of the literature chapter is aligned to a particular purpose to fulfil. Conversely, the principal base to

include a section on an integrated theoretical paradigm in this study is informed by the need for theoretical lens through which to study the student dropout concern.

The literature review chapter also presents the discussion of the other two intrinsic aspects of this study - namely, the 'student dropout' - which is the general problem upon which this study centres and the 'student support' - which is an educational arena in which the plausible solutions rests. The section on 'student dropout' is inevitably included in this study because it is the terrain from which the research lacuna was found in the literature, for example:

Firstly, in spite of the plethora of literature focused on student dropout (DISA, 2014), the concern remains prevalent in higher education and poses a threat to the future of South Africa (Letseka and Maile, 2008);
Secondly, whereas the plethora of literature have their scope on student dropout studies limited to an undergraduate level (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007; CHE, 2010), literature on postgraduate level has been sparse (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12) and the dropout remains prevalent concern (DISA, 2014) in that arena.

The discussion on 'student dropout' commences with various descriptions of the construct 'student dropout' to explore how vigorous academic debates came to comprehend it and, also, how it is understood in this study. Underneath this broad construct, the chapter provides attempts to define it from theoretical (also known as conceptual) and empirical (also known as operational) perspectives as derived from the literature. In light of the prevalent congruence and controversy in descriptions postulated in the literature, the research expounds how the concept 'student dropout' is operationalised in the context of this study. The ensuing subsection centres its focus on student dropout within the context of open and distance learning (ODL) and it is followed by the discussion of factors that give rise to the problem of student dropout. Following the discussion on root causes of student dropout, the succeeding subsection of this chapter on literature review, presents arguments documented in the literature in relation to existing forms of mitigation strategies to deal with the problem which are suggested in the plethora of literature or which were practically tested to respond to the dropout concern. The chapter wraps its discussion on student dropout by focusing

on solicited students' and employees' experiences reported by other related studies on the same research phenomenon.

The other primary aspect that is unsurprisingly incorporated into this chapter and valued pertinent in the entire study, in particular, is the 'student support'. Evidence has shown that student support has been valued essential in order to promote success rate, yet current forms of student support interventions are unresponsive (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p.17). Similar to student dropout section, the section on student support commences by unpacking the term 'student support', presenting postulations inherent in the palpable literature. The idea behind its inclusion is to reveal a repertoire of descriptions and understandings of the construct by several proponents.

Following that, the chapter respectively discusses the types and the nature of support interventions, which are put into place in higher education environments and how they have been developed. The purpose of embracing the discussion on types and the nature of support interventions available for students in open and distance education is to enable a sound creation of the base for the research questions, which have guided this study.

The next discussion focuses on existing practices of intervention programmes adopted by an array of higher education institutions and the related information has been garnered using the desktop review.

Awareness on support available in the ODL institutions is discussed next. The purpose of this section is to build a theoretical foundation on various methods, which higher education institutions use to disseminate information regarding their institutional intervention programmes to elude students' withdrawal from courses, programmes or academic institutions. The purpose was, further, to determine whether some students are aware of the available support interventions in the institutional learning settings. This section is equally significant to inform the development of the all-embracing and responsive support framework for LPSs in ODL institutions. Furthermore, as this study is theoretically guided by, in addition to the deficit theory, Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory which posits, among other philosophical dimensions, that an

interaction between students and lecturers is crucial to bridge the transactional distance, it becomes vital to apply the lens to study methods with which ODL institutions disseminate information about the available support interventions.

The discussion on challenges, which higher education institutions encounter while implementing student support intervention programmes, comes next.

The structure of this literature review chapter ends with the discussion on measurement strategies to determine intervention programmes' responsiveness. The next chapter focuses on the research methodology employed in this study.

1.10.3 Chapter three (Research methodology)

This chapter will discuss the research methodology used in this study. It commences by presenting the schematic representation of the methodology and then introduce the research methodology and the following aspects: First, the chapter will discuss the research paradigm (approach). Second, it will address the aspect of the research design. Third, I will describe how I have collected data. The discussion on an analysis of data will then follow. Thereafter, the ensuing aspect discussed will be the quality criteria (trustworthiness). Next, I discuss issues relating to research ethics, which were deemed salient and carefully considered. In wrapping the discussion, important issues of the chapter are recapped under the summary section.

1.10.4 Chapter four (presentation and interpretations of findings)

In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented and interpreted. Following the introduction of the chapter, I will present data. First, I will present findings, which have emerged from in-depth interviews with lecturers. Second, I will present findings unveiled through in-depth interviews with administrative officers. Third, the chapter will present findings divulged through focus-group interviews with dropout students. Next, the chapter will reflect on issues valued significant in the development of the anticipated student support model. This with will be followed by the presentation of the proposed model and an explanation as to what does it means for ODL institutions. Then, the fundamental aspects dealt with in the chapter are packaged under the summary section.

1.10.5 Chapter five: (summary, conclusions and recommendations)

This chapter gives an overview of the study as a whole by summarising essential aspects, which have been discussed in the previous chapters. It also provides conclusions, which are minimally drawn from the literature review that was conducted and, largely, from the findings which have been unveiled by the empirical study. The chapter will be wrapped with recommendations, which are also influenced by findings, and new directions for future studies are given.

1.11 SUMMARY

The purpose of the chapter on orientation to the study was to introduce the research topic, issues relating to student dropout and support in broad-spectrum, the research problem from which this study originates and the research questions for which answers are sought. The chapter also introduced the theoretical paradigms through which to study the pervasive student dropout concern as well as their philosophical dimensions upon which they are grounded. Part of the introduction's primary intention was to motivate the rationale behind undertaking this research and the contribution that this study hopes to make into the proliferated academic discourse on student dropout and the field of education in wide-ranging. To this end, the introduction

element presented a synopsis of the most imperative aspects that are discussed in details in the body of this study. The chapter of study orientation started by debating the general research problem which this study evidently claims that it exists, from both a theoretical and practical context – that irrespective of plentiful support interventions accessible to needy students, dropout concern continues to be a challenge in higher education sector (Letseka and Maile, 2008). The Chapter further discussed the research problem statement to narrow down the general research problem into a specific gap that this study wants to address. The purpose has been achieved through a reflection of assertions that despite a huge volume of literature put more attention on student dropout at an undergraduate level (CHE, 2010; Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013), the focus on postgraduate level has been less emphasised or been scrubby (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). The second major component of the chapter on orientation of the study is the background to the study in which the purpose was to provide the contextual background to the study referring to the theoretical discourse that influenced the study. This purpose was achieved by presenting an overview of the literature that was centred on student dropout and the support interventions. The chapter also provided an introduction to the research methodology and its related aspects applied in this study such as the research ethics, research design, sampling procedure, target population, data collection methods, data analysis methods as well as steps undertaken to ensure the dependability of the data collection instruments and valid findings.

The next chapter is the 'literature review' and it comprises and discusses three broad issues that are valued pertinent and essential for this study:

- Firstly, theoretical frameworks that guide this study - an integrated use of deficit theory and Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance;
- Secondly, the student dropout concern; and
- Thirdly, the student support intervention.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE: A TRADITIONAL (NARRATIVE) REVIEW

Whereas the previous chapter (orientation to the study) had a general purpose of introducing various chapters of this study, providing brief information about what this study discusses and expounding the theoretical background that gave rise to the undertaking of this research, this chapter - 'literature: traditional (narrative review' – serves as a theoretical base on which the study is built.

The chapter starts by presenting a structural overview of aspects that are important in this study and have been discussed, as a result. The schematic representation of how this literature review chapter is structured is given as part of the section on introduction and it is portrayed as follows:

LITERATURE : A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Introduction

Theoretical framework

Deficient theory

Transactional theory of distance

Student dropout

Student dropout in an ODL environment

Some reasons/causes of student dropout

Perceptions regarding student dropout in higher education institutions

Challenges associated with student dropout

Concept 'student dropout'

Theoretical definition

Empirical/operational definition

Geographic areas as a principal reason for dropping out

Staying away from home
Political strife

Political unrest
Unpreparedness and lack of academic support
Lack of counselling/career guidance

Students' experiences
Lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions

Students' unpreparedness

Low academic performance

Financial and economic constraints

Learning environment

Having been registered in a non-preferred field of study

A change or break in intimate relationship

Inability to manage time

Ill-health

Student support

The concept 'student

Types and the nature of studen supports in highe

Development of student support programmes in

Mitigation strategies

Practices of student support intervention programmes in higher education

44

support'	education institutions	higher education	

| Support programmes in higher education institutions | Support programmes in higher institutions | Importance of student support for higher education institutions and students | Communicating student support interventions to students | Students' experiences as well as lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions on student support | Challenges in implementing student support intervention programmes in higher education institutions | Measurement strategies of the student interventions' effectiveness | Consequences of dropout |

Figure 2.1 Schematic representation of the literature review chapter

Source: Researcher's own compilation

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Literature review is 'a research process of examining and synthesising information by focusing on documented research outcomes' (Boote and Beile, 2005). Motives behind conducting a literature review are profusely wide-ranging. Most remarkably, the purpose of reviewing a literature is to enrich an understanding (Boote and Beile, 2005, p. 6) and knowledge on specific research phenomenon, key constructs, theoretical frameworks (Randolph, 2009, p. 1) as well as research methodological pradigms that have been employed to study the same aspect (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996; Randolph, 2009) to ultimately form a foundation on which the study should be built. Other motives for conducting literature reviews include finding gaps in the existing body of knowledge on the issue that is being investigated, avoiding following unrewarding methods, delineating the problem that impelled the research and questing for recommendations that unveil what future studies should focus on (Gall et al, 1996).

Literature review is a vital component in any research process (Webster and Watson, 2002; Ellis and Levy; 2008). It assists in the formulation of research questions, suggesting relevant data collection methods (Burns and Grove, 2005) to be used, pointing out gaps and suggesting methods with which to fill them (Cronin, Ryan and Coughlan, 2008, p. 660) in the body of literature on the topic under investigation. It is a critical, unbiased and exhaustive analysis and integration of suitable existing studies that garners information from voluminous sources (Cronin et al, 2008, p. 38).

Prevailing forms (Webster and Watson, 2002, p. xiii) and foci (Cronin et al, 2008, p. 40) of reviews of literature vary. On one hand, the researcher can embark on a ubiquitous research phenomenon that is characterised by ample of literature that requires an investigation and a fusion in order to develop a theoretical model that expands and synthesises the existing body of knowledge (Webster and Watson, 2002). On the other hand, the researcher can investigate a new research problem that has received less emphasis in order to propose a ground-breaking conceptual model (p. xiv). Both the former focal point and the latter are equally central and applicable to this study. Relatively parallel to the former, this study generally focuses on student dropout phenomenon which, over many years, has sufficiently been attended to

(Wingate, 2007; Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, 2007), yet until this epoch it remains recurring despite voluminous support frameworks which were developed in response to its pervasive attack (Letseka and Maile, 2008). Many studies dealt with student dropout by centring their focus at the undergraduate level of education (Ramsay, Jones and Barker, 2007; Wingate, 2007; Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, 2007) than the postgraduate level (CHE, 2010; Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007; Koen, 2007; 2015). This has culminated in a deep and prime understanding of student dropout at an undergraduate level as opposed to the attrition experienced at a postgraduate level. Compounding the matter further, those that were confined within the postgraduate parameters have given little attention to student dropout at lower (honours) postgraduate level as opposed to attrition that occurs at the upper (doctorate) graduate level (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). Captivatingly, rival viewpoints on dropout at postgraduate level exist in the literature, portentous that much is still to be done to optimize an understanding of student attrition at the postgraduate level that appears to be a difficult and multi-layered phenomenon to deal with. This assertion is exemplified by Herman (2011, p. 40) who offered a divergent position, arguing that a doctoral dropout is a complex issue that has not been entirely learnt. In this study, the focus is on student dropout within the confinement of undergraduate level. The study uses a case of Unisa's lower-postgraduate course called an 'advanced communication research' (COM4809). Similar to this study, there had been studies that looked into the dropout phenomenon within at the course level at Unisa. A case in point is Tladi's (2013) research on dropout of undergraduate students who were enrolled in Cost Accounting and Control course (ACN203S) which looked into dropout of students who failed to write an examination. The distinctiveness of this study is that whereas Tladi's (2013) study conceptualised dropout as a student's absence from examination or failure to write an examination and was limited to attrition at an undergraduate level, this study defines dropout as a failure to register in the following semester and it is based on dropout that takes place at a lower-postgraduate level. Moreover, Tladi's (2013) study adopted a quantitative methodology and this study is affixed in a qualitative research design.

Of all conceivable foci a literature analysis can have, such as methodologies, research results, models or theories and applications (Cooper, 1998), this study is largely oriented towards findings, theories and applications rather than methodological

approaches to study the dropout phenomenon. The choice for these foci is informed by what the study hopes to achieve and the contribution it envisages to make in the existing body of literature. The study explored the dropout incidence in open and distance education terrain to inform the development of responsive student support model for lower-postgraduate students. Engrained from these three identified foci of this study, three components constitute the structure of this literature review chapter – that is, the 'theoretical framework', the 'student dropout' and the 'student support'.

Approaches to conduct reviews of literature are copious. Evidently, academic discourses show that there is an array of kinds of literature reviews such as, the narrative or traditional literature review (Cronin, Ryan and Coughlan, 2008, p. 38), the systematic literature review (Cronin et al, 2008; Parahoo, 2014, p. 125) and the critical evaluation review (Slavin, 1987). This study presents their variations in a form of table as derived in the analysis of related studies. It aligns its form of analysis and synthesis with the traditional (narrative) review.

Table 2.1: Descriptive characteristics of narrative, systematic and critical evaluation literature reviews

Some characteristics/types of literature reviews		
Traditional or Narrative	**Systematic**	**Critical evaluation**
Asserting on the narrative review, Cronin et al (2008) argue that: - its purpose it is to highlight the importance of the study and the contribution of new research to the reader, - it provides detailed accounts of the background to the study to enable the reader to understand the new developments of the body of research, - draws inferences on the topic investigated by critiquing and summarising the plentiful existing literature, - It has the ability to identify the variations or gaps in the existing body of research,	- Its purpose is to give as many sources of all research pertinent to the study as possible, both the, unpublished and published - It tries to use rigorous and clear criteria to ascertain, critically scrutinize and provide a fusion of all related literature on the phenomenon under investigation, and - It specifies how the research questions were developed, studies were selected, information was analysed, literature quality was measured	- The principal drive of critical evaluation review is to subsume studies that match the prearranged quality measurement framework and disregard those which do not. - It is based upon meta-analysis and uses only research sources that meet a particular quality threshold standard of methodology (Slavin, 1987). - Its doctrine is that the inclusion of only quality sources leads to higher quality of findings (Kennedy, 2005). - Its drawback is that if the defined criteria for inclusion are wide-ranging, studies that do not meet the quality measurement range predetermined may cause poor quality findings (Kennedy, 2005). Strict inclusion

- It has the capacity to assist investigators to formulate objectives/research questions, - It can enable researchers to formulate a research topic and to refine it, - It gives a summary of findings of studies that focused on the same topic. - Coughlan, Cronin and Ryan (2007) contend that narrative interviews are important in generating a theoretical framework.	and how the information will be dispersed (Cronin et al, 2008; Athanasiou, Debas and Darzi, 2010, p. 38). - It applies scientific methods of primary investigation to review the literature (Athanasiou et al, 2010, p. 38). - It is an intermediate approach that draws from narrative reviews' and critical evaluation's merits (Abrami, Cohen and d'Apollonia, 1988). - It specifies the period in which the literature was selected and the manner in which the information was analysed and synthesised (Parahoo, 2006).	criteria probably lead to fewer sources selected which, subsequently, affects the generalisability of findings (p. 171). - Closely parallel to Kennedy's postulation, Meline, (2006, p. 22) posits that while a wider inclusion range makes an analysis and synthesis of selected studies problematic (over-inclusion threat), limiting inclusion criteria often hamper the clinical use of results (over-exclusion threat).

Further to the significance of systematic form of literature review, Coughlan et al (2007) posit that it can also assist the researcher to develop a theoretical model. The form of literature review presented in this study dominantly borrowed characteristics of traditional (narrative) review and this chapter is thus called 'literature: a traditional (narrative) review'. The narrative form of literature review has been dominantly applied in this study to analyse and synthesise literature on student dropout and student support themes such as, student dropout in the context of distance education, factors that lead to dropout incidences, challenges, which institutions of higher learning encounter when executing support programmes, preventive measures put into place by higher education institutions to address the attrition concern, and methods with which higher education institutions use to measure effectiveness of student support intervention programmes.

The aim of this research is to investigate student dropout in open and distance learning environment. To achieve that aim, a narrative review has been chosen as a lens to guide the process of reviewing the literature. It enables the researcher to develop a theoretical framework (Cronin et al, 2008); Athanasiou, 2010, p. 38), which makes it most suitable for this study since the ultimate intent is to quest for responsive student support model. Furthermore, the narrative review has been selected for the study it allows the researcher to exercise flexibility to excerpt and synthesise only information deemed relevant and crucial (Athanasiou, 2010, p. 38) irrespective of whether the source is a research or a non-research product.

Less so, this study also applied the desktop form of literature review to analyse and synthesise the practices which higher education institutions are involved into to respond to the growing concern on student dropout which has deeply attacked the higher education terrain. The decision for an option of a 'narrative review' have been informed by an all-encompassing purpose described in the literature and the specific purpose for which this study wants to achieve. This chapter is important because of the following reasons:

- Firstly, to show the significance of conducting this research,
- Secondly, to expand the background to the study from which the research gap emerges,
- Thirdly, to show new trends in the body of knowledge, and

- Fourthly, to critique and synthesises the contemporary literature.

To achieve these broad objectives, the literature review chapter focused its discussion on three important research issues – namely, the theoretical approach which the study employs, the 'student dropout' and the 'student support'. The chapter critically discusses the adopted theoretical lenses that inform this study in terms of their philosophical epistemologies and beliefs that provide grounds on which they are based. It rationalises the choice made for the application of the deficit theory and the theory of transactional distance. Of an importance in the discussion of theoretical frameworks applied in this study are aspects, such as their origins, elements, strengths and shortcomings. The reasons for including them in the study were to understand their documented evolutions, to reveal their advantages and drawbacks, and philosophical views they theorise. In the next part of the scope of this chapter, the focus is on student dropout. This section is divided into subparts that embrace discussions on the following various issues:

- Theoretical and operational definitions of the concept 'student dropout' as posited in the identified literature,
- Student dropout in the context of distance education,
- Some root causes of student dropout,
- Support interventions that are used within the scope of higher education to address the student dropout challenges, and
- Students and staff's experiences presented in the literature

Following the discussion on the concept 'student dropout' itself, the definition that is operationalised for the purpose of this study has been developed. These discussions were deemed salient for building a theoretical foundation for the study and their inclusion were guided by the research questions posed in this study. Since this study is set within the distance education environment, it was significant to review literatures that make assertions on dropout of students who are learning through distance education institutions. This was done to understand challenges, which students who are involved in distance education encounter in the learning process that result in some of them discontinuing learning.

Equally important to receive an attention in this chapter and the whole study in particular, was the discussion of support interventions, which higher education institutions use to respond to an all-pervading student dropout concern. The rationale behind its inclusion as part of the discussion in this chapter was to determine and reveal documented forms of student support services practised within the global higher education sector.

Another major area of focus of this literature review chapter was the student support. The discussion on this aspect was vitally pertinent to understand prevalent conventional and contemporary forms of student support services and their unresponsiveness to the problem. The chapter begins the discussion on student support with variant conceptual and empirical descriptions of the construct 'student support' found in the related studies. The purpose for including the viewpoints on student support was to reveal distinct understandings of theorists who have researched the same phenomenon and to formulate an appropriate definition to be operationalised in this study. The ensued section of student support dealt with types of support interventions and what they entailed. Since this study wants to contribute to theory generation by developing a student support model for postgraduate students, types of support services offered in higher education remains pivotal. To understand the way in which higher education institutions communicate their support intervention programmes to students, this chapter discusses various forms of institution-student communications on support services offered. Moreover, the chapter discusses various forms of practices adopted by HEIs to support their students. The purpose of the section was to expose ways by which HEIs interventions can best be performed. Two forms of reviews were used to achieve that purpose. These were, to a lesser extent, desktop review which, in addition to the predominantly used narrative review, helped to identify existing practices.

Although the study dominantly uses contemporary sources to support arguments raised in certain parts of discussion, to a lesser extent, it also included historical sources. This decision was informed by what Cronin, Ryan and Coughlan (2008) identified as scarcity of influential studies that remained suitable to the contemporary practices and shortage of research.

The purpose of this chapter on literature review was to analyse and synthesise information inherent in the preceding studies, which looked into dropout occurrences in higher education landscape. This undertaking was undertaken to find important issues, such as findings and existing research gap; to expound contestations; and to locate the arguments of this study within the body of knowledge in the field. To achieve that purpose, the study applied Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method to analyse and integrate significant assertions made in the multi-vocal literature. Although it is chosen to guide the review process of this study, it has some drawbacks which subsume that it is the product of non-scientific method rather than empirical; it relies heavily on contributions and efforts of theorists who wrote about qualitative methodology; it is based on case studies and it pays no attention to the impending findings (Ogawa and Malen, 1991, p. 265). In this study, the model was appropriate because it increases rigour in the review of the related literature. The method entails eight steps, which are discussed hereunder as follows:

2.2 LITERATURE DESIGN: OGAWA AND MALEN'S (1991) METHOD

In this section, the study explains each step of Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method of reviewing a literature with Illustrations on how the review of literature in each step is linked to their philosophical principles. To demonstrate how it was applied, tabled information and model are also given in some steps to show the procedure which has been followed in this study.

2.2.1 Step 1: Development of an audit trail

At the onset of the review process, an audit trail is created and very step that an investigator goes through is documented in order to clearly show evidences that validate each of findings, where such evidences can be accessed.

2.2.2 Step 2: Definition of the focus of literature review

In this phase of an analysis and synthesis of information, all the core concepts of the review are explicitly defined, which help to set standards for inclusion and exclusion of, for instance, cases or information or participants. Step 2 of Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method of reviewing a literature has been applied in this study. An indication of its adoption and application is tabled below:

Table 2.2: Evidence of an important concept defined in the literature review of this study

Examples of definitions of key 'student dropout' concept		
Concept	**Murray's (2014) theoretical definitions**	**Operational definition**
Student dropout	Involuntary dropout as the termination of students' registration on the ground of having not achieved satisfactory results or met the standard of the university; or Voluntary dropout as students who transferred their studies into other higher education institutions to continue studying regardless of having achieved satisfactory academic results. Voluntary dropout also refers to student's decision to cease studying prior to being excluded by the institution on the grounds of having academically performed below the required standard.	In this study 'dropout' refers to a student who did not register a yearly module in the following year; or was absent from an examination; or never submitted an examination portfolio; or have deregistered the module for whatever reason; or have transferred studies to another higher education institution for any reason.

2.2.3 Step 3: Exploration of pertinent literature

The focus of the literature review in this stage was to search for and use appropriate information for the study, disregarding whether the material sources are academic (such as academic articles, books) or not (examples include newspaper articles, magazine articles and minutes of meetings). As Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Ormston (2013, p. 342) posit, qualitative studies, use, in addition to specific data yielded for a

particular research, pre-prevalent data such as informally published materials, press coverage and diaries. The emphasis is on the information itself rather than sources from which they come. A case in point to this claim is that this study also review non-research sources such as Daily Maverick (2015) and Eyewitness News (2015) and Creamer Media's Engineering News (2016) to determine to substantiate discussion on political strife as a cause of dropout.

2.2.4 Step 4: Classification of the documents

In this phase of the literature review process, the relevant information is grouped according to their types and what they epitomise. At this juncture, the review of the literature was guided by the research objectives and research questions which define the types of information required from the existing literature in order to address the research problem that has prompted this investigation. Those research objectives or research questions were phrased into statements or themes that served as lenses to generate specific information. The ensuing table illustrates the types of information generated and what they represent as posited by in this step 4 of Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method of reviewing a literature.

Table 2.3: Evidence of the types of information reviewed and what they represent

Examples of themes and the types of information they seek from the literature			
Participants	**Foci**	**Themes (types of information)**	**Representation**
Students	Student dropout	Student dropout in an ODL environment	Root causes of dropout incidence Students' experiences of dropout in an ODL environment
Staff	Student support	Support framework	Intervention programmes for lower-postgraduate students The structure of support programmes Perceived reasons for unresponsiveness of certain intervention programmes Methods used to identify students needing support intervention

2.2.5 Step 5: Development of summary databases

This firth review stage entails the development of schemes for coding and attempts to compress all essential information in the relevant documents to form narrative summaries.

2.2.6 Step 6: Identification of constructs and hypothesised causal relationships

The purpose step 6 of the review process is to enrich the understanding of the aspect of interest, which, in this study is 'dropout'. Step 6 helps to identify important themes that have emerged when the review of the documents was carried out and to make assumptions of the relationships between the themes.
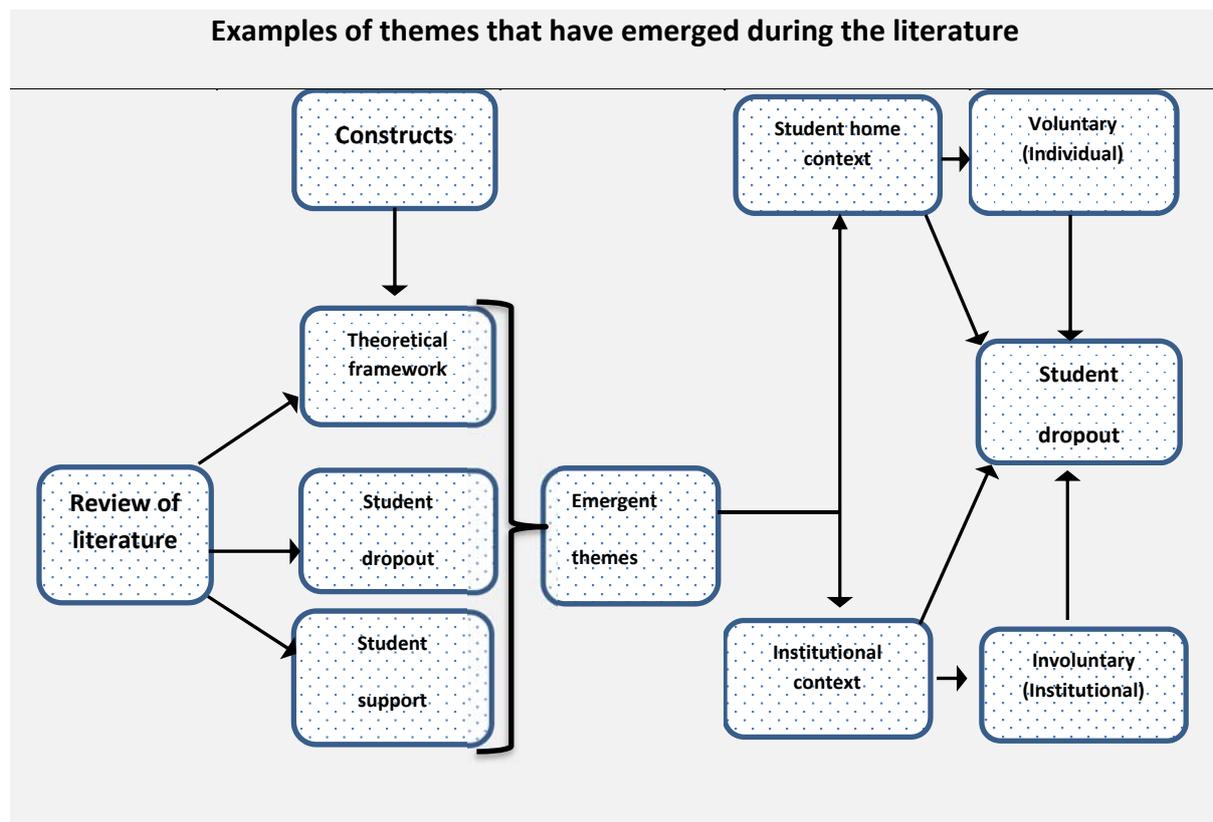
Figure 2.2 A review model to explain emergent concepts (theoretical framework, dropout, and student support) hypothesised linkages between themes
Source: Researcher's own model based on a literature review

Identification of concepts and assumed causal linkages in this literature review are explicated by means of a model which I have developed from an analysis and synthesis of literature review carried out. The purpose of this model is to represent, schematically, how the sixth step of Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method to review literature have been applied in this study. The theoretical framework, student dropout and support are the key concepts, which I have identified to build a foundation upon which it is based. Drawing from the major themes that emerged during the review, the model explicates that the incidence of dropout occurs due to unfavourable home environments of students as theorised by Bean and Metzner (1985) in their conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate. Unfavourable home context can best be exemplified by student's poor financial background (Vignoles and Powdthavee (2009, p. 1) and the unconducive institutional system. It also shows that student dropout is a voluntary or involuntary decision (Murray, 2014). Voluntary student dropout is exemplified by what Reisel and Brekke (2009, p. 693) define as the act of transferring educational programme to study at another higher education institution. The involuntary occurs, for example, when the institution disallows students who academically performed below the regulated policy standards of those institutions. Thus, this literature review satisfied the requirement of step 6 of Ogawa and Malen's (1991) method of reviewing a literature. With regard to the need to identify the hypothesised causal relationships between themes, if the students' home and institutional contexts are important and must be made conducive for learning. Thus, student success is influenced by many varied variables that reside in either a student's home or an institutional context.

2.2.7 Step 7: Quest for divergent findings and contending positions

The purpose of this stage of the information analysis and integration is to find contradicting findings and competing viewpoints in the literature of proponents who investigated the phenomenon of interest. This was successfully applied in this literature chapter and in the whole study in particular. Assertions that exemplify divergent findings prevalent in review of literature include Bean and Metzner's (1985)'s and Breier's (2010) findings on student dropout:

Table 2.4: Evidence of prevalent contrary findings and rival postulations as applied in this study

Examples of contrary findings

Focus	Bean and Metzner's (1985) finding on dropout	Breier's (2010) finding on dropout
Academic reason	In their conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduates, Bean and Metzner's (1985) looked into the linkages between the academic variables and environmental variables and found that environmental factors are highly significant than academic reasons, predicting that even though the academic factors can be favourable, if environmental factors are bad, students will drop out from the course of the programme.	Contrary to that finding, Breier (2010, p. 662) reported, in the study that was focused on the student dropout in the University of Western Cape, that 18% of 159 students dropped out because of having achieved poor academic results.
Financial reason	Murray (2014, p. 1) theorized that, amongst other factors, financial backgrounds potentially have a causative effects on student dropout.	Cunha, Heckman, Lochner and Masterov (2006) reported that the dropout or inability to access higher education can be minimally attributed to family backgrounds, such as poor financial backgrounds

An example of rival interpretations

Focus	Payne (2009)	Valencia (2010)
The concept 'deficit theory'	Payne (2009, p. 2) claims that the name 'deficit theory' is just a theoretical concept that exists at an abstract level.	Valencia (2010) rebuts by asserting that the deficit framework has great utility in comprehending the bond between theory and practice.

Assertions that exemplify rival interpretations which are prevalent in the review of literature include Payne (2009) and Valencia (2010)'s interpretations of the construct 'deficit theory'.

2.2.8 Step 8: Use key informants or relevant colleagues to verify findings

In this final step, the purpose becomes to seek for credibility of findings. To realise this end, the reviewer should agree with colleagues, informants or both of them to peruse, critically, the report draft. As this study is for a doctoral educational programme, this step has been done by sending the draft for supervisors' perusal and comments.

There is an ample of studies on student dropout concern (for example, Astin, 1971; Tinto, 1975; Willging and Johnson, 2004; Casely-Powell, 2004; Levy, 2007; Tello, 2007; Jacklin and Riche, 2009; Batram, 2009; Reisel and Brekke, 2009; Gobbens, Luijkx and Schols, 2010 and Forbes-Merwett, 2013) and as a result, this study wants to analyse and synthesise the growing body of research on the aspect to develop a student support model for lower-postgraduates. The ensuing section discusses the deficit theory and transactional distance theory that are integrated into this study to study and explain student dropout in order to be able to develop a support framework that will address the problem for lower-postgraduate students studying through distance education.

2.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

While the preceding section of this chapter identified and expounded three forms of interviews – that is, the narrative or traditional literature review, critical evaluation and systematic literature review. This section discusses the theoretical frameworks, which the study identified and found them appropriate for studying a dropout phenomenon in higher education. It substantiates the choice for applying them into this study.

Higher education terrain is occupied by and proliferated with complex issues to address. Amongst these issues is the aspect of student support that had been widely acknowledged as crucial. To ensure an effective provision of support services in the higher education sector, institutions develop strategies with which to address the

academic and social needs as well as the expectations of students. A huge number of universities across the globe do not notice the sophisticated and complexity of learning to learn at university and that support measures should go beyond ad hoc interventions (Wingate, 2007, p. 392).

This study is anchored in inductive approach to investigate student dropout in order to develop a student support model for lower-postgraduates who are enrolled in open and distance education. It uses the University of South Africa's advanced communication research that is taught at an honours level as a case in point. This section of the literature focuses on the conceptual framework, discussing the current status of student attrition as well as theoretical lens that have been employed to guide this study – namely, the 'deficit theory' and Moore's (1993) 'theory of transactional distance'. In the Conkin's (2002) description of a theoretical framework, it is defined as a conceptual model that serves as a guide to investigate the identified and existing research problem. In research, theory is applied to serve a particular purpose. Parahoo (2014, p. 144) asserts that the purpose of applying a theory in qualitative research is three-fold, namely:

- to help the researcher develop a conceptual framework or model,
- to support the researcher's choice for the research design or paradigm, and
- to analyse and interpreted data garnered.

In addition to the mentioned objectives, the conceptual framework can be used to provide descriptions of the ontological phenomenon studied (Sandelowski, 2010). For the purpose of this study, an amalgamation of deficit theory and the theory of transactional distance are adopted to provide descriptive accounts of the phenomenon, analyse collected data on student 'dropout' and 'support' and to make sense of them in order to develop an all-encompassing student support model for students who are at the lower-postgraduate level (honours). Although some studies do not apply any theoretical lens to investigate the aspect under research, theories provide a useful foundation on which the study can be based through empirical observation (Coughlan, Cronin and Ryan, 2007, p. 660). Theories are primary to investigations of complex issues that make it possible to predict generalisations (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008, p. 6). Nevertheless, even the pioneering theories are without detractors and their generation are by no means simple practices. Reflective of this

critical postulation, Parahoo (2014, p. 141) offers a criticism that, over the past decades, an overreliance and overemphasis on testing certain prevailing theories and models which were grounded on pseudoscience or speculation were decimally failing to explicate objective accounts and has hindered theory development as a result. In spite of criticisms, exemplified by Parahoo's (2014, p. 141) assertion, literature points out that theory development is fundamental and possible in qualitative research that wants to apply systematic methods (Layder, 1993).

The necessity for ensuring student support in higher education introduced the use of theoretical lens that entail procedures and strategies to give support to deserving and needy students. The needs of students vary according to contexts relating to, among other things, their differing family backgrounds, frame of references, financial backgrounds, academic backgrounds, age, gender, abilities and educational levels. Distinctive set of historical backgrounds enthused higher education institutions to develop a range of student support models to address specific students' needs for different levels of study.

It is central in this study to explore reasons accounting for student dropout in order to determine whether they are located within the students' home environments as per the philosophy held by the deficit theory; or institutional contexts that seem to have less emphasis in the deficit thinking. Since this study's context is distance education, exemplified by University of South Africa as a case study, it is equally imperative to probe challenges, which students encounter while learning through distance education institutions. Findings arrived at through these blended theoretical frameworks will enhance an understanding of root causes of student dropout and suggest methods to address the problem. It is envisioned that such findings will enable the development of an integrated student support model that will help address dropout challenges for lower-postgraduates who are involved in distance learning. It is, however, noted that several student support models are already proposed in the literature and focused centrally on undergraduates, particularly first-year level (for example, Ramsay, Jones and Barker, 2007; Wingate, 2007; Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, 2007). Examples of such models include *"a framework for student support for learning"* (Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis and Lopez 2011) and *"a framework for the coherent and comprehensive*

development of learning", yet there has been minimal attention centred on lower-postgraduate level. The study wanted to fill this void.

Despite an array of theories which were developed to guide research on 'educational dropout (for instance, ecological theory, the systemic inequality model, independent theory, interactionist theory, Murray's (2014) competing risks methodology and the communication process model), this study identified some of typical theories evident in the literature which can be adopted to study the dropout phenomenon – namely, Valencia's (2015) Three-M Model, John U. Ogbu's Cultural-ecological model, Deficit theory and Moore's (1993) transactional theory. Other theories which have applied as frames to study dropout involve, among others, an ecological theory in Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux and Trustcott (2016), an attribution theory in Herman (2011) and Kember's longitudinal-process model of dropout from distance education in De Hart and Venter (2013). In the Valencia's (2015) assertion, the concept 'achievement gap' refers to indicators of academic performance of the mean group variance between students of white communities and those from black communities. Such performance indicators, as epitomised by Valencia (2015, p. xiii), incorporate programme completion ratio and achievement examination performance.

This study identified and briefly expounds the following related models, although only the deficit theory and transactional distance theory are coalesced to investigate student dropout concern in distance education:

2.3.1 Explanatory Sociological Model of the Dropout Process

Spady's (1970) Explanatory Sociological Model of the Dropout Process that explicate student dropout as a conditional problem. Spady established a model that became influential and is grounded on socialisation and it encompasses, inter alia, friendship support and communal values to study and describe dropout processes. Two conditions that help to expound student dropout in the context of higher education are inherent in this model – specifically, are 'lack of moral consciousness (normative congruence)' and 'lack of collective affiliation (friendship support)'. The former argues that the attrition process embeds an interaction between students and their learning environments within which their variables, such as cognitive abilities, behavioural attitudes and temperaments become conspicuous to expectations, impetuses and

demands from, among other sources, peers, members of the faculties and administrators (p. 79). The model theorises that if both the 'normative congruence' and 'friendship support' are not factors in the social assimilation, the probability to drop out of educational programmes increases. It also defines dropout as an involuntary outcome that occurs when academic institution disallows students who academically perform below a specific regulated standard to enrol for the programme again. In the dogmas which the model posits, this can occur irrespective of students being highly integrated into the environmental system or highly satisfied. Although Spady's (1970) Explanatory Sociological Model of the Dropout Process is somewhat comprehensive, it carries potential to draw criticism. For instance, its insertion of involuntary dropout process is closely parallel to Tinto's (1975, p. 85-90) general criticism of related theories in which he argues that some definitions of 'dropout' lacked attention during the formulation stages, confusing 'dropout' with what Reisel and Brekke (2009, p. 693) calls 'stop-out'.

Another popular traditional theory that became the fundamental foundation upon which many other theories were developed [for example, Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance] occur is Tinto's (1975) interactional theory. While the previous discussion and this one dealt respectively with the deficit theory and Explanatory Sociological Model of the Dropout Process, the next section focuses on interactional theory.

2.3.2 Interactionist theory

Tinto (1975) generated an interactionalist theory that became somewhat congruent to the Spady's (1970) underpinning philosophical dimensions, which were discussed in the former section. This section deals with the interactional theory.

Drawing minimally from economic notion of cost-benefit analysis as well as Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide, Tinto founded an institutionally-focused model which is based on socialisation that subsumed, amongst other phenomena, friendship support and shared values to explain the nature of student dropout processes from higher education institutions as opposed to the ones occurring within the system (p. 91). Durkheim's theory is rooted on the hypothesis that the more integrated individuals are into the society, the more they are probable to survive; the lesser integrated they

become, the more likelihood for suicide to take place. Tinto's purpose of developing an interactionalist stemmed from the need to explain interaction that occurs between individual students and higher education institutions, which eventually accounts for dropout of various students. This was achieved by reviewing existing literature and synthesising it. For this reason, Tinto's (1975) model is potentially discreditable for having been built by merely reviewing related studies (p. 90-91) rather than through an empirical research. Comparable to the Spady's model, although openly aligned with Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto's interactionist theory asserts that the higher individual students' integration into the academic social system, the more likelihood they persevere to study; the less integrated they are, the greater the chance to drop out from higher education institutions. Criticising Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto (p. 92) asserted that it is of no importance in the development of the theory on dropout that is aimed at expounding how different students adopt behaviours that consequently result in dropouts from higher education institutions. He further decried Durkheim's theory (1961), arguing that it only descriptively identifies certain conditions within which an array of attrition exists.

Whereas there are varied models and theories in the documented literature which have been developed over the past decades to provide explanations about student dropout and its processes, this study identified and discussed some of them, and the conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate students, is part. The forthcoming section focuses on the conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate students. The purpose of this section is to enhance, further, an understanding of the nature and processes students go through that lead them to dropping out from higher education institutions. As in cases of other models and theories identified and discussed, this section will dwell into the philosophical viewpoints posited by the model and briefly provides critiques directed to the model.

2.3.3 Conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate

Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition that is based on two compensatory effects – namely, effects of environmental and academic factors and those of psychological and academic achievements on student dropout. It argues that whereas a high score of academic

performance determines student retention when accompanied by encouraging psychological effects, non-academic variables compensate for low academic achievement rate. Measured in terms of their relationships, the model predicts that students tend to drop out when environmental and academic factors are unfavourable. It further theorises that environmental factors are highly significant than academic reasons, predicting that even though the academic factors can be favourable, if environmental factors are bad, students will still dropout. On the compensatory effect between the psychological and academic outcomes, the model postulates that students who perform poorly in both are likely to drop out than those whose scores are high in both types of achievements. Over again, the model considers academic support and outcomes as of less importance to student retention. It portends that students are more likely to drop out if they are highly stressed, or have low satisfaction level, low utility level, less motivated to study. It also postulates that dropout is the result of lack of social and academic integration that students experience. The latter makes the model congruent to the philosophical views underpinning Tinto's (1975) theory. The forthcoming section is based on the popular theory of transactional distance and provides highlights of philosophy held by the theory of transactional distance.

2.3.4 Three-M Model

Valencia's (2015) Three-M Model which, in which he theorises (t p. xvii) that in order to stimulate performances of low socioeconomically deprived students of colour (black), a vigorous discourse of complications and resolutions at microlevel, macrolevel and mesolevel is essential.

2.3.5 Cultural-ecological model (CEM)

John U. Ogbu's Cultural-ecological model (CEM) that helps researchers to study and expound the performance/success differences among racial groups. It guides researchers that for them to investigate factors that give rise to the students' failure or dropout, they must first understand the typology of minorities such as, 'autonomous', 'immigrant' and 'involuntary' (Valencia, 2015, p. xv). He argued that members of groups with 'autonomy' value an education high and tend to perform academically well

(Valencia, 2015). Ogbu's theory further posits that students who are part of 'immigrant' group do not have adaptation problems and failure, but encounter problems relating to adjustment, acculturation and assimilation. The model claims that those who are members of an 'involuntary' group perform below the regulated standard and are unable to adjust with the academic demands (Valencia, 2015, p. xv).

2.3.6 Attribution-based theory of motivation

Another popular theory that has widely used in studies that sought to explicate student attrition is the attribution theory. The term attribution refers to an explanation of a particular factor that people assert to describe events that occurs to and around them (Weiner, 2010; Herman, 2011, p. 42). There are three aspects of this theory which researcher can examine attributes (Weiner, 2010). The first aspect is 'stability' that is based on the likelihood of factors to change of a particular timeframe. The stability dimension encompasses competencies and capabilities. The second aspect of the attribution theory is the 'locus of causality' that is oriented towards whether attributions are from within (e.g. competency level, abilities and efforts) or from outside (e.g. lucks). The final dimension is 'controllability' and it measures the perceptions of individuals to determine whether such individual people are able to control the cause or event.

In this study, a combination of deficit and transactional distance theories is used to serve a guide in the process to undertake this research. The ensuing explanatory section provides grounds on why the study adopts these two theoretical approaches. This is in congruence with Parahoo's (2014, p. 146) avowal that the option for theories must be justified science there are several theories to investigate the topic. The detailed reviews of these theories as discussed in the plethora of literature are provided later under the banner of this chapter – 'literature: a traditional (narrative) review'.

2.4 GROUNDS FOR THE INTEGRATED THEORETICAL APPROACH: DEFICIT AND TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE THEORIES

All these highlighted theoretical lenses are equally significant to investigate reasons for underachievement and students' failure. However, this study employs the amalgamation of deficit theory and Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance to study student dropout in distance education environments. The decision to integrate the two adopted models stems from the need to draw from their strengths and to study the problem (student dropout) from a wider and proper theoretical zone. Moreover, it is contemplated that an integration of these distinct theories will enhance an understanding of the problem and as a result a more trustworthy and an all-encompassing framework to explain student dropout and suggest better practices to curtail the problem can be developed. The deficit theory is part of the integrated paradigm to study deficiencies of students of colour (black students) that tend to negatively affect their academic performance level, resulting in some failing or dropping out of the enrolled programme or studying at all. The second theoretical approach, Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory, is subsumed to explore how distance for students learning through distance education affects their studies. The ensuing discussion deals with the deficit theory in detail.

2.5 DEFICIT THEORY AND TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE THEORY

This study has been informed by the conventional deficit and transactional theory of distance. Student support research is a sophisticated and complicated class of research with multiple descriptions and insights about what it is, and how it can be better practised in higher education system. Because the demarcation of this study, in relation to the education level, is on higher education terrain that comprises traditional and open distance learning (ODL) institutions, two theories will inform the study and serve as theoretical points of departure and references. The first theoretical framework is the deficit model that guides the discussion on traditional higher education institutions that rely heavily on face-to-face teaching and learning pedagogies.

The second theoretical point of departure is the transactional theory of distance that presents arguments within the borders of open distance learning territory that, unlike the traditional pedagogical modes, uses blended learning that involves the modern and traditional delivery modes.

2.5.1 Deficit theory

Deficit theory puts blame to victims (students) of colour, positing that they possess traits that inhibit them from performing up to the regulated standard like their whites' counterpart. It is centred on students' home context rather than the school context and theorizes that students' motivation to study is low, they have low cognitive capacity, they come from communities, cultures and families that do not value education or socialise them in a manner that will enable them to perform better and succeed academically (Valencia, 1997; 2011; 2012; 2015).

The deficit theory is a well propagated theory that generally provides a lens to analyse the damage, weaknesses and shortcomings and it has been widely used in the variety of fields of study such as language (Ramos-Sanchez, 2004; Johnston and Morrison, 2007) social work (Roer-Strier, Strier, Este, Shimoni and Clark, 2005), psychology (McLean, Stuart, Coltheart and Castles, 2011) and education. In the field of education, the deficit theory provides a theoretical framework for the analysis of the student needs by focusing on their problems and challenges, which result from their differing backgrounds (Bartram, 2013, p. 7). Given the South African context that is characterised by cultural diversity and ethnic groups, students studying through institutions of higher learning come from different backgrounds such as environmental and family living conditions, financial, customs and norms, race, gender, age, and life style. Owing to these differences in the backgrounds, students in higher education institutions react differently to educational environments. As a result, it becomes vital for higher education institutions to support them based on their differing needs to enable them to, successfully, adjust with the higher education demands so that they can accomplish their educational goals. The deficit theory of education is important for this study because it provides a framework to discuss student support in the context of distance education, e-learning, and face-to-face educational landscapes.

2.5.1.1 Origin of deficit theory (thinking)

The deficit theory has its origin in racism (Valencia, 1993, p. 12 and 360) and belief that people do not possess other personal dispositions and qualities that can clarify inequality in different sectors of the society (Valencia, 2015, p. 12). Advances in the academic discourses around the notion of 'deficit theory' introduced various concepts that are used interchangeably to refer to social; economic; educational; cultural (Edwards, 1967); linguistic and economic (Eller, 1989, p. 670) difficulties that are caused by victims themselves. Subsequently, descriptions on the 'deficit school of thought' were later labelled as a 'deficit thinking' (Valencia, 2012), 'deficit model' (Vaencia, 1993; Swadener, 1995) 'deficit theory' (Nieto, 1992), 'deficiency approach' (Boykin, 1986) and more recently 'learning disability' (Mastropieri et al, 2007). In this study, only the terms 'deficit theory', deficit school of thought and the 'deficit model' are, dominantly used interchangeably. Although, it is complex to state when exactly the concept 'deficit' was used in the field of education, literature contains various competing attempts to trace this ubiquitous phenomenon. While some views tend to support each other's historical position, others take a complete opposite direction. Menchaca (1997) argued that when it is put parallel with other theories or models that were developed to explicate failure (dropout), the deficit theory is oldest of them all. Valencia (2012) points out that the evolution of the deficit theory is epitomised by the way in which students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds were discriminated against by the variety of policies in education, both at micro – and macro levels.

While some theorists claim that there is no clear and precise period to which the term 'deficit thinking' can be attributed and traced and that it is considered elusive to define (Valencia, 2012, p. x), ample corpus of literature covers assertions that tend to disrepute such claims. For example, in her study entitled *"Johnny can't talk, either: the perpetuation of the deficit theory in classrooms"*, Eller (1989) and (Valencia, 2010, p. xiv) posited that the deficit theory was developed in 1960s to study the amounting failure rate of learners in schools, claiming that they were suffering from 'linguistic deprivation'. Eller (1989) further argued that the deficit theory assumes that learners have constraints on their mental capacity and, consequently they cannot properly read and speak. With Eller's evolution of deficit theory, it can be said that the deficit theory emerged in the field of language. Nonetheless, as several contestations on the history

of deficit theory exist in the body of literature, it becomes incongruous to affirm that the deficit theory first emerged as part of theoretical lens in the field of language, primarily because a plethora of literature suggest contradicting fields of study. For example, Black (1965) and Edwards (1967) view the deficit theory from the cultural perspective as opposed to Eller (1989) who views it from the linguistic point of view and Mastropieri et al, (2007) who talks about 'learning disability' from an educational perspective. Common to views offered in literature regarding an era in which the deficit theory was developed is that many of proponents of this school of thought claim that its emergence was in 1960s. It is confirmed in the literature that several studies between 1960s and 1990s seem to have laid down the basis for the discourse on 'deficit theory' which resulted in socially constructed concepts, such as 'cultural deprivation' (Edwards, 1967; Menchana, 1997), 'biological inferiority' (Menchana, 1997); 'at-risk' (Ronda and Valencia, 1994) and 'culturally disadvantaged child' (Black, 1965). Other historical accounts relating to the emergence of the deficit theory assert that it has existed very prior to 1960s. In the observation made by Menchaca (in Valencia, 1997), the deficit thinking is an American ideology which has started during the early racist debates in 1620s with the influx of English tourists in North America and it became apparent later in 1730. As a formal theoretical perspective, theorists have reconfigured deficit-related thoughts into what became popularly known as the 'deficit theory' in 1960s. It is well-documented in the literature that since its first appearance and acceptance as a model in the educational space, the deficit theory has been used as a framework to provide an account of economically disadvantaged learners' schooling failure, such as dropping out of school and performing below the required standard (Valencia, 2012, p. xi).

2.5.1.2 Components of the deficit theory of education

The space of deficit theory of education in the promulgated literature is chock-full with writings on students' lack of cognitive learning abilities and their failures to achieve learning goals, but studies that identify and expound the blocks on which the theory is build are scrubby. One popular theorist who recently identified the elements of the much educationally entrenched deficit theory is Richard Valencia. This guru theorises that the deficit theory is constituted by six characteristics (Valencia, 2012) that are viewed and expounded, in this study as components – namely, blaming the victim,

temporal changes, oppression, heterodoxy, pseudoscience and educability. The ensuing section provides explanations of these six components.

Blaming the victim

The axiom 'blaming the victim' was originally invented by William Ryan during an epoch when the theoretical discourse on the deficit theory was at its pinnacle in 1971 as a title of the book which was destined to respond to deficit thoughts and policies developed around 1960s (Valencia, 2012, p. 3). Extending the remit of deficit theory to comprise other areas of social sciences, such as health care and race relations, William Ryan blamed victims for their dire situations (for instance, poverty, being illiterate, and untreated diseases), arguing that they have negative attitudes towards an education; that they are ignorant to their health status and that they do not quest for information about their health (Ryan, 1971, p. 7-8) and must therefore be persuaded to change their attitudes and behaviours (p. 8). Ryan's (1971) assertion closely parallel that of Vaughan (1968) who argued that students drop out of their studies because they either have intellectual or psychological deficiencies. Both Ryan and Vaughan put blame to students for their discontinued learning. Deficit theory is thus founded on a blame directed to students who academically perform below the required standard (Valencia, 2010). To assist deficient students, programmes, over the decades, have been developed and implemented in academic learning institutions well as governments. In the context of health care, for instance, Ryan (p. 7) pointed out that support intervention programmes, which are aimed at attempting to stimulate victims to improve their competencies and abilities and to take health-related issues mindful, are put into place. Examined within the arena of education, deficit theorists postulate that students' failure in their studies or dropping out of enrolled courses (or programmes or academic institutions) is a result of them being ignorant and unwilling to study hard. Henceforth the component – blaming the victim, appropriately position the deficit theory flourishing into this study to serve as a theoretical lens in order to explore and explicate student dropout occurrence in higher education terrain, particularly its root causes and support interventions offered to students to enhance their academic performance level.

Temporal changes

Temporal changes refer to educational interventions for socio-economically deprived students (Valencia, 2012, p. 8) who are considered to have certain characteristics that sow the academic improvement. Such interventions discriminate and segregate students based on their ethnic group and race. Giving an example of a temporal change, Valencia (2012) shared that the economically disadvantaged Mexican students were segregated because they were considered to have linguistic problems and would, as a result, negatively affect the learning progression of students from white communities.

Oppression as a form of deficit theory

Oppression has been a sensitive topic of increasing concern all over the globe. For decades there had been many attempts (in a form of government policies and campaign programmes) (Kuper, 1954, p. 19) to suggest how states can inhibit different forms of oppression of certain group of people by others based generally on their origins of births, skin colours and ethnic groups (Valencia, 2012). Theoretically, oppression has its roots in the work of great proponents of deficit school of thought, with Karl Mark serving as an epitome. Opposing the need to ensure people's rights and democratic government for certain ethnic group, Marx (1875) developed a deficit model that was based on the idea of corrupted bourgeois which posits that bourgeois must be commended (and are capable) to govern themselves. Within the territory of South Africa and across the world in particular, oppression was popularised and came to be widely known as an 'apartheid system of government' that was branded mostly by racial segregation and discrimination. Some forms of racial segregation, within the government of minority (apartheid), were even legalised. For instance, the Reservation of Separate Amenities, Act no. 49 of 1953 was enacted to oppress people from back community by imposing physical separation between them and whites. Within the scope of education, it was considered inappropriate for a black child to be mingled in the same class with whites and to receive the same quality of education, let alone the school. Bantu Education served the interests of white hegemony and parted schools for each South Africa's ethnic groups (namely, blacks, whites, coloured and Indians) forbidding black students from accessing quality of education as well as educational resources (African online digital library, African studies centre, Michigan state

University, Matrix and National endowment for the humanities, n.d). In this study, aimed at developing student support model for lower-postgraduate students who are pursuing their educational careers in open and distance institutions, the researcher argues that although students' deficiencies lead to poor performance, failure and student dropout, there are other varied complex factors that contribute to the current escalating dropout rate. This study recognises that several studies were undertaken to advance understandings of student dropout phenomenon, but many of authors (for example, Ramsay, Jones and Barker, 2007; Wingate, 2007; Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, 2007) put more attention on the first-year level of education and less so on the postgraduate level. Distinctive to the well-documented literature, the development of student support model to address student dropout concern for students who are at postgraduate level is the universe that this study wants to fill.

Pseudoscience

Deficit school of thought is a form of Pseudoscience which Blum (1978, p. 12) defines as a practice of fabricated inducement by means of scientific pretence - what Valencia (2010, p. 18) calls *"methodologically flawed ways"* and it is based on class and racial prejudice. Valencia (2012) asserts that pseudoscience form of deficit theory successfully induces policymakers and many theorists because it is falsely believed that it follows correct scientific methods. Pseudoscientists are biased towards economically disadvantaged students of colour.

Educability

Educability form of deficit thinking posits that black students who are coming from poor families find learning difficult because they have personal dispositions that limit their capability to learn. Instructors and several policy developers blame students for their failure and attribute academic achievements of the institution to themselves (Valencia, 2012, p. 8).

2.5.1.3 Philosophical stance of the deficit theory of education

Students' underachievement, failure and dropout are the central focal points around which the doctrine posited by the deficit theory is based. The deficit theory of education claims that low-income learners' failure in schools is attributed to shortcomings which

are socially related to familial shortfalls and internal weaknesses, such as low level or lack of motivation and low cognitive ability (Valencia, 2012, p. xi). Defining 'failure' amongst learners in schools, Valencia, (1997; 2011) argues that it refers to persistently, extensively and extremely poor academic results. Students' deficiencies or failures are also attributed to the degree to which the students are prepared prior to their admission at the upper educational level (for example, the transition from high school to tertiary level). It has been postulated in the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, p. 6) that basic education learners entering the post-school system (colleges and universities) are usually unprepared to study at higher education institutions. Mastropieri et al (2007) note that the deficit theory is grounded on the normative advancement of students whose families and communities have made them ready for schooling prior to their formal admission into the school. The deficit theory tries to provide an explanation of poor academic achievement of students coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds and students of colour, by blaming the students themselves for the academic underachievement or failure, their communities as well as their families (O'Chonnor, Horvat and Lewis, 2006; Irizarry, 2009; Valencia, 2011). Such deficits, as Valencia (2011, p. xv) posits, are caused by putative students' lack of motivation to study, presumed cognitive ability, behavioural and cultural beliefs embraced within their communities and families which do not value the essence of being educated, students' poor intellectual capacity as well as cultures that are dysfunctional. Congruent with the postulation made by Valencia (2011), Irizarry (2009) further observed that perspectives located within the deficit model of education believe that students of colour and those coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds for their victimization, viewing their difficulties in studies as caused by cultural features.

2.5.1.4 Critiques on the deficit theory of education

Over the past decades, the 'deficit school of thought' has been one of the influential theoretical lens to study student academic failure and dropout and it still remains well entrenched in the literature of the range of study fields and disciplines, (such as educational, social, cultural and health studies). Nevertheless, it is by no means a perfect theoretical model to explicate academic failure and dropout and been by no means without its detractors. It has accumulated critics as the debate around students' deficiencies in higher education studies advances to a greater level in academic world.

Despite a widely noted importance and pervasive influence of the deficit school of thought, current emerging thoughts (for example, Irizarry, 2009) condemn its dogmas. It blames students for failure or dropping out, and never recognise that they their prior knowledge or competencies. Students enrol into a programme with a particular unique set of capabilities and experiences (Moisey and Hughes, 2008, p. 421). It fails to consider the learning environments and structures that may, additionally, serve as factors that spur student failure (dropout), especially economically disadvantaged black students. Despite the fact that there are studies (for instance, Lovitts, 2001) that have found complementary results to the philosophical dogmas of the deficit theory that students are there ones to be blamed for their attrition, other studies have generated rival findings and contrary assertions. For example, Manik's (2014) inquiry, which was aimed at uncovering factors that lead to student's departure at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, attributed dropout to factors, which emanate from the institutional context, divulging reasons, such as lack of financial support, high academic amount of work, career derailment and non-availability of counselling. Another epitome of studies that attributed dropout to the institutional environment is the study done by Terentyev, Gruzdez and Gorbunova (2015) which examined student dropout accounts and its root causes and found that university administrative officers and professors are the major reasons for student dropout. In line with the corresponding views, Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya (2013, p. 1563) also examined attributes that result in student dropout and found that some lecturers', peers' and administrative officers behaviours and attitudes are prime dropout determinants. Moreover, and in contrary again, a study that investigated factors that lead to an examination-based dropout (absence) at an undergraduate course level to ascertain whether or not academic support lead to student absenteeism (dropout) from examination has divulged findings that are partly contrary to the philosophical views held by the conventional deficit theory. Findings revealed, among other reasons, that 50 % of students enrolled in ACN203S failed to write an examination because they felt less confident because oflecturer's lack of abilities to explain terms (62.5%), lecturer's failure to grant sufficient time for students to provide feedback, tutor's lack of full understanding of the source and learning materials delivered late (Tladi, 2013, p. 74, 76 and 80). These rival findings mark the weakness of the deficit theory that ignores the reasons for student dropout that emanate from the institutional environment.

The study that researched the perceptions of the faculty staff and doctoral students on dropout revealed that recent arguments assert that the deficit model's shortcomings rest upon its broad philosophical position that students fail or dropout because they possess some levels of disability that result in them experiencing deficiencies in their studies (Mastropieri et al, 2007). Lashing it out for its ignorance to take other attributing variables for students' failure and dropout cognisant, Mastropieri et al (2007) debate that, in addition to students' deficiencies to learn the skill being imparted, being absent from classes, poor classroom climate, peer pressure and instructors' inability to teach effectively can feasibly be some principal reasons that consequently result in poor academic performance, failure and dropout. It is marked in the literature (Marx, 1875; Valencia, 1997; Valencia, 2012; Mastropieri et al, 2007) that through the lens of deficit school of thought, students' deficiencies are linked to cultural and historical backgrounds, with students of colour, particularly blacks viewed unfit to study. This is because investigators' attention in their scales to measure student deficiencies has largely been centred on students' home environments as compared to their school environments (Mastropieri et al, 2007; Irizarry, 2009). An accentuation on the students' contexts leads to untrustworthy findings, unless the structures of academic institutions also receive an increased attention. Even the schools must be blamed (Valencia, 2002, p. 144). In a similar vein that supports blaming the school too, and contrary to the dogmas held within deficit school of thought that students' cultural deprivation and their unfamiliarity with cultural models associated with school achievement, Irizarry (2009) asserts that the reason for students' deficiencies is the result of oppression subjected to them by the institutions in which they study rather than their inability to learn; their poor family backgrounds; communities and their cultural belief system and assumptions. The use of racial labelling 'student of colour' to refer to black students and stereotyping them that they fail or dropout because of their personal prepositions that were shaped by, inter alia, their race, ethnicity and cultures have been disproved in the body of research. In line with this interpretation, Wood et al (2016, p. 1) studied causes of dropout and reported that race/ethnicity was not found to be a significant attrition attribution.

Studies conducted on learners' deficiencies from linguistic and cultural perspectives in early 1970s repudiated deficit theory, arguing that learners who are culturally deprived have high level of competency in language if they are allowed to use their

own vernacular in settings where they can exercise some level of control (Labov, 1985). It has been noted and invalidated in much of the proliferated accounts in the literature that the philosophical notion of blaming economically disadvantaged students for failing is misleading. The influence of parents and relatives on students' academic successes has also been discussed in the literature. Reflections indicate that parents can play an essential role in their children's studies, motivating them to do better (Valencia, 2002). Valencia (2002, p. 144) also articulated that the disparities in the families' educational history and the availability of time and educational resources determine the level of parental academic participation in students' education, irrespective of their racial difference. Whereas parents with poor educational backgrounds are less probable to actively participate in their children's studies, those who are of high academic graduates tend to be more active in their children' studies (Valencia, 2002, p. 144). Regarding the availability of time and pertinent educational resources (for example, books and calculators) for academic involvement, Valancia (2002), matched low-income and high income families and concluded that the economically disadvantaged parents lack time and resources as compared to those with strong economic stability.

An emerging body of literature is cognisant that the topic of students' deficiencies has, until recently, received little attention and is less advanced since in inception in the 1918s. Valencia (1997) argued that although the deficit theory of education has a remarkable long-standing history, the inexorable analysis of it in the popularised literature has been sparse, requiring a general and integrated analysis of the widespread deficit framework and its variations. Equally important to note is that there has been little devotion drawn to expound the aspect of student support, employing the deficit model of education. It is the lacuna which this study wanted to fill by developing a comprehensive student support model for lower-postgraduates studying through distance education institutions. Decrying the conventional deficit model of education, Valencia (1997) provides a critique that the model is grounded on pseudoscience, methodologically imperfect studies, chauvinism, classism, racism and ignorance. Since the deficit thinking model is pseudoscientific, theorising that students of colour have characteristics that prohibit them from achieving high academic results, Valencia (2015, p. xiii) advocates for rebuttal and suggests that plausible analysis of imbalances in education must be undertaken. Valencia (Valencia, 1997, p. 2) also

noted that social and behavioural scientists consider the deficit theory to lack a practical authentication, and that it is unjustifiably simplistic. More freshly, Valencia (2012, p. 6) observed certain flaws in the deficit theory:

- that studies on deficit theory of education are usually grounded on specious premises,
- that contending hypotheses for the results determined are overlooked,
- that data collection tools employed are unreliable, and
- that data collection tools are psychometrically weak.

Other critiques of the deficit theory examined the role of parents in their students' learning experiences. In spite of the positive impact of parental involvement on students' studies (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Antrop-Gonzalez, Vlez and Garrett, 2005), the deficit theory remains questionable for its failure to take into cognisance that many parents from poor socio-economic backgrounds and families of colour are unable to partake in their students' learning processes because oftheir locked-off traditional avenues (Irizarry, 2009).

Moreover, another critique in the growing body of literature (such as, Irizarry, 2009) focuses on the aspect of students' success that has received little attention in the deficit-centred discourse as opposed to students' failure. Such success-focused perspective asserts that the traditional deficit model ignores the success of students of colour who have similar assumed deficiencies and come from culturally deprived families and communities, but were able to complete their studies. This avowal becomes reflective that students to do come to schooling empty-minded even if they have similar backgrounds of cultural and linguistic deprivation as well as poor socio-economic status. Ingrained from this position, Yosso (2005) recommends that institutions of learning must recognise the cultural and social capital of disadvantaged communities and communities of colour. In addition to the dozens of critiques, Valencia (1997) detracts the deficit theory, arguing that its proponents tend to violate the scientific method that is grounded on objective accounts and empirical verification (Valencia, 2010, p. 12).

2.5.1.5 Strengths of deficit theory

Despite having received extensive condemnations, since its popularization in the early 1960s, the deficit theory has been a strong influential model on educational policies (Valencia, 2012, p. 2). Even though the theory is grounded on the hypothesis that students of colour instinctively comprise certain features that preclude them from academically performing in accordance with the set standards, it has been approved and found suitable for studying achievement disparities between whites and students of colour – economically disadvantaged students (O'Connor, Horvat and Lewis, 2006). As to whether the ubiquitous deficit theory of education is applicable or not, there are varied contestations about it in the dozens of studies. For instance, Payne (2009, p. 2) reflects that, although the deficit model has very little scientific research, there are studies on it which were conducted through scientific methods. Valencia (2010, p. 100) decry such a position by contesting that the theory is based on ideology and confluence of science that result in pseudoscience. While Payne (2009, p. 2) further claims that the name 'deficit theory' is just a theoretical concept that exists at an abstract level, Valencia (2010) rebuts by asserting that the deficit framework has great utility in comprehending the bond between theory and practice. In light of the varied substantial war of positions of Payne (2009) and that argued by Valencia (2010), it becomes apparent that the deficit theory's weaknesses and strengths are contestable pillars that require verification through methodologically correct epistemologies. On one hand, it can be argued that considering the deficit theory as a form of scientific research as per the claim made by Payne resembles its strength since it implies that findings were empirically verified. On the other hand, Valencia's (2010) postulation that it is non-scientific, but pseudoscience reflects that it is its weak point, as findings are determined through imperfect research designs. Contestations around 'deficit theory' show the degree of its indefinability.

2.5.2 Transactional theory of distance (theory of transactional distance)

In this part of the discussion on one of the two applied theoretical frameworks in this study– *transactional theory of distance*, the scope is on the evolution of transactional theory of distance, its general components (such as, distance education and transactional distance) and Moore's (1993; 2007) pedagogical components (namely, dialogue, structure of the educational programme and students' autonomy in learning processes), and philosophical views underpinning the theory as well as its criticisms and strengths as per the allusion evidenced in the pervasive literature.

2.5.2.1 Origin of transactional theory of distance

The aspects of the theory of transactional distance had been discussed since 1972 in endeavours to describe distance education (Moore, 1993) and has constituted to what became known as the theory of transactional distance in 1980 (Benson and Samarawickrema, 2009, p. 6; Moore, 1980). Since the Industrial Revolution, developments in the technological environment, particularly the introduction of the internet in 1963, have resulted in a broadly propagated and accepted form of education called distance education (Keegan, 1993). The theory of transactional distance became the first American theory to expound the field of distance education (Reyes, 2013. 43) and was created and popularised by Michael Moore in 1993. The theory of transactional distance is argued that it first appeared as part of the theory of independent learning in the early 1970s (Moore, 1972). It is viewed as the redefinition of the traditional theory of independent learning and teaching which is characterised by student autonomy and transactional distance dimensions (Keegan, 1993, p. 62). Other noteworthy pundits followed suit and expounded it further, for instance, Saba and Shearer (1994), Chen and Willits (2007) and more recently, Moore (2007) and Gokool-Ramdoo (2008). Much of the attention in the early development of transactional distance theory adopted an all-inclusive paradigm, describing characteristics and methods to differentiate distance education from face-to-face education (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008, p. 3).

2.5.2.2 Components of the transactional theory of distance

This subsection of the theory of transactional distance is centred on the components that constitute the transactional distance theory. Much of the discussion is drawn from Moore's time-honoured and influential (1993) 'theory of transactional distance'. For example, the pedagogical space that is characterised by three principal concepts of 'dialogue', 'structure' of the educational programme and the student's ability to exercise 'self-directness' in learning. The discussion starts broadly with the description of distance education, drawing largely from the general discourse derived from the literature in the field of distance education.

2.5.2.2.1 Distance education

The pervasive 'distance education', both as a construct and field of education has received more attention from different theorists (for example, Dewey and Bantley, 1949; Moore, 1972, 1980; 1990, 1993, 2007; Keegan, 1980; Rumble, 1986; Moore and Kearsley, 2005; Garrison, 2000; Anglin and Morrison, 2000) who provided an array of descriptions in an endeavour to define and explain what it is. On aggregate, distance education is a form of education in which interactions between lecturers and students is facilitated, mostly, by technologies and it entails certain specific techniques to design structures of the courses or programmes and teaching pedagogies (Moore and Kearsley, 2005, p. 2).

2.5.2.2.2 Transactional distance

The term 'transaction' was first applied in the distance education discourse in 1949 by Dewey and Bantley (1949) as part of the attempts to define distance education and refers to the interaction and relationships amongst the persons in teaching and learning processes (students and lecturers), forms of their behaviours and the learning environments (Moore, 1993). It refers to the possible misunderstanding of instructions/guidance by the lecturers and students' responses in a pedagogical lecturer-student relationship, occurring in communications and a psychological space (Moore, 1993, p. 22; Moore and Kearsley, 1996). Moore's description of transactional distance theory put more emphasis on psychological isolation between lecturers and students rather than geographic. A similar view was also offered by Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008, p. 2) who defined the transactional distance as a form

of separation which is characterised by a dialogue within the space of relationships between the lecturers and students. Conversely, in their description of the construct 'transactional distance', Moore and Kearsley (2005, p. 223) argue that it refers to an interaction and understanding lacuna which is influenced by geographic separation between students and lecturers. They further posit that such a geographic distance can be curbed through persuasive dialogue and the use of specific techniques in the structure of instructional programmes. Fascinatingly, the plethora of literature encompasses congruent and divergent positions, mirroring that the concept 'transactional distance' is a loaded and an elusive construct to define. Captivatingly, Moore later refined his position, accentuating that the transactional distance is determined by the psychological separation as opposed to the former locus that described separation from the geographic point of view (Moore, 2007). His doctrine holds the view that the distance education transaction takes place between lecturers and students who are psychologically isolated from one another (Moore, 1993, p. 22). Moore (1993) identified three key constructs of transactional distance – namely, the nature and the amount of the student's autonomy, the dialogue occurring between the students and lecturers as well as the structure of instructional programmes. These key constructs are the components of theory of transactional distance (Moore, 2007, p. 24-31; Reyes, 2013, p. 44) which the ensuing subsection discusses in tandem with 'distance education' and 'transactional distance'. The discussion begins with structure of the instructional programme, followed by dialogue between students and lecturers. This section on components of transactional distance theory has been concluded with Moore's (1993, p. 23) concept of nature and students' autonomy.

2.5.2.2.3 Structure of instructional programme

Supportive learning contexts are central to ensuring students' positive learning experiences. To achieve this, Moisey and Hughes (2008) propose that designers of the course structures as well as academics should consider creating an enabling learning environment. There are varied understandings of course 'structure' or 'design' in the proliferated body of literature. Theorists who contributed to the academic discourse grounded on the theory of transactional distance have offered the variety of descriptions to the 'structure' of instructional programme. Moore's (1983, p. 157) description of the 'structure' variable argues that it is a degree to which an instructional

programme becomes responsive to the expectations of each of the enrolled student. Moore (1993, p. 26) further describes the structure of an educational programme as the manner in which components in the course design are planned and arranged insomuch that it influences the transactional distance. How course designs are structured (Moore, 1993, p. 26) is determined by the communication to be used to deliver the distance education. For example, a course offered online may use uploaded voice messages, videos, and/or written messages transmitted through online forums to deliver an educational content. Structure as a component of the theory of transactional distance serves to express and describe the flexibility and rigour of the anticipated and contemplated learning outcomes of the educational programme (Moore, 2007, p. 26; Reyes, 2013, p. 44) as well as the degree to which it becomes responsive to students' needs. It has been argued within the scope of the much spawned distance education-centred literature that educational programmes tend to vary in terms of the degree of rigidity and flexibility (Moore, 2007). While some programmes are highly structured, others are less structured. Distinguishing and exemplifying less and highly structured instructional programmes, Keegan (1993, p. 63) postulates that while less structured educational programmes are well-defined by open registrations that can run throughout the whole year and that the timeframe for the submission of the assignments is usually wide-ranging, those that are more highly structured usually set the starts and the ends of the course and students are required to submit assignments within a shorter timeframe. The structure of the instructional programme determines whether the dialogue can take place or not as well as the form in which it will take. This view is clearly inherent in Moore's (1991) assertion that the structure of the instructional programme (course design) and a dialogue are inversely related and that they determine the transactional distance involved. Moore (1991) posits that a mixture of lower level of dialogue and highly structured course designs lead to higher transactional distance. A well-structured course design increases students' chances to succeed in their studies. It is paramount to bridge the transactional distance between distance education students and lecturers through the course design in order to promote online student accomplishment (Murphy and Cifuentes, 2001, p. 298). Suggestions to reduce the transactional distance are evident in the plethora of the literature. Whereas a programme that amalgamates traditional forms of correspondence and teleconferencing bridges the transactional distance and

enhances a dialogue between students and lecturers, one that delivers traditional printed study materials to the students leads in no dialogue (Keegan, 1993, p. 63).

2.5.2.2.4 Dialogue occurring between students and lecturers

The term 'dialogue' is an important factor in the relationship between students and lecturers. It is the degree to which students, lecturers and the educational programme manage to exchange mutual and positive communications between each other (Moore (1983, p. 157). In the assertion of Reyes (2013, p. 43), dialogue is a two-way communication encounter which takes place when lecturers provide instructions to students who also partake in an interaction by providing responses and being in active listening immersion. It is seen as a form of communication that is constructive and purposeful and contains positive qualities (Moore, 1993). Holmberg (1989, p. 43) claims that when lecturers and students are engrossed in a friendly and didactic interaction, distance education becomes effective. In learning environments, lecturers develop the learning materials to teach the students, be it online or on face-to-face counter and a dialogue becomes a vital component in teaching and learning processes, which are directed towards an enriched positive learning experience of the student. Where students encounter hitches in understanding the content of the learning materials, a dialogue plays a critical role in enabling both students and lecturers to share meanings intended. Garrison (2000) contends that a dialogue between lecturers and students necessitates teaching and learning and must be enhanced through technological modes. In a similar vein, Gokool-Ramdoo (2008, p. 9) accedes that with the use of technological facilities, the degree of dialogue escalates when programmes are less structured, leading student to be more self-controlled and directed. Gokool-Ramdoo's postulation compete against Moore's (1993) understanding that transactional distance between students and lecturers can be bridged through an integration of high structured course design and a high level of dialogue. A dialogue can take numerous forms and be transmitted through the variety of conventional (for example, telephone) and modern (for example, online forums) communication modes. The transactional theory of distance holds the view that studying through distance education presents challenges for students and lecturers because dialogues (particularly, face-to-face counters) are usually limited between the students and lecturers. However, a dialogue is not an independent variable. It depends

on characters of students and lecturers, subject matter of the module, educational dogmas held by lecturers who develop the learning materials as well as environmental factors (Moore, 1993).

2.5.2.2.5 Nature and amount of student's autonomy

Autonomy as a component of transactional theory of distance education is described as the propensity of the students to take charge of leaning processes (Moore, 2007, p. 101). It is the level of independence that students demonstrate, in a lecturer-student relationship, to determine learning involvement, goals and decisions to evaluate learning programme (Moore, 2007, p. 31). It has been proven, empirically, that low level of autonomy in learning results in many students dropping from their studies. For instance, lack of accountability, independence, impetus, flexibility, rationality and self-assurance are some of attributes that cause dropout (Spady, 1970, p. 75). This view agreed to that of Robson (1967) who are less autonomous and lack abilities to take charge of their studies often drop out of learning. Although student autonomy is an important aspect when learning through distance education institution, there are diverging perspectives towards it within the discourse on transactional distance education. In his theory of transactional distance, Moore (1993) postulates that student autonomy is essential for students receiving a distance education, and stresses on the student's capacity to determine effective pedagogies with which to learn and to be responsible in the learning processes. In a different vein to Moore's perspective, Keegan (1993) posits that a face-to-face contact between students and lecturers is more important than just student autonomy because they want to feel a sense of belonging and cooperation. Student's inability to have a sense of belonging, coupled with feelings of exclusion, is a leading dropout determinant in higher education landscape (O'Keeffe, 2013). Students' autonomous learning is largely determined by the extent of the transactional distance. The more the transactional distance is, the more students have to become self-directed in learning (Moore, 1991, p. 5).

2.5.2.3 Philosophical stance of the transactional theory of distance

Transactional distance theory is based on the underlying philosophy that student-student isolation, lecturer-student isolation, and the isolation of student-academic institution have an effect on the success rate and must be abridged through

appropriate programme structures and dialogues to support teaching-learning environments. Hockridge (2013, p. 142), Simmons (2013, p. 62) and Jowallah (2014, p. 189) agreeably postulate that the transactional theory of distance argues that there are several hurdles between the lecturers and their students. To mitigate such hurdles, the transactional theory of distance further theorises that distance education institutions must develop effective communication strategies. The theory holds the view that an isolation or distance between students and lecturers as well as amongst students themselves is not geographical based. Instead, it is a psychological, dialogue (Moore and Kearsley, 2005) and pedagogical space (Moore 1993, p. 23) of misunderstanding the intended meanings of educational messages exchanged between lecturers and students. In order to reduce the transactional distance, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009, p. 17) suggest that an ongoing two-way dialog between students and lecturers and amongst students themselves is crucial. In concord with Benson and Samarawickrema's (2009) assertion, Nichols's (2010) study that wanted to measure student retention has paralleled students who have received support interventions with those who did not to explore their views and found that those who were supported regarded their relentless contact with their tutors as having been pivotal and motivated them to persist with their studies, as a result.

2.5.2.4 Critiques on the transactional theory of distance

In spite of its international acceptance and support by several salient gurus who commended it since its dawn in 1980s as an all-encompassing model of distance education (such as, Keegan, 1980 and 1993; Rumble, 1986), the influential transactional distance theory has also received some disapprovals. Literature highlights that the theory still requires advancements (Reyes, 2013, p. 49). Compatible views to that asserted by Reyes (p. 49) are inherent in the writings of Garrison (2000) and Gokool-Ramdoo (2008). Whereas Garrison (2000) proposes for an improved transactional theory that will comprise learning theories and synthesis of standpoints, Gokool-Ramdoo (2008) later suggests that elements such as, policymaking and quality assurance should feature in the model. Though not so clear in the literature, it appears that the appropriateness of the transactional distance theory in the field of education loose its strength as the technological environment advances and when new technological means of communication come into place. Reyes (2013, p. 49)

concludes that in order for the transactional distance theory to remain relevant to study future problems and challenges of distance education, the aspects of the theory require some form of advancement that would have taken the technological development and forms and nature of communications into account. Although the theory of transactional distance made a good attempt to explain significant aspects of distance education, it failed to point out how a dialogue can be easily realised between all students and lecturers where isolation is pedagogical and psychological. Instead, it explicates that environmental factors; the subject matter of the module; the educational doctrines of persons who develop the learning materials; and that the degree and the type of a dialogue is reliant upon lecturers and students' personalities. Its dogmas that there are environmental variables on which a dialogue can be dependent upon is largely based on untested hypothesis. It only identified the few environmental factors, but Moore (1993) makes a call for investigations into other environmental variables. Although there are assertions that the theory is not ubiquitous, as also acknowledged but its pundit - Moore, Keegan (1993, p. 73) suggests that future research should attempt to develop a comprehensive model of teaching and learning that will put 'learning' in the central position, as opposed to the existing theories that are centred around the 'distance' or 'students' dimensions. Since its development, the theory of transactional distance received much criticisms and spawned a vigorous debate, with views that consider it to be all-encompassing (for example, Moore, 2007; Reyes, 2013, p. 43) and others being divergent (example, Keegan, 1993; Moore, 1993; Garrison, 2000). As the discourse advances to a greater level, Moore later changed his position and argued that the theory of transactional distance is encompasses all aspects of distance education (Moore, 2007). In support of Keegan's proposal, Garrison (2000, p. 12) made the same call that a new suitable theoretical lens must be sought for. Occupying a different stance towards the proposed general framework, Gokool-Ramdoo (2008, p. 1) disputes Keegan's and Garrison's recommendations and justifies his claim by arguing that the theory of transactional distance comprises all elements that are in theories on transactional distance which were established after Moore's theory and can therefore be regarded as the global theory. Whereas Keegan and Garrison's call for a new and all-inclusive theory in distance education indirectly suggests that there are weaknesses in the theory of transactional distance, Gokool-Ramdoo concludes that there are no such weaknesses. Further to the shortcomings of the Moore's theory of transactional

distance, the geographical universe that is argued as not isolation between lecturers and students is also based on assumption. It is contested in the discourse on the theory of transactional distance that, although psychological and pedagogical spaces determine the transactional distance, the geographical space is also an important dimension that influences the distance transaction. For instance, Controverting Moore's philosophical view on the theory of transactional distance that the separation in student-lecturer relationship is based on pedagogical and psychological universes, Keegan (1993. p. 63) noted that the transactional distance also embraces the geographical space. Recent studies proved that geographical isolation could negatively affect students in their studies. For instance, in the discourse on student support, Sittichai (2012, p. 286) reports that peer support, lecturers' support and assessments as well as advisors characterise learning environments and may lead to student attrition if not provided to the needy students. Sitichai's assertion challenges the suitability of Moore's traditional theory of transactional distance. The theory of transactional distance further fails to identify methods with which support interventions to students that are naturally incapable to express themselves can be offered when encountering isolation that relates to the communication space in the relationship between them and lecturers. Moore's transactional theory of distance does not specify various levels of education at which students are – namely, primary, high or tertiary; undergraduate (first-year, second-year, third-year) and postgraduate (honours, masters or doctorate). Moore's theory is focused on pedagogical concept that occurs when students and lecturers are isolated by time and space, unfolding the universe of lecturer-student relationships, and not on student support phenomenon. It describes the pedagogical isolation of students and lecturers within distance education context, and less so on open and distance learning (ODL) environment, although it covers certain aspects of ODL. It lacks student support element in its doctrine. Contrary to Moore's theory of transactional distance, this study focuses on the lower-postgraduate level (honours) within the Open and distance learning institution and is based on student support. Moore realised the limitation of his theory and proposed that future models on transactional distance education should be based on, amongst other aspects, the theory of history of distance education, distance education theory of administration and a theory of distance student stimulus (Moore, 1993, p. 23).

It is important to develop theory to sustain distance education (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008, p. 1). The purpose of this study is to develop a student support model for lower-postgraduate students studying in an ODL environment. The inference is to be drawn from perceptions and opinions of administrative officers, lecturers as well as students' experiences. Partly, the model can be seen as a response to Moore's suggestion that there is a need to develop a distance education theory of administration and distance student motivation.

However, the theory of transactional distance remains pertinent and essential in locating the study within a sound academic theoretical lens. It is also appropriate for this study because it approaches the student support component of teaching and learning from the communication perspective and the transactional theory recognises communication as an imperative element in supporting students.

2.5.2.5 Strengths of theory of transactional distance

Irrespective of critiques attached to the theory of distance education, the transactional theory of distance education remains seminal in the discourse within the field of distance education. It contains aspects that are in all related theories of transactional distance education that have been developed until recently (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008, p. 3). Matching all theories that are improvements or expansions of Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory, Gokool-Ramdoo (2008, p. 3) concludes that its strength lies in its capability to embrace transactional and organisational matters without trailing focus on students, the academic institution and the overall nation. The traditional theory of transactional distance, as pointed out by Jung (2001), is an effective theoretical lens to determine behavioural patterns of lecturer-student dialogue in distance education institutions.

2.6 STUDENT DROPOUT

A striking proportion of research on student dropout have used distinctive epistemologies to understand its ubiquity and to provide expositions about it, thereby focusing on, inter alia, time estimates that dropout can possibly occur (Zewotir, North and Murray, 2015; Shea and Bidjerano, 2016; Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016) and attributions to dropout (Jennison and Johnson, 2004; Murray, 2014). Irrespective

of an extensive literature and several pioneered models to explain dropout processes for students, for instance, Spady's (1970) Explanatory Sociological Model of the Dropout Process, Tinto's (1975) theory of transactional distance and Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduates' attrition, there is a growing concern about its pervasiveness in the higher education system (Mills, 2015, p. 41). It has captured the attention of not only higher education institutions, but also policy-makers and states across the globe. Within the territory of Europe, the Union policy-developers have set a standard to drop school attrition rate to, at least 10 % on average by 2020 (Cabus, 2015, p. 601). In the territory of the Republic of South Africa, the department of higher education and training (DHET) has planned to address the proliferation of the so-called 'school leavers' (referring to learners who did not achieve grade 12) to reduce the prevailing high dropout rate and enhance their probability to be employed (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013). History about student dropout in the literature points out two causes for this problem.

On one hand, that there is an insufficient attention given to the generation of theoretical frameworks that intend to describe and explicate the nature of processes leading to students dropping from higher education studies (Tinto, 1975), and
On the other hand, that there is a lack of attention paid to the definition of the construct 'student dropout', (Tinto, 1975, p 85) are attributes to failure in numerous attempts to explain the nature of process.

The widespread of the discourse on student dropout indicates that it is by no means a contemporary problem. It has a long-standing history, with several seminal pundits having hugely contributed to the academic debates, which appear to have reached its apex from 1980s up until late 1990s. Rumberger (1983), Thornberry, Moore and Christenson (1985), Mensch and Kandel (1988), Roderick (1993; 1994), Neumann (1996) and McNeal (1997) are some of examples. Regarding the educational contexts to which investigations were directed, student dropout incidences have been carried on over the past few decades in both the distance education and on-campus courses (Levy, 2007, p. 185). Studies on the aspect of student dropout as a broad area of interest predates 1976, with foundational works, such as Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory about the student retention in higher education and Astin's (1975) book on how to address the student dropout in higher education institutions.

Historically, a huge amount of research on student dropout was conducted in the United States, largely in countries, such as United Kingdom (Longden, 2006; Yorke and Longden, 2008) and Australia (McInnis and James, 2004). Until recently, the aspect of student dropout is still one of the phenomena in research that continues to attract researchers because of failure of recommendations to curb the dropout problem. Studies that were confined within the South African higher education system claim that the dropout phenomenon is adequately researched on (Murray, 2014, p. 1). Breier (2010) studied dropout in the University of Western Cape and found that, (p. 662) out of 10265 students who were enrolled for the programme targeted in the study of Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 1825 (18%) left studying during or at the end of 2002. This occurred despite numerous support programmes put into place to curb it. Examples of such support intervention programmes subsume NSFAS (p. 663) and academic supports (p. 661). In South Africa, the higher education system is characterised by high student dropout rate and low participation, with the overall graduate rate of all the universities being the lowest in the entire global higher education domain by 15% (Letseka and Maile, 2008). Further to this disappointing proportion of 15%, Letseka and Maile (2008, p. 6) also found that two students in technikon and three in the university level within the context of South African higher education dropped out of their studies between 2000 and 2004. In the view of Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt (2013, p. 165), both student dropout and retention are compound subjects to deal with. A huge portion of every group of students that register for a four-year programme in the United States of America drop out of the studies prior to the degree completion (Ozdagli and Tracher, 2011, p. 1). Letseka and Maile (2008, p. 1) assert that the non-stopping student dropout problem, predominantly among blacks (HRPULSE, 2013, p. 1) is a threat to the future of South Africa. This prognostication is in accordance with the philosophical viewpoint posited by the deficit theory that is used in integration with the transactional distance theory to guide this study in quest for responsive student support model. Through euphemism figure of speech, the deficit theory employs the term 'students of colour' to mean 'black students', especially those coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Even though the deficit theory assumes that black students are characterised by personal dispositions that affect their academic performance, resulting in them dropping out, it partially agrees with Letseka and Maile (2008, p. 1) postulation that unremitting attrition affects students from poor economic backgrounds. Matching findings were

reported by CHE (2008), showing that the graduation rate for white students is 50% greater than that for students from non-white community. Six hundreds and thirty-five students (24.9%) at the University of South Africa dropped out in 2011 (DISA, 2014). In the study aimed at predicting dropout for first- year students at Eindhoven University of Technology's Electrical Engineering department, (Dekker, Pechenizkiy and Vleeshouwers, 2009, p. 41) found that 40% of them withdrew from the programme. Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt (2013, p. 166) reported 17% of students that entirely dropped of their university studies, with 50% of them having transferred their studies elsewhere for completion. Reisel and Brekke (2009, p. 693) offered an opposing view of dropout. They disagree with Hovdhaugen et al' (2013) understanding, expressing the transfer of an educational programme into another higher education institution as an 'institutional dropout'. Some studies explored the influence of socio-economic factors on student dropout. As pointed out by Murray (2014, p. 1), the documentation of research on the effects of socio-economic factors, such a poverty, gender, race, and marital status (Di Pietro and Cutillo, 2008, p. 255) on dropout is sufficient in the literature. A gender- and age-based comparisons on student dropout indicated that females are less probable to drop out than their counterparts are, but both older men and women are more likely to drop out (Hovdhaugen et al, 2013, p.167). Marital status of individual students can also be used to measure the probability of withdrawal from the studies. A study conducted by Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008) revealed (p. 552) that students who are cohabiting or married are more likely to drop out of their studies than those who are unmarried or not in cohabitation. With regard to the age as an influential factor leading to the dropout incidence, Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 552) found that the dropout probability for students aged twenty-five and older is higher than for those aged twenty-one and less.

This section presents the types of data which served as the scope of the literature on the dropout phenomenon and which were generated to better understand the student dropout in higher education sector. The section provides the followings relevant types of data:

- the description of the concept 'student dropout'
- student dropout in an ODL environment
- lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions on student dropout in open and distance learning environments

- honours students' experiences on dropout in ODL environments
- dropout mitigation strategies
- consequences of having dropped out
- challenges associated with student dropout provision

2.6.1 The concept 'student dropout'

Defining the construct 'student dropout' is by no means a simple exercise to embark on. Its descriptions tend to be commonly categorised by definitive rival terms, such as 'individual' and 'school' or 'institutional'; 'voluntary' and 'involuntary'; and 'home environment' and 'school or 'institutional environment'. The existing body of knowledge comprises varying perspectives upon how it can be viewed. Among other complicating grounds, as identified by Viadero (2001), are that it is usually defined as a 'status' or 'event' ratio. As a 'status', Viadero (2001) theorises that it refers to the percentage of 16-24 years old students who have failed to pass the highest high school grade and who, during specific time boundaries, are not registered in any of high school programmes. As an 'event', dropout is defined as the rate of students who left high school grade without having successfully finished it (Viadero, 2001). The current huge volume of literature indicates that the concept 'student dropout' has no clear or universal definition regardless of numerous existing studies, which were focused on courses offered in both distance education institutions and face-to-face learning environments (Levy, 2007, p. 185). Dropout occurs both in on-campus and distance education environments and has been evident across national terrains. Nonetheless, literature further reveals that student dropout descriptions are often grouped into either an individual perspective (voluntary dropout) or school or institutional perspective (involuntary dropout) (Tinto, 1975; Murray, 2014; Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux and Truscott, 2016). In their study to determine factors that lead to student attrition in Vocational High School, Tas, Bora and Selvitopu and Demirkaya (2013, p. 1561) identified four categories into which attributions leading to student attrition can be categorised. Those are, in addition to individual and institutional variables, 'family' and 'neighbourhood'. Thus, students' families and neighbourhoods can cause attrition. Some authors have argued that a concept can be defined from a theoretical (conceptual) or operational (empirical) point of view. Du Plooy (2002) is one such example.

Literature showed that dropout could be influenced by reasons that emanate from the students' home contexts (which encompass individual, family and neighbourhood variables) and institutional contexts, which include, among other reasons, lack of support from instructors. In this study, the individual and institutional perspectives as well as voluntary and involuntary dropouts are explicated in detail in the ensuing discussion. This study discusses the construct 'student support' from conceptual and operational viewpoints.

2.6.1.1 Theoretical or conceptual definition

A range of forms, terms and meanings of the concept 'dropout' are classified and expounded in the related literature (Reisel and Brekke, 2009, p. 693), and existing views describe it as a confounding (Tinto, 1975) and an indefinable term (Astin, 1971). Adding to the complexity inherent in any act of defining an aspect under investigation, Du Plooy (2002) posits that in any research, conceptual and empirical levels are imperative to consider. Conceptual (also known as theoretical) definition refers to the use of arguments that represent nonconcrete ideas (Du Plooy 2002) and it has to be well defined in terms of other concepts (Gobbens, Luijkx and Schols, 2010, p. 78). In Creswell and Poth's (2017, p. 6), a conceptual definition is a particular component that help the researcher to, systematically, measure a scientifically defined construct.

The broad purpose of the definition is to gain insights into the precise gist of the term. Attempts to find a universal definition of 'dropout' proved to be challenging and impossible, with many of them emphasising on an indefinability of the term. Historical accounts on the definition of the concept 'dropout' are attributable to the foundational writings of, among other ground-breaking pundits, Astin (1971), Tinto (1982) and Tinto (1993). Astin (1971) epitomises the camp of proponents who argue that the concept 'dropout' is an unclassifiable and a complex phenomenon that cannot be distinguished straightforwardly from non-dropouts if students are still alive. Despite being regarded as hard to formulate an all-encompassing definition, Tinto (1982) suggested two routes towards understanding the concept 'dropout' – namely, describing it from individual or an institutional viewpoint. Correspondingly, in the view of Reisel and Brekke (2009, p. 693), empirical research on student dropout rate and behaviour covers two classifications of dropout, that is – firstly, those which are centred on individual students continuing to study irrespective of having transferred programmes from one

academic institution to the other; and moreover, those that limit their focus of student dropout in one academic institution. Closely paralleled with Tinto's (1982) and Reisel and Brekke's (2009), Murray (2014) classified the student dropout into two categories – voluntary and involuntary dropout. Murray (2014, p. 1) refers to the concept 'student dropout' as follows:

- Firstly, that voluntary dropout refers to students who transferred their studies into other higher education institutions to continue studying regardless of having achieved satisfactory academic results. Voluntary dropout also refers to student's decision to cease studying prior to being excluded by the institution on the grounds of having academically performed below the required standard.
- Secondly, that involuntary dropout means the termination of students' registration on the ground of having not achieved satisfactory results or met the standard of the university.

Dropout definitions which are constructed from an individual standpoint are typified by Willging and Johnson's (2004); Castles's (2004); Levy's (2007); Frydenberg's (2007); Tello's (2007); Morris, Finnegan, and Wu's (2005); and Dekker, Pechenizkiy and Vleeshouwers's (2009) descriptions that accentuate official withdrawals from the course by students themselves. Dropout definitions, which resemble an institutional perspective, are descriptions that accentuate withdrawals of students by the academic institution following the mismatch between their performance competency and the stipulated institutional requirements (Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos and Vergidis, 2004). Defined at a course level, a 'dropout' is a student who officially (Finnegan, Morris and Lee, 2008) ceased studying without having passed the subject that was registered for (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Castles, 2004). Definitions which were drawn and constructed from both an individual and institutional perspective define the concept 'dropout' as students who decided to cease their studies or have been cancelled by the institution from the educational programmes for which they were enrolled (Ivankova and Stick, 2007; Perry, 2008; Finnegan, Morris and Lee's (2008). In addition to the individual and institutional perspectives, Reisel and Brekke (2009, p. 693) defined dropout in three terms, namely, the 'institutional dropout' – the act of transferring an educational programme to study at another academic institution; 'dropout' – students who have stopped studying completely without having accomplished their educational programmes; and 'stop-out' – a temporal withdrawal

from studying for a period of least two years. Whereas many of definitions existing in the literature seem to be in accordance with each other, some take complete divergent positions. As a case in point, in the understanding held by the European Commission, as shared by Cabus (2015, p. 600), 'dropouts' are students aged between 18 and 24 years, who do not have higher secondary diplomas, and did not register for any educational or training programme at any academic institution.

2.6.1.2 Empirical or operational definition

It is important to contextualise the definition (Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon, 2014, p. 290) to suit the purpose for which the study is undertaken - operationalisation. From the perspective of LoBiondo-Wood, Haber, Cameron and Singh (2014), operationalisation is the process of translating the concepts of interest into observable and measurable phenomena. In the context of the research, operational definition (also known as empirical) refers to the manner in which significant concepts that underline the research are defined to achieve the purpose of the study (Parahoo, 2014, p. 155). Creswell and Poth (2017, p. 6) define operational definition as the technique, tool or a method that shows the way the construct is to be measured. It is also understood as a connotation (Walliman 2005) and it is defined in terms of the observable data and the applicable criteria in order to understand the degree to which the concept exists (Gobbens et al, 2010, p. 78). Although this study makes an inquiry about the reasons for student dropout in an open and distance learning institutions, it is also fundamental to reflect the understanding of student dropout in the framework of this research. Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon (2014, p. 290) avow that finding both the description of the concept dropout and its causes have equal status of significance in research, but (p.291) dropout must be defined prior to investigating factors that result in it.

The operational definition can be at various levels, such as the course level, the programme level, and the university level. In their study, Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon (2014, p. 292) defined 'student dropout' at a programme level as a dropout of students studying through online higher education institution without the mandatory enrolment and permanence requirements. At a course level, dropout refers to the learner' discontinuity from a course without having accomplished it and it takes place

in more than one ways that incorporate leaving without having commenced; leave having attained some knowledge; conditional stoppage and real attrition (Grisolia and Oliveira, 2016).

This study investigated student dropout in open and distance learning environments and used the case module - [an advanced communication research (COM4809)] of the University of South Africa (Unisa) which is taught in the Department of Communication Sciences. As a result, the description of the concept 'dropout' which is operationalised in this study is at a course level with an advanced communication research (COM4809) serving as a case to explain dropout at lower-postgraduate level (honours). As this study deals with dropout to subsequently develop a support framework to explain the problem for lower-postgraduate students who are dropping or have dropped from the course, criticism that crush defining dropout from only a course exist in the literature. Bean and Metzner (1985) objected such a definition, arguing that students who only wanted to register for one module and completed it but did not also complete the whole programme for which such an enrolled module is part cannot be labelled 'dropouts'. In their postulations, Bean and Metzner (1985, p. 489) argued that the suitable definition of dropout for the purpose of generating a framework should describe 'dropouts' as all students who did not complete their educational programmes because even though they enrolled in the preceding semester, they failed to enrol the following semester. Bean and Metzner (1985, p. 489) pointed out two disadvantages of the dropout definition – firstly, largely, it is defined from an institutional perspective and less so from a national perspective and secondly, the transitional timeframe (semester to semester) that is used to determine dropout is short. However, in a robust academic debate, no assertion prevails without its detractors. Adding to Bean and Metzner's (1985) criticism, it is also evident in Parahoo's (2006; 2014, p. 155) contestation that clear and proper definitions of core concepts are dependent upon the context and the purpose of the research and Coughlan (2007, p. 661) added that it is inevitably vital to enable the reader to understand their meanings. Within the demarcation of open and distance education which this study focuses upon, Lee and Choi (2011, p. 603) suggest that future research on student dropout from an online course should be based on a standardised definition. Lee and Choi's (2011) call for standardised definition supports other positions that describe student dropout as a complex and vague phenomenon. Owing

to the heterogeneity of descriptions of 'student dropout', it is challenging to frame a profile of an emblematic student who dropped out of studies. For this reason, in this study and in response to Lee and Choi's (2011, p. 603) proposal of a definition attuned into a particular context in mind, the inclusion criteria for the sampling of participants are founded on the following measures of suitability for partaking into the study - that is, whether a student has…

- deregistered (cancelled) the module for any reason;
- failed to reregister the module the following year;
- never wrote or submitted the examination portfolio;
- changed the module (deregister and register for an alternative module);
- changed the institution of learning to study at another higher education institution.

Constructed from the above criteria, the construct 'dropout' refers to the following:

a student who did not register a yearly module in the following year; or was absent from an examination; or never submitted an examination portfolio; or have deregistered the module for whatever reason; or have transferred studies to another higher education institution for any reason.

2.6.2 Student dropout in an ODL environment

An open and distance-learning mode or open university system (Pierrakeas et al, 2004) is characteristically a distance learning system that is mostly facilitated with online communication tools. This creates many challenges that result in some students dropping from their higher education studies and, subsequently, in low graduation ratio of the institution and the country in particular. To preclude dropout incidence, Moisey and Hughes (2008, p. 421) posit that institutions should build enabling learning environments that will prevent students from dropping out while promoting student retention and ensuring increased academic achievements.

Teaching and learning online is characterised by swift technological changes that eventually affect pedagogical modes used to deliver instructional learning materials and the manner in which lecturer-student, student-student and student-lecturer dialogues occur. Such constant rapid advancements in the technological milieu infers

that higher education institutions, especially open and distance education institutions that prevalently offer online courses, has to adjust with the pace at which the technological space is changing. Dropout incidence has been widely recorded in literature as, partly, a negative effect of the emergence of online form of education. Both online distance education studies, which are centred on student dropout at an undergraduate level, and those that are based on postgraduate level of educational programmes sufficiently exist in the body of literature within the field of education. However, many of these studies dealt with student dropout at an undergraduate level as opposed to dropout at a postgraduate level. Although not to an adequate fraction, dropout at the postgraduate level has been attended to, but a bigger stake of the studies explored the phenomenon at a masters and doctoral level and sporadically on lower-postgraduate level. Unique to previous research is that this study focuses on student dropout at lower (honours) postgraduate level, with a goal to develop an all-embracing and responsive support framework for honours students who are enrolled in open and distance education. An extensive review of literature, undergone in this study, signifies that it appears that there had been no support framework developed from lower-postgraduate students, yet the dropouts continue to occur at that level. Thus, this study seeks to address such a lacuna. A comparative analysis by Pierrakeas et al (2004) on student dropout at an undergraduate module of a Bachelor degree in Informatics with a postgraduate module of a Master's degree in education at a Greek distance education university serves as an epitome.

Across the entire globe, in open and distance learning institutions, teaching and learning instructions are usually aided by online technologies, which may pose a challenge to students who are unable or less able to use them. Such online systems must always be effective if institutions want to realise an increased student success proportion. Institutions must therefore measure their extent of their responsiveness and make changes accordingly. In the view held by Willging and Johnson (2004, p. 115), the effectiveness of online facilities is best measured by the rate at which students drop out of their studies.

The advent of online communication tools, particularly the internet and the variety of its applications, as well as the quick advancement in the broader technological environment, has reshaped how universities conduct their businesses and communicate with their students. Online communication tools have introduced e-

learning, a form of learning that require students to have access to the public internet so that they are able to access study materials, and to communicate with their tutors, lecturers, their peers and administrative officers. This, as Minnaar (2011) puts it, helps students get support, personal meaning, knowledge (p. 483) and positive learning experiences. Despite the fact that online learning appears to have presented many benefits, both to the students and the academic institutions, there are many challenges that are associated with an online form of learning. For example, Minnaar's (2011) study that focused on support for students who are enrolled in online modules in order to develop an exploratory student support model for them identified three themes that relate to intervention in e-learning modules. Those were a human contact, a panic attack (pedagogy) and technical problems (p. 483). These challenges are determined by, among other variables, the fast growing and changing technological and pedagogical spaces in which the process of learning is altering from lecturer-to-student into a networked student-to-student model (Minnaar, 2011, p. 484).

Students studying through ODL institutions encounter challenges and only the fittest students are able to endure until they successfully complete their degree programmes. Many students who encounter some difficulties usually cease their studies, voluntarily (For example, those who chose to transfer the degree programmes to study in other academic institutions) or involuntarily (for example, when the university deregister those who performed below the minimum regulation or standard put in place) (Murray, 2014, p. 1). This is what is referred to in this study as the 'student dropout'. The dropout challenge in open and distance-learning mode of higher education has been the catalyst for the current volume of studies seeking to encourage student retention and to preclude the rise of student dropout. CHE (2008), for example, compared the graduation rates of conventional face-to-face with that of non-face-to-face institutions within the minimum prescribed timeframe to complete a three-year programme and found that 91% of students in non-contact higher education institutions needed additional two years to accomplish their studies. Several inquiries into the student dropout aspect in higher education context have received an acceptable and a more resounding focus. The works of Letseka and Maile (2008), Sittichai (2012), Tinto and Engstrom (2008), Lockhart (2004), Vignoles and Pawdthavee (2009) are some of examples. As observed by Grau-Valldosera and Munguillon (2014, p. 290), myriad of

contemporary studies were focused on factors that influence the student dropout in online higher education.

In spite of sufficient attention devoted to the enormous student attrition problem within and from the higher education landscape, there is an increasing concern that many students drop out during an early phase in their studies. Documented cases that are congruent to this assertion are deeply marked in the literature. For instance, in the study aimed at finding out whether or not an improved student commitment leads to school attrition in the context of vocational education and training (VET), Cabus (2015, p. 599) contends that the rate of dropout incidences an early in courses is the highest in the learning process. In a similar vein, Jennison and Johnson's (2004, p. 2) study to determine the extent to which an alcohol abuse can impact on the student dropout, arrived at a complementary inference that confirmed the recurring incidence of attrition at an early phase in the learning process in higher education domain.

The higher education terrain in which open and distance education (ODL) forms part, is changing swiftly with the growing practice of online technologies for teaching and learning purposes as a vehicle for the delivery of education. Astoundingly, despite experiencing progressive increased student enrolment rate that is largely influenced by advantages offered by the existing advanced technological environment, institutions of higher learning remain victims of student dropout occurrences. This study centres its focus on student attrition in an ODL context in order enhance an understanding of the extent of the problem and to generate a responsive student support model for honours students studying with distance education to help deal with the attrition. It is evident in the literature that open and distance form of education experience higher dropout fraction than traditional face-to-face learning institutions. For instance, earlier studies that matched classroom-based and online education at the college level show that online learning tends to be highly characterised by a greater proportion of failure and dropout than classroom-based learning (Xu and Smith Jaggar (2011). A similar finding was reported by Pierrakeas et al (2004) who studied the dropout ratio of student furthering their education through open and distance learning institutions and of those who are enrolled in traditional higher education institutions. Their findings unveiled that the rate at which students drop out from their studies in ODL institutions is greater than that of students enrolled in traditional higher education institutions (p. 2). Another comparable investigation that paralleled dropout incidences

between online students and those learning on campus was Patterson and McFadden's (2009) study that found that the dropout rate of the former tends to be higher than that of the latter. Parker (2003) and Xenos (2004) who confirmed that dropout incidences of students who are enrolled in online programmes count between 25 and 40 % higher than that of face-to-face academic institutions, which ranges from 10 to 20 % also reported complementary finding.

Despite the existing plentiful studies that reported that the rate at which students drop out from e-learning education is higher compared to the dropout rate for students learning through on-campus academic institutions, there is paucity of studies devoted to determine the root-cause for such significant disparity (Levy, 2007, p. 185). Parallel perspectives are inherent in the widespread literature and advocate that there is an ample quantity of inquiries into reasons for student dropout in the broader international higher education system, yet few were focused into dropout in an online learning environment. This is evident in Willging and Johnson's (2004) contention that regardless of a satisfactory volume of literature directed at dropout in the worldwide higher education landscape in United States, little attention has been given to dropout in the context of online distance education. A similar position, although oriented to the nature of student attrition, by (Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon, 2014, p. 291) supports the view that scholarly literature is proliferated with studies on dropout in higher education, but the nature of dropout, until recently, received little attention.

Taking a divergent position, Minnaar (2011) noted that there is a huge volume of positive postulations on student support in e-learning environments, but critically argued that it looks like they are often not accessible to students when they need them; or if they are accessible, students do not use them, or the institution does not provide the suitable support intervention required (p. 485). This contention makes a supposition that there could be some incompatibility between what students need and types of support interventions, which higher education institutions use to meet to those needs. Should this be the case, Lee et al (2011) argue that support intervention methods that are pertinent to addressing a continuum of students' needs and expectations as well as their pedagogical modes of studying must be used to encourage learning and to ensure students' positive learning experiences. Supporting Minnaar's (2012) rival inference, Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya (2013, p. 1563)

reported that students do not use support services available in the institution because they do not see the necessity to do that.

2.6.3 Reasons/causes for the student dropout

Dropping out of a course or from higher education studies is a severe problem in the global higher education terrain and has become a deep propagated academic debate of an increasing concern (Di Pietro and Cutillo, 2008, p. 546) across the entire globe.

Empirical and theoretical epistemologies have been used to study student attrition, particularly attributions that spur dropout in higher education. The recent high volume of literature reflects student dropout as a multi-layered concern that has been found in several studies to be attributed by, in the view of Nelson, Duncan, Clarke (2009), multiple variables associated with educational and personal challenges. Studies, such as Letseka and Maile (2008), Pierrakeas et al (2004), Grau-Valldosera, and Minguillon (2014) resemble empirical trajectory, to state few. Alternatively, an analysis of existing academic discourse on student dropout has been employed as another typical strategy that can be adopted and to study the attrition phenomenon (Terentyev, Gruzdev, Gorbunova, 2016, p. 45). Ample studies on student dropout have commonly researched the scale of the problem by classifying several dynamics that determine students' learning paths, how they influences students' academic accomplishments and how such dynamics spur attrition (Terentyev et al, 2016, p. 45). This massive dropout research void has been tantalising proponents to explore attributes that result in attrition behaviour amongst students, at both pre-tertiary and tertiary education systems. It is significant for every higher education institution to determine factors that lead into student attrition. A big chunk of the literature that wanted to expose reasons for student dropouts and how they take place, tended to be centred more on finding symptoms (behavioural patterns) that result in attrition and trying to treat them, yet students who are dropping out have other unattended reasons that equally warrant an inquiry (Mills, 2015, p. 42). Mills (2015) embodies symptoms, such as poor academic achievements; failure to respond to lecturers, tutors and other students and absenteeism in classes as typical examples. The existing wide-ranging literature on dropout issue contains ample methods with which to learn and enhance understandings of student behavioural patterns and many variant root causes of

student attrition. Such lavish methods offer a range of lenses to study and provide expositions of the extent of the dropout problem and how it happens and can best be exemplified by prevailing sufficient models and theories that have occupied the literature scope in the field of education, such as, inter alia, the deficit theory, Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance, and Spady's (1970) Explanatory Sociological Model of the Dropout Process. In addition to these models and theories that offer varied epistemologies towards knowing the dropout concern, Golde (2005, p. 672) postulates that an identification of differences in university policies and practices can help yield reasons for disparities in student dropout.

Reasons into why students in higher education fail to complete their studies at a course or qualification level are abundantly documented in the literature on student dropout phenomenon although Golde (2005, p. 670) disputes that. These comprise, among others, studies undertaken by Breier (2010); Tinto and Engstrom (2008); Lockhart (2004); Pietro and Cutillo (2008); Vignoles and Pawdthavee (2009); and Sittichai, Tongkumchum and McNeil (2008).

It has been learnt that factors affecting dropout for students enrolled for online courses are unique for each student (Willging and Johnson, 2004, p. 115). In addition to the dropout challenge that institutions of higher learning suffer from, a deficiency in student support lead to an under-representation of certain ethnic groups at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels. The under-representation of certain ethnic groups, as observed by Kettley (2007), is attributed to the low level of aspiration, poor quality education at secondary/high schools, the perceptions of students towards universities, financial limitations and lack of family support. Kettley's (2007) identification of plausible dropout variables such lack of motivation, lack of family support, students' low-income financial background, and their perceptions towards higher education institutions through which they are furthering their studies are in concord with some of the philosophical views underpinning the deficit theory that this study applied as a guide. Blaming the students (particularly students of colour) and their home contexts (for instance, low level of family involvement into their children education), the deficit theory posits that students have personal dispositions (for instance, negative perceptions about their institutions and valuing education less important) which result in them dropping out of the course, programme or the institution itself (Valencia, 2002; 2010). Both the students' home and the school contexts comprise factors that can lead

to dropout incidences and must be enabling to ensure that students accomplish their studies. In view of the significance of ensuring enabling and supportive contexts, with a central focus at schools, Themane and Osher (2014) postulate that although safety is not an all-embracing condition for learning, it remains vital if ensured along the provision of student support. The challenge remains how to build a social environment that will promote continued engagement in learning since there has been very little attention in studies that examined dropout factors (Yang, Sinha, Adamson and Rose, 2013, p. 1). Although their view is cognisant of the negative effects of coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, racial challenges, trauma and disability, among other factors, Themane and Osher's (2014) assertion accentuate that deficiencies must be addressed through ensuring effective learning environments. Another congruent position that further blames the students' home contexts for student dropout is evident in Tladi's (2013) survey. Tladi (2013) wanted to find out causes of failure to write an examination (dropout from examination) in an open and distance education institution and unveiled a negating result that indicated that non-academic variables accounts for an examination-based dropout. Tladi's (2013) study unveiled reasons, such as employment responsibilities that often encroach on students' time to learn or result in them spending inadequate time to study. In the same vein, Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux and Truscott (2016, p. 1) examined reasons for dropout from both individual and institutional viewpoints and divulged that dropout is attributed to the growing unemployment ratio in the country, the passing away of the students and when students get arrested.

An example that blames the school environment is reflected in Kettley's (2007) viewpoint that, amongst other factors, the quality of education at the levels below the university and the under-representation of certain races in all South African universities are the major contributors to the high dropout rate. Kettley's postulation was confirmed a year later by Letseka and Maile' (2008) findings. In the observation made by Letseka and Maile (2008), 70% of the under-represented students in South Africa' university's system was the first of their generation to get a chance to study at the university.

In addition to the variety of reasons already expounded, there are many more causes in the documented literature, which have been proved to be affecting student dropout. Murray (2014, p. 1) argue that potential variables that lead to student dropout in

university-based studies embrace student's age, gender, ability, motivation level, academic integration level, living environments and financial background. A qualitative study on premature discontinuing with university studies, which had been conducted at Prince of Songkla University by Sittichai (2012, p. 283) yielded five major reasons in the context of Eastern culture. These were, as identified by Sittichai (2012), lifestyle, security, inability to manage time, a change or break in intimate relationship, and having registered in a qualification programme not preferred.

2.6.3.1 Geographic areas as a principal reason for dropping out

Geographic locations in which students reside can affect negatively on their academic life, resulting in attrition from university-based studies. As posited by Sittichai (2012, p. 285), concerns around lifestyle; security, such as political strife and staying away from home are the three chief factors associated with geographic location which primarily cause student attrition.

2.6.3.1.1 Staying away from home

Staying far away from home can bring a number of challenges. Students residing in or adjacent to the academic institution where they are enrolled, but away from their homes, encounter challenges such as reduced or inadequate financial and emotional support from their families (Sittichai, 2012, p. 285). Another form of remoteness that affects students and ultimately causes the dropout is student-department isolation. Nevertheless, Golde (2005, p. 680) reported that the separation between students and the department has little influence to the dropout of doctoral programmes.

2.6.3.1.2 Political strife

The political turmoil in the South African higher education sector serves as political-related case that political instabilities in different countries can result in students dropping out of their studies. The 1976 Soweto uprising and, as observed by Koen (2007), the 1980s political struggle against the apartheid in South Africa led in many students at both elementary, secondary and higher education institutions ceasing their studies. The more recent students' struggle against the high costs of tertiary education in the South African higher education landscape befell in 2015 and was propagated

underneath the title "FeesMustFall". With this form of protest, students demonstrated that they experience financial constraints, which, in the view of Mgwebi et al (2017), lead to increased dropout rate in the South African university space. The South African university system consists of 25 universities. The "FeesMustFall" movement commenced in the middle of October 2015 at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and it was locked-down for a period three days. Soon, many universities' "FeesMustFall" movements, such as at the University of Pretoria, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, Rhodes University, Fort Hare University, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and the University of Limpopo, followed suit. Many of the protesters were suspended, and others were expelled from their universities for the defilement of the university properties. Others were arrested. For example, twenty-five students who participated in the Rhodes university "FeesMustFall" movement were arrested. Dludla (2015) have reported that another twenty-three protesters were arrested at the University of Cape Town for barricading the university's main entrance with burning tyres and the disruption of peace. Sesant, Eliseev, Grootes, Koyana (2015); and Davis, Swingler and Merwe (2015) reported that 30 students were arrested during the protest at the South African Parliament on allegations relating to violation and trespassing into the parliamentary precinct. Students' protest at Wits was a reaction to the university 10.5% escalation of study fees. Journalists reported contradicting proposed percentage of increase. For instance, As Dludla (2015) puts it, the university proposed an increase in study fees of 11.5% for the year 2016. At the University of Cape Town, a 10.3% rise in student fees was intended for the year 2016. In all these universities, students sensed that high increases of study fees pose enormous dropout threat to many South African students who are coming from disadvantaged and low-income families that, because of the suggested percentage increase, may not be able to afford paying for their study fees. The protests received supports even at the international domain. An estimated 200 students assembled in front of the South Africa High Commission at Trafalgar Square in U.K (the Citizen, 2015) to show their support and harmony to the South African "FeesMustFall" campaign. Other supports to the national student campaign emerged in the form of letters sent to some South African universities. As reported by the Citizen (2015), students from School of Oriental and African Studies and University of London wrote and addressed their letters to, among other universities, the University of Cape Town, University of Witwatersrand and the Rhodes

University. Sesant et al (2015) reported that almost four-hundred academics from the variety of universities in the South African educational system praised protesters for standing for their rights. This is the right conferred in the Bill of Rights in the constitution of the Republic of South Africa that everyone has the right to be educated further and the state must make such an education accessible to the citizens of the country (The constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996). It can be deduced that the protests were used as a preventive measure against the probable dropout for the student cohort that would not afford the required study fees even the proposed increases were accepted. Despite the assertion made by the Minister of Higher Education, Dr Blade Nzimande, that the government is not in good position to assist poor students by offering a free education (Dludla, 2015), the position was altered as the national strike deteriorates, and subsequently culminated in the resolution that there should be no increase in the costs to study at the university level in 2016. In his postulation, the Wits' Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Adam Habib, has indicated that an amount of approximately R8 billion is need to pay for every student in South African universities.

2.6.3.2 Students' unpreparedness

Lack of quality education in pre-tertiary schooling has been widely observed as a drawback for students entering into the higher education institutions and a major cause to students' inability to adjust with the academic demands as well as the rise in student dropout. Letseka and Maile (2008) and CHE (2013, p. 35 and 60) attribute the South African low graduate rate and the startlingly increasing dropout rate to students' unpreparedness for higher education studies in the universities. Similarly, Mgwebi et al (2017) cited students' unpreparedness as a major dropout determinant in higher education. Vignoles and Pawdthavee (2009) suggest that the focus should be more of providing support interventions. In contrast to Vignoles and Pawdthavee's (2009, p. 1) notion of diverging the focus to facilitating the degree completion, the (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. viii) proposes a South African post-school system in which accessibility to higher education is increased, with no dead-ends to students who want to further their studies. Promoting accessibility to and widening participation in higher education for students who want to advance their studies at a higher education level poses a challenge to academic institutions. Seidman (2005, p.

8) point outs that even though ethnically diverse groups are enrolling for various programmes in large quantity within the higher education system, the rate at which they drop out continue to escalate. Referring to an increased participation as a 'mass higher education', Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt (2013, p. 165) contend that students' probability to drop out heighten, principally because the institutions' claims that students entering into the systems are satisfactorily ready for higher education become incorrect. Report from OECD (2008) presented some factors contributing to the rise in the rate of students dropping out of higher education studies, which included students' unpreparedness because of having schooled in low quality education. Complementary findings which have been revealed by a study that was contextualised in the University of Western Cape were reported in Breier (2010, p. 665) that students who obtained unsatisfactory results in their Senior Certificate subjects are more likely to fail or rather drop out of their studies than those with higher and satisfactory matric results (exemption). Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 552) also found that the likelihood of dropout incidence for students who performed excellently in high schools is less compared to those whose results are poor.

2.6.3.3 Low academic performance

A profound review of attributes associated with dropout has divulged diverse determinant causes of dropout (low academic outcomes), levels at which it emerges (individual or school/institutional) and sources of decisions to dropout out (involuntary or voluntary). Dropouts can be the result of students having been deregistered by the university should their student academic results fail to meet the university regulation requirements (involuntary attrition) or it can also take a form whereby students decide to deregister themselves, with varied intents that subsume furthering their studies elsewhere with other academic institutions and looking for jobs in the labour market (voluntary attrition). In their remark, Ozdagli and Trachter (2011, p. i) argue that some students contemplate the extent of their likelihood to succeed in their educational programmes and decide to discontinue their studies, if less likely to pass, to go and look for jobs in the labour market without having finished the programmes they were pursuing. In the same vein, the study to determine factors leading to the premature dropping out of university studies, which was conducted by Sittichai (2012, 285) found that 48% of students at Prince of Songkla University dropped out because the

university deregistered them after they performed below the regulation requirements put into place, or own deregistration by students themselves to continue studying in another academic institution.

Poor academic results are sufficiently identified in the plethora of literature as one of major causes of the student dropout occurrence in higher education system. In the study that was focused on the student dropout in the University of Western Cape, Breier (2010, p. 662) reported that 18% of 159 students dropped out because of having achieved poor academic results. Sharing their findings on student dropout decisions in Berea College with the community of interest, Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2009) reported congruent findings, which confirmed that academic competency level is a good predictor of students' behaviour that results in dropout. Speaking with the same voice, Bowers, Sprott and Taff's (2013) study that delved into predictive reasons for possible attrition at an individual level have also divulged complementary findings that supported previous postulations that poor academic achievement is the primary attribution which is directly associated with student dropout. More recently, the study (University of Washington, 2016) to predict the time it will take for students to drop out of their studies at the University of Washington have shared corresponding findings, which again admitted that academic underachievement is one of primary dropout determinants in higher education, with the first-year students being the most probable cohort to be victims of attrition. Reflective of the degree of its massiveness in education, dropout is not only a higher education problematic phenomenon, but also occurs at high school level as well. In their study to get insights about student-and institutional attributions that result in student attrition, Wood et al (2016) found that academic performance and extracurricular involvement are some of the determining variables for dropout. Even at a secondary education level, poor performance can help institutions to assess students' probability to drop out of higher education, and success. Hovdhaugen et al (2013, p. 166) argue that students who attained lower grades in secondary education are more prone to dropping out of their studies at higher education terrain than those who have achieved higher grades. This finding is recently opposed by the University of Washington's (2016) discovery that revealed that well prepared student cohort at second year showed a higher chance of dropping out from their studies (p. 3). Despite the existing widely acceptance that student dropout incidence can be caused by academic factors which also subsume low

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academic scores, Tladi (2013, p. 72) found an opposing reason that attributes examination dropout to non-academic factors, such low motivation level, absence of self-confidence and unpreparedness. An intermediate position that regards both academic and non-academic factors as attributions to student dropout is documented in Bennet's (2003) writing, positing that, amongst other plausible reasons, students' low academic performances and confidence levels determine student dropouts. Antedating studies have offered contradicting postulations, positing that student dropout is a result of either of one or more effects of various variables. An example of such preceding studies is Bean and Metzner's (1985) investigation that ended up generating a conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition. Their model theorises that the likelihood of dropout occurrence becomes greater when environmental variables are bad to students and increasingly worse during the combination of environment and academic variables. A more recent supporting position to the dogmas held by Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model regarding dropout occurrence is that of Mills (2015) which argues that when there is an amalgamation of academic expectations (for instance, low academic outcomes) that are unfulfilled as well as external life reasons (such as, relationship and financial problems), the incidence of dropout for students who are enrolled in online programmes befalls (p. 41).

While convention has it in the plentiful literature that low academic achievement is one of the primary causes of 'student dropout', variables leading to underachievement are highly varied. Heavy alcohol drinking is a form of behaviour that also accounts for worrying increased student attrition from colleges (Jennison and Johnson, 2004, p. 1) and preceding research have not yet satisfactorily dealt with it, especially its effect on early dropout (Dowdall and Wechsler, 2002).

2.6.3.4 Financial and socio-economic constraints

Competing viewpoints from proponents who examined whether or not financial limitations have an impact on students' studies are sufficiently inherent in the proliferated body of research on student dropout. As an example of major dropout foundations, the financial constraint is increasingly labelled a serious concern, along with low socio-economic limitations for many students at every level of higher education. However, Valencia (1997) contested that, arguing that diversity in financial

strengths of students is not reliable ground for students' dropouts in the school context. In support of Valencia's (1997) study, the University of Washington's (2016) inquiry about variables that cause attrition and the period at which the actual attrition occurs, found that students from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds demonstrated higher probability to discontinue their studies as opposed to those who were socio-economically underprivileged (p. 3). Contrary to Valencia's (1997) contestation, the South African higher education system has suffered operationally from violent students' struggles, which were against exorbitant costs to study between 2015 and 2016. Such students' protests became known throughout the entire country and world as "FeesMustFall" and wanted to reduce high costs associated with university studies, largely affecting students from poor financial and economic backgrounds. The operations of a range of the South African universities, such as the University of South Africa (Unisa), University of Limpopo (UL), University of Witwatersrand (Wits), and University of Pretoria (UP) were adversely affected because of "FeesMustFall" struggle. In response to the problem, R4.563 billion was spent in 2016 to support students from low-income families (Qonde, 2016, p.1).

Focusing at a postgraduate level of education, Golde's (2005, p. 669) findings became in contrary to the Valencia's (1997) assertion, indicating that 40 % of doctoral students in America do not complete their studies because of problems relating to lack of financial support. It must be featured that deficiency in financial support for certain cohort of students in higher academic institutions has been widely identified as one of large fractions of attrition causes. Although a financial problem as a factor leading to the student dropout in global higher education terrain has been extensively investigated on, the degree to which South African students from low-income families which are leaving below the poverty datum line are deprived has, until recently, been given insufficient attention (Breier, 2010, p. 657). OECD (2008) and Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya (2013) are some of the exemplary studies that revealed that students' poor socioeconomic background is one of the major factors causing student dropout in higher education landscape. Findings, which were revealed in a study (Manik, 2014) to examine variables that lead to student attrition at the University of KwaZulu-Natal uncovered that lack of finance amongst the students, pushed them out of the institution. Breier (2010, p. 657) reported that the vast majority of the financially impoverished students in the University of Western Cape in South Africa dropped out from their studies. A related research by Zewotir, North and Murray (2016) which

wanted to predict how long it will take for a student to drop out or successfully finish the degree programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal supported assertions that regard lack of financial support as factor that may also lead to student dropout or delay degree completion (p. 134).

Student dropout may also be attributed to the demographic characteristics of students. For instance, Murray (2014, p. 1) theorised that, in addition to students' gender, living conditions of students, and ages, students' financial backgrounds potentially have a causative effect on student dropout. A corresponding inference that confirms that causative effects of age demographic trait of students on dropout exists in the literature. For instance, the findings reached by Hovdhaugen et al (2013) from an inquiry into the linkages between ages and student dropout revealed that, even though older students usually have clear academic goals, economic constraints remain a threat to many of them. As indicated by Seidman (2005, p. 8), the cost of studying at a higher education level has risen and governments respond to the problem using various financial support programmes. South African examples include, inter alia, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) – loan bursary, Academic Qualification Improvement Programme (AQIP) and South African Institute of Chartered Accountants' (SAICA) student support programmes targeted at curbing student dropout (or to promote retention) and to maximise graduations rates in the field of accounting. In the United States (U.S) a huge chunk of students from low-income families receive financial aid from the 'Bill and Melida Gates Foundation' to pay for their studies (Ashburn, 2010, p. 4). The 'Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation' in the United States disburse an extensive amount of money to assist more than half of students whose families earn less than $40 000 per annum (Ashburn, 2010, p. 5). The foundation helped higher education with financial grants amounting to $178 million since 2008 and $72 million only in 2009 (p. 5), with Lumina Foundation contributing to financial aid in the sector by a total of $58 million. Competing and incompatible findings of financial constraints as a reason for student dropout are well avowed in the literature. The findings of the Sittichai's (2012) study identified financial-related problems as one of the reasons for student dropout and reported that only one of students had a financial problem and subsequently dropped out of the university studies. However, according to this finding made by Sittichai (2012), financial problem is not reported as a major influential factor for student dropout in higher education.

These findings are in parallel to Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner's (2007) conclusion drawn from a calculation of a lower bound on student dropout fraction that would be retained at Bera College irrespective of having financially supported students from low-income families. An investigation undertaken by Reisel and Brekke (2009) for estimating discrepancies in the feasibility of students to drop out of their studies in higher education amongst majorities and minorities in Norway with that of the United States (p. 697) revealed (p.705) that low family income and education are the reasons for dropout in U.S. The findings disputed those of Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2007) that financial restraints do not explicate the dropout decisions of a larger proportion of student community. Instead, they complimented the findings made by Ozdagli and Trachter (2011) which reported that financial constraints is a major problem, particularly for students from poor families which, among other characteristics, have poor socio-economic bacgrounds (p. 1). A dynamic model developed by Ozdagli and Trachter (2011) to measure the relationship between the college dropout behaviour and the family wealth reported that the cause for dropout of certain low-income students is the direct result of incompatibility between academic ability and the initial levels of the families. Other related research confirmed that poor socio-economic background contributes to student dropout in higher education institutions. For instance, the study that investigated the socio-economic gap in university dropouts (Vignoles and Powdthavee, 2009) reported that whilst three-fourths of students from lower-income backgrounds in United Kingdom (U.K) and United States (U.S) successfully complete their qualifications, one-fourth decide to drop out. Another study (2016) that explored factors that lead to attrition reported the same results and family socioeconomic background was subsumed (p. 1). Cunha, Heckman, Lochner and Masterov (2006) reported comparable findings that the dropout or inability to access higher education can be minimally attributed to family background, such as financial constraints. Based on their findings, Vignoles and Powdthavee (2009, p. 1) further predicts that students with poor financial backgrounds are more likely to drop out from university studies as compared to those who have satisfactory financial support – largely because they are usually clueless about the expenses required to complete a programme in higher education. Bennet's (2003) study that was contextualised within the field of business studies also fortified the global standpoint that financial difficulty experienced by students is a dominant measure of dropout from a course of the degree.

2.6.3.5 Learning environment

The learning environment is crucial for students at higher education and can affect their academic performances if it is not conducive for learning purposes. Nonconductive higher education environments for learning purposes may result in students dropping out of their studies. Sittichai (2012, p. 286) views learning environment as characterised by peer support, lecturers' support and assessments as well as advisors, and which may lead to attrition if not provided to students. The OECD's (2008) viewpoint that student dropout is caused by poor or lack of career guidance strengthened the need to provide an advisory role in averting the problem. Although a number of pundits who wrote on the aspect of dropout consider peer support as a pivotal intervention (Lockhart, 2004) which can improve students' academic competency level, Sitichai (2012) could not find the matching evidence that inadequate peer support can result in student attrition. In the study conducted by (Golde, 2005) to determine the role of the department and the discipline in doctoral students' dropouts, it was revealed that lack of intellectual support, communication, and trust between the student and advisor could significantly cause student attrition (p. 686). Learning environment can also include family support, such as assisting students academically. Related research proved that a significant relationship between the family educational background and dropout exists. For instance, Hovdhaugen et al (2013, p. 166), Spady (1970) and Chase (1970) affirmed that students whose families have lower educational level face a greater susceptibility to drop out of their studies than those from well-educated families. Similarly, as Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 552) contend, there is a match between students whose parents' educational level is a degree and a low incidence of withdrawal from the enrolled university programme. Breier's (2010) study also confirmed that learning environment can contribute to the student dropout in higher education institutions. The participants' responses to Breier's question of 'fit' with the student and institutional culture revealed that owing to the different students' personal backgrounds, many were unable to fit into the student and institutional culture of the University of Western Cape (UWC) (p. 665) and consequently dropped out of their studies. Murray (2014, p. 1) posited that the living conditions of students in universities may perchance have causative effects on student dropout.

2.6.3.6 Having been registered in a non-preferred field of study

Registering for academic programmes in the preferred fields of study is an important factor in precluding student dropout in higher education institution. An incompatibility between students' expectations and the field practices can also result in student dropout. The findings of Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt's (2013, p. 165) study that centred on student retention and institutional strategies showed that lack of compatibility between students' demand for education and the programmes being offered in the higher education institution contribute to the escalating students' withdrawal rate of their studies. In their study of the same phenomenon, Sittichai (2012, p. 286) also arrived at complementary conclusion that being registered in the non-preferred field of study is one of the reasons for student dropout, primarily because it affects the academic work. Another study that divulged complementary findings was Manik's (2014) study that shared that university staff guided them to enrol for programmes they did not initially intend to go for and they eventually dropped out because they did not like pursue them. Golde (2005) studied the role of the department and the discipline in dropout of doctoral students and uncovered (p. 680) that a mismatch between students' goals and practices in the field of study is another cause of student attrition. Golde (2005, p. 690) further identified and pointed out the following causes of dropout: firstly, that the doctoral students' perception of job opportunities as poor can be an influential factor to dropout (p.690); secondly, students found that the preferred ways of being a lifelong member of the field portrayed by the department could not correspond with their expectations (p. 688).

2.6.3.7 A change or break in intimate relationship

A change or disruption in a close relationship can affect student academic performance. The study on the reasons for student dropout in higher education institutions (Sittichai, 2012, p.287), found that student dropout can also be caused by a significant change or break in students' close relationships.

2.6.3.8 Inability to manage time

Time management is an important skill that distance education students must have in learning. If not well managed, students' lack of time management skill for learning can influence attrition. Correspondingly, in Sittichai's (2012) qualitative inquiry on early doctoral candidates' withdrawals from studying in Prince of Songkla University, it was found that lack of time management skill amongst students is one of the five major determinant factors of dropout. The capability to manage time in learning trajectory is, thus, particularly significant because distance education postgraduates are expected to be self-directed in learning, to plan learning pathways and to determine paces for studying. This qualitative study is looking into dropout incidences of honours postgraduates in the context of open and distance learning, with Unisa having been purposefully selected as a case university and an advanced communication research (COM4809) as a case module. The study is guided by Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory and the deficit theory. Inherent in the former is a students' self-directedness element in learning which is characterised by, among other things, time management for successful studies in distance education institutions. The latter theorises that students' learning deficiencies affect their studies and sometimes result in attrition. Although very sparse, it has been documented in the literature that students' inabilities in managing time for studies undesirably affect their performances and subsequently result in them dropping out of their educational programmes (Sittichai, 2012, p. 286). Lack of time management is a multifaceted factor which is influenced by many reasons, such as studying being employed. It is mostly a case, particularly in distance education that students enrol for educational programmes while already absorbed into the labour market and mostly unable to manage their study time appropriately as a result. A corresponding postulation was provided by Tladi's (2013) study that unveiled a vast array of reasons, which embrace employment responsibilities that often encroach on students' time to learn or result in them spending inadequate time to study, resulting in them becoming victims of attrition. This finding suggests that ODL universities, which want to reduce honours 'students' dropouts, have to, also support students by transferring skill to manage time for learning.

2.6.3.9 Ill-health

Many studies have used concepts such as 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' student dropout (Murray 2014, p. 39), 'individual' and 'institutional' dropout (Tinto, 1975), as well as student-related (intrinsic) and institutional-related (extrinsic) factors (Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos and Vergidis, 2004) to refer to distinct classes of reasons for student dropout in higher education studies. Pierrakeas et al (2004, p. 1) argue that whereas intrinsic reasons for student dropout encompasses factors, such as students' hitches emanating from studying while being employed and poor health conditions, extrinsic causes relate to tutor support, educational approach, study materials and learning methods.

Although with little documentation, the ill-heath conditions of certain students affect their studies and eventually cause them to drop out. Students with HIV/AIDS are one of the vulnerable sets, which are prone to dropout incidences before study accomplishment. The study conducted by Breier (2010) found that HIV/AIDS is also one of the causes of student dropout (p. 665). Breier's survey (p. 665), reported that while some students were dropping out because they were tested HIV positive and felt less interested to continue with their studies as a result, others were dropping out because they wanted to support their siblings whose parents died of HIV/AIDS. Another assertion that confirmed that negative effect of ill-health status can subsequently lead to student dropout is highlighted in the study conducted by Woolf, Johnson, Phillps and Phlipsen (2007, p. 681). Their study contended that ill-health results in decreased completion rates and consequently leads to student attrition. For instance, mental illness costs colleges to lose students per annum due to dropouts (O'Keeffe, 2013).

2.6.4 Experiences regarding the student dropout in higher education institutions

Part of the theory required to understand the student dropout phenomenon relates to the experiences of both students and the staff – lecturers and administrative officers in ODL environments. This was done to form a complete picture of the degree to which postgraduate student dropout is a problem in open and distance learning institutions. Preceding studies have unveiled that investigating dropout from only students' perspectives can reduce the truthfulness and dependability of the findings. As a case in point, Terentyev, Gruzdez and Gorbunova's (2015) recent study, which was

confined within the Russian University system to examine student dropout, chronicles and its root causes, has found that university administrative officers and professors are the major reasons for student dropout. This contradicts the traditional philosophy held by the deficit theory that blames students and their home contexts for their failure, including attrition, positing that they carry certain traits that limit them from producing superb academic outcomes.

The growing interest of intellectuals to investigate student dropout has culminated in studies, which put emphasis on the experiences of students and administrative officers as a way to gain insights into the attrition phenomenon in higher education. For example, the study conducted by Golde (2005) in Midwestern University has sampled four departments and explored the experiences of doctoral students who have dropped out of university studies. In support of views advocating for the inclusion of lecturers to investigate student attrition, Gruzdev (2013) contends that studies that research the dropout problem only from student's worldview fail to take into account the role of professors in enhancing insights into student dropout. Inherent in Gruzdev's (2013) postulation is that integrating different pertinent participants has the potential to divulge trustworthy findings. Hence, this study has targeted students who have dropped out of their honours postgraduate studies in ODL institutions. This decision was in consistent with other studies, which have used an integrated approach aimed at finding out the experiences of students and staff members. However, while the majority of those studies have investigated students' and staffs' experiences at an undergraduate and doctoral levels in, mostly, residential academic institutions and online learning, this study limits its focus to students' experiences and lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions of dropouts occurring at an honours postgraduate level in the ODL domain. Sittichai (2012), for example, integrated students and the staff as participants and focused at higher levels of authority, such as the Rector, Vice-Dean of the faculty of Science and Technology, the Dean of the faculty of Education and the Dean of the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Gardner's (2009) study investigated dropout of doctoral students from the perspectives of students and lecturers to augment an understanding about their familiarities with dropout and their politics.

2.6.5 Students' experiences on dropout

The findings on what students' view as reasons for dropping out of their higher education studies entail varied experiences. Hovdhaugen et al (2013, p. 167) posit that many students point out reasons for dropping out which are outside the control of the university and they include, amongst others, the unavailability of educational programmes which they want to pursue as well as the hitches met when studying while already employed.

2.6.6 Lecturers' and administrators' perceptions on dropout

Determining comments of administrative officers and academics on student dropout have been the secondary focus of numerous related studies. For example, in the study to find out why students drop out of university studies at Prince of Songkla University, Sittichai (2012) included, in addition to students, senior administrators, such as the Vice-Dean of the faculty of Science and Technology, the Dean of the faculty of Education, the Dean of the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences as well as the Rector. Findings have revealed that student dropout is the result of, among the variety of reasons, the unpreparedness caused by political unrest and poor educational background (96%); inability to adjust with the academic demands at their first-year level of study, such as being independent, educational system and residing far from home; as well as a class size of more than forty students. A survey conducted by Breier (2010) which has collected data from academics and administrative officers has found that some students were dropping out because of their poor family circumstances whereas others were able to endure until they complete their studies even if they were equally impoverished (p. 665). These findings reflect student dropout as a complex problem to understand. The views of the University of Western Cape's lecturers on what causes student dropout in the university indicated that poor 'Senior Certificate' results are the best indicator of the dropout (Breier, 2010, p. 665).

2.6.7 Challenges in dealing with student dropout

Despite the existing proliferation of studies, which have explored student dropout, ameliorating insights on the phenomenon, both conceptually and empirically, has proved to be a difficult task to fulfil and pervasive challenge that has remained hard to overcome. While many studies have made several endeavours to examine predictive dropout factors, as Wood et al (2016, p. 2) remarked, varying definitions and criteria can plausibly pose a threat to the calculation. Distinguishing students who have dropped out their studies on their own from those whom the university has deregistered owing to their failure to meet the regulated academic standards can be challenging. In the postulation of Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon (2014, p. 292 and 304), one of the challenges that has been linked to dropout is that it is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which, even if students have failed to register for more than one consecutive semesters, it becomes difficult to label such a failure as a dropout because some may have chosen to have a longer period of pause in their studies. The research that was undertaken by Vignoles and Pawdthavee (2009) has reported to have failed distinguishing between students whose studies were discontinued by the university because they could not meet the academic standards from a cohort that simply chose to drop out by themselves.

Student dropout is further found to be challenging because even when preventive measures are put in place to address it, institutions of higher learning continue to suffer from its occurrence which subsequently cause a truncated student success rate. Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 546) noted that despite the availability of different effective dropout mitigation approaches, such as ensuring that only students who have been measured competent are admitted into programmes, that the size of the class should be kept small, and that the student-lecturer ratio should be low, the challenge remains that there is paucity of literature on the impact of such approaches which relate to the delivery of university education. Compounding the issue even more, while an existing far-reaching body of literature has dwelled expansively on attrition attributes and processes and were even able to estimate the length of time which it will take for

dropout to occur, programme completion rates, a limited scope of literature was focused on these three phenomena (Scott and Kennedy, 2005). Although there are numerous scholarships, loan bursaries (such as NSFAS and Eduloan), full bursaries in South Africa (such as Thuthuka) to help finance studies for students who are learning in higher education, the dropout problem continues to be a challenge, for both students and the higher education sector. Breier (2010, p. 664) posits that the situation is caused by the mismatch between students' demand for financial assistance and the NSFAS supply of funds which do not afford to pay for full costs of studies. Reflective of the multifariousness of the dropout phenomenon, Breier (2010, p. 664) has reported that families' poverty causes student dropout, but asserted that even though the majority of students in the University of Western Cape were from impoverished families, some of them were able to complete their qualifications in large numbers. Reisel and Brekke (2009, p. 691) matched college perseverance patterns between minorities (blacks and latinos) and majorities (whites) students in colleges and universities in the United States (US) with that of the Norway. Their findings (p. 691) showed that although pre-emptive attempts have been made to control the student dropout, the graduate percentage of minority students in Norway has been less compared to that of the majorities of students in Unites States.

The 2015 South African students' "FeesMustFall" national struggle against the high costs levels to study at higher education universities materialized despite voluminous financial schemes (NSFAS, Thuthuka, etc.) available in the country to assist students to further their studies. The "FeesMustFall" struggle resulted in a substantial amount of students suspended and others exorcised from their academic institutions because of having participated in an illegal protest and having damaged the universities' properties during the struggle. This situation further expounds the extent to which the student dropout is a challenge, to both the higher education institutions and the country in particular.

2.6.8 Consequences of dropout

Dropout results in dire social consequences for both students who are victims of attrition, the society at large (Tas et al, 2013, p. 1562) and the universities (Harris, Casey, Westbury and Florida-James, 2016). It is important to address the student

dropout concern to evade experiencing its social effects. The protuberant line of research on student attrition has reported numerous consequences of dropping out from educational programmes, reflecting that a failure to thwart dropout occurrences can result in students becoming into dire situations within the society. For instance, in the previous decades, it has been asserted in the pervasive literature that there is a high likelihood for students to drop from their studies and to go to work in illegal jobs (Tas et al, 2013, p. 1652) which may eventually land them in custodies (Christle, Jolivette and Nelson, 2007, p. 325) and which embrace, among other examples, drug dealings (Mensch and Kandel, 1988); and involvements into crime (Berlin and Sum, 1988), such as being part of gangsters, than those who have successfully accomplished their educational goals. Christle et al (2007, p. 325) have identified additional dropout penalties which comprise being jobless, looking for public help (such as, begging for money and receiving social grants) and netting far less financial rewards than those who have successfully accomplished their studies. In the same vein, Mgwebi et al (2017) assert that labour markets are adversely affected by students' dropouts. Premature dropouts from studies usually cause students' financial debts and living expenses (Harris et al, 2016, p. 825).

Not only governments and students who have dropped out suffer from the dire consequences of dropout action. Previous studies have documented assertions that show that universities too encounter some financial penalties when students drop out. Owing to the fact that universities are anticipated to retain students in order to show their institutional excellences, dropouts may adversely affect future funding (Harris et al, 2016, p. 825) that, for instance, come from governments when students graduate. Up until this current era, attrition continues to harm higher education institutions (University of Washington, 2016, p. 4), the society and the government's financial muscles, demanding the state's financial contribution to deal with the unfavourable outcomes of having dropped out. As an instance, a contemporary study by Letseka and Maile (2008) reported that the South African government incur a loss of 1.3 billion amount spent on yearly basis as a financial support for students who fail to accomplish their studies. In a study to calculate the intent of college students to graduate, Raisman (2013) posits that while private universities and colleges, on average, lose correspondingly $7, 921,228 and $8,331,593 from student dropout, universities and colleges, which are publicly aided, incur a financial loss of $13,267,214. On the same

note, Mills (2015, p. 41) adds that institutions are regularly in perpetual endeavours to recruit and retain students to preclude considerable financial losses and to produce quality graduates. With the same observation, the University of Washington (2016, p. 4) also contends that despite being highly imperative, attempts which are aimed at ensuring student retention require a considerable financial spending and human capitals. The University of Washington further pointed out that failure to avoid dropout can negatively affect the institution's image and economic power (p. 4) which, in turn, may affect its operations.

Furthermore, students who have dropped out from their studies usually encounter difficulties when trying to be absorbed into the labour market than those who have accomplished the educational goals, resulting in a startling increased unemployment rate (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2008; Tas et al, 2013, p. 1562) in the country. To elude an ominous life zone which school leavers may possible find themselves hooked in, the South African government has, to that end, expanded access to technical and vocational education and training colleges (TVET) so that dropouts can further their studies. The primary aim is to train them, imparting them with knowledge, skills, abilities and positive attitudes that lead in the creation of the South African economic power and an advanced employability of such people in the labour market force (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 11).

2.7 STUDENT SUPPORT

Defined by Moore and Kearsley (2005), student support refers to the provision of counselling and guidance services, such as an administrative help and orientations to e-learning for students. Support interventions are in the paramount interests of both leaners and higher education institutions as they often condense the parameters of student attrition (Nichols, 2010, p. 95) and often result in extensive amount of money lost because ofdropout incidence if neglected (McGivney, 2004). Supportive learning context is imperative to encourage student retention and can serve as driver for student success for (Baloyi, 2013, p. 31) higher education learners, children, and youths in schools (Themane and Osher, 2014, p. 1), especially those with disabilities, who experience trauma, who come from impoverished families or who are

encountering racial effects, among other factors. Student support, mainly at first-year level, is paramount in higher education institutions (Dekker, Pechenizkiy and Vleeshouwers, 2009, p. 41). The provision of student support has been identified, years back, in Keegan's (1996) leading description of distance education as one of central characteristics that determine student success, promotes student retention or reduce student attrition. Nevertheless, some recent studies reflect that student support is not an all-encompassing condition that determines student academic success or retention. In support of this stance, the University of Washington (2016, p. 5) suggests that academic institutions which need to enrich their understandings of students' behavioural patterns that portend the timeframe it will probably take for an attrition to occur must take into cognisant that students exercise the ultimate control over whether to continue with their studies or not. This suggestion reflects some inexorable potential limitations that any form of support intervention has and the philosophy that believes that granting support services to students does not guarantee student success or retention. This view further connotes that student dropout is a complex phenomenon, one which is easy to discern, yet uneasy to combat. Rival to this competent viewpoint, this study argues that a well-developed, an all-embracing and effective student support model can fuel student retention, decrease attrition and escalate success rate. That is what the study aimed to contribute with to the existing body of knowledge on the attrition phenomenon in open and distance education environments. This is in line wide-ranging views, which indicate that responsive support interventions can lead to a decreased dropout, improved retention and success rate of the enrolled students. For instance, in a comparison of students who have received various support interventions and those who were not, Nichols (2010) revealed that those who received supports became reinvigorated and remained constant in learning while those who did not receive support interventions ended up dropping out of their studies. Regardless of the very far-reaching literature on student dropout from higher education, much is still unknown about the unresponsiveness of existing support frameworks to deal with this ubiquitous attrition challenge. Despite the identified importance of support interventions for students as contained in Nichols's (2010) findings, support interventions do not always result in positive effects. In line with this articulation, Tladi (2013) argues that the responsiveness of the counselling support intervention programme largely depends on its success to manage variables that cause low students' dissatisfaction level as well as their capabilities to curb dropout

incidence. Tladi's (2013) argument is reflective of the gap that uncovers that there is no an all-encompassing support framework that guarantee positive results. This study looks into the student attrition to understand the phenomenon and to generate a comprehensive support framework for students who are at a lower-postgraduate level.

This section on student support provides related data from the literature review to understand the student support in higher education sector better. The section is relevant since the ultimate goal of this study is to design the student support model for postgraduate students in open and distance learning institutions. In addition to diminishing student dropout, student support is also important in improving academic results, student retention and degree completion. Studies on student dropout were unable to describe best practices to address attrition of doctoral students (Golde, 2005, p. 670). However, this study focuses on the honours postgraduate level. Therefore, this section on student support presents discussions on the following types documented literature:

- understanding the concept of 'student support'
- types and nature of intervention programmes
- process to develop support framework
- Practices of student support intervention programmes in higher education
- Importance of student support for higher education institutions and students
- Communicating student support interventions to students
- Students', lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions on student support
- challenges associated with the provision of support services
- mitigation strategies

2.7.1 Understanding the concept 'student support'

This subsection is entrenched from the need to scrutinize and get some insights into the manner in which the academic community of interest understands the term 'student-support'. The quest for the right information to enhance the understanding of the term student support mirrored that there is currently no universal definition of 'student support' and many authors assert that it is an indescribable concept. In the viewpoint of Jacklin and Riche (2009, p. 736 and 738), student support is described and practised with a gamut of approaches in the higher education landscape and are

effected for diverse purposes. Other conceptions mirror student support as an elusive and a multi-layered term with multiple interpretations across the worldwide higher education system. In their assessment of the ways in which higher education institutions describe student support, Batram (2009, p. 308 and 314) found that there are varying understandings of student support with insinuations to redefine the term and the mode in which students, institutions and its staff community communicate.

This fragment of the literature section reports on the understandings derived from the related literature upon the concept of 'student support'. This discussion transitionally ensued from the discussion on the theoretical framework that is intrinsic and applicable to this study. This subcategory is fundamental for the formulation of the operational definition that ultimately reflect the view of the student support held in this study and it is derived from the conceptual descriptions existing in the body of knowledge on the same aspect.

The conceptual definition of student support services, as per the understanding of Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004, p. 56) hold a view that such services are non-academic interactions that occur between students and their higher education institutions and embrace pre-admissions, recruitment, promotion, registration, orientations, financial support, career counselling, technical support, emotional support, academic support, library support services, degree and academic record auditing. In the standpoint of Forbes-Mewett (2013, p. 182), student support encompasses services, such as financial advice, housing, counselling and language and learning support services. Perspectives on support in the contemporary rampant documentation entail several understandings, which are context-based. In the context of international higher education, student support intervention refers to every service that an institution gives to its students for ensuring their security and welfare (Forbes-Mowett and Nyland, 2008). Jacklin and Riche (2009, p. 735) propose a modification in understanding support in higher education institutions from being viewed as a reactive response towards regarding it as a proactive response in a form of supportive cultural practices and conducive environment to study. The disparity of student support desires leads to inquiries as to what type of the support is appropriate and what method is best for the support service transfer (Bartram, 2009, p. 313).

Understanding the concept 'support' principally depends upon the approach from which it is examined and the purpose for which it was designed to serve. Such approaches have been labelled as technical and holistic approaches (Smith, 2007, p. 688) and therapeutic, humanistic and instrumental approaches (Bartram, 2009, p. 313). The diverse approaches towards describing support means, it is by no fashion a simple thing to define. Henceforth, there is no universal conception of support, but multiple complementary and contradictory positions. Nonetheless, all these windows to defining support are crucial for the augmentation of different philosophies on what constitute the concept 'support'. Bartram (2009, p. 313) contended that a therapeutic approach is deep-seated from the notion that students who are in need of support to aid them to properly cope with the inevitabilities of higher education institutions are vulnerable, victims and often feel less self-assured and therefore, must be abetted. Bailey (2013, p. 144) holds a congruent standpoint that students to whom support must be directed are perceived as victims in their institution-student relations, and support in this circumstance becomes necessary as a remedial measure rather than a personal developmental tool. Support services that are targeted at addressing the essentials of the victimised students are social supports (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart, 2007) and include, inter alia, academic support, financial help and student counselling. Lockhart (2004) also reported that lack of social and academic supports is some of the principal causes to student dropout problem in higher education studies. In divergence with the therapeutic school of thought, Bartram (2009, p. 310) theorises that the humanistic position to understanding support in higher education precincts, is inherent in the institutional cultural belief that students require assistance on their academic demands and that tutors are the ones to execute such a support provision mandate. The humanistic view regards higher education institutions as the product manufacturers and students as the consumers, and the success of academic support viewed from this angle is reliant on intimacy, interaction and a good relationship between the student and the tutors (Smith, 2007, p. 688).

2.7.2 Types and the nature of student-supports in higher education institutions

One of the objectives, which this study wants to attain, was to determine the types of student-support interventions available in the broader higher education sector. To

establish the basis for this, this part of the literature provides some of important information generated from the existing body of related knowledge about the aspect of student support in the wider context of higher education. The preceding subsection of this chapter was delineated to the variety of descriptions on student support as inversely defined by the engrossed academic community who authored on the phenomenon. The idea behind such descriptions was to reveal the existing conceptual definitions of the student support facet and to, subsequently, formulate the empirical definition that becomes the view of this study on the aspect of student support within the higher education sector.

Therefore, this section is on the discussion about the existing kinds of support interventions that are implemented in higher education institutions to assist students to overcome dropout problem.

Ample evidence of types of support interventions, which are offered to students who are furthering their higher education studies both, locally and internationally, have been plentifully documented and stressed in the all-embracing literature. A myriad types of student supports palpable in the higher education literature incorporate psychological support, emotional mentoring (Pearson, 2012, p. 187), practical, social and informational support (Ramsay, Jones and Barker, 2007, p. 252-253), technological support (Bailey, 2013), lecturer, tutorial, discussion classes and counselling support. A recent study (Manik, 2014) which explored University of KwaZulu-Natal's students' perceptions to determine a myriad support services they need concluded that psychological (counselling to reduce personal and academic-related stresses) and physiological supports (like, food to reduce hunger) are some of the important support interventions students need to minimize dropout. Bailey (2013, p. 144) asserts that the technological support has infiltrated higher education domain and resulted in an increased need for technological competency transfer to the student population as well as a transformed support service delivery that encompasses e-learning and virtual environments executed by, amid others, lecturers and libraries. Ramsay et al (2007, p. 252-253) focused limitedly on the first-year students in exploring the social companionship, practical, emotional and informational (communication) support to determine and understand the amount of support services received, sources of such support services and the degree to which students are

satisfied with the support offered to them. The non-availability of needed support result in detriment effect and stress to students, which then lead to an incapability to become compatible with the higher education contextual demands and, subsequently, dropout. For instance, a failure to offer social and emotional support to students when they are profoundly indeed of them causes homesickness – a feeling of loneliness and abandonment (Vergara, Smith and Keele, 2010, p. 1499). Tajalli et al (2010, p. 100) define social support in academic world as being responsive to the needs of students by taking care of them through ensuring that they are comfortable with the educational setting and its demands and assisting them to realise a high level of self-esteem. Support interventions usually come from the variety of sources. In their view, Vergara et al (2010, p. 100) argue that students' supports come from lovers, friends, colleagues, physicians, families as well as community organisations.

Social support is a broad concept that encompasses the variety of interventions, which students need for adjusting with the higher education institutions' expectations. Among those kinds of social supports are the peer, teacher and academic support (Wang and Eccles, 2012). The descriptions of these three social supports are based on the sources from which they come, that is, who provides them. Offering emotional and psychological support is regarded as one key responsibilities of every staff member in the university, be they administrative or academic staff (Simpson, 2006; Simpson; 2008; Tinto, 2006; Pearson, 2012, p. 187).

In addition to these sources of support for students in higher education institutions, lecturers, tutors, administrative officers executing support functions in academic institutions and governmental institutions or departments are some of the sources from which student support is offered. Within a single university, support services may be grouped based on which department, directorate or level of authority provide and administer such services as well as the platform used for the delivery of support services. For example, the Course Design and Features category support students with regard to course design and the delivery of content; departments and colleges may support students through course design and technical services, instructional support services, academic services centres, and services provided through student organisations; and University may offer support such as awards, scholarships, library

resources, retention and success programmes, orientation programmes, using technology and the general support services (Stewart et al, 2013, p. 295).

(Moore and Kearsley, 2005) posit that internal factors, such as students' academic competence, satisfaction with the course or programme and a sense of belonging to the university; and external factors, such as gender and financial backgrounds (McGivney, 2004; Mills, 2015, p. 42) influence graduation rates. Families are also labelled invaluable in supporting their children and relatives through parental guidance and financial support. In a related study Simmons (2013, p. 71) found that grandparents are also helpful in the support provision for their nephews so that they are able to succeed compatibly in meeting the arduous higher education potentials during the switch from secondary schools to tertiary education zone. In response to students' difficulties which are encountered during the transition from pre-tertiary schooling to a tertiary level, the CHE (2013, p. 152) recommended that the transition strategy must be developed and be led at national level by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). CHE (2013, p. 152-153) reflected that a temporary financial and administrative support for higher education institutions is essential for the execution of the proposed migration strategy which should incorporate students, professional bodies, support for and liaison with the institutions, financial and administrative planning. Although most of perspectives on what constitute a student support comprehend it as a functional activity, other views argue that it is a myth that acts as a symbolic function that build reality in higher education and enable the shared meanings. Myers (2011, p. 745) claims that student support is a social ritual that only indicate that students are cared for and recognised.

Albeit Ramsay et al (2007) concentrated on four types of student support in their research, several other types have been discussed in the profusion of the related literature, indicated as pivotal in enabling students, not only first year, to adjust with the academic life in its entirety. Student support in higher education system fall into the following clusters (Belot, Canton and Webbink, 2006, p. 264):

- Basic grant: When paralleled with the other three categories the basic form of support is a mammoth support category, which is contingent on situation, such as living away from home or at home with parents and spouses.

- Supplementary grant: This form of support is reliant on family variables, such as the income netted in the family

- Loan: In this form of a support, students are granted financial assistance to be reimbursed to the source within a particular timeframe given after the accomplishments or even when they did not complete their qualification programmes. It is commonly used to assist students who did not meet the required academic achievements, but who are needy for financial support to further their higher education.

- In-kind support: This type of support is designed to assist students with unpaid transport in the course of the week and on weekends and it is synonymously referred to as the *travel pass.*

Stewart et al (2013, p. 294) identify the variety of student support types which are pertinent in aiding higher education students to match the standards and expectations of their academic institutions and those are as follows:

- Support during Admissions and registration periods
- Academic counselling (career guidance)
- Induction to the University
- Induction to learning online
- Teaching and learning (academic) support services
- Awards and scholarship programmes
- Support with regard to using technology and computing resources
- Library services
- Career placement
- Articulations and transfer from other institutions

The study conducted by Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis and Lopez (2011, p.158) on the guidance offered to students in a course has identified three support interventions to respond to students' needs, and those are technical, peer and instructional support. Desa, Yusooff and Kadir (2012) advise that a good, reliable and prolific type of support to deal away with various students' concerns is to urge them to communicate with their faculty members during and even after classes. In their view, Vergara et al (2010, p. 1499) posit that social and emotional supports are some of the foremost student

support needs which higher education institutions have to attend to, and are caused by, among other factors, homesickness –feeling loneliness. What even stress more other than homesickness are factors such as psychological, cultural, political, financial and academic demands and inability to speak a language of people whose culture students are not familiar with (Vergara et al, 2010, p. 1499; Pan, Wong, Chan, and Joubert, 2008). Within the borders of the South African education and training system, particularly in the college terrain, the student support range offered involve career counselling, social support, academic support, helping students to obtain bursaries and finish their programmes, helping them to find the relevant companies to do the practical element of their studies, and providing them with an aid in searching for employments following the successful completion of the programmes (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 17-18).

To address the social support need of South African college students, sports and recreation facilities must be put into place (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p.17). Wingate (2007, p. 398) advocates that a pre-induction can be a useful type of student support, offered between the admission period and the outset of the term. A practical epitome of a pre-induction initiative is Bournemouth University's web-based module that is taught in the School of Design, Engineering and Computing and was entrenched from the following four reasons:

- To condense the overload of information during the actual induction programme
- To relieve worry and involve students at an early
- To arrange important and meaningful series of activities for the Induction Week
- To urge students to reflect on learning processes (Keenan, 2005).

In order for students to successfully adjust with the higher education institutions' life, Desa et al (2011, p. 366) concurs with the notion to develop and implement an orientation programme during the first months in the academic institutions. The manner in which higher education institutions deliver education depends on many factors, which, among them, encompass blended learning. This form of learning support involves the use of various delivery modes, both traditional and modern pedagogies. The implementation of a blended learning business model leads to efficient and effective positive learning experiences (Garrison and Hakuna, 2004, p. 95).

The other type of support executed in higher education institutions is the bridging course, which is a pre-admission support intervention that students first undergo in order to improve admissibility so that they match the required admission standards. This form of support is popularly practised in various higher education institutions across the globe. It addresses the problem of, among others, student unpreparedness that is a result of inadequate foundational basis offered by schools below the post-school education and training system. In a computer-mediated learning domain, Heift (2006) avows that the first-year students need support more than intermediary students do. This instructional support comprises responsive communications such as tailored remarks and constructive feedbacks (Lee et al, 2011, p. 162). In their study on whether the bridging programmes are effective or not, Ssempebwa, Eduan and Mulumba (2012, p. 140) found that the programmes are effective in preparing students for higher education. It is central to any South African post-school academic institution to provide support to those students who are insufficiently prepared for further studies through a number of programmes including the foundational and mentoring programmes.

Numerous programmes in higher education institutions are developed and implemented to support students. The academic qualification improvement programme (AQIP) which is implemented in the University of South Africa (Unisa) is an epitome of a support programme, albeit focused on postgraduate students employed permanently in the university. Postgraduate students enrolled for Masters and doctoral programmes are legible to apply for this support programme. If their applications have been found successful, students admitted to Master's programmes temporarily leave coming to work for a period of two years to focus on their studies. Doctoral students are given three years to complete their doctoral programmes. Postgraduate students using this support programme have to appoint some on a provisional basis with the right qualification for replacement during the period of study.

With regard to students with disabilities in the South African post-school system, the department of higher education and training set a goal to provide them with support through managing information, policy formulation and support, conducting disability-

oriented research and providing the required resources to higher education institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013, p. xv).

Support for students in higher education has taken the variety of shapes and are given to various needy students. Many students from poor families and socio-economic backgrounds experience economic barricades to access higher education and, as a result, many countries across the world have introduced financial schemes to address students' financial challenge. Curtailing a financial barricade to access expensive higher education demands a financial attention and support directed to students who, otherwise, would have not been able to further their studies in higher education institutions (Opheim, 2006, p. 277). As for academically deserving South African students seeking monetary support in the higher education domain, the South African Government established a National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 1999 for study loans and bursaries (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 33) to assist students financially, particularly those who are socio-economically deprived. Opheim (2006, p. 277) studied the effects of the Norwegian student support initiative (Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund) by examining the number and the opus of students offered support prior to and after the changes, and the amount of resources which the state allocate for the provision of support services between 2001 and 2004, and the findings showed that the capacity of resources allocated have been expanded because ofa rise in the number of students getting support interventions.

One of the foremost support interventions, which higher education students who are away from their home need, whether local or international, is the assistance with accommodation. Coles and Swami (2012, p. 87) accommodation for students studying away from homes must be provided at an early stage of adjustment. Other types of student support that Coles and Swami (2012) consider imperative for the inclusion in the early student support package for student adjustment is the course provision, student union gatherings and societies which are crucial in offering students with opportunities to socially assimilate with others and swiftly adapt to new experiences.

Within the scholastic discussion of student support phenomenon, communication emerges as both a form of student support and a mode of support delivery. Viewing it

as a type of support, Simmons (2013, p. 71) attests that communicating with the faculty aided the African American men student category to become and remain attuned and focused towards completing their degrees.

2.7.3 Development of student support programmes in higher education

While the previous subsection of this chapter dwelled on the identification and classification of student support for HEIs, this section concentrate on the development of a student support programme in the higher education sector. It provides the detailed views of other proponents who wrote about the aspect of how the student support programmes are developed in the context of higher education. It also serves as a foundational literature on which to build up this study, addressing the ultimate goal of this study – to develop student support model for the open and distance learning institutions. This quest for a comprehensive student support model, although for lower-postgraduate students in the context of ODL institution, is a recognised gap in the distance education-centred literature. Simonson (2006) avows that the concomitant rise in the use of the pervasive online education facilities, continue to make theory development in distance education studies a serious concern. Simonson (2006, p. vii) further stresses that in spite of the variety of theories in the distance education, there is still no all-encompassing model for instructional designers and researchers. It is for this reason that this undertaking has become crucial to fill the existing research gap that calls for responsive student support model.

Research stressed the issue of support model development in higher education institutions and mirror that every student support initiative is developed to serve a particular purpose. It is generally acknowledged that the initiative must be responsive to students' needs. Desa et al (2011, p. 368) found that the attitudinal and environmental acculturative stresses of international postgraduate students need to be addressed and propose that when developing the intervention programme, an accentuation should be placed more on these two sources of stress. Various proponents who authored on the same phenomenon of the development of the student support intervention, such as the learning design concur with the implicit view that the intervention programme is substantial.

In their suggestion, Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004, p. 57) have asserted that higher education institutions offering distance education should respond to the concomitant rise in the number of students furthering their studies by developing an effective user-friendly and collaborative system to foster student support services. Addressing the e-learning virtual environment demarcated within the frame of transactional distance theory to inform learning design, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009, p. 7) postulate that it is significant to develop a learning design that efficaciously addresses distinct students' needs and that perfectly respond to different learning contexts such as at home, workplace and classroom. Benson and Samarawickrema (2009, p. 7) further articulate that higher education institutions formulate polices, develop their models, procedures and learning management systems that have an impact upon the student support. Numerous gurus researching on student dropout have proposed the variety of student support models that can help institutions of higher learning to thwart student attrition from occurring. A typical epitome of the model developed to serve as a student support framework in higher education is Ozdagli and Trachter's (2011) dynamic model of educational choice, which is designed to explore the correlation between the household wealth and the college dropout behaviour. MyUnisa which is used at the University of South Africa for exchanging communication between students and the variety of university structures is a typical instance of learning management system used in higher education institutions to offer communication support to students. It is a technological pedagogy designed for the facilitation of communication for both teaching and learning purposes.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness and the success of every design require a particular set of skills, such as literacy and technological skills. Benson and Samarawickrema (2009, p. 7) noted other influences as the access issues, learning supports, whether the staff and students have the necessary skills to use the relevant technology as well as whether they are ready or willing to apply such technologies.

Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 102) suggest that, if the teaching faculty wants to develop an effective support system, it should be the result of a collective effort of a team constituted by a course design specialist who will help with the course design, media expert who will be responsible with the technical development of course materials, and the lecturers who will be the content provider.

Within the virtual online environment, Lee et al (2011, p. 161) assert that the type of student support being planned should take the nature of students available in the academic institutions into consideration since students are different in many respects and require different types of support interventions. It is noticeable that developing a student support intervention for higher education students has recently been one of the exercises incessantly embarked on by the higher education institutions. Processes to design intervention programmes vary from one academic institution to the other. For instance, the University of Manchester's School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences introduced and implement indicative tests for first-year students doing biology, Chemistry, English, Mathematics and Physics to determine students' weaknesses, if students have to undertake a specific pre-requisite module for study, as well as the degree of readiness of pharmacy students undertaking the course (Sharif, Gifford, Morris and Barber, 2007, p. 215).

The development of support strategy for higher education international students must take into cognisance that adjusting magnificently and successfully with complex academic settings and their demands is a long jagged journey that require a plenty of time and should be developed in the university structures to assist student to cope with challenges (Coles and Swami, 2012, p. 87).

2.7.4 Support frameworks for higher education students

Student dropout has been studied using the variety of theoretical frameworks, such as an integration of social perspective on student retention and organisational theory perspectives (Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt, 2013). The plethora of literature contains several support models have been developed to attempt addressing student dropout in higher education institutions. Typical examples comprise the following models:

2.7.4.1 A framework of student support for learning

In their study that was based on the relationship between the students' perceptions of support intervention, online source satisfactions and learning achievements, Lee et al (2011, p. 158) developed a framework of student support in e-learning. The aim of their study was to develop a student framework for online learning. Their framework comprises three significant types of student support interventions – those are instructional, technical and peer support.

Table 2.5: A framework of student support for learning
Source: Adapted from Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis and Lopez (2011)

Student Support for Learning		
Instructional Support	**Peer Support**	**Technical Support**
(from instructors, TAs, etc.)	(from other students)	(from instructors, TAs, technical staffs, etc.)

2.7.4.2 Integrated Student Service Processes Model (SSPM)

Whereas myriad student frameworks are centred in distance education scope, very few are on traditional higher education institutions that are characterised by face-to-face interactions between students and instructors. Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) propose an integrated Student Service Processes Model (SSPM) to develop programmes and processes, which are meant for the delivery of student support services in both contemporary and conventional teaching and learning pedagogies. In their proposed SSPM, they identified five fundamental junctures of student support services, which are, to mention them, learner intake, intervention, transition, support, measurement of effectiveness (p. 58). These proponents argued that different strategies could be developed for each phase. For example, in the learner intake phase, support components that are essential for inclusion into the strategy may embrace financial assistance, helping student to register, using information and communication technology, admission, pre-enrolment diagnostic tests and orientation (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004, p. 58).

2.7.4.3 Student support framework for transition

Wingate (2007, p. 391) have developed a student framework that is aimed at assisting first-year students in their transition from high schools to universities and to enable them to fully comprehend what is required of them at the university level. In the framework, Wingate (2007) posits that the first-year student framework is all about developing academic skills to study at the university in their transition from schools to universities so that they are able to adjust with the nerve-wracking academic life. Through the proposed framework, Wingate wanted to make instructors and the university managements to be aware that various existing student support models have been, to a greater degree, dependent upon the traditional deficiency model and deal with students' apparent academic difficulties, resulting in those frameworks claiming very little positive outcomes. To this point, Wingate's assertions reflect that the current frameworks for students who are entering into the higher education level, have not been fully achieving their goals. Ingrained from this philosophical position, Wingate suggests that an all-encompassing subject-specific approach to impart all students with skills to learn in higher education institutions is required. While Wingate (2007)'s framework limits its focus to first-year students only, this study wants to establish a comprehensive student support model for lower-postgraduate students who are furthering their studies with open and distance learning institutions. Another differentiating characteristic that makes this study unique from Wingate's framework as well as the proposed holistic subject-specific approach is that this study wants to develop an all-embracing support framework that is not only focused on skills to learn at higher education domain, but also other types of necessary support interventions such as counselling, social, academic and financial. This study argues that support frameworks that have employed to curb the dropout problem have not been responsive.

Wingate (2007)'s framework is therefore intrinsically significant and has been one of the influential model that has instigated the undertaking of this study. Table 2.6 (Framework for the coherent and comprehensive development of learning) presents Wingate's (2007) framework for transition:

Table 2.6: Framework for the coherent and comprehensive development of learning
Source: Adapted from Wingate's (2007) framework for transition

Framework for the coherent and comprehensive development of learning			
Objectives	Context	Agent	Methods
Students to gain awareness of conceptions of learning and knowledge in discipline	Pre-induction course Induction course	Online materials Subject and personal tutors	Case studies with relevant questions (↔induction 1) Self-profiling questionnaire (↔ induction 2) Small group discussions based on case studies and/or reports by second-year students (↔ pre-induction 1) Introduction to reflective tools (↔ pre-induction 2; ↔ personal tutorial 2)
Students to – assess their abilities as learner – set goals and targets – plan action – monitor and evaluate progress	Personal tutorial	Personal tutor (online materials)	1. Small group discussions based on case studies and/or reports by second-year students (↔ pre-induction 1) 2. Introduction to reflective tools (↔ pre-induction 2; ↔ personal tutorial 2) 1. Regular discussions between tutor and student 2. Reflective tools: self-assessment questionnaires, action planning forms, diaries, portfolios and progress evaluation forms (↔ induction 2) 3. Personal tutors encouraging students to observe processes of knowledge construction in the classroom (↔ classroom 1) 4. Personal tutors encouraging students to take an active role in classroom and to monitor this role via reflective tools (↔ personal tutorial 2, ↔ classroom 2)
Students to – approach information in a focused and critical manner – evaluate existing Knowledge – synthesise different sources into a coherent argument express own voice	Classroom	Subject tutors (online materials)	1. Tutors demonstrating, modelling critical approach to information and construction of knowledge (↔ personal tutorial 3) 2. Teaching approach that encourages students to think critically and debate (↔ personal tutorial 4) 3. Assessment methods that facilitate students' development into knowledge 'creator' rather than recipient

Note: The links are indicated with the symbol ↔.

Within the parameters of social support, Sirin et al (2013, p. 202) developed a Support Networks Measure to examine the levels of perceptions of the immigrant youths on academic and emotional support from the social network in 15 specific areas.

2.7.5 Mitigation strategies of student dropout causes

Grappling with strategies to prohibit student dropout is a worldwide concern amongst Universities (Zewotir, North and Murray, 2015, p. 134) and other forms of higher education institutions (Di Pietro and Cutillo, 2008, p. 546) and it has been regarded as a key responsibility of every higher education in order to improve student throughput and retention (Mills, 2015, p. 41). This has stemmed from a widely recognised importance of student support intervention across the global education system. As remarked by Lee et al (2011, p. 158), support intervention in students' learning trajectories is essential to ensure that they have positive learning experiences. Since ensuring student retention, success and curbing dropout has had been research phenomena of renewed interests for many scholars, literature has, as a result, accumulated various proposed methods to expound and to address them. From a long-standing account about dropout and the need to retain students, a vast array of proposed mitigation measures can be traced back to the 1970s with the ground-breaking work of Vincent Tinto. Tinto (1975) developed an approach to demonstrate the dropout behaviour of students, which emphasises the quality of interaction between students and the university. In the Tinto's proposed model, the ultimate interaction between students and the institutional experiences (the academic element and interaction with lecturers as well as the social element and interaction with peers) is the direct result of their first-level motivation which is built upon their knowledge of pre-tertiary schooling; family background attributes, such as the parents' educational status as well the individual characteristics which comprise age, gender and competence level.

Even though suggestions to address or rather control the mammoth dropout concern in the international higher education system were conceived numerous decades ago, recent studies still reflect the basic need to quest for responsive dropout mitigation strategies. For instance, Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt's (2013, p. 165) comparative observation of available mitigations for dropout between the European

and American universities, showed that European universities have exerted little effort to mitigate student dropout in relative to their American counterparts. Mitigations vary according to dropout causes. In the view of Vignoles and Pawdthavee (2009, p. 2), different policy solutions are put into place to address various causes of dropout in higher education institutions. There are many negative effects that individual dropout students, higher education institutions, and society can experience and are copious in the plethora of literature. For instance, Seidman (2005, p. 8) asserts that dropout results in forfeiture of resources by the student, society and the institution of higher learning in which the student was enrolled. In recognition of its negative effect on students and the society at large, Hovdhaugen et al (2013, p. 165) propose that higher education institutions have to come up with innovative and effective plans to predict student dropout and to classify influences leading to it (Dekker, Pechenizkiy and Vleeshouwers, 2009, p. 41). Hovdhaugen, Frolich and Aamodt's (2013) assertion serves as an epitome of possible mitigation strategy. Even though there are claims in the plethora of literature which argue that the existing student support frameworks have been ineffective (for instance, Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p.17), others were found effective. For example, the Italian university system reduced student dropout by changing the content, timeframe and the structure of the degree into a more flexible programme, which resulted in a change in student behaviour and, subsequently, a decrease in dropout risk level (Di Pietro and Cutillo, 2008, p. 546 and 554). Closely parallel to the Di Pietro and Cutillo's (2008) proposed type of student support to reduce an attrition problem, Mills (2015) recommends some potential mitigation strategies for students who are enrolled in online courses, and those are as follows (p. 41 and 42):

- Firstly, that institutional pedagogies over which higher education institutions teach online courses through learning management systems (LMS) must be redesigned,
- Secondly, that the lecturers' role ought not to be mere presentations of educational contents from study materials, but to execute a development and mentoring role,
- Thirdly, learning management systems should be designed with the purpose of curbing student dropout in mind,

- Fourthly, academic institutions should measure the student's extent of emotional intelligence (Vergara, Smith and Keele, 2010, p. 1503); Ghararetepeh, Safari, Pashaei, Razaei, and Bagher Kajbaf, 2015), pliancy and presentation of learning materials - what Moore (1993) refers to as 'instructional programme structures' in his theory of transactional distance (p. 42).

Further to the proposed solutions to curb student dropout, Murray (2014) asserts that the 'competing risk methodology' which is aimed at modelling the decision-making process, and in which there is a set of socio-demographic variables that make students to either drop out or remain studying until they complete their studies can serve as a mitigation strategy. This can enable higher education institutions to marshal their academic and other types of support interventions to better address the attrition problem and keep students enrolled (University of Washington, 2016, p. 5).

To deal with the attrition concern at the first-year level, Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 546-547) contend that by incorporating internship programmes into the university curricular and grounding the institutions' admission requirements on high academic performances of students, including those who are coming from poor low-income families, can ensure positive dropout mitigation strategy. Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 546) and Sittichai (2012) further found complementary findings that indicated that the lower the student-lecturer ratio and the smaller the class size in higher education institutions the higher the chance to mitigate student dropout. It has been revealed that determining students' satisfaction level on the programme is imperative in inhibiting or dropping the student attrition level. The comparison made by Levy (2007, p. 185) on perseverance in e-learning courses and dropouts of students established that the degree to which students are satisfied with e-learning can help predict the degree to which they drop out of courses offered online. Levy (2007, p.185) found that students who had low satisfaction level on e-learning courses dropped out as a result, while those with higher satisfaction level persisted until they complete their studies.

Students' ability to integrate into the academic and social aspects of the university is fundamental in precluding dropout and the rejuvenation to persist with the studies. In the assertion presented by Murray (2014, p. 1), the degree to which students are able to interact with both the faculty and lecturers (academic variable) as well as with extracurricular activities and their peers (social variable) can help the university to determine students' probability to drop out or to persevere with their studies. Dropout,

in the understanding of Ferreira (2006), can also be the result of negative relationship between students and their supervisors, and can be mitigated in terms of Pearson's (2012, p. 187) assertion that it is necessary to build a more positive student-lecturer relationship to circumvent attrition and to encourage student retention and degree completion rates. Numerous other mitigation strategies on student dropout have been suggested in order to lower the rate at which student drop out from university studies. In this study, the following examples were identified:

2.7.5.1 Political unrest as a cause of student dropout

Very little has been documented on how to mitigate dropouts relating to political unrests in the higher education terrain. An instance that was found in the literature was that the political instability as a cause for student dropout has been mitigated through the financial support for strengthening security. For example, the government supported the Prince of Songkla University with security facilities, such as CCTV, fiber optics systems, and network. Within the South African university parameters, the national students' "FeesMustFall" protest that occurred in 2015 and 2016 was dealt with by financing qualifying students, particularly first-year students, who were economically deprived. NSFAS was allocated more funds to support financial needy students. Commenting on the South African popular "FeesMustFall" protest, Mgwebi et al (2017) suggest that the problem of student dropout can be successfully be dealt with by involving researchers and experienced policy makers who have considerable level of expertise and judgement.

2.7.5.2 Unpreparedness and lack of academic support as causes to dropout

Being underprepared for higher education studies has been pointed out as one of the prime attributions leading to student dropout for, largely, first-year students. Much of the literature has dealt with dropout at undergraduate level than the postgraduate level. The current body of literature on dropout have presented copious corresponding postulations and research findings, which have blamed a high school level for producing less qualified and unready students to study at higher education institutions. Although not all, as posited by Wingate (2007, p. 393), many first-year students experience serious challenges during their transitions from high schools to the university system because they lack autonomy and self-learning skills. As an

exemplary case, the University of Washington's (2016) research that wanted to predict dropout based on students' attributions of dropout have found that many first-year students drop out from their studies as a result of, inter alia, being underprepared. To uproot the problem in the South African post-school system, Naude and Bezuidenhout (2015, p. 222) pointed out that South African universities have been using a continuum of support intervention strategies which subsume, inter alia, offering students with foundation and bridging courses as well as academic support. A far-reaching review of literature for creating the foundation of this study has sufficiently divulged that bridging courses to prepare students to cope with the academic demands, to retain them, to improve their academic achievements and to prevent them from becoming victims of attrition have, for the past few decades, been a commonly used form of support for unprepared undergraduate students. For instance, at Prince of Songkla University, foundation subjects, English as well as a range of other options of modules to choose from, are also offered as bridging courses to help students meet their academic expectations and to curtail the dropout (Sittichai, 2012, p. 287) problem. A more contemporary preventive support strategy, as mentioned by Naude and Bezuidenhout (2015, p. 222), represents a shift in focus, moving from classifying students' learning deficiencies and curbing them through the provision of bridging modules into developing staff and the institution. As exemplary cases to this shift in focus, the University of South Africa has introduced and continue to implement a mentoring programme to develop academics, particularly those who fall under the college of human sciences and who are mostly involved in first-year courses, and the young academic programme for academics who are less than 35 years old drawn yearly from the entire staff community. These programmes have been established to equip young academics with competency to enable them deal with a variety of problems while their executing instructional role. Another conventional type of mitigation strategies to combat student dropout for underprepared learners is through the expansion of scope of programme offerings. An analysis of related literature revealed that having a broader repertoire of educational programmes within the university is further confirmed to be one of the effective dropout mitigation strategies. As an epitome, Di Pietro and Cutillo (2007, p. 547) reported that the Italian university system's 2001 reform recommended, as part of the dropout prevention, that a wider range of qualifications must be offered in Italy's universities to encourage students to remain studying and improve completion rates. Dekker, Pechenizkiy, and

Vleeshouwers (2009, p. 41) posit that universities should identify the so called 'risk group' as early as possible to minimize or probably curtail student dropout. 'Risk group', as described by Dekkert et al (2009, p. 41), refers to the student cohort which may be successful, but need specific intervention to help them succeed.

Vignoles and Pawdthavee (2009, p. 1) assert that if it is true that the disadvantaged students enrolling for higher education degrees are more likely to drop out, then the focus must shift from just widening access to higher education into facilitating the accomplishment of the registered degrees. A complementing finding on the notion of putting more attention to the facilitation of degree completion, Golde (2005, p. 686) suggests that the dropout of doctoral students can be mitigated by ensuring a positive advisor-student relationship which is characterised by regular intellectual support, interaction and trust. Although mitigation strategies, such as the use of bridging courses are important to reduce the dropout attributed to student unpreparedness, other universities were reported not have no mitigation strategy put in place for the doctoral students' unpreparedness. For instance, the Midwestern University had no form of support for the unprepared doctoral students coming from poor educational background (Golde, 2005, p. 685) to reduce the gap.

In the forthcoming section, the discussion focuses on documented mitigation strategies for dropouts that are influenced by lack of counselling support as well as lack of career guidance for students.

2.7.5.3 Lack of counselling/career guidance as a cause of student dropout

While the preceding discussion dealt with academic support interventions for dropouts of students who are underprepared for higher education, this section is limited to how counselling as a form of student support can be used to address the dropout challenge. In addition to offering bridging courses as has already been discussed, mitigation strategies such as counselling advices with more information on the variety of available programmes (Di Pietro and Cutillo, 2007, p. 547), best learning pedagogies, decision-making and a skill to manage time are all essential to address student dropout in higher education institutions (Lockhart, 2004). Manik's (2014) study to determine reasons for dropout at UKZN reported that certain considerable student

cohort dropped out of the university mainly because they were not fully aware of myriad choices of educational programmes and had limited knowledge about those programmes and, compounding that problem even further, they were not provided counselling. Engrained from this finding, it is clear that career guidance is fundamental if universities want to achieve a decreased attrition fraction. In the view of Pearson (2012, p. 187), the duties and the responsibilities of the counsellor for students conducting research for higher degrees and their supervisors includes all components of organisational, social and mentoring support. As claimed by Pearson (2012, p. 187), this ensures an increased students' satisfaction level on the degree pursuit. Subsequently, when students' satisfaction level escalates, the possibility to retain (evade dropout incidence) students in their studies also heightens (Levy (2007, p. 185). Studies into reasons for student dropout phenomenon have cited students' negative perceptions on the future job opportunities as a factor causing attrition (Golde, 2005). To circumvent the attrition for students who hold negative perceptions about the job market available in the fields they are studying, Golde (2005, p. 696) advises that university departments must be in position to offer comprehensive information in advance to students with discerning questions. A similar dropout mitigation strategy was suggested to the Italian university system to enable students to take informed decisions that all universities in Italy must organise, conduct orientation sessions, and organise tutorial classes (Di Pietro, 2007, p. 547).

In order to mitigate dropout for which students attribute to reasons that are beyond the control of the university, such as learning while studying and wanting to pursue programmes which are not offered in the university, a closer contact between students and their lecturers is needed (Hovdhaugen and Aamodt, 2009).

The study done by Murray (2014) on factors that affect student dropout and graduation rates at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in South Africa revealed that helping students with accommodation and finance expedite their programme completion and prevent the possible dropout for certain group of students. Another strategy to preclude student dropout is through improving student involvement by means of enhancing commitment to peers, teachers and the school (Cabus, 2015, p. 599). It has been recognised in the plethora of related studies dealing with dropout facet that some students experience hitches during the transition period from a particular lower

level of education to the next higher one and, consequently drop out from their educational programmes. On this note, Cabus (2015, p. 599) shares one of preclusive practices of Dutch for learners transiting from pre-vocational school to vocational school, stating that the Dutch follows at-risk learners with higher probability to drop out during the summer, go over admission process and transfer a file entailing information about the learner, and that, ultimately result in vocational school getting better.

As a conclusive remark, Manik (2014) suggested that an institution should enter into an engagement with students to learn and understand their support needs if they are to address the student dropout concern. This recommendation supports the philosophical standpoint held by the Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance that theorises that a dialogue between the students and the institution is necessary to reduce the transactional distance. Manik (2014) investigated causes of dropout at the UKZN and reported several causal variables, which encompass, inter alia, lack of finance, career derailment, and lack of counselling support.

2.7.6 Practices of student support intervention programmes in higher education

This section of the study discusses, with evidence from the related review of literature, the higher education institutions' different implementations of their student-oriented support programmes. It follows the preceding section of the literature review chapter that have discussed mitigation strategies in the arena of higher education. The information presented in previous sections was garnered by means of a traditional (narrative) review. This discussion about the practices of support programmes in higher education institutions has been possible using desktop review to determine the available support programmes in universities. Hence, different websites were browsed into in quest for support programmes, which universities have for supporting their students.

2.7.6.1 Support programmes in higher education institutions: Literature review

One of the objectives, which this study wanted to realise, is to determine and eventually recommend the possible best practices to support students in HEIs in order to curb student dropout and maximise the success and throughput rate. The

Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, p. 33; Ozdagli and Trachter, 2011) claim that poor living conditions negatively affect students' success rates. Higher education institutions have the responsibility to respond positively to the problem by using a range of support programmes, such as providing fiscal, accommodation, academic support, social support and even support in the form of interactions. Julal (2013, p. 414) asserts that universities support their students who are experiencing social difficulties with an array of services.

Student support in the context of higher education is a complicated multi-faceted educational need that is characterised by socio-emotional, academic and practical needs. To address these challenges, Bartram (2013, p. 5) reports that students opt to use an active social network to maximise the interconnectedness among themselves through continuous interactions.

Many universities are still using old support methods that are no longer effective and responsive to the recent higher education territory that is characterised by rapid alterations in pedagogical modes and technological landscape of operations and the swelling in of students in huge numbers. The outdated student learning support measures are reactive and incorporate developing and providing generic extra-curricular skills modules, which tend to facilitate revisions of academic learning activities such as, inter alia, jotting down relevant notes, answer essay type questions, studying and managing time in the learning practice (Wingate, 2007, p. 393). Wingate also recognised that it is important to guide students on how to approach the module for which they are registered.

At ensuring an effective student support intervention, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) designed and recommend a framework that consists of principles and philosophies for ensuring best practices, and which is positively responsive towards challenges for students doing their certificates and degrees online (SREB, 2016, p. 2).

Practises of support offerings available to students in the histrionic edging higher education system have been relentlessly shifting and predisposed by the existing hasty development in the information and technologies. Forms of support offered to students which have been widely considered imperative in addressing the economic barriers towards access and upgraded scholastic performances, entail learning and

financial supports. Debates as to who does what and better than others are also hugely renowned in the surfeit of the correlated literature. Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld's (2005) juxtaposed evaluation of the potential value of first-year support from tutors and peers revealed that peers are more valuable support provider than tutors do. In dichotomy to this viewpoint, Simmons (2013, p. 70) arrived at a finding that considers both the peers and the faculty staff members as equally important in supporting students on academic issues, helping them attain their educational programmes.

Higher education institutions employ multifarious approaches to providing support and their perspectives upon what constitute student support depends a particular kind of support offered. Practises of support provisions take many forms, such as the development of certain programmes (e.g. induction programmes), the establishment of forums and organisations, which focus on students' needs. The latter is prevalently implemented in higher educations for support provision to specific student category, such as students studying the same field of study. Delving into the influences that lead to the persistence of African American men (AAM) in a student support organisation called Project Empowerment (PE) in the University of Memphis – a white dominated educational context, Simmons (2013, p. 62) found that features of the PE are motivational and supportive for the retention of AAM in the university. The establishment of PE was stemmed from the recognition that the African American students drop out was an alarming concern which needed a support intervention to address the retention dimension (Simmons, 2013, p. 62). Simmons (2013, p. 71) further reflects that the University of Memphis's EP student organisation comprises a number of student intervention initiatives which incorporate Educational support programme (ESP) and Intellectual Empowerment Sessions (IESs), designed purposely to respectively upgrade academic skills level and to enhance writing and oral competency standards on Spanish language.

2.7.6.2 Support programmes in higher education institutions

The global higher education sector has many and varied programmes aimed at supporting students in their studies. The purposes for which such different support programmes are designed are unique, depending upon the types of students' needs for their studies. The desktop review conducted to determine student support programmes, which are put into place in the demarcation of higher education terrain,

yielded the variety of data and the variety of support programmes in the higher education institutions. Some of the student support programmes revealed by the desktop review undertaken for this study are as follows:

2.7.6.2.1 Masakh'iSizwe Student Support Programme

The Western Cape government in South Africa initiated Masakh'iSizwe Bursary Programme to support students in Western Cape Province with difficulties they face in their higher education studies (Western Cape government, 2016). Masakh'iSizwe Student Programme provides academic, social and financial supports to students. The programme is divided into seven categories of student support, namely, Social support, academic support, support with skills to improve employability in the labour market, leadership programme, outreach programme, student health and wellness, and professional development programme.

- Masakh'iSizwe Student Programme identified the following four objectives for its social support for first-year students:
- to help them positively respond to the challenges the institution presents
- to help the cope to the personal, social, lifestyle in university and the academic expectations and demands
- to enable them take informed decisions on their plans for future
- to enhance their abilities to be able to attain academic goals and personal success

The 'academic support', which is included in the Masakh'iSizwe support programme, addresses the student unpreparedness, which has been widely propagated in the literature because of the gap between the pre-tertiary and the tertiary education. The programme includes student support interventions such as tutorial classes in order to fulfil the following purposes:

- empower and advance students' competence;
- offer quality help which is consistent and suited to the standards of the university; and
- enable students achieve satisfactory academic results

The third type of student support that Masakh'iSizwe Bursary programme provides focuses on the employment-oriented abilities, such as driving lessons, the ability to articulate proficiently in English, writing persuasive and professional curriculum vitae, ability to write report. The main objective of this type of support is to improve students' competitiveness and to enhance their probability to be absorbed in the broader job market.

The fourth support service offered to students by the Masakh'iSizwe Bursary programme is focused on enhancing and empowering students with interpersonal leadership capabilities. It builds and escalate students' confidence level to take correct, and to some extent hard decision without fear.

The firth support service that Masakh'iSizwe Bursary programme offers to students is a community outreach in which bursars are required to empower learners in poor communities with education and competences in order to promote fields, such as engineering, science, mathematics and technology.

Another essential support intervention embraced into the Masakh'iSizwe Bursary Programme relates to students' health and wellness. The purpose of this intervention directed to students is to foster heathy lifestyles by creating awareness on distinct ill-health issues, such as, inter alia, HIV/AIDS, high blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol. It has been found that student dropout is also caused by, among other diseases, an HIV/AIDS. (Breier, 2010, p. 665) reported that some students who tested HIV positive dropped out of their tertiary studies because they lost interest and self-esteem. Others dropped out because they wanted to support their siblings whose parents died of HIV/AIDS.

The last support service that Masakh'iSizwe Student Support Programme assists students with is the 'professional development programme' that helps them obtains practical experiences in their fields through vocation or in-service training. Students' Participation in the professional development programme occurs by means of placement in the private enterprises and government department, such as the Department of Transport and Public Works. Masakh'iSizwe student programme also help students find jobs after they have successfully completed their qualifications.

2.7.6.2.2 Ikusasalethu: SAICA's Student Support Programme

Through 'Ikusasalethu' (the tomorrow is in our hands), SAICA's Student Support is a Thuthuka project that responds to the South African dearth of high-level skills in the field of chartered accountancy. The programme was developed in partnership between the South African Institute of Chartered Accountancy and FASSET and was launched on 4 March 2016 by the University of Cape Town (Creamer's Engineering News, 2016). SAICA's Student Support Programme is aimed at preventing student dropout rate and improving as well as expediting students' retention, and completion rates in the university (Creamer's Engineering News, 2016). Ikusasalethu is a Thuthuka and FASSET initiative established to promote equity and transformation in the South African demographic profile of the Chartered Accountancy discipline. Ikusasalethu help students with skills to amplify students' employability, such as how to prepare professional curriculum vitae, how to manage time for studies, skills to study, additional tuition lessons, motivational sessions, and workshops to prepare students for the examinations.

2.7.6.2.3 Orientation and Support Programmes

In the South African's University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), student support programmes such as the community internship and mentorship programmes are put into place to assist students with hands-on experiences and to stimulate both their vocational and academic advancement. The community internship entails the development, academic and research projects and the standard procedure for the appointment of students to participate in the internship programme consists of considerations relating to educational level, financial background and local conditions (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2016). Furthermore, the UKZN offers bridging courses in the form of access, foundation programmes, extra courses, and restructured courses for first-year students to enhance their academic writing and communication abilities and keep them fit and ready to face the challenges, which the university presents to them. The aim of the mentorship programme is to prepare students so that they can eventually able to fit into the institutional culture and to adjust with the

academic environment (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2016). The mentorship is led by senior students and the criteria to select students to take part into the mentorship programme includes satisfactory results, leadership and communication skills.

2.7.6.2.4 University of South Africa's student support and learner development

University of South Africa (Unisa)'s response to students' needs for development and financial aid exist in the range of support services, bursaries and scholarships to help dozens of students from the disadvantaged family backgrounds to further their studies. Unisa has 357 000 students enrolled for formal programmes and, 79 000 enrolled for informal and short courses, most of them come from the poor families (University of South Africa, 2016a). The Unisa Foundation established the bursary scheme called 'Unisa Bursary Fund' to assist students who are financially needy and who have met the university regulation requirements and academic merit level. The university' strategic objective is to mobilize alumni in the service of humanity, build a learning environment that is conducive for all students, one in which they will feel a sense of belonging (University of South Africa, 2016a). In addition, Unisa also provides an ICT enhanced support to its students. The objectives for which Unisa Bursaries aim to realise include the following ones:

- To curtail student dropout that has been the result of financial restraints.
- To entice and encourage people who want to further their studies in higher education.
- To lessen the challenge encountered by the NSFAS that attempts to cater for a huge student population is the entire South Africa higher education system.
- To minimize the level of scarcity in certain fields.
- To contribute to the South Africa' future personnel.

The student support at Unisa consists of counselling, work integrated learning, tutorial services, regional centres and advocacy and resource centre for students with disabilities (ARCSWID). Unisa has seven support centres (regions), namely, Midlands, Eastern Cape, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. These regional centres offer students with tutorial services. The university employed tutors to execute the tutoring role in order to assist students academically. Unisa also has a directorate called 'Tuition Support', which consists of

three sub-units, namely, Tutorial Support Services, Telecentre Community Outreach and Experiential Learning. The Tuition Support's vision is to create excellent structures, processes and tools to provide prime support for needy students (University of South Africa, 2016c). Unisa, furthermore, has the Directorate for Counselling and Career Development which classified types of student support services they offer into three – 'Manage my career', 'Manage my studies' and 'Manage myself'. The 'Manage my career' entails services that are aimed at supporting students to manage their careers by informing about them, assisting to understand how they can make informed decisions on which career to opt for from a range of the available career options and to impart students with the necessary skills for the workforce (University of South Africa, 2016b).

The 'Manage my studies' category of student services assist students to manage their studies by providing them with effective learning abilities and capabilities, time management skills and abilities for the preparation of examinations (University of South Africa, 2016b).

The 'Manage myself' classification of student support at Unisa focuses on helping students to understand better about themselves and what they need and what they are capable of. The 'Manage myself' equips students with necessary capabilities to respond to challenges of life that may possibly disturb their studies (University of South Africa, 2016b).

2.7.7 Importance of student support for higher education institutions and students

The need to support students in their studies is a worldwide notion that has penetrated the entire higher education sector. In some countries there are legal obligations that universities must offer support to their students. For example, in Netherlands, universities are mandated to assist students in choosing the right field of study (Dekker, Pechenizkiy and Vleeshouwers, 2009, p. 41). The objective which relates to this subcategory of descriptive and explanatory study on student support is to theoretically find out the extent to which student support interventions can benefit both students and institutions and to enable higher education institutions offering them to

meet their needs and expectations and purposes for which such support services were meant.

The previous discussion looked into how higher education institutions implement their student support intervention programme. In this section, the focus is on the importance of student support in higher education zone. It looks at and discusses the necessity of having student support in the higher education institutions and their benefits to both students and the academic institutions offering them.

It is profoundly acknowledged in the documentation on student support that the needs and expectations of students must be at the heart in the operations of the higher education institutions. Within the global post-school system, particularly the university terrain, Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007, p. 249) postulate that universities have to become aware of students' needs for support and ultimately strive to achieve a steadiness between the variety of challenges and academic needs and the demand for support interventions, recognition and reassurance. Student support offer numerous and varying benefits, both to students and academic institutions and their countries. Canton and Blom (2010, p. 49) assert that students' incapability to pay for their education expenses might be the reason for low access rate to higher education and must be curbed by means of financial aid to contribute to the human capital and economic advancement. Study loans, grants, scholarships (Canton and Blom, 2010, p. 49) and bursaries are important in mitigating students' financial problems. Delving into online student support frameworks, Stewart, Goodson, Miertschin, Norwood, Ezell (2013, 290-291) posits that online student frameworks assist academic institutions to assess the quality of teaching and learning. In their assertion, Sirin, Gupta, Ryce, Katsiaficas, Suarez-Urozco and Rogers-Sirin (2013, p. 200) supports offered to people in order to help them realise their social needs may enable them positively enhance their developmental paths. Sirin et al (2913, p. 204) further discovered that social support is important in reducing the acculturative stress that students suffer from as they try to adjust with academic life in the transition period. Extending the role demarcation of student support component in the higher education system, Simmons (2013, p. 63) perceives social inclusion as fundamental in motivating students to learn and to complete their qualification programmes.

In the view of Andrade (2006, p. 131), within the countries in which English is the most spoken language, international students contribute positively towards the education and economy and therefore must be backed through support interventions. Edward (2003) postulates that ensuring an effective transition of students from schools to universities lead to an increased retention capacity, improved students' performances and speed up their progress towards completion of the enrolled programmes. Confirming an increased retention element, Simmons (2013, p. 62) also contends that suitable support interventions help students to persist learning and eventually accomplish their goals. Locating this view within the study to detect aspects that lead to retention of the African American men who are affianced in Project Empowerment in the University of Memphis, Simmons (2013, p. 62) suggests that higher education institutions should develop and implement effective support intervention strategies that are aimed at nurturing student retention and assist them to realise their academic success.

Desa et al (2011, p. 366) argue that support aimed at helping students to become proficient in English and expedite them towards attaining their academic goals is important and, therefore, higher education institutions should strive to realise that in their endeavours. In the context of the blended learning, student support services are offered through many ways including the establishment of services centres. The Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom of America established a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and the so-called the Personalised Integrated Support Centres (PISC) to respectively, inter alia, uphold student support services and to develop an all-inclusive student support model that entails the variety of study programmes to support students so that they are ultimately able to meritoriously succeed in learning (Stevens, 2012, p.137). Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 102) articulates that in order for students to progress positively, support services centres must provide students with access to computers or other gadgets with internet networks as well as to support them by means of a skill-transfer so that they are able to utilise the necessary technologies for learning purposes. A similar view towards the prime need to have support centres for college students is given by the South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training, stating that it is intrinsically pivotal to initiate support services office that will coordinate all support activities (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 17).

Not only does offering support become important at the university level. At college level, support is also prominently a need for some students and must be provided to assist students in their endeavour to meet the institution's anticipations and adjust to the demands of the qualification programmes (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 17).

Student-support is an integral and influential factor in boosting learning experiences within all academic institutions (Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis and Lopez, 2011, p. 158). Reduced support, such as social support from friends and families, more especially among students who are away from home to carry on with their higher education studies, can make them feel uncomfortable with the academic environment and ultimately performance academically poor. Such stressful conditions relative to challenges in transitional processes that students in higher education are going through often result in an escalated psychological misery and low academic successes (Tajalli, Sobhi and Ganbaripanah, 2010, p. 99). In the sociocultural need, being successfully adjusted to the higher education institutions' stresses, especially for international students, is attributed to the sociodemographic factors that include, among other variables, prior cross-cultural knowledge, level of education, family income, superb academic performance and host linguistic skills (Swami, Arteche and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010).

The issue of low success rates does not only speak to the university system, but remains a gigantic challenge to the colleges as well because they are part of the post-school system and are also characterised by diversity with regard to students coming from the variety of backgrounds which subsequently affect their scholastic performance. Belot et al (2006, p. 262) assert that the effects of public support on students' scholastic achievements is inadequately examined. Although there were efforts made in the context of South African colleges to minimize or attempt to curtail the low success rates, college students' success rates are still low (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 17). Sandhya et al (2012, p. 47) argue that various factors allied to teaching and learning can lead to poor services.

Vergara et al (2010, p. 1498) conducted a study to find out the relationship between the acculturative stress and emotional intelligence (EQ) and determined that

international students' acculturative stress is caused by students' perceived discrimination, homesickness and a culture shock. Acculturative stress is defined as the process in which students undergo a culture change, characterised by unfamiliar customs and norms of the other cultures (Vergara et al, 2010, p. 1499). The study conducted by Desa et al (2011, p. 364-369) on the accumulative stress of the international postgraduate students reveals that the attitudinal and environmental stress cause a hindrance in adjusting to academic life and achieving academic goals. Environmental acculturative stress relates to finding accommodation and familiarising yourself with modes of transport used and can be more challenging to international students than local ones (Desa et al (2011). The study done by Ye (2005) reported that there is a relationship of acculturative stress with social and academic satisfaction. There is an alarming increase of shortage in accommodation in many higher education institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 33). To foster a comfortable and conducive educational environment to study, insufficient student accommodation requires remedial actions such as upgrading accommodation and expansion of capacities. The need to address students' accommodation challenge is a global concern both in national and international higher education contexts. Within the international outskirts of higher education, the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (NSELF) does not support students only for their tuitions, but also for other expenses, incorporating paying for their accommodations (Opheim, 2006, p. 278).

Desa et al (2011, p. 368) argued that addressing the attitudinal and environmental stress demands the higher education institution's attention and support intervention. This is reflective of the existing relationship between the student support interventions and the academic success. In support of this contention, it has also been ascertained that good student-student and student-instructor relationships is a cradle of encouragement to learn and can consequently result in good performance (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt and Oort, 2011). An assortment of discussions of student support in the literature believes that there is a relationship between student support services offered and the attainment of learning outcomes. Stewart et al (2013, p. 291) are collectively an epitome of community of interest that uphold that student support is important component for the student success. Lee et al (2011, p. 161) recommend that in order for students to develop a course satisfaction, learning environments should foster a learning experience that is geared to the student mode of learning by offering diverse

support from which students opt for the methods most appropriate for them. The study conducted by Ssempebwa, Eduan and Mulumba (2012, p. 140) surveyed the variations between the academic performances of Kampala International University students enrolled through the bridging programmes and those who met the admission requirements straightaway and reported that there is no significant difference between the two admission routes. Whereas higher education institutions consider bridging programmes to be effective pre-requisites for students who do not precisely meet the benchmarks in promoting readiness to enrol for the qualification programme, Hay and Marais (2010) contend that view and disparage it that it deprives higher education institutions of the quality of enrolees. In their observation, Hay and Marais (2010), bridging programmes are direct endorsements of avaricious minds to generate fiscal resource without being thoughtful of the timeframe, content, assessments, teaching pedagogy (Ssempebwa, Eduan and Mulumba, 2012, p. 142) as well as quality assurance.

Another crucial area that is extensively underlined as demanding support intervention in higher education institutions is the academic or learning component as well as financial support initiatives. Furthermore, the relationship between financial student support intervention and the scholastic performance phenomena are not sufficiently documented in the related literature (Alon, 2007; Belot, Canton and Webbink, 2007, Canton and Blom 2010, p. 49). Belot, Canton and Webbink (2006, p. 261) made an inquiry on whether the diminution in student support delivery affect students' scholastic standard of performance, and noted that, within the confines of a decreased financial support intervention, the dwindling could have had fiscal consequences. An examination carried out by Canton and Blom (2010, p. 49) upon the experiences of universities in Mexico on academic performances and support services offered to students revealed that aiding students financially can lead to higher accrual of human investment through an enhanced academic performance as well as an amplified rate of enrolment. Lee et al (2011) studied the relationship among students' perceptions of support, their satisfaction level of the course and learning achievements in online learning. The results of their survey discovered that there is a significant relationship the perceived student support and the inclusive satisfaction of the online course (Lee et al, 2011, p. 158). The student capability to retain the learning outcomes has also been identified in the existing knowledge as an advantage to be recognised if supports

towards improving learning experiences are effectively undertaken. Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, and Huett (2008); and Britto and Rush (2013, p. 29) also acknowledge that higher education support interventions can result in maximised student retention and competency level. Student support is also a paramount priority, following the use of diagnostic tests for admission purposes and to discover students' weaknesses, skills and competency levels so that a necessary support intervention can be made to help them perform better in programmes, which they are enrolled in. In their research to find out the kind of support students' need in order to cope with the university academic demands, a particular cohort seeking support intervention and to check students' readiness, Sharif et al (2007, p. 215) assert that there is a correlation between the diagnostic tests and examination results. In their analysis, for first year students in Australian University, of the relationship among adjustment and types of student support, sources and support levels, as well as students' satisfaction on support levels, Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007, p. 247) found that less adjusted students have low levels of social friendship support as compared to the adjusted cohort. This finding further concurs with the gamut of worldviews that student support intervention can result in students adjusting well with the academic life. Examining the relationship of students' difficulties and social companionship support on mental fitness of students in Islamic Azad University, Tajalli, Sobhi and Ganbaripanah (2010, p. 99) identified that the relationship between both the social support and mental fitness and between students' daily difficulties and their mental fitness exist.

Every type of support that student may need to be assisted with is worthy to be noted and urgently responded to. Literature revealed in this regard that students' challenges, such poor financial background, occupational burdens, study materials, educational background, and lack of family support might lower students' academic performances (Andrade, 2006, p. 131 and 137). Andrade (2006, p. 131) investigated whether variables such as linguistic skill, personal traits, educational background, strategies to support students towards realizing academic success, support interventions put in place, as well as individual study habits affect students' fulfilments, and the results showed that proficiency in language does not affect international students' achievements.

2.7.8 Communicating student support interventions to students

Recent academic debates on communication strategies for improving student support services highlight that the way in which higher education institutions communicate to their students across the global higher sector has become significant. In the postulation of Appleton and Abernethy (2013, p. 209), how students communicate with their academic institutions has become a phenomenon of interest in the United Kingdom of America (UK) higher education sector and different higher education institutions are developing initiatives to look into students' experiences.

Whereas the previous subcategory of this literature chapter dealt with the essence of providing support services to the higher education students, this section limits is scope to strategies that higher education uses to ensure effective communications of student support to their students. Its incorporation in the study stemmed from the need to optimise an understanding on whether awareness of the available support intervention can have an impact on student attrition or not. Preceding studies have indicated that many students are not aware of the range of available support services offered in the landscape of higher education and some of those became aware of them but still do not use them. For example, in a study to find out the relationship between students' stress levels and retention and the available obstacles to support service use in higher education, Harris, Casey, Westbury and Florida-James (2016) have found that though some students know of an array of support interventions, which they can get from the institution, they were unwilling to seek for them. More recently, Heagney and Benson (2017) focused on Australian universities and studied the mature-students to find out how they become successful in higher education, with an aim to implicate findings for institutional support interventions. Their study has revealed related findings that some students were unaware of the available support services in the institution. These findings highlight the need to increase awareness on support services within academic institutions to ensure dropout reduction, improved programme completion rate and student retention.

This section is important to inform the development of student support model which this study seeks to achieve.

The objective, which this study strives to achieve, is to determine what communication strategies do higher education institutions develop and execute in addressing the needs of students so that they are able to adjust with the demands linking to furthering studies in higher education institutions. Barker and Angelopulo (2013) describe communication as the glue that binds sections of the organisation together. Benson and Samarawickrem (2009, p. 6) argue that a two-way communication and the application of new media technologies are some of factors that define the recent operations of distance education in providing support to students.

Existing views on student support in the literature also dwelled on the significance of communication element in delivering supports in the context of higher education. In the words of Saba (2007), classroom communications are integral in learning processes and should be insisted. It is, therefore, integral to communicate support programmes to all students so that they become aware of the range of support services available to them. This is, however, not always the case in higher education institutions. Research has indicated that while support interventions are abundantly available for students in their institutional environments, many students are not aware of them. Directly parallel to this viewpoint, Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya (2013, p. 1563) delved into reasons for student dropout in the context of vocational high school and divulged that, while other students do not want to receive counselling form of support interventions, others were simply unaware of such support services in their learning environment. As posited by Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance that guides this study, communication in student-lecturer, student-student and student-institution relationships is vital in learning trajectories to ensure student success and to reduce dropout rates. In their research to determine whether there is a relationship among the perceptions of students, course gratification and learning outcomes in online learning, Lee et al (2011) uncovered that the significant relationship between students' support perceptions and their total satisfaction of the online learning course exist. Lee et al (2011, p. 158) construed that their results imply that lecturers must communicate the range of support interventions available to students and how those students can access them, use them and benefit from them. However, communicating the available student support intervention programmes to students does not guarantee that it will result in reduction of dropout or academic success. This was the case in the study conducted by Tladi (2013) to determine causes of student

examination dropout and whether social and academic supports that are prevalent in the institution have effects on examination attritions. Tladi's (2013) survey divulged that despite a sufficient scale of awareness about the available support programmes and services and the need for support interventions, such as academic, tutor support, social support as well as providing counselling, the degree to which students use support services remained disappointedly low (p. 67). In the context of bridging courses as support interventions to students who are not fully prepared for the level, Durkin and Main (2002) pointed out that students tend to disregard them, seeing them as of no value to their learning pathways. Tladi's (2013) study further uncovered the following significant findings for students who failed to sit for an examination of Unisa's ACN203S course despite whether or not they were aware of the variety of support interventions available for them (p. 75):

that 17.1 % of students who failed to sit for (dropped out of) ACN203S examination knew of that Unisa's DCCAD provides counselling support but 2.85 % failed to seek for support interventions,

- that whereas one the two students who never received counselling support intervention had no hope that counselling will positively impact on academic success, the other one just did not have time to approach DCCAD another,
- that 82.4 % who were the victims of examination dropout were aware of discussion form of academic support available at Unisa, but 62.5 % responded that they did not see the value of discussion classes provided and subsequently decided not to attend them,
- that those students who were aware of the available tutorial support intervention that Unisa amounted to 54.8 %, but 74 % never received tutorial support interventions.

The occurrence of examination dropouts despite using the available range of support intervention in the institution as reported in Tladi's (2013) study support the argument of this study that the current existing support frameworks have been unresponsive to the dropout concern – a void that this study intent to fill by questing for a universal student support model that will address the attrition of students at lower-postgraduate level.

The bio-ecological theory theorises that frequent interactions between students and their peers and between students and their teachers build up processes that motivate development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, xv) advocates that the post-school system must create awareness of students' needs and the staff with disabilities, such as support staff, management and lecturers. Previous research shows that, in online learning parameters, the amalgamation of virtual meeting software and instant messaging aid in nurturing instantaneous communication, making students feel betrothed into the course content.

Further building upon the preceding research on communication as a type of support, lecturers' prompt and immediate feedbacks on the student questions and difficulties lead to course satisfaction and learning outcomes, and prospectively, an improved academic performance. As an effective communication strategy, undertaking both face-to-face and online review sessions enhances a student-lecturer communication (Lee, 2011, p. 160). It is farfetched to note insights from literature that interactions among students themselves, both in and outside classrooms, are encouraged to help deal with or minimize their social- and academic-related hassles. Nevertheless, Leask (2009, p. 206) decries that mingling local and international students in one classroom neither guarantee an evocative interaction among them nor enhance their intercultural communication skills. Other primary means to promote communication among students is to encourage on-campus and online collaborative learning so that they feel included in the learning community and eventually support each other.

To realise the objective of encouraging and intensifying communication of students studying online, Britto and Rush (2013, p. 38) report that the Lone Star-College Online department of a Lone Star College System developed a newsletter called eStudent Times which is distributed to online student population through e-mails. This communication tool carries information such as essential dates of the semester, online chat, online tutoring, and contact details of financial assistance available. Not merely does communication occur between students and the lecturers or among students themselves, but also become salient between other constituents of higher education institution and students.

The study conducted by Appleton and Abernethy (2013, p. 214) examined how library-student partnership can help the library to improve support services and assuring quality and continual enhancement and progress, and reported that communication channels, such as agenda driven meetings, are vital. In these meetings, students are encouraged to take part and communicate issues to the library management and the management gather intrinsic pertinent information and students' experiences, and subsequently use it for an amelioration of the support services offered (Appleton and Abernethy, 2013, p. 214-215).

The body of knowledge on support directed to the needs and challenges of students in learning is insightful on the stance that communication about the support structures in place is integral and must be encouraged. Lee et al (2011, p. 162) uphold that lecturers should find means to communicate support to be offered to students and encourage peer interactions on a recurring basis so that they feel a sense of belonging to the learning populace. Inestimable effective communication channels used for the transmission of support services for students are abundant in literature. Tajalli, Sobhi and Ganbaripanah (2010, p. 102) recommend that in order to stimulate an understanding of students on the available social support services, experienced daily stresses and mental health, universities and their counselling centres should design instructional brochures, organise workshops, academic lectures, and other distinctive programmes, and teach competencies and effective strategies for adjusting with the stressful academic demands. A similar view with regard to using workshops and academic lectures as effective communication platforms to support students with social need is further proposed in the literature. In their qualitative inquiry on sociocultural coping transition of international university students as well as the role of university constituents in the process, Coles and Swami (2012, p. 98), found that controlled interactions occurring in seminars and labs are potentially pivotal in the creation of peer-peer and student-lecturer relations and serve as valuable social support contexts.

2.7.9 Students' experiences, lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions on student support

In the preceding section, the discussion focused on how higher education institutions communicate support interventions to their students. This section is a foundational layer on which the conduction of this study regarding the experiences of students, perceptions of lecturers and key informative administrative officers is based.

Student support as a research phenomenon has been researched from both national and international perspectives using distinct methodological paradigms. For example, Bartram (2013)'s study was purely directed to an international students and had adopted a qualitative methodological paradigm that was guided by the following three set of research questions: What are the expressed support needs of U.K. students studying abroad? To what extent do students feel their support needs were met? Moreover, how did students attempt to address their support needs? In addition to these imperative questions, Bailey's (2013, p. 146) exploration of the academic staffs' experiences about their academic life and the degree to which they are involved in pedagogical matters also asked crucial questions, such as the following: What is the role and the purpose of learning and academic support? In addition, what are your experiences of this support provision? Whereas these research questions are central for delving into a student support educational aspect within the scope of international students' experiences, this study is confined within the national margins and adopts the blended approach that cuddle qualitative methods for data collection and analysis.

It is however, widely acknowledged that students experience-focused studies are in abundance in the global academic literature, with few of them scrutinising students' views of support, evaluations and their preferences from the student support perspective (Bartram, 2013, p. 6). In the context of the concomitant rise in technological development and advancement for learning purposes as well as a wider implementation by the universities worldwide, Paechter, Maier and Macher (2010, p. 222) affirm that studies on students' expectations and experiences are limited in the present-day existing body of related knowledge. The experiences of students in higher education institutions vary from student to student, contingent on many factors that involve academic backgrounds, cultural differences, personal frame of reference, social experiences and psychological experiences. Desa et al (2011, p. 366) point out

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that students' experience difficulties that relate to academic aspect of learning in higher education institutions, such as struggling to adapt to instructions given in classrooms, feeling unfree to participate in group and classroom discussions as well as thinking back and forth about what is anticipated of them by the lecturers. Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa and Barkham (2010) and Julal (2013, p. 414 and 416) postulate that students who experience higher level of psychological grief have low effective problem-focused adjusting panache and are, therefore, likely to utilise available support services. An array of stressful factors that students experience in academic settings can result in low academic immersion and performance (Harding, 2011) and foremost effects in their academic experiences, which embrace maintaining their personal relationships, getting financial assistance and finding employments (Julal, 2013, p. 414).

Other experiences of students in intercultural and multicultural higher education institutions, as per the views of Vergara et al (2010, p. 1499), involve as sense of weirdness originating from disparities in cultures, values, and language, finance, and among other aspects of life. Although domestic students recognise the significance of engaging into communication with the international students, they are often not prepared to integrate with them (Leask, 2009, p. 207). Vergara, et al (2010, p. 1503) posit that in the international domain, students with social and emotional skills and who are able to adjust with acculturation-related difficulties are likely to successfully cope in new cultural changes. The research international students' experiences undertaken by Russell, Rosenthal and Thomson (2010) reached an analogous finding that international students who have received adequate social companionship support are characterised by enhanced positive effects of learning internationally as well as the decreased cultural stress, resulting from a feeling of successful social assimilation. Students' experiences on support services derived from being a participant in a student organisation mirror multifarious stances. The findings reached in by Simmons (2013, p. 70) in an analysis of factors of persistence for the African American men student populace in a Project Empowerment organisation, demonstrated that student membership in student-oriented organisation affords them a constructive academic experiences.

Students' low level of language proficiency is also described as an area that needs to be improved. Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, and Al-Timimi (2004) theorise that students

with higher level of language proficiency adapt swiftly to the new academic life whereas those with lower language proficiency level encounter a negative experience during the transition to higher education institutions. To support students who are experiencing acculturative stress which relates to, for instance, low language proficiency, social, academic and emotional needs, Vergara et al (2010, p. 1503) proposes that higher education institutions need to fortify their counselling tactics by adding support programmes that will promote students' emotional intelligence and capability to adjust to new cultural and academic life.

Understanding students' learning experiences and their needs requires a holistic approach that involves the participation of the administrative and academic staffs. While administrative officers are accountable for executing counselling tasks and the delivery of other forms of support services such as aiding students to register online using a particular technology and interacting with students on various matters, academics are expected to provide support in their teaching pedagogies, communicate to students through constructive feedbacks and to hold support-oriented sessions, among other core roles.

Studying the academic counsellors' perceptions of student support services of Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), Sandhya, Doluweera, Biswas, Somarante (2012, p. 46) revealed that there were no perceived differences between the faculties excluding the interactive engagement and enrolment guidance of students in the day school as well as the scope of the summative assessment tool. Sandhya et al (2012, p. 48) further established that the perception of the academic staffs on student supports, such as instructional materials, practical aspects of learning, tutor clinics and project work as well as teaching in face-to-face modes were different at an individual and subpopulations levels. The study undertaken by Leask (2009, p. 2017) reports that academic staffs experience an agitation and difficulties in bringing local and international students together to embark on collaborative learning. Bailey's (2013, p. 143) exploratory study on lecturers' perceptions of academic student support at both institutional and interpersonal levels of teaching and learning involvement and their attitudes towards it discovered that recent pedagogical studies insufficiently examined lecturers' experiences and hugely covered students' experiences phenomenon. Bailey (2013, p. 147) further found that academics ordinarily have limited conceptions and experiences of the intricate characteristics of student support if viewed from outside

the curriculum continuum. An inquiry into the use of student support by the faculty with dicey online students revealed that the reasons for their failure to communicate support services to their students is because they were not cognisant of the collection of support interventions existing or that they did not comprehend their worth (Rosalie and Russo-Gleicher, 2013, p. 1). Rosalie and Russo-Gleicher recommend that to diminish this concern the onus be upon college administrators to create a greater awareness of the student support services available and motivate faculty to use and refer students to such services.

2.7.10 Challenges in implementing student support intervention programmes in higher education institutions

This section discusses the academic debates inherent in the literature that is pertinent to the challenges accompanying the implementations of the various supports, which are directed towards higher education students.

Higher education institutions operate with plentiful and stressful dynamics that make the running of this type of institutions challenging. Such factors cannot be simply disregarded as they prohibit the academic institutions from realising their academic objectives and expectations, such as an improved success and throughput rate. Learning to learn at a university is a multi-layered challenge for students entering the higher education system. Wingate (2007) posits that it is challenging for students to learn and quest for sources of income at the same time, make the right decisions when making selections of educational programmes and modules, participate socially with others, and to know the learning pedagogy that match the learning benchmark of higher education terrain. University students are also expected to be autonomous and afterwards learn independently, managing their time and to attain academic writing culture (Wingate, 2007, p. 392). As students' cognitive capabilities are dissimilar in many respects, managing learning autonomously is a complex process to those who are without the required competences and skills. Low student proficiency with regard to using technologies makes the provision of supports to higher education students challenging, especially for the cohort studying courses that are offered online.

Stress is also identified as a serious problem causing student dropout and it is difficult to deal with. Nilsson, Butler, Shouse and Joshi (2008) note that students' stress is a

problem to any higher education institutions, irrespective of whether they are local, national or international academic institutions. Previous research into the dropping out of the enrolled programmes shows that the influence for high student dropout rate occurs because of stressful adjustments and is the overt result of being inadequately ready to face the university academic demands and as a result, it becomes a challenge for many students to meet the university learning expectations. Although conceptions of adjustment reflect that it is a subtle and multi-dimensional complex phenomenon, Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007, p. 248) define it as a transitional process that a person undergo through and which, subsequently, result in suitable set of aptitudes to cope with a new setting. In addition to the dropout challenge that higher education institutions attempt to get rid of, Desa, Yussoff and Kadir (2011, p. 364) mention that students also experience a acculturative stress which demoralise them to learn and subsequently lowers their performances. Desa et al (2011, p. 365) describe an acculturative stress as the anxiety which incorporate social, physiological, and psychological facets which is caused by the process of change in culture and the worsening of a health status of an individual. Rosalie and Russo-Gleicher (2013, p. 3) suggest that in order to lower the rate at which student drop out, universities must embark on a thorough screening, face-to-face orientations as well as to maximise the technical support services. Research exposed that, in the context of propagating need for high quality education as well as outcomes, higher education institutions experience a challenge in positioning themselves well in academic world to meet, positively, students' expectations (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p. 95). Blended learning, because oftechnology pervasion, has redefined teaching and learning in higher education sector, and Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 104) predict that in few years to come, higher education institutions will preclude deficiencies, monetary and pedagogical challenges that are currently leading to negative classroom experiences.

Other foremost challenges that international students encounter in host countries include inability to speak a native language. Literature widely promulgates that English is one of languages with which most International students experience discomfort. Andrade (2006, p. 137) indicates that students with little or no English competency find adjusting difficult and to support them in this regard with their peers and lecturers. Tallying to the low students' competency levels in English language, Bartram (2009, p. 309) identified another mounting agony in higher education system as an emergent

challenge in both crafting and preserving a supportive bond with an individual student which are protuberant in enhancing the scholastic potential and performance as well as to expedite their personal developments. The deteriorating retention and graduation rate of students is also reported in the literature as a sombre challenge in higher education institutions. The waning in the graduation rate and the escalating number of student dropout in higher education institutions is inherent in Simmons's (2013, p. 62) assertion that African American men drop studying early in their academic life.

Another challenge is associated with the provision of counselling support to the needy students. Commenting about the doctoral students, Henkelman and Paulson (2006) noted that sometimes the recipients of counselling support do not provide their counsellors with negative experiences of academic life, difficulties they face in their research projects and how they are being supervised.

2.7.11 Measurement strategies of student support interventions' responsiveness

This component of the literature review section examined the discussions on the strategies put in place in the higher education sector to trace students' progress after the use of support interventions, which have been designed to assist them to cope with the difficulties they encounter, and to meet their needs and expectations. It is intrinsically valuable to immerse into the discussions of this nature to enhance an understanding of effective social and academic support-oriented practises, which are followed by the higher education institutions. Additionally, the main purpose of this research is to develop, ultimately, the framework for student-support for the open and distance learning system and to prescribe the best practises suitable for the adoptions of the anticipated framework.

The objective is to get insights into the measurement strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of the student support interventions that higher education institutions put in place for dropout at-risk students. Several measurement instruments have been used over the past decades to measure a particular challenge and an effectiveness of the intervention and to further reflect whether there is a need for student support or not. Despite an extensive use of variant preclusive forms of measures which are centred on promoting student commitment and participation at high schools, the responsiveness of dropout support prevention and intervention measures have not,

until recently, been given a sufficient focus. Measuring the acculturative stress that international postgraduate students suffer from in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Desa, Yussoff and Kadir (2011, p. 364) have applied the self-administered questionnaire which comprises the social, attitudinal, familial and environmental acculturative stress scale (SAFE). The instrument was developed to measure students' acculturative stress, which includes the social, familial, attitudinal and environmental-related stress. Where blended learning has been adopted as form of student support in higher education institutions, measuring its effects according to higher cognitive order of learning that includes reflective and critical thinking should be a pivotal priority. Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 104) posit that the standard aspects which measurements for effective blended learning system should involve student retention, satisfaction and attainment of the learning outcomes.

In the context of the increasingly espoused bridging programmes to advance admissibility of students who do not directly meet the admission requirements for higher education qualification programmes, contemporary measurement approaches still rely heavily on the variety of conventional models including the Wiggins and McTighe (1998)'s model for evaluating the effectiveness of bridging programmes.
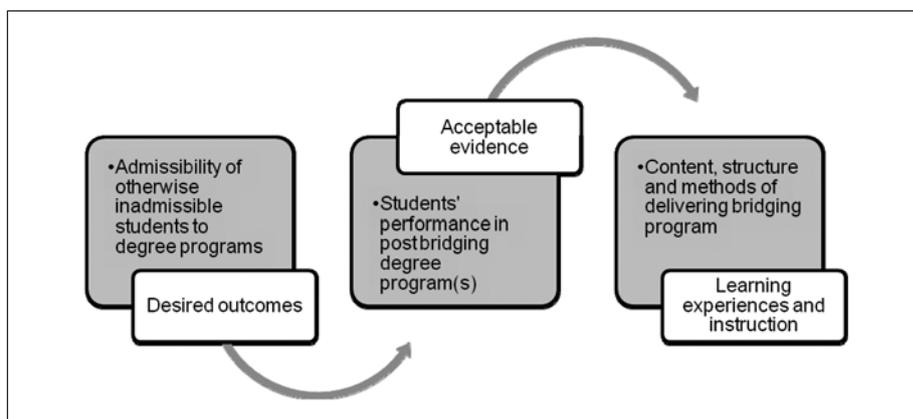
Figure 2.3 Model for evaluating the effectiveness of bridging programs
Source: Adapted from Wiggins and McTighe (1998)

According this model, measuring the effectiveness of the bridging programmes for the acceptance of students for higher education qualification programmes entail three

fundamental stages. The first one enhances the admissibility to degree programme and a set of the desired outcomes are given to which students must conform. If students had performed well and achieved the outcomes of the programme, they are then granted admissions based on the evidence that they are prepared to study the degree. The last stage involves the design of the bridging programme that contains the teaching mode, the content and the structure of the programme.

Contrary to some of the deprecations that the shortcomings of the higher education bridging programmes are that the evaluation methods are shoddy, their periods are short, they are not accredited and assessments are only from within (Ssempebwa et al, 2012, p. 142), the South African Department of Higher Education and Training for Post-School Education and Training system (WPPET) proposes a post-school system in which there should be no dead-ends to students who want to further their studies (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. viii). This view implies that bridging programmes will continue to be of a higher value as a means to support students for admission into the degree programmes within higher education institutions. The proposed post-school education and training system further envision that higher education institutions should address students' needs and expectations and make sure that there are often accessible paths to improve qualifications without undue reiteration (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. viii).

In addition to establishing students' preparedness to study at a particular qualification programme, diagnostic tests are used by some higher education institutions in the global education arena. The physics and biology tests utilised for admissions in the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at the Manchester University (Sharif et al, 2007, p. 220) serves an embodiment of diagnostic tests.

More recently, and in addition to the discussed traditional model conceived by Wiggins and McTighe (1998), the contemporary salient measurement approach for the assessment of the effectiveness of the support strategy proposed for the use in the higher education sector emphasises creating partnership relationship between the higher education institutions and their students. In the assertion made by Appleton and Abernethy (2013, p. 208), partnering with students helps higher education institutions to be effective and to develop and continue to advance the library and student support services (L&SS). A range of student support measurement methods

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are widely discussed about in the existing body of knowledge. Appleton and Abernethy (2013, p. 208) avow that the performance improvements measurement instruments, such as bi-annual LibQUAL survey, comments scheme and library feedbacks, and tailored frameworks to determine student satisfactions during certain times as deemed necessary are some of these assessments platforms. Aktins (2008) promulgated a student support model that popularly became known as Affective, Reflective, Cognitive and Systemetic (ARCS) model to encourage student educational growth by helping them to recognise their potentials and self-assuredness.   Within the confines of Aktins's model, the affective component focuses on students' feelings on their learning experience; the reflective component deals with students' drives and intents for study; the cognitive element addresses students' capability to intensely think and apply the acquired skills and knowledge, and lastly, the systematic facet looks into the entirety of students' systems and their processes in their provision of support.

Other higher education institutions apply diagnostic tests measures to establish, inter alia, student's prior knowledge, linguistic skills, and problem-solving skills. Sharif et al (2007, p. 216) advice that by evaluating the relationship between the outcomes of the diagnostic tests and the mid-course examination or formative assessment results, higher education institutions can be in better positions to monitor students' potential and progression. Hussein, Moriarty, Manthorpe and Huxley (2008, p. 1589) explored the degree of progression of students who were studying for DipSW programme in United Kingdom of America (UK) and scrutinise the influences of students in accomplishing their studies in record time without withdrawing or failing, delayed or referred.   Their findings (Hussein et al, 2008, p. 1589) revealed that students with self-reported disabilities, black students, and male students have low progression degree. This student population is diagnostically found to be at higher risk and habitually take much longer time to finish the course, and as a result, it needs support counteractive remedies. A related study by Reisel and Brekke (2009) also arrived at the same finding that the dropout of students from black community in the United States is triggered by, amongst other variables, their poor socioeconomic circumstances.   Other studies contend that the demographic traits of students do not serve as indicators of dropout. For instance, Willging and Johnson's (n.d.) online survey aimed at understanding isolation, technological problem and disconnectedness as factors of dropout has found

that students' demographic characteristics do not predict their probability to drop out of the higher education studies.

Support to student vary and can be offered at different learning phases. Recognising the substantiality of support interventions for students in higher education institutions, Sharif et al (2007, p. 220) believe that students who are in need of an academic support must be identified at an early juncture of the learning journey in order to address their needs through assigning them to suitable intervention programmes. Sittichai (2012, p. 286) found no evidence, at Prince of Songkla University, that supports that insufficient academic support leads to student dropout. Concurring with this sight, Hussein et al (2008, p. 1589) posit that effective student support measurement strategies for specifically identified students who are at greater non-progression rate must be sought. Concentrating on the role of the gamut of university components and the adjustment of international students to socio-culture in the host country, Coles and Swami (2012, p. 87) reported that the provision of course, accommodation, and the student representative clubs and societies enable students to intermingle with others and experience the adjustment support at a premature juncture in the transition. Over and above this, another effective measurement instrument recommended for evaluating the effectiveness of students support services of the variety of online programmes is the online Student Services Self-Assessment Tool (OLSS-SAT) which enables higher education institutions to review links of their websites and online support services (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004, p. 56). To remain recognisant with benefits from the positive economic and educational contributions from higher education students, Andrade (2006, p. 131) suggest a strategy that universities should identify factors that students hassle with in their adjustment need and institute suitable support interventions to address such challenges.

2.8 SUMMARY

The first chapter – 'orientation to the study' - provided the background to the study and introduced prominent aspects on which the study focuses, such as the purpose of the study, research problem, theoretical frameworks employed in this study and the methodological paradigm it follows.

The second chapter is the form of 'literature review' that has been popularly known as a 'narrative or traditional literature review' and had varied purposes to serve in this study that encompassed the following:

- Firstly, to provide an indication of the significance of conducting this research,
- Secondly, to expand the background to the study from which the research gap emerges,
- Thirdly, to show new trends in the body of knowledge, and
- Fourthly, to critique and synthesises the contemporary literature.

To this end, all the identified general purposes for this literature review were achieved by providing detailed discussions on theoretical frameworks underpinning the research, 'student dropout' and 'student support'. Such discussions were able to highlight the research gap that prompted the study.

In an all-purpose, the idea behind this narrative review of literature was to create a foundation upon which the study develops. The types of information required and selected from the existing body of literature on 'student dropout' and 'student support' served as inclusion criteria and were informed by the research purpose which subsequently determined the general research questions to which this study seek answers, namely:

- How do lecturers and administrative officers perceive dropouts of honours students in open and distance learning institutions?
- How did honours students experience dropouts in open and distance learning institutions?

- What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of lecturers and administrative officers in ODL institutions?
- What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of honours students who have dropped out of their studies in ODL institutions?

These research questions were purposely posed to define the types of information the study needs and provide parameters for the information generation. To this end, discussions of various related themes were guided by and aligned with this research questions, resulting in relevant information summarised and synthesised.

All other types of information that were not adding value to the creation of study base were excluded.

As its point of departure, this chapter started the discussion of the literature review with an introductory and explanatory passage that gave an overview of the aspects on which it is centred as well as its contextual background. It then discussed an integrated theoretical approach that guides the research process and bequeathed justifications for their inclusion and importance in the study. Philosophical dimensions that underpin the study's theoretical frameworks were also discussed and critiqued. Part of the discussion about theoretical frameworks used in this study has dealt with their historical accounts of how they have evolved over the past years, their components, their strengths and weaknesses. Sections that ensued thereafter, have provided varied descriptions of the broad term 'student dropout' which were evidently inherent in the literature, asserted from conceptual (theoretical) and operational (empirical) viewpoints. Ingrained from such compatible and divergent descriptions, the operational definition of 'student dropout' as contextualised within this study became mandatory and was elucidated.

As this study is contextualised within the distance education form of learning, the discussion inexorably incorporated academic debates on 'student dropout' in open and distance education institutions. This was ensued by the discussion on some of factors which the study has managed to identify in the literature as some of the root causes of this ubiquitous 'student dropout' concern. Following that, the chapter has dealt with intervention strategies employed to address student dropout in higher education

terrain. Equally pivotal for incorporation and since the primary segments of the population which the study targets are students who are at lower-postgraduate level (that is, honours), lecturers and administrative officers who are involved in distance education, it was of a paramount importance to discuss their experiences' of student dropout as reported and asserted in the rich literature.

Another major phenomenon, which this study has dealt with, is the aspect of student support. The chapter has discussed it by looking into the conceptual and operational definitions. The purpose of examining how the documented literature defines it was two-fold: firstly, to mirror out standpoints of various proponents who wrote on the same topic, and secondly, to enable the development of operational definition for this study. Having achieved that, the chapter discussed types and nature of student support interventions put into place in higher education and how they are designed to get sense of how they look like, in terms of their structural components. The chapter has concluded its discussion of the literature by reviewing a range of cultural practices of support interventions in the higher education landscape. The purpose was to achieve an advanced understanding of varied 'means' which higher education institutions use to offer support to their needy students. To realise that purpose fairly, the chapter has used the literature review to deal with higher education institutions' practices by discussing the importance of providing student support services to the students, methods with which HEIs use to communicate support programmes accessible to the students, challenges HEIs experience when implementing support intervention programmes (SIP) and strategies to measure intervention programmes' effectiveness. To completely achieve the entire purpose, an integrated approach to garner essential information relating to the support programmes which are available in higher education institutions has amalgamated the 'literature review' with the 'desktop review'.

Another imperative feature in an academic research is the methodological approach used to study the problem. The next chapter presents the research methodology on which this study is affixed.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

```
                          ┌─────────────────┐
                          │  Introduction   │
                          └─────────────────┘
                                  │
                          ┌─────────────────┐
                          │ Research paradigm│
                          └─────────────────┘
                                  │
                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │ Qualitative research │
                        │       design         │
                        └──────────────────────┘
```

Primary target population   Secondary target population

Postgraduate   honours   Lecturers
students in ODL institution
                                             Administrative officers

```
                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │  Sampling (selection)│
                        │        design        │
                        └──────────────────────┘
```

Snowball (dropouts suggested by   Purposive sampling technique [for a sample of
lecturers) and purposive sampling   lecturers involved in advanced communication
techniques (dropouts derived from the   research (COM4809)] and the census for the total
requested statistical information)   enumeration of administrative officers

```
                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │   Data collection    │
                        └──────────────────────┘
```

Methods: Focus-group   **Methods:** In-depth interviews (individual)
and telephonic interviews   **Instruments:** Interview guides, laptop
Instruments: Interview guide,   and tablet
laptop and tablet

```
                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │    Data analysis     │
                        └──────────────────────┘
```

Qualitative thematic content analysis   Qualitative thematic content analysis

```
                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │   Quality criteria   │
                        │   (trustworthiness)  │
                        └──────────────────────┘
```

Dependability of the interview guides   Dependability of the interview guides
Credibility of the findings   Credibility of the findings

```
                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │ Ethical considerations│
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Figure 3.1 Research methodology
Source: Researcher's own compilation

3.1 INTRODUCTION

There are several ways in which research methodology is defined. For instance, to state but few, while Kothari (2011, p.8) describes the research methodology as a systematic process that is characterised by a variety of stages towards resolving a particular research gap, Taylor, Bogdan and De Vault (2015, p. 3) define it as the way in which researchers approach the identified problem and quest for answers. It is labelled 'nuts' and 'bolts' of a procedure followed in an investigation of the identified research gap (Coughlan et al, 2008, p. 661). I have aligned my view on research methodology with that of Taylor et al (2015). As indicated in chapter one underneath the research problem section, the problem investigated by this study is the incessant student dropout in ODL environment, focusing at a lower-postgraduate level. To this end, as provided in chapter one, four research questions were formulated.

While the previous chapter has discussed the related literature, this chapter discusses the research methodology that has guided the inquiry. As schematically represented in Figure 3.1 (Research methodology), I structured the chapter as follows: first, I describe the qualitative research design followed. Second, I deal with the selection procedures (sampling techniques) employed. Then, I give description on data collection methods and instruments used. Next, I discuss the methods I used to analyse data. The discussion on quality criteria comes next. Lastly, the chapter explains how ethical considerations were ensured.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

There are traditionally three research paradigms, namely, quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007; Netanda, 2012). Owing to its several benefits, such as its potential to unveil rich and trustworthy information that consume less of time and costs and its suitability and capacity to explore the research topic and problem in depth (Operario, 2008, p. 6), I adopted the qualitative research paradigm. The prime driver for applying a qualitative paradigm in this study was prompted by different advantages it presents to a research undertaking. Most notably, a qualitative research paradigm has a

potential to explore the topic (Carlsen and Glenton, 2011) and the research problem in depth, which is how this study investigated the student dropout phenomenon. This paradigm has enabled me to interview students, lecturers and administrative officers in face-to-face encounter and telephonically and to put meanings of their responses into context. It also capacitated me to know their perceptions and experiences regarding the dropout phenomenon and the support interventions required to address the problem. The forthcoming section talks about the research design that has been followed in this study.

3.3 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is a juncture of the research process in which the researcher transits from asking research questions into planning about how to find answers to those questions (White, 2008, p. 98). As pointed out in chapter one and in the introduction of this chapter, this study predominately applied a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design is a plan that relies on a naturalistic and interpretive epistemology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 3 and 117) to guide researchers on how best to collect descriptive data, people's opinions and records of people's behaviour (Taylor et al, 2015, p. 3). Reasons for conducting a qualitative study vary and are sufficiently documented in the proliferated literature. For example, Luborsky and Rubinstein (2011) argue that the primary reason of qualitative design is to find out the number of cases, type of cases or observations to be made in order to represent the entire population as well as to reduce incorrectly identifying or missing relationships between aspects. In contrast to this view, Elmusharaf (2012) asserts that a qualitative research seeks to understand, from within, the subjective accounts of reality from the participants. A qualitative research design was chosen because, in a qualitative research, a researcher adopts a flexible research design that enables the researcher to conduct interviews. In the next section, explain type of the research design followed.

3.3.1 Adopted type of qualitative designs

A considerable number of gurus who have authored on qualitative designs have shown mixed views upon what qualitative designs are. This study has followed the description asserted by Creswell and Poth (2017, p. 103). These pundits identify five

types of qualitative designs, which are as follows: narrative research design, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and a case study. The latter was found appropriate for the study. In chapter one, I indicated that this was a case study of the university of South Africa and I gave a full background of the setting for the problem and showed that lower-postgraduate attrition is a problem in higher education terrain. Unisa was selected purposively because it is the ideal ODL institution that can best exemplify the continued prevalence of lower-postgraduate dropouts. In line with my choice for a case study design, Creswell and Poth (2017) are of the viewpoint that, in a case study, the researcher choose one typical case to epitomize an existing ontological issue, although it may, sometimes involve more than one case.

3.3.2 Model of qualitative research design

Although there are several models of qualitative research design in the literature, this study applied Maxwell's (2012) interactive model of qualitative research design, which focuses on five different integrated features that must be taken into account when designing and executing the research process (p. 4). In this model, the central feature is the 'research question', which is the most aspect linked to every other feature and which directly affect and be affected by other features. In harmony with Maxwell's (2012) view that regards the research question as a foremost element in a qualitative research design, Jansen (2007, p. 2) also contends that it is the core feature and has the potential to scale the degree to which the study is worthy or deceitful. Maxwell's (2012) model comprises elements such as the goal, the conceptual framework, research questions, methods and credibility (Maxwell, 2012, p. 4).

Accordingly, in chapter one I have indicated that the ultimate goal of the study was to develop a student support model, with an aim being to investigate the continued prevalence of dropout of LPSs in an ODL domain. As already been explained, with regard to the conceptual framework, the study was guided by the deficit theory and the theory of transactional distance, which were also introduced in chapter one and are fully discussed in chapter two. Four research questions that guided the study have also been specified in chapter one. Methods (of data collection and analysis) and credibility (trustworthiness of findings) have been introduced in chapter one and are further discussed in detail as fundamental chunks of this chapter.

Maxwell's (2012) model's strong point, which has paved its way for its application into this inquiry, is that it provides considerable flexibility in the design. With flexibility, it is thus plausible to construct and reconstruct research questions depending on the variety of grounds that may encompass, inter alia, modification or a complete shift of the goal or conceptual framework or what has been explored and learnt from the literature. The ensuing section explains how I selected participants.

3.4 SAMPLING (SELECTION) DESIGN

A sampling design refers to a framework that consists of types and the number of sampling schemes as well as the size of the sample, and in which the selection takes place (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007, p. 239). Despite the plethora of related studies, which have failed to specify sampling techniques they used, previous research that have dealt with dropout concern have applied distinct pathways to study the same phenomenon. Drawing from the analysis and synthesis of the literature on student dropout, the bigger proportion of them followed qualitative selection methods. For instance, a snowball sampling method (Tas et al, 2013), and a content analysis of datasets or databases (Jennison and Johnson, 2004; Herman, 2011; De Hart and Venter, 2013; Murray, 2014, Shea, 2016; Wood et al, 2016; Chesters and Watson, 2016). This study sampled participants from two target populations, namely: primary (lower-postgraduates) and secondary (lecturers and administrative officers) populations, which are discussed hereunder as follows:

3.4.1 Sampling of students (primary population)

The sampling of core informative 'dropouts' was guided by the scope and the definition of the 'student dropout' term that was operationalised in this study – descriptively, that a 'dropout':

refers to a student who did not register a yearly module in the following year; or was absent from an examination; or never submitted an examination portfolio; or have deregistered the module for whatever reason; or have transferred studies to another higher education institution for any reason.

This definition is an application of Lee and Choi's (2011) suggestion that the forthcoming research on dropout of students learning online should define the term 'dropout' according to a particular appropriate standard measure. This was pivotal in view of the fact that the context of this study is open and distance education and that it exemplifies the prevalence of dropout incidences through the lens of the case of advanced communication research (COM4809) course offered at Unisa.

The inclusion criteria for the sampling of students for partaking into the study as participants were based on the following five measures of suitability that also relate to an operational definition and the scope of the study:

Table 3.1: Systematic selection criteria for students as participants

Inclusion criteria for sampling dropout students	
Operationalised definition of 'dropout'	**scope**
Refers to students who have…	*Includes students who would have…*
deregistered (cancelled) the module for any reason; or	studied an advanced communication research module (COM4809);
failed to reregister the module the following year; or	been registered for COM4809 between 2011 and 2016; and
never wrote or submitted the examination portfolio; or	did not complete COM4809
changed the module (deregister and register for an alternative module); or	
changed the institution of learning.	

The study sampled students who have met at least one criterion that relates to the operational definition and all three criteria that fell within the ambiance of the scope. This was the standard to measure the relevance of the participants and included them into the study. All other students who did not match this standard measure were excluded as per the presentation in in the table 3.1 (systematic selection criteria for

students as participants). These were the units of analysis to be verified. The challenge of employing a purposive sampling technique was that while selection of more participants may have led to unmanageable magnitude of data, fewer participants might have threatened the adequacy of extensiveness and depth (Jan, 2014).

Snowball and purposive sampling techniques were used to sample dropout students. An application of snowball sampling technique was achieved by requesting lecturers to suggest dropout students who have left COM4809 between 2011 and 2016. Using snowball sampling technique, a list of 21 students was generated, but only sixteen dropout students were accessible for interviews. Despite the fact that reasons such as the dysfunctionality and changes of phones made it impossible to access others, the overarching response rate became positive.

As for the purposive sampling technique, the ICT department was requested, through the administrative officer who was in charge of the module, to provide statistical information (databases) of dropout students who have left COM4809 module between 2011 and 2016. Two lists (sample frames) of dropout students were then furnished, namely: the one that contained 127 dropout students who have deregistered (cancelled) COM4809 and the one with 92 names of dropout students who were absent from examinations (that is, those who have failed to submit their examination portfolios). The specification of a range of years in which such attritions took place became imperative to yield data that can be well managed. This was done in recognition that data collected using qualitative methods tend to be extensive and difficult to handle (Willig, 2013, p. 24).

The embedment of snowball (suggestions of dropout students by lecturers) and purposive sampling techniques (using only dropout students listed in database – i.e. statistical information) were adopted to maximise the accuracy, trustworthiness and transferability of the findings.

In the ensuing section, the description of the procedure on how lecturers were sampled is provided and the choice for using an entire enumeration of the only two administrative officers is justified.

3.4.2. Sampling of the lecturers and administrative officers (Secondary populations)

Lecturers were selected through the purposive sampling technique. In the standpoint of Elmusharaf (2012), purposive sampling technique (also known as judgmental), enables researchers to select individual participants who are the representatives of the populations targeted. The reason for choosing this type of sampling methods was directly engrained from the need to ensure that only key staff members who would provide perceptions and experiences on student dropout from the COM4809 and who would have been involved in the teaching, learning and the administration of the course between 2011 and 2016 are selected.

Table 3.2: Systematic selection criteria for staff as participants

Inclusion criteria for selecting staff as participants	
Scope	
Lecturers (academics)	Administrative (support) staff
who have been involved…	*who have been involved…*
- in teaching an advanced communication research module (COM4809); - between 2011 and 2016.	- in the administration of the module; - between 2011 and 2016.

Purposive sampling procedure was also opted for because it allows the researcher to approach the defined key-targeted population that will be able to give the information required.

Although census approach to include all participants is generally considered uneconomical and impractical in the sense that studying the entire population usually becomes difficult and requires a huge financial support and the longitudinal time dimension, this study has used it to involve the administrative officers as participants. This choice was informed by a number of reasons which encompassed the fact that there were only two administrative officers who were involved into the administration

of the case module – COM4809, and determining a sample would be meaningless for this population. Furthermore, no financial constraints threatened the study by involving all administrative officers.

The blended approach to sampling, as applied in the study, was ingrained from the need to realise a positive response rate and to increase the internal and external credibility of the findings.

Lecturers' and administrative officers' usual contacts with students were believed that they might have enabled them to be familiar with students' challenges in academic life and the types of support interventions they offer to them. Next, I discuss how data were collected.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

Different qualitative data collection methods were drawn from the qualitative methodology within which this research was anchored and were integrated. Qualitative methods included face-to-face focus-group and telephonic interviews conducted with dropout students; focus-group and in-depth interviews conducted with lecturers; and individual in-depth interviews conducted with administrative officers. Each interview proceeding, in both focus-group and in-depth interviews, lasted approximately between 30 and an hour.

3.5.1 Methods with which data were collected from students

As already pointed out in section 3.5 (data collection), data from dropout students were collected using focus-group and telephonic interviews. This section explains further on how these qualitative methods were followed for the collection of data from students.

3.5.1.1 Focus-group and telephonic interviews

The design of the interview guide for students is comprised of questions that relate to 'student dropout' and 'student support'. The type of data which the interview guide was set to generate were the perceptions and experiences of honours students in relation to the dropouts in open and distance learning institutions. Thus, only students who have dropped out of COM4809 participated in the study. Dropout students were

selected using snowball and purposive sampling techniques. While the purposive selection of dropout students from the given dataset (statistical information) of 219 dropouts, which was requested from the information and communication department (ICT), was used, the snowball selection method came into play when lecturers identified twenty-one dropout students from their personal records and furnishing the researcher with detailed contact information about them. Using the contact details (telephones) from the lecturers who were supervising dropouts, I managed to invite and hold focus-group interviews with a group of six dropout students in my office at Unisa. I also held telephonic interviews with ten dropout students, summing up to 16 participants.

The interview guide for dropout students was constituted by seven questions, including the question aimed at generating the demographic data of the participants. Each question was designed to garner specific type of data. Table 3.3 (Student data framework) presents and summarises the type of data that were required to answer the research question: 'How did honours students experience dropouts in open and distance learning institutions?'

Table 3.3: Student data framework

Research question: How did former honours students experience dropouts in open and distance learning institutions?			
	Focus	Questions	Data probed for
	Demographic information	Q1: Indicate your gender, age and race	Gender, age, employment, marital status and race
Dropout	Attributes	Q2: Why have you dropped out of an advanced communication research (COM4809)?	Reasons/factors/causes for student dropout
Support	Available support	Q3: What support services for honours students are available in the university?	Support intervention programmes and other forms of services with which the university can help honours students.
Support	Mitigation	Q4: How did the university try to support you (mitigate dropout) before you withdraw from COM4809?	Actions taken by the university to mitigate possible dropouts for honours students.
Support	Evaluation of support intervention	Q5: How do ODL universities measure the effectiveness of a	Strategies with which the university determine the impact of an intervention on students.

		dropout mitigation strategy for COM4809 LPSs?	
Dropout	Identifying at-risk students	Q6: How did the university find out that you require support intervention?	The manner in the university to Calculate possible student dropout.
Support	Dissemination of information on the available support services	Q7: How did you become aware of the support services available for honours students in the university?	Awareness programmes and channels used to communicate support services to honours students.
	Additional information or general comments	Q8: If there is any other information relating to your experience on dropout in ODL institution, please share them with me.	Other information, which they deem important but not necessarily, asked for in the interview guide.

The development process of the data collection instrument (the interview guide) for focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students has taken into account the aim of the study – the main aim of this study is to investigate the causes of increase in the dropout rate within the ambiance of open and distance education and how best to address them. The design of the interview guide for dropout students was also influenced by the deficient theory and the theory of transactional distance, which have guided the study. The interview guide was comprised of predominately open-ended questions, which were dispersed in, generally two themes, namely: student dropout and support.

The focus-group and telephonic interviews which were conducted with dropout students were planned to last between 30 and hour. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, and the request to record their responses was made prior to the commencement of the interviews. A tablet and laptop were utilised for the recording of focus-group interviews. An integrated approach to use both a tablet and a laptop originated from the need to back each other up in case if something wrong occurs to one of them, such as getting dysfunctional, not clearly audible, getting lost or stolen.

Notes taking was also done along with recording. In addition to serving as another backup, notes taking allowed the researcher to jot down emerging themes and to ask probing questions, which were not necessarily included in the interview guide but which were valuable in responding to the research questions of this study. Of a high

significance was that the use of tablet and laptop for recording the students' interviews and notes taking of emergent themes enhanced the credibility and dependability of the findings, along with targeting lecturers and administrative officers. Participants were also assured that their participations would be treated confidential and as anonymous.

Next, methods followed in the collection of data from the lecturers and administrative officer is expounded.

3.5.2 Methods with which data were collected from lecturers and administrative officers

Data from the lecturers and administrative officers were collected using in-depth interviews. Studies that collected data from lecturers and administrative officers are dominant in the existing body of literature on student dropout. One such instance is the research that was undertaken by Breier (2010) which interviewed twenty-one lecturers of the University of Western Cape in South Africa. This section provides explication on how in-depth interviews were performed to solicit lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions of honours students' dropouts and their experiences of support interventions in ODL environments.

3.5.2.1 In-depth interviews

To elicit lecturers' and administrative officers' responses and to enable the researcher check and verify if all relevant questions have been asked and answered, two interview guides were developed for each target segment of the staff members. They were comprised of demographic information, dropout, support and general comments. One theme (student dropout in an ODL environment) consisted of the student dropout component with two questions asked.

In relation to the support aspect, six questions were asked. The first questions of interview guides were meant to collect data on demographic information of lecturers and administrative officers. The interview guide for the lecturers collected data on occupational level, experience in teaching at a postgraduate level, experience in teaching ODL institution, and experience in teaching an advanced communication research module (COM4809). With regard to the interview guide for the administrative officers' category, information relating to the occupational level, experience in

administration at ODL institution, experience in working at a postgraduate level of study and experience in the administration of an advanced communication research module (COM4809) were collected.

The detailed information is given in the Table 3.4: (Soliciting staff's views: Themes, questions asked and types of data required).

Table 3.4: Soliciting staff's views: Themes, questions asked and types of data required

	Themes	Questions	Data probed for
	Demographic information	Q1. What level is of your education, occupation and experience?	Educational level, occupational level, number of years working in ODL, number of years supervising students at a postgraduate level and number of years supervising students at COM4809 case module.
Dropout	Student dropout in an ODL environment	Q2: With reference to COM4809, why do LPSs drop out in ODL universities?	Lecturers' views regarding reasons/factors leading to dropouts of honours students who have been enrolled in an advanced communication research (COM4809) in ODL
		Q3: How have you been experiencing student dropout in an ODL environment?	Lecturers' views/opinions about student dropout in ODL
Support	support services (dropout mitigations strategies) available for honours students in the ODL institution	Q4: How do you perceive support intervention of honours students in ODL institutions?	Lecturers' responses regarding various ways in which honours students can be supported to evade dropping out
	Student needs	Q5: How do you identify postgraduate students who need support services?	Diagnostic mechanisms used to determine honours students who are likely to drop out in ODL
	Student support model	Q6: What are the postgraduate support services available in the university?	Support services put in place to curb postgraduate students in the university
		Q7: How do ODL universities mitigate dropout of LPSs doing COM4809?	Actions/means taken by the university to respond to student dropout concern
	Evaluation of an effectiveness of support services offered to honours students in ODL	Q8: How do ODL universities measure the effectiveness of a dropout mitigation strategy for COM4809 LPSs?	Methods to evaluate the impact of support programmes for postgraduate students in the university
	Dissemination of information on available support services	Q9: How do ODL universities create awareness on the available support services?	Communication methods/channels through which ODL institutions disseminate information on the available support services to honours students
	Other information	Q10: General comments	Additional information that lecturers deem important to them, but not necessarily appearing in the in-depth interview schedule. For instance, suggestions and opinions.

3.5.3 Data collection instruments and organisation

This section explains measurement instruments used for data collection and how they were structured.

3.5.3.1 Instruments

This section expounds the types of instruments used to facilitate the collection of data, namely - interviews guides, audio recordings and notes-taking.

3.5.3.1.1 Interview guides

Data collection instruments included interview guides for each group of participants (students, lecturers and administrative officers). Hence, three interview guides were developed. The first one was designed to collect data from dropout students. The second one was designed to garner data from the lecturers, while the third one was for data collection with administrative officers.

3.5.3.1.2   Audio recording and notes-taking of data

All participants (lecturers, administrative officers and dropout students) consented to participate in the study verbally as well as by signing the consent forms. Participants have also given consents to the audio recording of interviews, in all focus-group and in-depth interviews with lecturers, in-depth interviews with administrative officers, and focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students. The timespans for each in-depth interview with lecturers and administrative officers ranged from 30 minutes to an hour. Capturing of data was fulfilled by taking notes and audio recording of the interviews using a laptop and a tablet.

The taking of notes was inevitably indispensable to fulfil six roles. First, to increase the level of trustworthiness of findings during the analysis phase. Second, to involve non-verbal cues derived from participants' body languages when assigning meanings to the findings. Third, it was helpful in recapping participants' responses that warrant further probing questions. Fourth, it was also undertaken to safeguard if audio-

recorded interviews become inaudible or corrupted during the analysis. Fifth, it also served as a backup should anything wrong could happen to laptop and a tablet used for the recording, such as getting lost or pilfered. Six, it also helped me to quickly record the emerging themes and subthemes.

The choice for audio recording was influenced by the desire to collect massive data from participants to assist the researcher to support interpretations of findings using statements quoted verbatim. The process to collect data ceased when a saturation point was arrived at – that is, when no newer information could be sourced. Though some participants' responses were not related to the interview guides' questions, there were those types of information which participants deemed prominent to them.

3.5.3.2 Organisation of data collection instruments

Prior to and upon the completion of data collection process, the task to organise data was an element of respectively data collection and analysis stages. This section explains how general categories and their subcategories, which have been used to solicit participants' views, were organised in the interview guides and how presentation or the reporting of findings and their interpretations are structured.

While the forthcoming section deals with structures of the interview guides, coding and categorisations of concepts and ideas as well as how findings are organised and presented will be dealt with in full, later on, under a section on analytic framework.

3.5.3.3 Structures (organisation) of the interview guides

During the data collection stage, research questions were always put in mind and the interview data collection instruments were structured according to main research questions and sub questions. In each interview guide, the first question collected the demographic data of the participants. Depending on the types of information valued vital to be included into the study, demographic characteristics for each target population differed.

From the lecturers, demographic characteristics, which were solicited, were educational level; occupational level; and experience in teaching in an ODL institution,

at a postgraduate level and in a COM4809 honours case module. The thought was that such demographic information will add value in the analysis of in-depth interview data and that they will show any existing linkages between levels of experiences and dropout occurrences.

For the administrative officers, only the occupational level (Junior and senior administrative positions) and the participants' experience with regard to the number of years, which they have been involved in the administration of the module, were deemed important.

From students, the study collected demographic data that encompasses gender, age, employment, marital status and race. These demographic characteristics were selected to enable the researcher to determine the effect of gender, age and race on honours students' dropouts in ODL institutions.

The research question and its sub-questions in the interview guides followed the demographic data theme. The last question wanted to generate any additional information which participants consider salient to them. Data were, therefore, analysed and presented in the sequence in which questions were asked in the interview guides. In the ensuing section, I provide the description on how I have analysed the data.

3.6   DATA ANALYSIS

Several inquiries into the dropout phenomenon have used a range of approaches to analyse the generated data. From Murray's (2014, p. 2) standpoint, a bigger fraction of the related studies connected one or more academic or socio-economic factors to dropout by applying a standard survival analysis based approach. The approach allows the inquirer to feed academic or socio-economic factors into a risk function that subsequently create a likelihood distribution to calculate the time students will take to drop out of their enrolled programmes (Murray, 2014, p. 2).

In this section, I describe how I analysed and presented data. The actual presentation and interpretations of findings is part of the scope of chapter 4. The study has applied the qualitative thematic content analysis approach to analyse data. There are two

forms of content analysis described in the corpus literature, namely: quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Providing the disparity between the two, Boreus and Bergstrom (2017, p. 24) assert that while a quantitative content analysis is an analytic technique in which the purpose is to count and measure something in texts in order to determine the rate of recurrences, in qualitative content analysis, nothing is measured or counted within the texts. Linked to Boreus and Bergstrom's (2017) position on qualitative content analysis, Ritchie et al (2013, p. 345) contend that thematic content analysis is a type of data analysis that includes verifying data which have been summarised or coded from themes which capture conceptual variations in the data. In similar vein, Schreier (2014, p. 170) defined qualitative content analysis as a systematic analytic procedure in which the researcher ascribes successive elements of the material to the categories of a coding frame so that meanings to the collected data can be described. Ingrained from the prevalent differences with regard to conceptualisations on thematic content analysis, I have preferred, in this study, to use the term 'qualitative thematic content analysis' to indicate that this analytic technique is applied within the study anchored in a qualitative methodology. The position taken in this study is in line with Schreier's (2014) as well as Boreus and Bergstrom's (2017) standpoints on qualitative content analytic technique. This method was chosen because the study seeks to find meanings of perceptions and experiences of lecturers, administrative officers and students who have dropped out of their studies in open and distance learning environments.

The study generated and analysed the following types of data: data from focus-group interviews with six dropout students and from telephonic interviews with ten dropout students; data from focus-group interviews with eight lecturers and data from in-depth interviews with seven lecturers, and data form in-depth interviews with two administrative officers.

3.6.1 Thematic content analysis of students' responses

Students' responses from the recorded interviews were analysed in accordance with the sequence of the themes used to collect the data as organised in the interview guide. In this section, I describe how thematic content analysis was used to analyse data.

3.6.1.1 Qualitative thematic content analysis of data collected from focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students

Ritchie et al (2013) argues that there are two ways to analyse data which has been generated through focus-group interviews. The first method is the 'whole group method of data analysis' which regards the data which has been generated by the participants as whole, treating the group as a unit of analysis and a unit of individual data (p. 340). The second method of data analysis is the participant-oriented group analysis which separate contributions made by each individual participant in the entire context of the interview and data is summarised by allocating own row to individual participant in a group (p. 340). In this study, the latter is used and an analysis is done per each student who took part in the interview. The participant-based focus-group analysis has been chosen because it has the capacity to enable the researcher to analyse the variances and likenesses of research findings of all participants in a group and across all the selected groups for the study (Ritchie et al, p. 340).

Data from focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students who left an advanced communication research module between 2011 and 2016 was analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis. The predetermined themes identified during the literature review and themes that have emerged during the focus-group interviews, were amalgamated, categorised and analysed manually. The data were analysed according to the order of sequence of sections, themes and questions as they appear in the interview guide.

3.6.1.2 Qualitative thematic content analysis of lecturers' and administrative officers' responses

The study applied the thematic analysis again to analyse the findings derived from interviews with lecturers and administrative officers. The leitmotifs used in the collection of data, and as arranged in interview guide, were followed according to the structure of their appearances. Both the transcribed data from recorded in-depth interviews (using the tablet and laptop) as well as the specific data noted down during the proceedings of the interviews were analysed in integration. An analysis and interpretation of data from the staff took into account unintentional and non-verbal communications shown during the interviews and the deciphered communicated meanings were put into the context. The amalgamation of verbal and unintentional

non-verbal cues was deemed salient to promote the accuracy, trustworthiness and dependability of the findings. The forthcoming section describes how data were transcribed.

3.6.2 Data transcription

Interviews have been transcribed manually and verbatim. Only salient data, which answer the research questions, were transcribed. This form of transcription was opted for to enable me to draw an entire picture of the massive collected data and to use direct quotes from participants' responses to support assigned meanings to the findings. I read the transcribed data several times in order to gain a complete picture of the themes, which have emerged, as well as to optimize the trustworthiness of the findings and their interpretations.

3.6.3 Analytic framework

This section on analytical framework expounds the units of analysis of this study as well as how they were analysed. Such units of analysis involved lecturers, administrative officers and students who served as participants.

3.6.3.1 Participants

As has already been explained, the scope of data collection and analysis was limited to data from lecturers, administrative officers and dropout students. Thus, only lecturers, administrative officers and students have constituted the target population of this study. Lecturers and administrative officers were only those individuals who have been involved into teaching and administering an advanced communication research module (COM4809) between 2011 and 2016. Accordingly, students who participated into the study were those who have dropped out of their studies between 2011 and 2016. The study focused on dropouts of honours students within open and distance learning institutions. It employed Unisa as a case university and COM4809 offered in the department of communication science as a case module.

3.6.3.2 Analytic process

Data analysis is an important component in research. It has been described by Marshall and Rossman (1990; 2011; 2014) as a way of developing structure and order as well as to interpret the huge collected data and ascribe meanings to them. Data were analysed using thematic content analytical procedure as explained in chapter 1 and 3. Using the semi-structured interview approach, fifteen purposively selected lecturers and only two administrative officers who work on COM4809 honours module in the department of communication science have aided the researcher to collect the interview data in depth.

Three data collection and analysis phases have been followed in this study. The first phase involved data collection and analysis of lecturers' in-depth interview responses. The second phase involved the collection and analysis of data through in-depth interviews with administrative officers. The third phase was data collection and analysis of students' responses using focus-group interviews. Two activities were carried out during each phase, namely, data collection and analysis. This means that data analysis has been executed concurrently with data collection, but was continued after data collection was completed in each phase.

To identify emerging themes, O'Connor and Gibson's steps to analyse qualitative data were used and involve organising data; determining and organising ideas and concepts; determining and organising data into themes; ensuring dependability and credibility; getting reasonable interpretations for findings, and an overview of the final steps.

Table 3.5: Summary of how O'connor and Gisbson's qualitative analysis steps were applied in this study

Data analysis progression	O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) steps to analyse qualitative data	Application of O'Connor and Gibson's steps in the study	
Step 1	Organising data	Data were organised according to participants and the order in which they were collected	Lecturers, Administrative officers Students
Step 2	Determining and organising ideas and concepts	Ideas and concepts	**Lecturers' perceptions** unpreparedness lack of time management lack of technological skill and readiness Lack of access to technological resources students' poor relationship with lecturers lack of access to the required research data lack of academic achievement racism In adequate academic support Lecturers' workload

			Lecturers' lack self-reflection of on teaching pedagogies
			Lecturers' poor relationships with students
			Lack of lecturers' interactions with students
			Lack of subject library support
			Awareness of support services
			Lack of financial support programmes
			Lack of emotional support
			Administrative officers' perceptions
			Inaccessibility/unavailability of lecturers
			Taking longer time to provide students with feedbacks
			Students' technological challenges
			Students' financial constraints
Step 3	Determining and organising data into themes	Themes that have emerged	**Controllable and uncontrollable factors**
			Dropout factors which are associated with students' personal circumstances
			Dropout factors which are associated with lecturers' personal circumstances
			Dropout factors which are associated with institutional circumstances
			Dropout factors which are associated with other external circumstances
Step 4	Ensuring dependability and credibility of the analysis procedure and	Trustworthiness of analysis techniques and findings	Data were analysed in tandem with the notes jotted down during the interviews. Interpretations of findings took into account body languages of the participants and meanings assigned to the findings were put into context.

	the findings which been divulged		The defined concepts and categories which were the results of the researcher being highly immersed into the repeated perusal of the content were verified through consultations with participants. Perusing the whole interview transcript several times further enabled the researcher to categorise data and to make sense of it.
Step 5	Getting reasonable interpretations for findings	Coding techniques	I compared findings of this empirical study with those which found in the literature, checking if they were expected or if they came out as surprises and trying to determine meanings between ideas and concepts by grouping similar information together into categories and themes – what Rubin and Rubin (1995) calls "coding techniques". Thus ascribing meanings into the unveiled findings has taken into account what is documented in the related preceding studies and what the empirical study has managed to divulge.
Step 6	An overview of the final steps.		At this juncture, I have explained the epistemological approach towards exploring student dropout at honours level within the ODL environment, what the limitations, the strengths of the study were and areas were improvements have to be made and implications of the findings.

3.6.3.2.1 An application of O'Connor and Gibson's six steps to analyse qualitative data

This section expounds how O'Connor and Gibson's six steps to analyse qualitative data have been applied into this study. As argued by Marshall and Rossman (1990; 2014), an analysis of qualitative data is not neat and does not proceed in a linear style. In line with this viewpoint, it is worth to note that the analysis of data in this study was characterised by dynamic and overlapping steps.

Step 1: Organising data

I looked back into the research questions and their sub-questions in the chronological order of how they were prepared in the interview guides, and the target populations in the sequence in which data were collected. Thus research questions and sub-questions have provided me with the direction as to what type of data is needed and should be extracted from the transcribed data. For example, while the research question *'How do lecturers and administrative officers perceive dropouts of honours students in open and distance learning institutions?'* was an all-encompassing question that, in a broad-spectrum, needed a range of data, the sub-question '*With reference to COM4809, Why do LPSs drop out in ODL universities?',* wanted to solicit lecturers' and administrative officers' perceptions on the factors which account for dropouts of honours students in specific module – COM4809.

Step 2: Determining and organising ideas and concepts

Participants' transcribed responses to each sub-question of the research questions were paralleled in verbatim form to the sub questions, which were asked to solicit participants' views during the interviews. At this stage of the analysis, the type of information that I was searching for included phrases, which have been used in the interview data, potential meanings that were inherent in the language or expressions and unexpected findings. After determining the recurrent phrases used in the participants' responses, I then grouped them into categories. For example, answering to the question on why honours students drop out of COM4809, one of the participants stated that *"being an ODL institution means that students are mostly on their own in learning processes and they must be able to manage their time."* Time management has been one

of the common phrases that participants talked about and during this stage of analysis; I was able to find it. The most valued categories, which have emerged from such a directly quoted response, were 'students' self-directedness and lack of time management'.

Step 3: Determining and organising data into themes

The raw data, ideas, concepts and categories were then scrutinised to determine plausible overarching themes. For example, the analyses of in-depth interviews, from lecturers, revealed various reasons for dropout of honours students at a postgraduate level of study in open and distance learning universities. Such categories of factors which embraced, inter alia, students' workload, inability to pay for study fees, low academic performance, and inability to manage time, students' workload and unpreparedness. These findings resembled three general themes, which were collapsed into distinct categories that have emerged into wide-ranging themes. These themes were dropout factors that are associated with students' personal circumstances, dropout factors that are associated with lecturers' personal circumstances, dropout factors that are associated with institutional circumstances and dropout factors that are associated with other external circumstances. Interesting to find even more was the fact that these four themes can be collapsed into dropout factors which are controllable and those which uncontrollable.

Step 4: Ensuring dependability and credibility

As postulated by O'Connor and Gibson (n.d, 74), qualitative findings are credible and dependable when triangulation of data collection instruments and sources were used to complement each other. In this study, to establish the dependability (reliability) and the credibility (validity) of data, different forms triangulations were undertaken at the following different four levels:

- First level of triangulation: This level of triangulation has incorporated the amalgamation of target populations from which data were collected. These segments of participants involved lecturers, administrative officers and students.

- Second level of triangulation: This level of triangulation has encompassed integrating qualitative data collection methods, namely, focus-group and in-depth interviews with lecturers, focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students as well as in-depth interviews with administrative officers.
- Third level of triangulation: At this point, data have been captured using physical data collection instruments, such as the laptop and tables for the recording purposes and through notes taking of developing ideas and themes.
- Forth level of triangulation: During the analysis stage, interview data have been analysed in tandem with the notes jotted down during the interviews, interpretations of findings took into account body languages of the participants, and meanings assigned to the findings were put into context.

In addition, the defined concepts and categories, which were the results of the researcher being highly immersed into the repeated perusal of the content, were verified through consultations with participants. Perusing the whole interview transcript further enabled the researcher to categorise data and to make sense of it. Further to this, the created table was brought to the attention of participants for review.

Step 5: Getting reasonable interpretations for findings

To assign rational meanings to the findings which this study has divulged, I commenced by creating a table (Table 4.1: Organisation and presentation of findings) to summarise them. The table contains the target populations from whom data were generated, themes and sub-themes that have emerged. I then checked if there were the ones that I was expecting, drawing from what the review of literature that I have conducted (Chapter two) have documented. Paralleling them with those, which other comparable studies, which have investigated the dropout phenomenon, have reported, and as have been discussed in the literature chapter, I further checked the degree of their likeness and inconsistencies. This has helped me gain deeper insights into findings, which came out as surprises. For instance, some of the reasons why some honours students who are enrolled with ODL institutions drop out and which were uncovered to be surprising factors were students and lecturers' workloads.

The sixth step of O'Connor and Gibson's process to analyse qualitative data is an overview of the final steps. This step is discussed next as per the manner in which it was followed in this study.

Step 6: An overview of the final steps

At this step, I explained how the investigation of honours student dropout has unfolded, what the limitations and the strengths of the study were and areas were improvements have to be made. For example, in the introductory remarks of this chapter, I have expounded that this study was a qualitative design that wanted to explore dropout at an honour level in an ODL environment and the potential student support model that could be developed thereafter. I have also discussed the implications of findings and the best possible way to report them. I have also ensured that participants are identified by codes. With regard to limitations of the study, section 1.9 of this study explained about them. As for the strengths of the study, the section on dependability and credibility that has been explicated in step 4 of section on the application of O'Connor and Gibson's six steps to analyse qualitative data) is also applicable here.

Table 3.6 (An illustration of how the data were organised during the thematic analysis using the case of lecturers' interview data) serves to optimise how the data were organised during the process of coding and grouping of participants' views and categories. This form of data organisation during an analysis was applied for data collected from both focus-group and in-depth interviews with lecturers, focus-group and telephonic interviews with dropout students as well as in-depth interviews with administrative officers.

Table 3.6: An illustration of how the data were organised during the thematic analysis using the case of lecturers' interview data
Source: Researcher's own compilation

Stage 1			Stage 2	Stage 3
Research question (RQ) and sub-question	**participant**	**Pseudonym /code**		
		e.g. Lecturer 1 = L1, lecturer 2 = L2	**Answer**	**Category**
RQ1: 'Why do lower-postgraduate students (LPSs) drop out in ODL institutions?' Q1: 'Why do students drop out from an advanced communication research module (COM4809)?'	Lecturer	L3	*"Being an ODL institution means that students are mostly on their own in learning processes and they must be able to manage their time."*	Students' lack of time management
		L12	*"Although as a country we are improving at a higher pace with internet connections, I have heard many of my rural honours students saying they were unable to submit assignments because they had no gadgets connected to the public internet network and that they are no internet cafes and Wi-Fi where they reside and have decided to leave COM4809 as a result."*	Lack of access to technological resources

Step 4	**Overarching theme:** Dropout factors which are associated with students' personal circumstances

Table 3.6 (An illustration of how the data were organised during the thematic analysis using the case of lecturers' interview data) serves as an example to show how data were organised in this study to simplify the thematic analysis technique. After the recorded data were transcribed verbatim, I created a table that consisted of five columns. The first column contained the research questions and their sub-questions. These sub-questions were interview guides' questions, which I compiled to facilitate interviews. While the second column indicated the source of responses (participants), the third column provided the pseudonyms (codes) given to the participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of their participation and responses. The fourth column contained uncleaned transcribed responses of the participants. Categories, which have emerged during the thematic analysis, were given in column five.

Four stages of the transcribed data appeared in the organising of data. The first stage was comprised of the first three columns (research questions and sub questions, participants and codes identifying them). These are sorts of information that I have checked first to organise data and they were essential since analysing the qualitative research data has to take research questions and participants into account while codes helped to provide the privacy of participants. Such an undertaken decision was in line with Maxwell's (2012) claim that the research question is the most essential facet that is linked to all other aspects of a qualitative inquiry and it influences and is influenced by other aspects. The second stage was focused on participants' raw data because, as Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 3) posit, in qualitative design findings and interpretations have to come from them. The third stage was focused on ideas and concepts, which have emerged. This stage was important because it uncovers the findings emerging from the raw data. In the fourth stage, I collapsed different categories into a general theme.

3.6.4 Assigning meanings to findings

In this study, the main purpose of analysing qualitative data was to look for general statements on the linkages among data categories, which have emerged (Marshall and Rossman, 1990, p. 111). The conventional formal systems to assist researchers to simplify assigning meanings to the collected qualitative data have been applied in this study and incorporated what Rubin and Rubin (1995) refer to as *"coding techniques"*

(which are used for marking and getting the main concepts and ideas), classifying types of information that are alike in categories and finding the relationships between ideas and the developing themes.

Except on demographic information theme, an analysis of data from lecturers, administrative officers and students at an open coding juncture followed O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) first step. Analysis was commenced by firstly - organising data, secondly – searching for concepts and ideas, and thirdly - determining and organising data into categories. During the analysis of the data from participants, highlights with different colours were used to differentiate concepts and ideas.

3.6.5 Reasoning approach

By means of an inductive reasoning approach, data were analysed through an application of O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) six steps of analysing qualitative data as was planned in this study. An inductive reasoning is an approach in which theories are developed through drawing over-all conclusions from cases of empirical data (McAbee, Landis and Burke, 2017, p. 278). An inductive reasoning approach was chosen because, as Sunday (n.d) comments, it is appropriate for studies whose methodological paradigm is dominantly qualitative. This made an inductive reasoning approach apposite since this study is predominately anchored in qualitative methodological paradigm.

3.7 QUALITY CRITERIA (TRUSTWORTHINESS)

This section provides an explanation on how dependability of data collection instruments and the credibility of the findings were enhanced.

3.7.1 Dependability (reliability) of the interview guides

The dependability of the measurement instruments were ensured by means of the supervisors' and co-supervisor's perusal and approval of both the focus-interview guides for students and in-depth interview guides for the lecturers and administrative officers.

3.7.2 Credibility (confirmability) or validity of the results

Willig (2013, p. 24) defines 'validity' in research as the degree to which the study has achieved an evaluation, description and explanation of the phenomenon it needed to measure. With a congruent postulation, Maxwell (2012, p. 4) posits that the validity element of qualitative research design explains the extent to which the research findings are accurate or misleading, other possible interpretive accounts to describe and expound those findings, threats that can possibly limit the trustworthiness of the findings and the preventive measures to address them.

Furthermore, the credibility section of the design explicates reasons why the findings should be trusted. In this study, applying step four of the O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) six steps to analysing findings ensure credibility, which deals with ensuring dependability and credibility of findings and analysis. The step requires the researcher to thoroughly check the accuracy with which the questions in the interview guide measure what they are planned to measure, and the degree to which the findings are consistent.

The credibility of findings of this study has been ensured by means of an embedded approach in which telephonic interviews with ten dropout students, focus-group interviews with another group of six dropout students, focus-group interviews with eight lecturers, in-depth interviews with other seven lecturers and two administrative officers have been used in amalgamation. This is closely parallel to triangulation in which the data collection from various sources is believed to carry potential to increase the level of confirmability or credibility of research findings (Ritchie et al, 2013, p. 358).

Within the scope of social science research, as defined by Burton and Obel (2011), triangulation refers to the use of integrated methods to gain enriched understandings of phenomena under inquiries. In line with this postulation, this qualitative inquiry has collected data through focus-group and telephonic interviews with students, focus-group and in-depth interviews with lecturers, as well as in-depth interviews with administrative officers. As a result, it was anticipated that the findings obtained from different types of interviews would authenticate each other.

Table 3.7 (Summary of stages at which triangulations were undertaken to ensure dependability and credibility of findings) provides a summary about different triangulations, which were performed to increase the trustworthiness of the findings:

Table 3.7: Summary of stages at which triangulations were undertaken to ensure dependability and credibility of findings

Research process	Stages where triangulations have been performed	Action undertaken to ensure dependability and credibility of findings
Data collection	Participants	This level of triangulation has incorporated the amalgamation of target populations from which data were collected. These segments of participants involved lecturers, administrative officers and students.
	Qualitative data collection methods	This level of triangulation has encompassed integrating qualitative data collection methods, namely: focus-group and in-depth interviews with lecturers, in-depth interviews with administrative officers as well as focus-group interviews with dropout students.
	Physical data collection instruments	At this juncture, data have been captured through the use of physical data collection instruments, such as the laptop and tables for the recording purposes and through notes-taking of developing ideas and themes.
Data analysis	Data recording procedures	During the analysis stage, interview data have been analysed in tandem with the notes jotted down during the interviews, interpretations of findings took into account body languages of the participants, and meanings assigned to the findings were put into context.
	Confirmability of findings	The defined concepts and categories, which were the results of the researcher being highly immersed into the repeated perusal of the content, were verified through consultations with participants.

In addition, perusing the whole interview transcript further enabled the researcher to categorise data and to make sense of it. In table 3.7 (Summary of stages at which triangulations were undertaken to ensure dependability and credibility of findings), the first column, counting from left, is the research process that is constituted by data collection and analysis stages. The second column shows areas in the research process at which triangulation has been done to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. The third column explains how such different triangulations were carried out. This imply that an attempt to promote the accuracy and exactitude of findings have been exercised optimally. Nevertheless, there were some limitations, which were identified and are discussed in section 1.9 of this study.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

In chapter 1, I defined the research ethics and mentioned all the aspects considered salient. Here I expand the explanation on ethics.

3.8.1 Information privacy and participants' anonymity

The privacy of information and anonymity of the participants were stringently ensured and maintained. Data has been encrypted. The names and other identities of the participants were not recorded anywhere and no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about participants' involvement in this research. No one will be able to connect the participants to the responses they have given. Their responses were provided a code number or a pseudonym and participants were referred to in this way in the data, in any publications, or other research reporting methods, such as conference proceedings.

To safeguard anonymity of participants in the report of the findings that have been revealed, participants were given pseudonyms. The first lecturer to be interviewed is referred to in this study as lecturer 1 that has been abbreviated as L1. The second lecturer to be interviewed was given a pseudonym L2. The same happed up until L12. The second target population was administrative officers. Them too, were pseudo named Ad 1 and Ad 2 as per the sequence followed. Using the same method of pseudo naming participants, students were referred to as S1, S2 going forward.

I have, however, encouraged all participants to treat information confidentially. This is because confidentiality is an important ethical aspect of the research that demands the highest level of respect by the researcher (Operario, 2008, p. 11). For this reason, I have advised them not to disclose personal sensitive information in the interviews.

With regards to guaranteeing confidentiality of in-depth interview data collected from lecturers and administrative officers, interviews took place in their offices which have given optimal satisfactory privacy, enabling both the researcher and participants to feel highly comfortable with the running of the interviews.

The procedural ethics appropriate for this study and which have been followed comprise the following stages or actions:

3.8.2 Data exactitude

Views on the data correctness and integrity regard them as essential aspects in research that warrant researchers to exercise care. A case in point is that of Operario (2008, p. 12) who avows that when presenting and analysing the collected data, the researcher must exercise accuracy – 'exactitude'.

3.8.3 Data integrity

In addition, fundamental in research ethics is the aspect of integrity of collected data. Operario (2008, p. 12) suggests that researchers should avoid, as far as possible, to coerce a participant to provide responses in a manner that is contrary to what they believe in or their experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. Data should not be fabricated, as this would affect the integrity of underrating the study.

3.8.4 Ethics approvals

In order to successfully conduct this research – 'Student dropout in an open and distance learning institution: A quest for a responsive support model'- two ethics approvals were required. While the first one had to come from the University of Limpopo (UL), the second ethics approval had to come from University of South Africa (Unisa). This was due to the reason that the researcher specified Unisa as a case university and wanted to involve Unisa's students and staff as participants, on one hand. On the other hand, the researcher has enrolled for a PhD programme at UL. It

is therefore a mandatory requirement that every student who undertake an investigation into a particular phenomenon must apply for an ethical clearance. The section that follows provides exposition of the procedure followed to obtain ethics approval from UL.

3.8.4.1 Ethical approval from University of Limpopo (UL)

The focus of the research was on student dropout in open and distance learning environment. The study wanted to conduct an investigation into student dropout in an open and distance learning environment in order to ultimately build a student-centred support framework that can effectively respond to dropout incidences in an open and distance learning environment. As a mandatory requirement for all researchers at the University of Limpopo, including doctoral candidates, and with the faculty approval of the proposed study, the researcher applied for ethics approval online. Following a meeting of the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC) held on 3 November 2016, the application was approved with conditions. Such outlined conditions were later addressed and, the ethics approval was subsequently granted. However, for an application of ethics approval to be considered at Unisa, a UL ethics approval was required. This was despite having been successfully granted an Ethics Approval by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (familiarly known as 'CHS Ethics Review Committee'). The ensuing section provides a descriptive account of the process followed at Unisa.

3.8.4.2 Ethical approval from University of South Africa (Unisa)

The researcher has applied for an ethical clearance to Unisa in terms of the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Research Permission, which requires all Unisa employees who are enrolled for educational programmes with other academic institutions to first obtain ethics approvals. Once researchers have been granted ethics approvals, they can then apply for ethical clearance to Unisa Research and Innovation Ethics Review Committee (URIERC). This process was followed in this research and the ethical clearance was also granted.

Of a special note in ethical research process, upon having been granted ethics approvals, is the feature of data collection permission by the institution that is being

researched. In the next section, the description to unfold steps undertaken to apply for permission to collect data about humans is explained.

3.8.5 Permission to collect data

Following successful applications for ethical clearances, from both UL and Unisa, the researcher had to apply for the permission to collect data from Unisa staff (lecturers and administrative officers) as well as students who have dropped out of their honours studies to the Research Permissions Subcommittee (RPSC) of the Senate's Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Degrees Committee (SRIPDC). This process, also, has been followed for conducting this study. Moreover, Unisa has been informed about the researcher's intent to publish articles in order to contribute to the prevalent academic discourse on the topic and sharing the findings with the broader academic community of interests, both locally and internationally. It has been explicated further that the findings of the study will not harm the university, students, the broader community and the society at large.

3.8.6 Information sheet

An information sheet was developed. It contained the purpose of the study and the significance of individual participation for the success of the study.

3.8.7 Consent form

The UL TREC application form that also contains a section on consent form was used and adjustment was made to this study. Consent forms were distributed to all the selected students and staff who had to participate in the study so that a consensus can be reached between the researcher and the participants. Conditions with which to participate in the study have clearly included that the participation is voluntary. The purpose and significance of conducting the study were also thoroughly explained. The researcher proposed dates and times for interviews and all participants agreed on them. Through e-mails, all selected participants were sent consent forms together with other informant documents, such as the information sheet (which explains what the study is all about), ethics approval from University of Limpopo (UL), ethical clearance from university of South Africa (Unisa), permission to collect data from Unisa, the interview guide (which offered them an opportunity to know the types of questions

which the researcher was going to ask and enabled them to prepare for answers in advance). Printed copies of consent forms were again distributed to participants during the actual in-depth interviews and a brief overview of the study was provided to participants prior to them consenting to partake in the study by signing the consent forms. All participants also agreed to have the interviews recorded using the tablet and the laptop.

3.8.8 Declaration and recognition of sources used

The researcher has further declared upon the originality of the entire produced work that it originally belongs to him and indicated that plagiarism was avoided as far as possible by ensuring that all sources that have been used are referenced, both within the text and in the list of sources used. The ensuing chapter presents and interprets findings.

3.9 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I described the research methodology applied in this study. The chapter began by explaining a research methodology and moved on to explain the research paradigm that I followed. The ensued section explained the research design that was adopted. I, then, showed how I selected participants. Following that, I described how I collected data, after which I described how I analysed it. Moving further, the chapter described the procedure followed in the analysis of data. Thereafter, the criterion used to ensure dependability of data collection instruments and credibility of findings were discussed. The chapter ends with the description on research ethics taken in consideration when undertaking the research. In the forthcoming chapter, I present the findings and provide interpretations about them.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATIONS OF FINDINGS
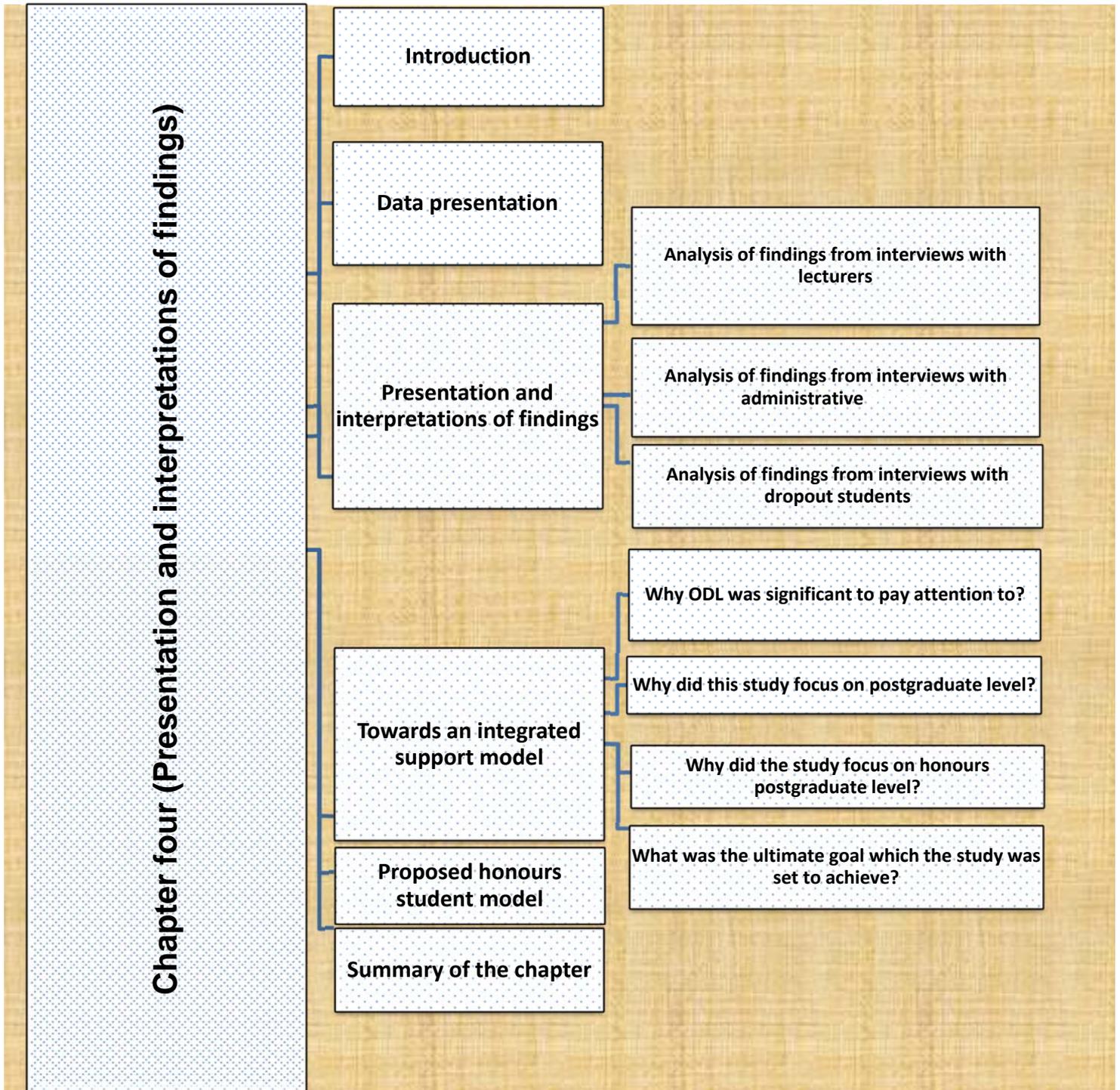
Figure 4.1 Schematic representation of chapter four (presentation and interpretations)

Source: Researcher's own compilation

The schematic representation shows the following structure:

Chapter four (Presentation and interpretations of findings)

- Introduction
- Data presentation
- Presentation and interpretations of findings
  - Analysis of findings from interviews with lecturers
  - Analysis of findings from interviews with administrative
  - Analysis of findings from interviews with dropout students
- Towards an integrated support model
  - Why ODL was significant to pay attention to?
  - Why did this study focus on postgraduate level?
  - Why did the study focus on honours postgraduate level?
  - What was the ultimate goal which the study was set to achieve?
- Proposed honours student model
- Summary of the chapter

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The schematic representation of chapter four (representation and interpretations) structurally depicts how the discussion in chapter four is arranged. Headings in this chapter appear in the second column. For example, to mention the first three, introduction, data presentation, and presentation and interpretations of findings. The third column consists of eleven subheadings.

While chapter 3 of this study has dealt with the research methodology, in this chapter the central focus is on the presentation and interpretations (analysis) of findings. The chapter starts by explaining the analytic framework. Next, it explains how the findings are presented and anonymity of participants were ensured. After that, it presents and interprets the findings. Following that, it presents the proposed model and closes with a summary of the main points discussed in the chapter. In the forthcoming section, I explain the way in which data are presented.

4.2 DATA PRESENTATION

The presentation of findings has been organised according to the population segments (lecturers, administrative officers and students) from whom data were collected. The study targeted three types of participants; those were lecturers who were teaching an advanced communication research module (COM4809), administrative officers who were involved in the administration of the module and students who have dropped out of COM4809 between 2011 and 2016. The discussion and the reporting of findings, which have been divulged by this study, begun by presenting an analysis of data collected from lecturers, and that from administrative officers ensued next, with findings from students presented last. This was according to the sequence of the data collection process followed in this study. The discussion of findings is arranged according to the groups of participants that partook in the study, the themes and their subsequent subthemes, which emerged during the data collection and analysis, and not according to how the interview guides were structured as expounded in section 3.5.3.3. The three general themes and various categories, which have emerged during the analysis, are described and the meditative accounts, which validate each theme

and category, are provided using participants' verbatim quotations. This was solely aimed at demonstrating the importance of each category.

While only four categories were found from the administrative officers' responses, namely: students' technological challenges, students' financial constraints, unavailability of lecturers and taking longer time to provide students with feedbacks, the following categories have emerged from the analysis of lecturers' responses:

- Unpreparedness,
- Lecturers' workload,
- Students' lack of self-directedness in learning
- Lack of time management for students,
- Lack of subject library support,
- Lack of technological skills and readiness
- Lack of awareness on support services offered,
- Lecturers' lack of self-reflection on their teaching pedagogies
- Relationship between lecturers and students,
- Interaction between students and lecturers,
- Students' lack of access to diverse technologies,
- Students' workload
- Lack of access to the required research data,
- Poor academic achievement, and
- Racism

All categories from both lecturers and administrative officers were collapsed into the following four themes.

- Factors which are associated with students' personal circumstances
- Factors which are associated with lecturers' personal circumstances, and
- Factors which are associated with institutional circumstances
- Other external factors

These four prominent themes were further collapsed into two general themes, namely; factors, which can be controlled, and those, which cannot be controlled. These findings imply the following:

- that open and distance learning type of educational transfer may be less fitting for some students than the on-campus face-to-face form of teaching and learning;
- that causes for dropout of honours students in open and distance learning contexts are unique to each student and wide-ranging; and
- that support needs to each at-risk student must be unique and tailor-made if institutions desire to effectively reduce the dropout concern.

There is a widely held belief that distance education institutions' courses and programmes account for greater student dropout percentage as opposed to those of on-campus learning environment (Willging and Johnson, p. 115). Earlier studies on dropout phenomenon dealt with dropout at different educational contexts ranging from basic schools to higher education institutions. For instance, Tas et al' (2013) study on dropout was within the confines of Vocational High School and has found four categories of reasons for dropouts which are somewhat similar to the ones found in this study. Tas et al' (2013, p. 1561) themes were individual reasons, school reasons, family and neighbourhood. In this study, the focus was on lower-postgraduate level within an ODL type of learning context.

Table 4.1: Organisation and presentation of findings

Participants' perceptions	Categories	Subcategories	Major themes
Lecturers	Dropout factors which are associated with students' personal circumstances	Unpreparedness Lack of time management lack of technological skill and readiness Lack of access to technological resources Students' poor relationship with lecturers Lack of academic achievement Racism	Controllable factors
	Dropout factors which are associated with lecturers' personal circumstances	Inadequate academic support Lecturers' workload Self-reflection of lecturers on teaching pedagogies Lecturers' poor relationships with students Lack of lecturers' interactions with students	
	Dropout factors which are associated with institutional circumstances	Subject library support Awareness of support services Lack of financial support programmes Emotional support	
	Dropout factors which are associated with other external circumstances	Lack of access to the required research data	Uncontrollable factors
Administrative officers	Dropout factors which are associated with students' personal circumstances	Students' technological challenges Students' financial constraints	Controllable factors
	Dropout factors which are associated with lecturers' personal circumstances	Inaccessibility/unavailability of lecturers Taking longer time to provide students with feedbacks	
Dropout students	**Dropout factors which are associated with students' personal circumstances**	**Workload** **Financial problems**	Controllable factors
	Dropout factors which are associated with lecturers' personal circumstances	Low academic achievement in assignments Unclear and discouraging comments on feedbacks Inaccessibility of lecturers	

4.3 PRESENTATION, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATIONS OF FINDINGS

Data generation and analysis of this study were meant to answer four research questions, namely: How do lecturers and administrative officers perceive dropouts of honours students in open and distance learning institutions? How did honours students experience dropouts in open and distance learning institutions? What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of lecturers and administrative officers in ODL institutions? Moreover, what perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of honours students who have dropped out of their studies in ODL institutions? Next, the analysis of findings from lecturers is presented.

4.3.1 Analysis of findings from interviews with lecturers

Of a particular importance to investigate student dropout in ODL institutions was the inclusion of lecturers as participants into this study. This was largely influenced by the literature that cited the deficiency of the studies that have sourced only perspectives of students to study the dropout concern. Lashing such studies, Gruzdev (2013) argues that using only students' views fail to take into cognisant the role of professors in enhancing insights into the problem. Informed by this background, this study wanted to increase the trustworthiness of the findings by incorporating lecturers as participants along with administrative officers and students who have dropped out of a case module – an advanced communication research (COM4809).

This section provides the discussion and interpretations of findings, which have been uncovered through in-depth interviews with lecturers. There are distinct ways to divulge findings in qualitative data. Padgett (2016, p. 149) point out two ways by which researcher can achieve that. Firstly, that finding can be uncovered "lying in wait", and secondly, that finding is a socially constructed reality. In this study, findings were the results of the combination of these two ways. As an illustration, all categories (for instance, students' unpreparedness, financial constraints, students' workload and lecturers' workload) which have emerged from the analysis of data were found "lying in wait" while the major themes (dropout factors associated with students' personal circumstances, lecturers' circumstances, institutional circumstances and other external factors) were social constructions. Both ways to unveil findings in the

qualitative data depends on whether studies, which are undertaken focus on changes over particular timeframes and whether their units of analysis are handled as a whole or whether their cases are viewed as chunks of averages regarding whose responses represent the mass collected raw data (Padgett, 2016, 149). This study treats cases as parts of an average view and has organised and analysed data according to the sequence they were collected. This was informed by the need to analyse each chunk of the collected data from each group participants while what transpired is still freshly reckoned.

This sections starts by presenting an analysis of lecturers' demographic profiles. Participants' demographic data were deemed salient to be encompassed in the overall interview data to enable the researcher to obtain a complete exploration of factors, which causes dropout of honours students in an ODL environment. Demographic profiles which were considered relevant for this study involved educational level, occupational level, experience in teaching at ODL institution, experience in teaching at a postgraduate level of study and experience in teaching an advanced communication research module (COM4809). The main rationale behind embracing demographic data into the exploration of factors, which determine student dropout at an honours postgraduate level in open, and distance learning was necessitated by the need to learn if there are relationships between them and dropout incidences. For example, to explore if teaching experience have had a negative effect of students' performance levels and which, consequently, contribute to the escalating dropout problem at honour level in ODL context.

4.3.1.1 Lecturers' demographic information

The study applied purposive sampling technique to select lecturers. Fifteen lecturers who were teaching an advanced communication research module (COM4809) were interviewed in depth in their respective offices. They were asked to provide demographic data relating to their occupational level (junior lecturer, lecturer and senior lecturer), educational level, and number of years they have spent working in an ODL institution, number years they have spent teaching at a postgraduate level and number of years they have been teaching COM4809. The minimum educational level that is required to teach an honours module in the department where COM4809 is offered is an honours degree. The study found that the majority of participants have

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an educational level above honours degree and many were lecturers in the positional hierarchy. The study has also shown that the majority of participants have been teaching an advanced communication research module in an ODL environment for a period of between five and seven years. This translate that many of them are extensively experienced in teaching at a postgraduate level within an ODL environment and the module in particular.

Following the quest for lecturers' pertinent demographic profiles, the study investigated reasons for student dropout incidences at an honours level in an ODL environment using the case University of South Africa's module – COM4809.

Table 4.2: Lecturers' demographic profiles

Demographic data					
Pseudonyms (Lecturer = L)	Educational level	Occupational level	Experience in teaching at a postgraduate level	Experience in teaching at ODL institution	Experience in teaching an advanced communication research module
L1	Master's degree	Lecturer	5 years	6 years	5 years
L2	Master's degree	Junior Lecturer	1 year	1 year	1 year
L3	Doctorate (PhD)	Senior Lecturer	5	5 years	5 years
L4	Honours degree	Junior Lecturer	2 years	2 years	2 years
L5	Master's degree	Lecturer	6 years	6 years	6 years
L6	Honours degree	Junior Lecturer	2 years	1 years	1 years
L7	Honours degree	Junior Lecturer	2 years	3 years	2 years
L8	Master's degree	Lecturer	7 years	7 years	6 years
L 9	Doctorate	Lecturer Senior	6 years	6 years	6 years
L10	Doctorate	Senior Lecturer	6 years	6 years	6 years
L11	Honours degree	Junior Lecturer	5 years	5 years	4 years
L12	Master's degree	Lecturer	6 years	6 years	6 years
L13	Master's degree	Lecturer	6 years	6 years	6 years
L14	Honours degree	Junior Lecturer	2 years	5 years	2 years
L15	Doctor	Full professor	10 years	10 years	10 years

4.3.1.2 Perceived reasons for dropout: findings from interviews with lecturers

This study was guided by four research questions, namely: How do lecturers and administrative officers perceive dropouts of honours students in open and distance learning institutions? How did honours students experience dropouts in open and distance learning institutions? What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of lecturers and administrative officers in ODL institutions? In addition, what perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of honours students who have dropped out of their studies in ODL institutions?

This section reports on findings drawn from the lecturers' perceptions of student dropout at an honours level within the confines of ODL institutions. The first question in the interview guide for lecturers had a purpose to determine reasons for honours students' dropouts in open and distance learning (ODL) environment with reference to the case module, an advanced communication research (COM4809) which is taught in the department of communication science at the University of South Africa (Unisa). The study has unveiled several attributes, which lead to student dropout in an ODL institutions. This section reports on and interprets findings on attributes, which account for dropouts of students who are at a lower-postgraduate (honours) level of study in ODL contexts. Table 4.3 (Emergent themes derived from the analysis of lecturers' interview data) depicts themes and their subcategories, which have emerged from the analysis:

Table 4.3: Emergent themes derived from the analysis of lecturers' interview data

Emergent themes	LECTURERS' PERCEIVED REASONS FOR DROPOUTS			
	Dropout factors associated with:			
	Controllable factors			Uncontrollable factor
	Students' personal circumstances	Lecturers' personal circumstances	Institutional circumstances	Other external circumstances
Categories	Unpreparedness Students' self-directedness Students' lack of time management Lack of technological skill and readiness Lack of access to technological resources Students' poor relationship with lecturers Lack of access to the required research data Lack of academic achievement Racism	In adequate academic support Lecturers' workload Self-reflection of lecturers on teaching pedagogies Lecturers' poor relationships with students Lack of lecturers' interactions with students	Subject library support Awareness of support services Lack of financial support programmes Emotional support	Lack of access to the required research data

As depicted in table 4.3 (Emergent themes derived from the analysis of lecturers' interview data), findings on reasons for student dropout have shown, generally, that honours students' dropouts are caused by factors emanating from the students' home contexts (students' personal circumstances), lecturers' circumstances and institutional contexts. These reasons can be classified into controllable and uncontrollable factors. I define controllable dropout factors as root causes, which can be mitigated by means of support interventions from lecturers, administrative officers, and higher education institutions as well as by the students themselves. Uncontrollable dropout factors refer, in this context, to all other causes which beyond the control of the lecturers, institutions and the students themselves. These findings reject the philosophy posited by the deficit theory that reduces student dropout and failure to their home contexts and not the school contexts. In terms of the deficit theory, students are the ones to be blamed

for their failures, which incorporate non-completion (dropout) of programmes and courses. Contrary to the doctrine held by the deficit theory, the findings support Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate theory that philosophises that unfavourable influence in student's home environment and academic learning institution has a bearing on dropout incidences. These findings were congruent to Tinto's (1982) legendary standpoint that the dropout facet can be viewed from individual and institutional viewpoints. The findings endorse a number of assertions which are inherent in related academic discourses and studies, which have looked into the dropout phenomenon that institutional variables and student personal reasons have an effect on students who fail to accomplish their postgraduate studies, students who take more time to finish the postgraduate studies and low student success rate. Such studies subsume studies undertaken by Letseka and Maile (2008), Association of African universities, South African Department of Higher Education and Training, to identify the few. Therefore, dropout is attributed by students' personal, lecturers' personal and institutional circumstances. In the ensuing section below, attributes that relate to students' personal circumstances are discussed as were found during the analysis of interview data collected from the academics who teach COM4809 honours module.

The next discussion of findings from lecturers is limited to attributes, which are associated with institutional circumstances that result in student dropout at an honours level.

4.3.1.2.1 Lecturers' perceived dropout factors which are associated with students' personal circumstances

As have already been indicated, this study has found two broad themes. Those dropout factors which students, lecturers and administrative officers can able to control and those, which they cannot. This section presents and discusses reasons, which were found to emanate from students' circumstances. These are dropout reasons, which the study has divulged that students, lecturers and academic institutions may be able to address.

Unpreparedness

A considerable quantity of literature and desktop reviews have been lop-sided more into student dropout at an undergraduate level and encompasses studies, such as Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007); Letseka and Maile (2008); CHE (2010), University of Washington (2016) and Mgwebi, Kruger, Maoto and Letsoalo (2017). Little attention was focused on the postgraduate level, especially the honours level of study (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). Much of their findings have uncovered that students' unpreparedness is one of the major factors which lead to dropout within the parameters of the South African university system (Letseka and Maile, 2008; CHE, 2013; Hovdhaugen, 2013; Mgwebi et al, 2017). Limited to an honours level within open and distance learning environments, this study has revealed congruent findings that students' unpreparedness is one of causes to student dropout at honours level in ODL. This finding was unveiled when selected lecturers were asked to share their perceptions regarding factors that lead to dropout incidents in an ODL environment. All the participants have indicated that students, particularly those who have transferred their studies from residential universities to study with ODL institutions have lack of theoretical foundation on the research subject. This simply implies that students who have little or no profound understanding of research encounter academic hurdles that usually influence them to drop out of their studies. One of the participants (L9) has commented, *"The theoretical base of the student is important"* if a student wants to do a research project. As was found in this study, students' unpreparedness is exacerbated by the fact the most of the student entering an honour level have not been trained on research methodology at an undergraduate level. This view was supported by one of the participants' comment who said, *"There is little or no training of student on methodology at an undergraduate level."*

Students' lack of self-directedness (autonomy)

In the words of one of the participants (L3),

"Being an ODL institution means that students are mostly on their own in learning processes and they must be able to manage their time."

This response has highlighted two attributes that relate to dropout of honours students who are studying through open and distance learning institutions. The first attribute is students' autonomy and the second one is time management. Lack of time

management skill will be discussed further in the next section. In this section, the central attention is on student autonomy. Student autonomy, as Biggs (2011) argued, is the result of having acquired metacognitive learning ability, an ability to learn a particular content and basic skills to learn. Basic study skills, in Biggs's (2003) assertion, includes the ability to make learning a priority, to jot down notes, to learn online, to be mindful of deadlines, to use the recommended referencing technique acceptably, to make presentation, and to commendably manage time to learn.

In-depth interviews with lecturers have uncovered that if students are not able to demonstrate sufficient autonomy in learning in an ODL environment, they are likely to drop out of their studies. This finding has supported the philosophical position that is held by Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance that has also guided this study. Moore's (2007, p. 101) description of student autonomy regards it as the ability of students who are enrolled with distance learning institutions to be in control of learning processes. This suggests that in ODL environment, students determine the pace of learning and effective learning pedagogies. The finding further posits that students have to learn how to learn in order to complete, successfully, their studies. Allan and Clarke (2007, p. 64) contend that students' capacity to exercise autonomy, to improve their learning methods and to direct their learning is a mandatory element for accomplishment and dropout preclusion in higher education.

Along with the student autonomy was the concern around the ODL type of learning environments that further exacerbates the dropout phenomenon at an honours level. This was evident in lecturers' responses, which pointed out the nature of the university as an element that also have a negative impact on students' studies. Many of the students remain isolated because of the nature of the university that requires them to study from a distance. This, in the view of the majority of participants, presents challenges to many of the students owing to the fact that the aspect of 'isolation' means that those who lack the required autonomy level in learning often drop out. Concerned with students' lack of autonomy for students who did their undergraduate in other universities, another participant (L2) said:

"I am highly worried about students who have studied research in residential universities where at any time when they like, they could just see their lecturers and tutors who can assist them instantly in classes and offices, if they don't understand something on the subject.

However, with us they have to read, and read and read by themselves and only consult their lecturers when their minds are filled up with something. And this exercise requires them to demonstrate independence because we try not to spoon-feed them."

Further reflections from lecturers' expressions were different feelings over students' lack of self-directedness. While the majority revealed a feeling of sympathy, others have reflected a feeling of disappointment. For example, words, such as 'worried' and 'concerned' regarding students' lack of self-directedness have been uttered in most of lecturers' expressions, reflecting a feeling of sympathy and sorrowfulness and the amount of difficulty that students go through when learning independently. One of the participants stated the following:

"My biggest concern is that some of our students fail or drop out from COM4809, not because they have not been hard at their work, but merely because they have been conducting their projects unaided in most of their time, without satisfactory consultation with their supervisors."

During the in-depth interviews with lecturers, it was evident in their body postures and facial expressions that they are worried of students who are not able to be autonomous in learning. Literature has documented ways to enhance student autonomy in learning trajectories. A case in point is that which is suggested by Gokool-Ramdoo (2008, p. 9) which postulates that the use of technological facilities can increase the degree of dialogue where programmes are less structured, and can, in turn, lead to student autonomy.

The study also attributes lack of time management to dropouts of honours students in ODL institutions. This factor has been discussed in the forthcoming section.

Lack of time management

Regardless of being sparse, as has been noted by Sittichai (2012, p. 286), preceding studies on the dropout phenomenon are prevalent in the concomitant literature. One such pertinent case was Tladi's (2013) study that unveiled that most of the students have no time management skill for successful learning. Among other whys and wherefores, Tladi cited work-related activities for students who are employed, positing that they tend to encroach on students' time to study, forcing some of them to drop

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out. Moore's (1993) theory that, in tandem with the deficit theory, has guided this study posits that in distance education, students' ability to manage their time meritoriously for learning is part of their autonomy that the previous section has dealt with. From Sittichai's (2012, p. 286) standpoint, students' lack of time management has a negative effect in their studies and consequently results in discontinuity. In a similar vein, this study's analysis of the lecturers' interview data also divulged that dropout is also a result of students' inability to manage their time to study effectively which, in turn, results in them discontinuing with the honours module. As per the avowal of a participant (lecturer 9):

"Some students lack time management and have very little or no time at all to refine the research product owing to the fact that the university deadlines for submission are tight."

Although not asked, the cognitive capability of students to grasp the research content was highlighted as an additional aspect of time management variable. Some students are able to perform better even in pressurised times because, in one participant's view, *"people do not learn at the same pace."*

As have also been illustrated on the finding 'student self-directedness', that participant (L3) has offered the following remark:

"Being an ODL institution means that students are mostly on their own in learning processes and they must be able to manage their time."

It is interesting to find further that being an employed student presents challenges, which negatively affect time management. This was evident in the majority of participants' views. One of the participants (L1) commented as follows:

"Most of the students who enrol for programmes with us are working and have little time to study and even to consult their lecturers."

Though it might be inferred that the attainment of time management skills can conceivably lead to a decreased dropout rate of honours students in an ODL environment, this has not been outward in the analysis.

Lack of technological skill and readiness

The higher education terrain has been changing with the growing acceptance of online teaching and learning pedagogies, which have been made possible by the rapid development in the technological landscape. Implicit in the lecturers' responses was the finding that, until this age of technological advancement, some students are still inept to effectively utilise technologies in learning and that some still prefer to learn through conventional learning pedagogies rather than embracing new technological approaches. As has also been postulated by Willging and Jonhson (2007, p. 115), experiencing technological problems is another principal reason that sway certain students to drop out from their studies. Along the same protuberant line of assertion, Juneby (2007) has studied student dropout in the context of distance education and reported that 58% of the students who were enrolled in information technology, internet-facilitated programmes have discontinued their studies. Although many students have necessary gadgets for study purposes, such as smart phones, tablets and computers with internet connection as have been revealed by this study, many of them still encounter challenges relating to using technological materials. Others were commented not ready. Evident from the participants' responses was the ensuing comment by L6 who said that:

"Some students are not ready to use information and communication technologies which impact negatively on their studies resulting in some dropping out of the module."

This assertion suggests two things. Firstly, that lack of technological skill for honours students is part of the much clustered attributes of dropout in ODL institution, secondly, that there is a need to train honours students on the essentialities of using technologies for learning purposes and how to use technologies for the purpose of conducting research. Predating studies have found students' lack of technological readiness to be somewhat perplexing to successfully deal with. Daugherty and Funke's (2007) study on rewards, handicaps and general efficacy of utilising the public internet as a learning and teaching tool has cited students' resistance as one of the major challenges in the technological support and student development.

Lack of access to technological resources

There were mixed views regarding access to technologies. The study revealed that lack of access to technologies, which are required for learning purposes, such as an internet, is also a factor leading to student dropout in an ODL environment. As one of the participants (L12) commented:

"Although as a country we are improving at a higher pace with internet connections, I have heard many of my rural honours students saying they were unable to submit assignments because they had no gadgets connected to the public internet network and that they are no internet cafes and Wi-Fi where they reside and have decided to leave COM4809 as a result."

Taking into account that some students are coming from families that are economically disadvantaged, other participants took rival positions, arguing that almost all students by now have access to technologies and are able to submit assignments online using myUnisa student management system and myLife e-mail account. MyUnisa is a learning system designed to offer students access to the variety of information (podcasts and announcements) about the courses they have registered for and other types of university information, such as announcements on possible protests by the staff, announcement regarding changes in the registered modules, library-related information and student records. It serves as an intranet, allowing lecturers to trace student records, such as their performance levels and contact details. MyLife e-mail account, on the other hand, enables interaction between students and lecturers through e-mails.

Students' poor relationship with lecturers

Recent reforms in postgraduate studies regard student-supervisor relationship as a fundamental requirement for academic success and the reduction of dropout rate in higher education. One of the themes that have emerged from an analysis of the data collected through in-depth interviews with lecturers was the view that students' poor relationship with their supervisors is a contributing factor towards honours students' attrition in ODL environments. Commenting on Batram's (2009) humanistic perspective towards understanding student support in higher education institutions, Smith (2007, p. 688) argued that some grounds for the success of academic support provisions embraces a good relationship and intimacy with tutors. Deducing from an entangled understanding offered by Smith (p.688) and the finding made by this study,

it is interpretable to assert that a student' relationship with a lecturer must first be good in order to stimulate support intervention that will subsequently reduce the dropout rate. A predating study on the dropout phenomenon, although it was contextualised within the doctoral level, has reported similar finding that poor student-lecturer relationship is one of the factors, which account for the increasing dropout concern in higher education (Pearson, 2012, p.188).

Excitingly to find in this study, both during the actual interviews and analysis, was that there were divergent opinions regarding students' poor relationship with lecturers as a dropout causative variable. Some of the participants impugned lecturers for not steering and nurturing healthy relationships with their students while another camp put liability to the students themselves. Blaming the lecturers, one of the participants (lecturer 5) stated the following:

"I am worried because sometimes students do not submit their assignments and lecturers do not bother to contact them and find why. We are not doing enough to encourage our students to learn. Some of us, especially senior lecturers, are forever unavailable in our offices and those students who personally come to university premises end up not being assisted. This is very bad and no student would want to be supervised by such a non-caring lecturer."

Other participants shifted blame to students, describing them as not typical students for distance learning. The following comment by one of the participants (L3) serves as an illustrative account:

"Our students do not really understand how an ODL university functions. They are supposed to know that in an ODL learning institution, they have to take charge of learning processes, including consulting lecturers whenever they encounter some difficulties and building a good bond with them, not to keep quiet and wait for us to detect that they have problems. We have many responsibilities that go beyond just teaching."

Low academic achievement

Preceding similar inquiries which have investigated student dropout phenomenon within the domain of higher education institutions [for example, Lockhart (2004), Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007), Wang and Eccles (2012)] have reported that lack of academic support is one of the root causes of student dropout. Highly

comparable to their findings, this study has revealed that performing below the university-regulated standard has been one of the reasons for dropout of honours students who have been studying through open and distance learning institutions. The findings have further unveiled that students who score low in assignments usually fail or discontinue their studies. In one of the participants' view,

"One of the major causes for dropout is poor academic performance. Most of the students who dropped out of COM4809 were those who didn't do well in their assignments."

These findings correspond with those, which have been reported by Breier's (2010) study that was confined within the undergraduate level. Breier (2010, p. 665) have divulged that learners whose matric results are low tend to drop out from their higher education studies. This implies that a good academic achievement or progress in studies can determine the success of the students and can, suggest, on the other pillar, the prognostication of plausible student attrition. Hence, it is fundamental for students to perform well during the course of the study in order for them to minimize the attrition probability. In the same vein, in-depth interviews with some of the participants (L2, L4, L9 and L12) have also indicated that most of the students who did not perform well in undergraduate research modules, such Research in Social Science and Communication Research modules the honours programme being underprepared and usually drop out before completing the it. Probed as to what causes low marks in assignments, as it was raised, the majority of participants, once again, mentioned student unpreparedness, stating that many students have not been involved practically in research projects or not given adequate training on research. A comment below which has been offered lecturer 12 illustrates the finding.

"...they are not properly exposed to the world of research and so they cannot conduct quality research projects independently."

This remark translates that there is no desirable transition from undergraduate level to lower-postgraduate level. Other participants argued that students perform low because they do not read the comments given on assignments. As one of the lecturers (L7) reported,

"Marking, sometimes, can become a dreary task. Our students do not read and incorporate the comments which lecturers have given them. They repeat the same mistakes over and over again, but they expect to pass."

To encourage students to improve their academic performance, some participants indicated that they have been lenient when giving marks, giving comprehensive and encouraging comments, and the benefit of doubt. One of the lecturers (L4) said

"I do not become so strict when giving feedbacks to my COM4809 students because I believe that detailed feedbacks that have been intertwined with good marks can result in an improved academic performance level."

However, many of the participants discredited clemency when marking assignments and even examination portfolios, holding the view that it deludes students and overthrow the whole purpose of learning. This view came out strongly in other in-depth interviews with a lecturer (L5, L8, L9 and L11) who further deprecated it, asserting that:

"Being merciful when providing feedback makes students relax under the impression that they are performing well while it is not the case. Instead it worsens the situation and further contributes to high student dropout proportion."

Poor academic writing skill

One of the findings that relates to the theme of dropout factors that are associated with students' personal circumstances on an advanced communication research module (COM4809) was lack of academic writing skills amongst honours students. It has also been evident in this study that some students drop out because they struggle to produce academically written products. In relation to dropouts of honours students in ODL environments, it was attention grabbing to find that being incompetent to write academically contributes significantly to the alarming dropout ratio. The much-proliferated literature shows that students who are at the middle and the upper postgraduate levels also experience difficulties in writing academically. For instance, Tamburi (2013) conducted a study that was demarcated within the doctoral level and found that, amongst the dropout causes of doctoral candidates, an inability to write theses academically has been one of the main reasons for dropouts. Tamburi's (2013)

finding is confirmed by the funding of this study, even though it was focused on honours students. One of the participants (L9) alluded as follows:

"It is really unbelievable that most of our honours students, not only on COM4809, are struggling to write academically, forcing the majority of lecturers to spend more time correcting grammar errors instead of the actual content. At an honours level, I expect students to know where to place a comma and full stop in a sentence, but that is not the case with our students. Frustrating even more, they neither know how to reference a cited source according to the specific required style nor to demonstrate an understanding of what plagiarism is."

Other participants cited poorly structured assignments as an example of poor academic writing skills. As lecturer 12 puts it,

"I expect postgraduates to have no serious challenges when it comes to academic writing. Nevertheless, we see miracles here. One the students that I was supervising used to submit an assignment that has no introduction, conclusion and list of reference and expect more marks. I guess low scores demoralised her and she left the module."

From the findings, which have been discovered, it is inferable to mention that lecturers are frustrated with honours students who cannot write in an academic way. This reflection was also apparent from the bigger fraction of lecturers' facial expressions, which complemented their verbal accounts. These findings give the impression that more training on academic writing are inevitably required to support students whose writing capacity is low.

Racism

One of the shocking but interesting finding that has emerged from the in-depth interviews with lecturers was racism. Although many participants did not mention it as a dropout-determining attribute, a small fraction of them held the view that it has an impact on student dropout at an honours level. Some of the participants, such as L1 and L8 said the following:

L1: *"one student once requested me to supervise her because she noticed a racist character that her white supervisor wasn't treating her well, seemingly, because she's black, and she went on to say she doesn't see the possibility to pass the module. I was very shocked to hear*

that. However, because I had already had many students, I suggested that she find someone else. But to be honest with you, I was really scared of what she told me…"

L3: *"Students from black community prefer to be supervised by lecturers who are also black and those from white community want to be supervised by white people."*

When prompted to show how racism leads to dropout incident, L3 said:

"I was once allocated a white student who had a negative attitude to me as a black person and showed no trust that I am qualified to teach an honours module. He used to indignantly argue with me over the comments I have made on feedbacks, telling me that I do not understand research. That student ended up dropping out. It worried me because I was doing the best I could and wanted him to successfully complete the course like others, but I couldn't sense that racism still exists after over twenty years of democracy in South Africa."

In quest for further information on racism as a factor that has been contributing to an alarming dropout rate of honours students doing COM4809, I asked other participants on the same aspect of race and one of the lecturers confirmed its prevalence in the academic universe by responding the following:

L1 *"Mh … I wouldn't say all students are racists but we do have students who feel comfortable to be under the supervision of someone from their race than others. For example, at Masters and doctoral levels, students have the freedom to choose supervisors based on their specialisation areas and fields of interest and you would be surprised to find that many who have chosen white supervisors are also white while the bigger stake of blacks went for blacks. I mean some of us have observed that for years and I am quite sure that that has become normal practice at postgraduate level."*

Students' lack of interactions with lecturers

In this study, 'students' interactions with lecturers' refer to every form of dialogue in which a communication encounter is initiated by the students on an issue that is study-related. An example could be a request to consult a lecturer and a student telephone call to ask a lecturer on academic-related matters. Communication between students and lecturer is a crucial facet in any form of learning trajectory. Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance that has been adopted in this study as one of the two

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theoretical lenses to guide the process theorises that, in a student-lecturer relationship, an interaction and a pedagogical space determine the transactional distance between students and their lecturers that, in turn, lead to a decreased completion rate. In order to bridge the transactional distance, Moore (2007) as well as Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) argue that interactions between students and lecturers are essential.

Dropout of honours students in an open and distance learning environment has been divulged to be attributed to lack of interactions between students and lecturers. Findings from the in-depth interviews with lecturers have uncovered that lack of regular students' interactions with their supervisors on sections of the module where they encounter some difficulties has been, among the reasons, why honours students drop out of an advanced communication research course. The finding is somewhat congruent to that which has been reported by Hart's (2012, p. 19) study. Focusing on student persistence in an online programme, Hart found that frequent interactions with lecturers and tutors influence student persistence. Implicit in Hart's finding is that little or no interactions with instructors may lead to dropout. This inherent meaning confirms the finding revealed by Zheng, Han, Rosson and Carroll's (2016) study that focused on online courses and eventually reported that lack of interactions results in student dropout. Directing liability to the students, one of the lecturers avowed the comment below:

"I am always available and ready to assist my students, but unfortunately many do not give me calls or rather send me e-mails. If they do not contact me, how would I know that they are stuck with their studies? Obviously they will perform badly in their assignments, get discouraged by their academic underachievement and drop out as a result or fail the final examination portfolios."

 Another participant believes that some students feel intimidated by their supervisors and just do not contact them. In line with that view, the participant (L12) sated the following:

"I expect my students to initiate an interaction with me because if you are a dedicated student, wanting to pass, then you should ask your lecturer whenever you don't understand what you are studying and never feel uncomfortable to speak to your lecturer. I mean why it is as if they

are petrified to consult us. Teaching is our core function and there is no way we can't explain whatever they don't understand."

Inferable from the finding on students' interactions with lecturers is the postulation that a student-lecturer communication is a fundamental basic element for academic success in distance education. The finding additionally suggests that ODL institutions which want to address the dropout problem, particularly at postgraduate level; have to encourage their students to engage their lecturers by contacting them through the variety of channels.

Death of a family member or someone close to the student

Death of a family member, a friend or a relative was also found to be a factor has been leading to dropout occurrences of COM4809 honours students. In support of this factor, one of the participants (lecturer 11) gave the following view:

"It is natural that when a family member has died, especially the one you were to close to, you become affected and can possibly lose focus in your studies and, subsequently leave your studies."

When probed to determine if the participant knows of a student who once dropped out of COM4809 because of the death of a family member, the participant went on to say the following:

"Yeah…yeah, one of the students that I was supervising once called me almost three months after the due date, asking if I can allow her to submit her portfolio. I felt sorry for her when she explained that three of her family members died few weeks prior to the due date and that's the reason why she didn't submit her examination portfolio."

This study confirms the findings of related documented studies, which have concluded that death is another variable that causes student dropout within the parameters of higher education. As an example, Wood et al (2016) explored factors that lead into dropout incidences from institutional and individual perspectives. Their study has divulged that, among the grounds, student dropout is caused by deaths of students themselves (p. 1). As to how can students' whose family members have recently passed away can be supported, Lecturer 4 suggested that an emotional support in the form of counselling is necessary.

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"Counselling must be done for students who have experienced problems, such as death in the family because during that time an emotional support can toughen the student and evade dropout."

When asked how the university should measure the effectiveness of the counselling or emotional support that would have been given to the affected students. The same participant (L4) has proffered the following reply.

"Every form of support given must be monitored to determine its suitability and results. If the university doesn't evaluate support programmes, how would it know that the results of support interventions have been negative or positive to enable it to respond appropriately in future?"

Lecturer 10 also suggested that an evaluation of each support intervention that has been rendered is vital to determining its level of functionality, but added an element of research, proposing that, to use the participants' words:

"Every unit or department that has supported the student on a particular problem should make a follow-up with the student and carry out a survey to find out the experiences of the supported students on the intervention programme."

These findings hint at the significance of providing counselling to students who indicate that they have just recently experienced death in the family. This may ultimately strengthen the students, decreasing the possibility of student dropout.

Pregnancy

Although fewer participants raised pregnancy as a cause of dropout for female honours students, the study has unveiled that some female honours students, particularly those who are at the late stage of their pregnancy, tend to drop out of their studies, including COM4809 module. One of the L1 said that he

"...I once supervised a student who later dropped out of COM4809 because she was pregnant and was expecting a baby few weeks before the closing date for the submission of portfolio. So' she couldn't submit her portfolio because pregnancy had taken much of her attention."

Another participant stated *that "students who have fallen pregnant tend be indolent and never want to do anything. So studying becomes difficult for them. I am that type of women"* Said a female participant. This finding has unmasked the prevalence of gender-dropout relationship, indicating that the demographic traits, such as gender can sometimes influence female students to dropout, with pregnancy as an epitome.

Health-related problems

Even though no specific illness was specified in lecturers' responses, the majority of lecturers held a perception that students' health-related problems are some of the key reasons why honours students drop out in ODL institutions. This finding corresponds with findings that were uncovered by previous related studies, which also looked into students' dropouts' determinants and came to the same inference that dropouts are also influenced by health-related problems. Representative studies embrace Woolf et al (2007) and Breier (2010) which have also shown that various health-related problems are some of the attributes which lead to student dropout in higher education. Breier's (2010) study has reported that HIV/AIDS is also one of factors, which lead to student dropout (p. 665) in higher education. Literature has further revealed that there are other types of illnesses, which account for dropouts in higher education. Citing mental illness as a dropout determinant, O'Keeffe (2013) asserted that it also accounts for student attrition in numerous colleges. Despite its negative impact on students' studies in the higher education domain, ill-health as a factor leading to student attrition has not received satisfactory attention, particularly for lower-postgraduates who are enrolled in ODL institutions. It is worthy to suggest that future studies have to focus on this research aspect. Of a special note is that such studies should attempt to get insights of the concern from the perspectives of students who have dropped out.

Using Unisa as the case ODL context and COM4809 as a case module to determine lecturers' perceptions on causes of student dropout at an honours level, this study found that some students drop out because they were ill.

The statements below from one of the participants (L11 and L7) serve to optimise that:

L11: *"I have been receiving doctors' confirmation letters, showing that students were ill and could not submit their examination portfolios because of that. This is not only a case in COM4809 module, but in other modules and the undergraduate level."*

L7: *"Sicknesses have been serious concerns which has been accounting for a considerable amount of student dropout in all modules. However, I also think that some students were not sick. They just try to come up will a strategy to convince their lecturers so that they can be allowed to submit their portfolios."*

The latter assume that there are other reasons behind the scene which students reduce them to ill-health problems. This further implies that the degree to which health-related problems cause dropouts in ODL institutions might be the result of exaggeration. Gauging the trustworthiness of findings and assertions, which are ascribed to dropouts in ODL, environments require further research.

Inability to pay for study fees (financial constraints)

This section reports on findings, which relate to students' inability to pay for their studies. These findings are only those, which emanate from the students' home contexts (unfavourable personal circumstances). Financial constraints that relate to unfavourable institutional circumstances are discussed later as part of the general them on dropout factors, which are associated with unfavourable institutional circumstances.

Student dropout in higher education terrain is an increasing concern across the globe, and in South Africa alike, as pointed out by Mgwebi et al (2017), it has become a multidimensional problem. As one of the root causes for dropouts of honours students in ODL environments, this study has uncovered that lack of financial support also determines the dropout. This finding confirm Mgwebi et al' (2017) assertion that the rise in study fees is a principal cause for the rise in student dropout in the South African university system.

Financial support can come from students' home environments (for instance, parents), academic institutions (for instance, bursaries), bursaries from private companies and other types of financial supports by the government (for example, NSFAS). It was interesting to find from the interview data collected from the academics that many

parents and students' relatives do not afford to pay study fees for their children. The finding is in congruent with Zewotir et al' (2016) study that was aimed at forecasting how much time students can take to either drop out or accomplish their studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Their findings have uncovered that lack of financial support can result in student dropout (p. 134). Evident from the analysis was that the majority of lecturers shared that most of the students, particularly those whose families have low-incomes, struggle financially. This means that some students who are coming from poor economic backgrounds usually find it difficult to finance their studies. Complicating the problem even further were other participants' views that some parents do not see the value of education and hence fail to pay their dependants' study fees. This perception is in line with the philosophical stance held by the deficit theory that puts blame into students' home backgrounds, contesting that their families, cultures and communities do not socialise them in a way that will encourage them to do well academically (Valencia, 2012; 2013). Inherent in the participants' viewpoint and the deficit theory's doctrine is the reflection that even students from high-income earnings may drop out of honours module owing to the reason that his or her families value education less noteworthy.

From the viewpoint of one of the participants (L12)

"Most of black students are from economically deprived family backgrounds and they are unable to look after their families and pay for their study fees even if they are already employed because they have to start looking after their siblings. This has had a negative impact on their studies, forcing some to discontinue their studies."

Another participant stated that *"some students fail the module and never come to reregister for the module in the following year, and one of the reasons is that they don't have adequate financial backup"* at home to assist them to register for the module.

Students' workload

Owing to the fact that some students are also employed, workload has been their concern. This view was apparent during the analysis of the in-depth interview data collected from the lecturers. Many of the participants were of the view that students who are already absorbed into the labour market struggle to get time to study because

they devote the greater percentage of the time at work. Such students, in the view of one of the participants,

"Do not easily cope with the demands of their work and that of the studies, and in most cases they decide to cease furthering their studies."

Speaking about the amount of work on COM4809 with which students have to face, one of the participants said:

"I always advice students who want to register for an honours programme with us to register the other four modules and finish with COM4809 or start with COM4809 and finish with the rest of the modules later on because COM4809 requires more time, undivided focus and has a lot to do. It is a research project that has to be conducted over a period of a year and, to me, a year is nothing if one desires to produce a quality output."

Accentuating the higher amount of work in COM4809, another participant said that

"COM4809 module has five assignments plus an examination portfolio. This implies that students who have registered for this module have little time to do a lot of reading and to prepare for the assignments. Those who fail to submit their assignments, probably because they could not get time to work on them often panic and drop out."

Students' workload has been cited in earlier studies as a factor leading to dropout of students. One such epitome is Manik's (2014) study that reported that big amount of academic work that students are faced with in higher education studies contributes to an increasing dropout concern.

One of the general themes that have emerged from the analysis of the interview data collected from the academics relate to dropout factors, which are associated with institutional circumstances. The ensuing section deals with it in expansion.

4.4.1.2.2 Lecturers' perceived dropout factors which are associated with lecturers' circumstances

Lecturers' circumstances are all factors, which relate to the problems or shortcomings of the lecturers themselves when executing supervisory role and which tend to push students out of their studies. These factors are listed and discussed in details in the imminent section as part of the findings of this study. Findings has divulged that lack

of academic support from lecturers, workload of academics, lack of emotional support from lecturers, absence of lecturers' self-reflection on teaching pedagogies, lecturers' poor relationships and lack of interactions with students account for the ubiquitous high dropout rate of honour students in an open and distance learning environment. These findings are in line with Terentyev et al' (2015) finding of the study that looked into factors that account for dropout in the Russian University terrain. Terentyev et al found that professors and administrative officers are the reasons for dropout in the university. This means that many of the students who have dropped out of COM4809 honours module have received little or no support from their lecturers in their learning trajectory. They have also meant inappropriate teaching methods, lecturers' workload, failure to engage students in good relationships and inability to necessitate interactive academic environments result in dropout. The findings oppose Tladi's (2013) report of a study that wanted to determine reasons for students' failure to write an examination (dropout from examination) in an ODL environment. Tladi reported that no academic-related variables account for students' failure to write an examination. In contrast to Tladi's findings, this study has unveiled findings which have supported those which were reported by Terentyev, Gruzdez and Gorbunova's (2015) and Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya's (2013) studies, which found that university administrative officers and professors are attributes of dropout. Next,

Inadequate provision of academic support

Supporting students academically is one of the fundamental roles which lecturers are expected to execute as they teach their students. If not well fulfilled, student dropout can occur. The study done by Jeneby (2007) has investigated student attrition and unmasked that lack of teacher support has, along with other attributes, led to 75% attrition rate of students registered in master's qualification level. in the same vein, this study has revealed that insufficient academic support by the lecturers also lead to dropouts of honours students in an open and distance learning environment. The majority of participants raised the issue of insufficient workshops on research for honours students as one of the main concern that contributes to an escalating rate of dropout in ODL institutions. Their main concern was that supervision of honours students in an open and distance learning environment is mostly homogenous. When prompted to enlighten what 'homogenous supervision' is, a lecturer (L4) who raised it

defined it as a single form of students' guidance in which there is one topic for all students and one or two workshops to advance the understanding of a research.

Another participant (L2) was concerned with giving few comments and in an unfriendly manner, feeling that it lowers students' interest to study. This translates that uncomprehensive and demoralising comments can result in a decreased student level of motivation, which in turn, exacerbates student dropout. It was also found that motivation and inspiration from the lecturers can help students improve their self-directness in learning, influencing a high pass rate and reducing the dropout problem in the meantime. One of the participants (L11) said:

"An inspired or stirred student gains self-reliance and take control of his or her learning processes, and that will ultimately result in him or her achieving the desired academic goal."

Lecturers' workload

Another thought-provoking concern that has arisen from dropout reasons, which are associated with lecturers' circumstances, was 'workloads' of academics who are teaching in ODL environment. Supervising students from different backgrounds, diversity of lecturers and the growing number of postgraduates are detrimental challenges to effective research supervision in open and distance learning institutions (Roets, 2016, p. 7161). The dropout problem in ODL space has been revealed in this study as another major concern that leads to an increased dropout proportion for honours students. Lecturers' viewpoints have mirrored that the increasing cohort of postgraduate honours students to supervise per annum affects their quality of supervision, the lecturer-student relationship and reduces interactions with students, which ultimately increase the dropout percentage. The reduction in the quality of supervision, as was found in this study, is in contrary to the vision of the South African National Development Plan which aims to expand access to South Africans and achieve the highest quality education and training by the year 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2013, p. 296). Widening access to higher education is not opportunity (Tinto, 2014, p. 6) for students who require support intervention and never get assisted. Thus if access to university education is merely expanded without accompanying it with matching supervision capacity, the national development plan's vision will become unrealised by 2030.

When asked to clarify as to what does 'too many students' look like in this context, many participants indicated that more than five students per supervisor is a high volume and it affects the quality of work and the students they produce. The quotation below serves as evidence:

L10: *"We should be more concerned about the quality of students that we produce than just numbers…"*

This teaching or supervision accountability is in addition to other academic responsibilities, such as research (for example, present conference papers and publish research articles); and community engagement. This implies that lecturers have to be 'ringmasters' who juggle numerous academic duties which they have to fulfil (Toews and Yazedijian, 2007).

Other participants were concerned with tight deadlines to give students feedbacks and late arrival of assignments. The statement below reflects that:

"It is not just a workload that is worrisome. We are required to provide feedbacks within two weeks. If you are supervising ten students, when would you get time to provide detailed comments? Besides, some assignments come to us very late and that will always mean that we have taken a student's time to work on the next assignments because the comments given must be incorporated into the next assignment."

Suggesting as to what needs to be done to improve the academic support for honours students, another participant (L4) thought that the reduction in the number of honours students per lecturer will be the right solution. Moreover, another view by lecturer 9 was that students should encourage collaborative learning to assist each other rather than working in silos. This served to mirror out that the idea that students in ODL institutions are isolated from each other owing to the fact that there are usually no classes to attend further contribute to the growing dropout of honours students. In addition, lecturer 9's view suggests that there is a need to bridge the gap between students and between lecturer and students. Using the deficit theoretical lens that has also guided this study to make meaningful interpretation of the finding, it is clear that its underpinning dogma that students' failures to achieve academic goals emanate from students' learning deficiencies is rejected. Instead, the finding reflects that that a

dropout incidence can be determined by, among other reasons, factors relating to lecturers' deficiencies in managing the larger group of students for supervision.

Absence of self-reflection of lecturers on teaching pedagogies

As have been reflected by findings from the perspectives of the lecturers, the absence of measurement strategies to determine the level of appropriateness of teaching methodologies has also been mirrored, in this study, as a determining dropout factor for honours students in ODL institutions. This is because, in the ODL environment and the South African territory in particular, which are characterised by varied students' profiles, effective teaching methodologies need to take into account that different learners require different teaching approaches. While perceptions of the majority of lecturers have revealed that blending various teaching methodologies is a vital and a required ability in ODL education delivery, the finding has shown that not all lecturers are able to use the blended instructional pedagogy. Blended instructional approach is an amalgamation of face-to-face and online teaching pedagogies (Graham, 2006). The findings have additionally shown that many of the lecturers, irrespective of the extensive experience they reported to have in teaching a research module in ODL and their seniority levels, they are not effectively using different teaching approaches which can best be customised for students from different backgrounds. The divulged finding - 'absence of lecturers' self-reflection on teaching pedagogies' - question the quality of teaching methods which must be assessed time and again. Although this finding was not expected, a further profound review of literature has confirmed that earlier similar studies have reported on the concern relating to poor quality of teaching as a dropout reason. For example, Rumberger's (2001) study that was demarcated within the high school terrain has found higher dropout rate in schools where students perceived their teachers as of lower quality. In the context of ODL, it is evident that the lecturers' competence level in blending instructional methods determines the extent of quality in teaching. Citing the benefits of blended instructional methods, López-Pérez, Pérez-López and Rodríguez-Ariza (2011) postulate that instructional pedagogies improve students' performance level and, ultimately lead to a decreased dropout rate. It must be inferred, nevertheless, that though the proliferation of related studies, which are set to explore dropout reasons have dramatically heightened in the education

domain, there is a considerable paucity of studies, which have cited low quality of teaching as a dropout determinant, especially in the higher education sector.

Within the scope of this study that has dealt with dropouts of honours students in ODL environments where it came as a surprise to unveil that lack of self-reflection is a contributing factor to the incessant dropout problem, one of the participants (L1) has reflected the degree to which conducting self-reflection exercises is fundamental for enhancing the quality of education transfer. The statement below attest to that as follows:

L1: *"Self-reflection is crucial and we have not been doing it. They are lot of mistakes we do as we are supervising our honours students, simply because we are human beings…"*

In addition, the findings have unveiled that poor supervision leads to, not only dropout, but also less research outputs and low graduate rate. This assertion was evident in one of the participants' response who stated that:

L5: *"Sometimes students fail, not because they aren't the materials to pass, but because they were mostly on their own or wrongly guided in their research. They end up transferring their studies to other universities or drop out completely."*

Other participants attacked the workload, stating that it is another factor that, also, largely affect the quality of teaching and makes self-reflection of lecturers a necessity. As per the viewpoint offered by one of the participants,

L3: *"With the increasing volume of students we supervise annually, the manner in which we teach and the quality of our teaching must also be assessed. Otherwise we will just carryon with inappropriate teaching methods and fail our students. Of course, if they feel that they have not been taught properly, they cannot come to register in the next registration period. They will go to other universities."*

Other participants (L4, L6 and L7) have argued that self-reflection has been occurring through the Improvement performance management system [(IPMS) – a system that has been designed to measure the employees' level of performance in order to help them improve the quality of their work]. However, the IPMS received criticism in some responses (L1, L2, L10 and L12) which claimed that there is no follow-up afterwards by the line managers to evaluate if improvements have been made in areas where a

lecturer has not been performing up to the given standards. One such discredit of IPMS was, in the view of one of the participants, that:

L11: *"As long as IPMS has some financial rewards for high performers we will all claim that we are high performers. And so' it will never be the right method to check and improve how we supervise students."*

To other participants' view, reflection has been done through 'moderation' of assignments and portfolios. Other participants who have held the view that those who are supposed to moderate assignments and examination portfolios, they, every so often, just approve everything without having conducted a satisfactory moderation too, heavily decried this. In relation to the moderation form of reflection on quality of work, one of the participants said

"Working within unfriendly tight deadlines makes the whole idea of moderation unrealistic."

Engrained from the findings reported above, it makes sense to infer that inappropriate teaching strategies and improper performance evaluation methods, such as dissatisfactory IPMS and moderation make lecturers' self-reflection necessary for quality teaching enhancement. Also implicit in the presented findings is the point that a high volume of work for lecturers deprive them a considerable time to conduct self-reflection on their teaching approaches. As a result, it can be deduced that the reduction in the number of students to supervise per each lecturer can enable them to perform self-reflection exercises and to improve how they teach, which will, in turn, contribute towards decreasing the rate at which honours students in ODL leave the research module.

Supervisors' poor relationships with students

Another identified root cause of honours student dropout in an open and distance learning institution is the 'supervisors' poor relationships with students'. This understanding was divulged by the analysis of data from interviews with lecturers. Supervisor' poor relationship with students in this context refers to lecturer's ability to associate well with the students as they engage in teaching and learning activities. One of the lecturers (L12) said the following:

"Some lecturers do not relate with students well and I believe some students leave the COM4809 because of that."

When prompted to give detailed explanation regarding the understanding of a lecturer' relationship with students, the same participant said

"As far as I understand, a supervisor' relationship with a student refers to the lecturers' abilities to take care of their students by amicably and constantly contacting them if they have not been doing well in their assignments, determining if they are encountering some challenges in their studies, reminding them of the due dates of assignments and showing respect to the them by providing inspiring feedbacks."

The findings of this study has shown that the majority of supervisors of students who have been teaching an honours research module are reactionary, implying that they wait for students to consult them on sections of the module which they require an assistance with. To these lecturers, support is provided when students have encountered some difficulties. This perspective on student support contradicts Jacklin and Riche's (2009, p. 735) suggestion of a paradigm shift from viewing student support as a reactive measure towards understanding it as a proactive response by nurturing supportive cultural practices and, what Themane and Osher's (2014) call enabling learning environments.

Further to these findings, it was also revealed that the reliance on students to consult lecturers has been a normal practice in open and distance learning institutions. One of the participants responded as follows:

"My role is to give guidance as to what needs to be done in student's project. Students need to understand how an ODL institution operates. They have to be independent and seek for guidance when it is necessary. Therefore, is their role to consult."

Thus, it is vital for ODL institutions that want to diminish the dropout rate of honours students, to encourage lecturers to create good bonds with students. The findings of this study have additionally implied that if not taken into account, poor lecturer-student relationship may lead to an increased dropout proportion. Furthermore, ODL institutions should create enabling academic environments to promote active participation in learning.

Lack of lecturers' interactions (dialogues) with students

Interaction is a give-and-take dialogue which occurs when academics give advices to students who, in the communication process, become active members by giving feedbacks and being active listeners (Reyes, 2013, p. 43). Closely related to the reason of 'lecturers' poor relationships with students' which is already reported on in the previous section was attributing lack of lecturers' interactions with students' to the dropout concern in an ODL-based honours module. An analysis of lecturers' perceptions of attributes which result in honours students' dropouts has reflected that lecturers' failure to interact with their honours students on regular basis makes students feel isolated from the university to a degree that some decide to leave furthering their studies. In line with this finding, teacher communication was cited as a dropout factor in Juneby's (2007) study that was confined with the dropout phenomenon in distance education. uncovering lecturers' lack of interactions with students was in congruence with the postulation that is inherent in Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance that student-lecturer isolation causes low success rate and should, thus, be reduced through interaction. Simmons (2013, p. 62), Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, p. 62) and Tamburri (2013) asserted that low student success rate is led by dropout. Implicit in this finding is the reflection of the importance to hold interactions with students on regular basis to curtail the dropout problem.

From the interview data, it has been found that some COM4809 lecturers take weeks to respond to students' queries that have been sent through e-mails. Compounding the problem even more, others were not accessible through telephone calls or personally in their offices. This, as per the view of one of the participants

"...frustrate the students and discourage them to study, resulting in some dropping out."

Another interesting finding that relates to lack of lecturers' interactions with students was their lecturers' failure to announce, either via SMSs, e-mails or through myUnisa (student management system) that they will not be available because of several reasons, such as being on leave (for example, vacation leave, and sick leave), and attending a conference. This too, according to some of the interviewed lecturers, discourages students and consumes their time to learn. Other participants (L1, L11

and L12) have responded that, on various academic issues, they interact with students through e-mils, telephones and personal contact to provide academic support that, as per their replies, embrace *"constructive feedbacks"* (lecturer 11), *"telephonic"* (lecturer 12) and *"personal discussions"* (lecturer 1) on certain parts of the research. When questioned as to how it will be measured to determine if supportive interaction has positively impacted on the students' performance, one of the lecturers stated the following:

L1: *"a good progress on student's work serves as an indicator to me that constant interactions might have helped them, but undertaking a research with students themselves can be a valuable strategy to determine if interactions have assisted them or not. Such research should include surveys that are aimed at learning the students' satisfaction levels on support intervention offered to them."*

Conducting research on all support interventions offered to the students for the purpose of evaluating their roles in student learning trajectories was one of the trending suggestions of the majority of lecturers.

4.4.1.2.3 Lecturers' perceived dropout factors which are associated with institutional circumstances

One of the three identified prominent themes that have emerged during the analysis of lecturers' responses embraced reasons, which are influenced by factors emanating within open, and distance learning environments. An analysis of lecturers' perceptions on dropouts of honours students who were enrolled for an advanced communication research in open and distance learning context has uncovered findings which rejected the philosophical contention of the deficit theoretical lens which, in tandem with Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance, has guided this study. The findings were partially in line with Kovacic's (2010) investigation that has reported that the instructional programme and the trimester length of time are principal determinants of dropouts in a distance education institution. Arriving in the same conclusion, such findings blame lecturers' and institutional circumstances as the primary determinants of dropouts, although this study also found students' personal reasons to, also, be the cause of attritions in the ODL landscape. However, it is worth to note that the findings are in compatibility with Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance which

describes the course structures (designs) as the extent to which the instructional programmes and their elements are planned and organised in order to respond to students' needs and expectations as well as to determine the transactional distance. Thus, in cases where students' expectations and needs are not met, dropouts may arise.

Dropouts who have left their studies because of factors, which are associated with institutional circumstances, were found to comprise the following four reasons for dropouts of honours students in ODL environment, namely: Lack of subject library support, awareness of support services, lack of financial support programmes and lack of emotional support. The deficit theory argues that students' dropouts or failures are caused by their personal reasons and not the institutional variables.

Next, the subthemes are reported in details.

Lack of subject library support

This study has uncovered findings, which have revealed that lack of support from the subject librarian can also cause dropouts of honours students who are furthering their studies with open and distance learning institutions. This standpoint came from three of the participants (L5, L10 and L11) who have indicated that although the universities libraries offer a range of support services to the students, such as access to the internet, books and articles, it does not have subject librarians who can further assist students on specific programme or course. Lecturer 10 went on to point out that academics have subject librarians whose roles are, inter alia, to assist academics with the variety of library support services, which encompasses workshops on how to search for relevant sources; announcements regarding newly published sources, organised research conferences and seminars; assist in findings sources to support those who are still studying and to assist lecturers by findings sources which can help them prepare manuscripts and books for publication. Another participant (lecturer 11) said:

"It is pity because some students enter an honours level with little or no basic theoretical foundation on research and they struggle to back up their arguments with sources when

writing a literature review chapter. A librarian is necessary to train postgraduate students to search for study materials."

These findings have shown the meaning of having subject librarians who can support students on various needs relating to their studies, such as searching for pertinent study materials. Inherent in the findings is the fact that lecturers are concerned about lack of support services from subject librarian in the institution that, in relation to the dropout problem, implies that some honours students leave the honours module or the programme because of that. This was clear from the use of words such as 'pity' and complementing facial expressions that were shown. Embedded in these findings is the postulation that the subject librarian support can provide students with the variety of support services, which, subsequently, may help reduce dropout rate of honours students.

Lack of awareness on available support services

One of the pivotal categories of reasons that are influenced by the circumstances of ODL institutions, which also exacerbate the ubiquitous dropout phenomenon, was lack of awareness on support interventions, which universities provide. Various academic and administrative support services, such as workshops on writing skills, workshops on research (proposal development, literature review, data collection, research methodology, data analysis and research report-writing), workshops on stress management, student counselling, career guidance, assistance with registration as well as an array of library services were found to be available in the university but many students, including honours students, often do not use them because they are not aware of them. In similar vein, Harris et al (2016) undertook a study to determine the relationship between student stress and retention and the prevalent barriers to using support intervention in the university. Their findings unveiled that irrespective of having reflected a greater stress levels and concerns about dropout, most of students were not aware of the available support interventions, which the university can offer and were not even interested to look for them. Heagney and Benson (2017) undertook a study to determine how mature-students in Australian universities succeed in their higher education studies and arrived at similar conclusion that some students were unaware of the support services available in the universities.

Contrary to the finding made by this exploration and the suggestion that an increased level of awareness of the range of support services available in the university will help to reduce the rate of student dropout at an honours level, Tladi (2013) has found that in spite of a satisfactory volume of awareness about the available support services, which encompass academic, tutor and social support as well as counselling, many students still do not use them because as, Durkin and Main (2002) observed, they do not see them as significant to their learning processes.

In this study, one participant (lecturer 6) has indicated that there are tutorial letters, which contain contact information of different university structures where students can get certain support services. Such contact details include e-mail addresses, office numbers and telephones, but unfortunately, students do not read those tutorial letters. Another lecturer (L7) argued that some students are aware of many varied support services, which are available in the institution, but still do not use them because they view them as less important to them. This view supported Durkin and Main's (2002), Minnaar's (2011) and Heagney and Benson's (2017) assertion that students may be fully aware of a range of support services, which are offered in academic institutions, but decide not to make use of them. The same participant (L7) said:

"...but I agree that our student support awareness is not sufficient. We have Unisa radio, student system that allows us to send bulk of SMSs to students and myUnisa student management system where we can post awareness messages, but we don't do that."

The finding of this study supports the Department of Higher Education and Training 's (2013, xv) proposal for an awareness on the variety of students' needs. It is clear that meeting students' needs and addressing student attrition is a national crisis, and both the government and universities are concerned. The finding suggests that there is a need to encourage students to use the prevalent support interventions available in higher education institutions.

Lack of financial support programmes in the university

The supreme postulation from the interviewed lecturers was that lack of financial support is the principal root of dropout incidents for the bigger fraction of honours students who are enrolled in open and distance learning institutions. This could mean

that such students are coming from low-income family backgrounds or that they are not yet absorbed into the lucrative labour markets. Participants further responded that more of funds, from both internal and external organisational environments, are in most cases channelled to the undergraduate and upper-postgraduate level, and the lower-postgraduate level (honours) continues to receive little attention. This leaves a crucial question as to why an honours level appears to be neglected. Nonetheless, although it did not clearly come out from the responses, the answer could be that there are more students doing undergrad level without the adequate financial muscles and assistance tends to be directed to them than the next level. This void warrants an exploration.

One participant (lecturer 1) additionally raised a concern regarding little financial support programmes that are available in the broader South African university system as well as lack of awareness of other funders that can assist students at an honours level. The view on insufficient financial programmes controverted Seidman's (2005, p. 8) observation that governments respond to the national financial concern through numerous support programmes. Seidman further asserted that the cost of studying in higher education has mounted. Within the confines of South African university system, Sidman's postulation on ascending study fees has been backed up recently by the national student protest, which came to be known as "FeesMustFall" which began in 2015 and resumed in early 2016. University students across the entire country were fighting against the increase in study fees (registration and tuition fees). Parroted word for word regarding lack of awareness, lecturer 1 said:

"Many of our students only know about NSFAS and Eduloan, but there are other sources from which they can be assistance financially and, unfortunately, they aren't aware of them."

This means there is a need to propagate messages on bursaries and scholarships to the students who are at an honours level.

Offering a suggestion to address lack of financial support for honours students, a participant (lecturer 5) said the following:

"Government should find means to have a balanced distribution of financial aid to all educational levels, either through NSFAS or other sources."

The meaning inherent in this view is that the government is also the cause to lack of financial aid for honours students by not, fairly, assisting students at all levels.

Another participant (lecturer 2) blamed the current South African Financial Scheme – national student financial scheme (NSFAS) that its attention is skewed in favour of undergraduate students, especially those who are entering higher education system for the first time and neglect those who are at postgraduate levels. It is worthy to note that dropout is a global concern and it takes place at all educational levels, but incapacity to assist students to finance their studies, particularly students from economically disadvantaged families, both within and outside universities, deteriorates the concern. To reduce the financial problems that honours students face, *"university must provide bursaries at a supporting honours students"*, said lecturer 12.

Lack of emotional support

Put parallel with other reasons for honours students' dropouts, lack of emotional support was found not to be a central root cause. However, it is important to be reported on since the development of an all-encompassing honours' student support model in ODL environments would require its inclusion. Even though only two lecturers (lecturer 3 and 12) identified lack of emotional support as a causal factor of dropout, it was thought-provoking to divulge that voluminous students, not only honours students, have not been given emotional support when they have encountered personal problems, such as death of a family member, when they have gone through insalubrious relationships in their families and when the lecturers' remarks on their assignments have been negative. The identification of lack of emotional support as a reason for student dropout confirms the finding reported by Vergara et al (2010, p. 1499) that lack of emotional support causes homesickness – what the authors labelled as homesickness, implying a feeling of rejection and lonesomeness.

Again, lack of awareness on support facilities in the university was cited to deprive students of emotional support services, which they could get had they been cognizant about them. These findings denote that there is little that the ODL does on supporting students emotionally and they further imply that there is a gap for an obligation to create an awareness programme, which can promulgate where students can obtain emotional support. Lecturer 12 advocated that in order to condense the scope of

dropout that has been originating from lack of emotional support, academics should be trained on emotional intelligence and be encouraged to impart the skill to their students. Lecturer 12 further said:

"An academic who is skilled and widely informed on an array of information relating to sources of funds such as bursaries, conferences that are relevant for students, research workshops and an understanding on how to deal with students who have negative attitudes towards lecturers and, of course emotional intelligence, can be an effective instrument to abate dropout."

4.3.1.2.4 Lecturers' perceived dropout factors associated with external factors

This section presents a finding that relates to a dropout factor emanating from external environment, and which sometimes becomes hard to preclude. In this study, only lack of access to the required data was perceived by lecturers to be such a factor that is beyond the control of the students, lecturers and administrative officers.

Lack of access to the required research data

One of the categories that have emerged from the thematic analysis of lecturers' interviews was students' lack of access to the research data. Students who have registered for an advanced communication research (COM4809) are required to do an actual research project within a period of a year. They have to choose an organisation that they will research on and apply for permission to collect data or ethical clearance. An analysis of lecturers' perceptions has uncovered that unfortunately some students drop out of their studies because they are denied permissions to conduct their research by the organisations that they want to research on. Although this study has found that some lecturers support their students in this regard by writing letters to confirm that students have been enrolled into the programme and that undertaking a practical research is part of the programme, it was also revealed that some students fail or drop out of the module because they were not granted permissions to collect data. One of the senior lecturers stated the following:

"To assist student get permission to conduct a research project in organisations of their choices, we write students letters to request organisations to grant approvals to conduct their research projects, but the onus is upon organisations to accept or reject the request. If

organisations have do not turned down an application, there is little likelihood of students to successfully complete the project, and in many cases they drop out."

Despite a high volume of related literature on reasons for student dropout in higher education, a deep narrative review conducted for this study could not yield reasons associated with students' lack of access to research data. This lacuna warrants further investigation to enrich insights into the mammoth dropout problem. Not only did this type of finding uncover student dropout to be a more challenging problem to deal with, but has also divulged that student dropout is determined by external factors, in addition to personal reasons, lecturers' weakness and institutional circumstances. Further to this, lack of access to the required data signifies that mitigating dropout factors can be beyond students', lecturers' and institutional abilities. This implies that a complete student dropout curbing depends on the types of causes from which dropouts arise.

Next, lecturers' perceptions of dropout at lower-postgraduate students in an ODL university are reported.

4.3.1.3 Lecturers' perceptions of honours students' dropouts in ODL institutions

The second question of the interview guide was designed to garner perceptions of lecturers on dropouts. This question was not asked during the interviews with lecturers owing to the ground that their responses to the first question that was aimed at finding reasons for student dropout have covered a range of information that also reflected their perceptions about dropout at an honours level in ODL environments. It might be deducible that different reasons that lecturers have indicated are by far reflective of their perceptions. Drawing from their responses, it is interpretable to assert that the majority of lecturers are not happy with the increasing dropout concern at an honours level and the way in which institutions attempt to support students. Lecturers' concern on high dropout rate put much of the blame to the institution, students and, to a lesser degree, themselves. The following tabled views illustrate the findings:

Table 4.4: Examples of lecturers' comments that put blame to students, university and lecturers themselves

Typical lecturers' responses that regard students, an institution and lecturers as influential factors of dropout		
Source of dropout problem	**Dropout factor**	**Lecturers' responses**
Students	Failure to submit assignments	L1: *"… Almost all students I supervised, who have dropped out, had a problem of having not sent their work through."*
Institution	Lack of awareness on available support services	L6: *"…but I agree that our student support awareness is not sufficient. We have Unisa radio, student system that allows us to send bulk of SMSs to students and myUnisa student management system where we can post awareness messages, but we don't do that."*
Lecturers	Students' poor relationship with lecturers	L3: *"I am worried because sometimes students do not submit their assignments and lecturers do not bother to contact them and find why. We are not doing enough to encourage our students to learn. Some of us, especially senior lecturers, are forever unavailable in our offices and those students who personally come to university premises end up not being assisted. This is very bad and no student would want to be supervised by such a non-caring lecturer."*

4.3.1.4 Lecturers' perceptions on support intervention for honours students studying with ODL institutions

The third question *'How do lecturers perceive lower-postgraduate support provision in ODL environment?'* was aimed at soliciting lecturers' opinions on the provision of support services to honours students. This study has divulged that lecturers' views on support services that are offered within the educational confines of ODL have shown that support services are inadequate. Participants were concerned with inadequate academic supports that are often offered through technological facilities, such as SMSs, e-mails and the use of myUnisa student learning system. Additionally, it was found that the problem of inadequate academic support is often dealt with by means of providing comprehensive and stimulating comments on assignments. Probed as to whether comprehensive and positive comments have the capacity to reduce dropout,

no clear-cut answer was given by any participant. Instead, the majority of them indicated that improvement in the next assignments serves as an indicator that the provisions of detailed and encouraging feedbacks have had a positive impact on their performances. This is a research lacuna that reflects the need for a further inquiry to determine the effectiveness of detailed and stimulating comments of feedbacks. Other participants reflected concern over the lower amount of library intervention for students who are unable to search for learning materials. Suggestion offered included that students' library literacy must be fostered through orientation that has to embrace workshops to transfer technological skills and to promote technological readiness and how to search for study materials. Also captivating to find were perceptions, which have reflected that institutional awareness on the available support, services have been poor. Participants doubted if students are aware of various support interventions available in the institution. This suggests that more awareness on student support is necessary.

Next, the manner in which ODL institutions identify students who are likely to drop out is discussed.

4.3.1.5 Identifying at-risk students

Getting insights into the root causes of dropouts in higher education is important (Dekker et al, 2009, p. 41) and, as viewed by Hovdhaugen et al (2013, p. 165), higher education institutions should develop plans to measure the students' probability to drop out. Thus identifying at-risk students can help higher education institutions to address the dropout problem. Congruent to these postulations, another crucial question that was asked during the in-depth interviews with lecturers was *'how do lecturers identify postgraduate students who need support services?'* This question was essential because undergoing dropout mitigation and reduction processes require appropriate support interventions that have been informed by different kinds of students' needs. As to who has to offer a particular type of support services will largely hinge on the type of support intervention that has been identified and the demarcation of focus. From the perspective of Scholes (2016, p. 952-953), academic institutions can decide upon the scope within which to measure factors attributable to dropouts of students which may involve, among others, programmes being offered, structures, modules, departments, schools, faculties, and general institutional processes.

In the scope of higher education, much of the related literature were focused on dropouts at the middle (Masters programmes) and the upper (doctoral programmes) postgraduate levels while attention to the lower-postgraduate level (honours programmes) has been sparse. Confined within the doctoral level, Albertyn, Capp and Bitzer (2008, p. 749), have paralleled doctoral candidates' performances and experiences of M.phil students and PhD students and found that the M.phil students needed more support intervention than PhD students do, particularly on the methodology area. Although this study was not aimed at predicting the dropout possibility, asking this question has yielded the variety of useful lecturers' perspectives on numerous ways through which to predict dropout occurrences and the need to appropriately intervene thereafter. It is, nevertheless, significant in informing the development of student support model. In relation to identifying at-risk students, three substantial categories have emerged during the analysis of lecturers' perspectives, namely:

- Previous performance at undergraduate research modules,
- Whether the students have submitted assignments or not, and
- Low academic performance at honours postgraduate level.

Nevertheless, different ideas to predict possible students who are likely to discontinue their studies in higher education are documented in the literature. For example, Levy (2007, p. 185) postulates, in a study to determine retention and dropouts of online students, that determining students' satisfaction level can assist in the reduction of possible dropouts. Murray (2014, p. 1), on the other hand, posits that getting insights into the extent to which students interact with faculties and lecturers and with peers and extracurricular activities can enable academic institutions to find their likelihood to drop out or to persevere with their studies. Naude and Bezuidenhout (2015) offered a divergent view that a mere identification of factors that lead to dropout has little impact in addressing dropouts. They suggested a shift from just grouping students' difficulties and using bridging modules as support interventions into developing the institution and its staff (2015, p. 222). When linked to the broad dropout factors, which this study has found, it is clear that Naude and Bezuidenhout (2015) consider factors, which are associated with lecturers' and institutional circumstances as the ones that require more attention than the students' personal reasons. This position has been rejected in this study since findings have uncovered that all three categories of factors leading to

dropouts of honours students in ODL environments are equally causative to the student dropout phenomenon.

Findings from this study can be helpful for ODL institutions and lecturers who want to deal with the dropout phenomenon at an honours postgraduate level.

In the forthcoming section, the findings (previous performance at undergraduate research modules, whether the students have submitted assignments or not, and low academic performance) are discussed.

4.3.1.5.1 Previous performance at undergraduate research modules

Hart (2012, p. 19) assert that studies that have been focused on identifying at-risk students who are likely to drop out of their studies are very sparse in the existing body of literature. Contributing to the little documented literature on identifying dropout-endangered students, this study has divulged that students who have performed poorly at undergraduate research modules are more likely to drop out of the honour programme or module. One of the participants has said as follows:

L9: *"If students did their undergrad programmes with Unisa and did not do well in research modules offered at that level, I can tell you, most of them usually don't complete the programme. They either fail or leave the module. It is worse with those who did their undergrad elsewhere because many of the universities begin to offer research module at honours module and it is usually a course work, not practical research projects as we do."*

The review of a rampant literature has shown related conclusions, which were drawn on dropout indicators. In a partial relation to the first indicator that has been found in this study (previous performance at undergraduate research modules), Breier's (2010) study that has looked into student dropout of first-year students from the lecturers' perspectives has found that poor 'senior certificate' outcome is an essential indicator of possible dropout in higher education (p. 665). While the proliferated literature has adequately reported and discussed student unpreparedness as a dropout determining attribute in diverse educational contexts, the greater volume have dealt more with dropout of undergraduate students, particularly the first-year cohorts, than the postgraduate level. Different from them, through the lecturers' perceptions, this qualitative study has found unpreparedness of honours students to be among factors

that influence dropouts in ODL institutions. Though many related studies have reported student unpreparedness as a reason for student failure and attrition as well as the prevailing postulations, which are inherent in the literature on the problem, a scant attention on what causes unpreparedness exists in the discourse. This void warrants further attention to enhance insights into the key root causes of dropout in higher education.

The finding suggests that to reduce dropout rates of honours students in ODL institutions, the undergraduate curriculum must include research modules in which students will have to engage into practical research projects. The finding further imply that admission criteria into the programme should seek a research module at an undergraduate level and offer an introductory module to those who did not do a research module at an undergraduate level. This will boost students who have the required theoretical foundation.

In the next section, 'submission of assignments' as an indicator of possible dropout is discussed in detail.

4.3.1.5.2 Submission of assignments

Also evident from the analysis of lecturers' responses was that failure to submit assignments is a common factor that usually influence dropout of honours students who have been enrolled in ODL. All participants mentioned this reason as a major indicator of dropout. The following quotations illustrate the situation:

L1: *"In many cases, students who haven't submitted their work in COM4809 module drop out. Almost all students I supervised, who have dropped out, had a problem of having not sent their work through."*

L8: *"COM4809 is highly unique from other subjects. It has six assignments, with the sixth one being an exam portfolio. The first five assignments are building blocks of the final product. Once the student does not do one, the whole portfolio will be affected. Because you cannot have an academic research that do not have literature and methodology chapters and you then call it a research. It cannot be. Students are fully aware that a missing block makes the study collapse, and that is why they drop out."*

The third indicator of the likelihood for honours students' dropouts in open and distance learning environments that is discussed next is the low academic performance of the student.

4.3.1.5.3 Low academic performance

The low academic performance, as was found in this study, is partly in line with Albertyn et al' (2008) study that reported that difficulties in methodology sections influenced negatively on M.Phil. student success rate than on PhD students.

Although lecturers have acknowledged that some students whose performances were poor in the first COM4809 assignment usually improve in the next assignment if they have read and considered comments, the majority of them were worried that most of students do not read the comments given and continue to perform poorly in other assignments. When they realise that they have not been performing well since each assignment carry year marks, some discontinue with their studies. Other participants have indicated that students who have plagiarised in an assignment receive punishment in a form of having his or her marks deducted and that cultural practice has been demoralising them to an extent that some decide to drop out. The following participant (L2) has said the following:

"I think one reason for dropout in COM4809 is the fact that lack of theoretical base on research makes students steal other people's ideas. When we find that they have plagiarised we deduct marks according to the amount of plagiarism that they have committed. This practice has, seemingly, had a negative impact on certain students' performances, resulting in then dropping out."

This finding is interrelated to the factor of 'poor academic writing skills' that has emanated from the analysis of lecturers' responses to the question that needed to determine reasons for student dropout at an honours level in ODL. It advocates that there is need to conduct workshops on a range of academic writing skills that has to subsume referencing styles. The finding also suggests that there is a need to develop strategies to encourage students to read comments, which have been provided. Though responses to the question that wanted to reveal ways by which lecturers identify at-risk students did not yield apparent findings relating to lack of interactions

and good relationships with students, it makes sense to argue that a regular communication exchange and building a good lecturer-student relationship can boost students to read comments which, in turn, can help students improve academically.

The ensuing section presents findings, which were garnered, from the lecturers in relation to their understandings of support services offered in the university to address dropouts of honours students.

4.3.1.6 Postgraduate support services available in the universities

The fourth question in the interview guide was *'What are the postgraduate support services available in the university?'* The purpose for including this question was to garner data relating to the types of support services, which can be offered to students who are likely to dropout.

This study has uncovered that there are a range of support interventions for postgraduate students in ODL institutions. Participants have mentioned various support interventions that embrace different library support services that incorporate, among others, training lower-postgraduate students on:

- now to search for sources. For instance, books and articles using the variety of search engines (such as google scholar), theses and dissertations available in the institutional repository and national ETD portal);
- how to reference sources using software, such as Refworks;
- how to be autonomous and to manage time to study;
- how to write a research proposal;
- how to create a good relationship with supervisors;
- offering assistance in relation to registration; and
- technical issues such as how to develop a table of contents and numbering of the pages.
- the research, such as how to write a sound literature review, collects and analyse data.

In addition to determining support services, which are available for lower-postgraduate students in ODL institution, question five of the interview guide sought to find out various means by which ODL institutions mitigate the dropout concern at lower-

postgraduate level. The next presentation and discussion of findings reports on findings that relate to suggested potential dropout mitigation strategies.

4.3.1.7 Mitigation of dropouts in ODL institutions

Education is the greatest influential instrument with which people may contribute towards changing the world (Mandela, 2014). Irrespective of its worldwide-recognised value, many students are not able to acquire higher education at universities owing to the prevailing dropout challenge that has adversely attacked the global university domain. A particular capacity that has potential to obliterate student dropout within the higher education parameters is student support intervention that universities are obliged to ensure from matriculation until students complete the higher education programmes (Harris et al, 2016, p. 826). Contemporary reforms in the current volume of literature have provided a vast array of mitigation methods to address the growing dropout concern of postgraduate students who are studying in ODL environment. While there is considerable amount of suggestions in the literature on how to address the dropout phenomenon in higher education, inadequate attention has been paid to dropout mitigation strategies for honours students who have been enrolled with open and distance learning institutions. This was the research void that this study aimed to fill. Across the global higher education landscape, universities have been attempting to mitigate students' dropouts at various levels of studies, namely, primary school, high school, tertiary level. Using the case of university of South Africa and a case of an advanced communication research module, this study has investigated dropouts of honours students occurring within the university system and in ODL environment in particular. While every university endeavours to increase the student retention and success rates (Mills, 2015, p. 41), the growing rate of dropouts has been a global concern, and determining responsive student support interventions is by no means a simple task to undertake at the university level (Zewotir et al, 2015, p. 134). This section reports on findings, which relate to dropout mitigation strategies (or providing student support services) which can be implemented in ODL universities as have been inherent in lecturers' perspectives. Their views were solicited by asking a question *'how do ODL universities mitigate dropout of LPSs doing COM4809?'* This question was important in the collection of data relating to potential support services that may reduce the dropout rate of lower-postgraduate students in ODL universities. Lecturers

who have identified the potential dropout causes were probed to share prevalent practices and possible preclusive measures regarding how such a cause can be dealt with in ODL universities. Findings on mitigation strategies are presented according to three general themes, which have emerged during the analysis, namely: dropout factors associated with students' personal circumstances, dropout factors associated with lecturers' circumstances and dropout factors associated with institutional circumstances. These findings suggest that different mitigation strategies have to be used to address a repertoire of dropout factors in open and distance education honours students. Hence each individual or an amalgamation of variables will determine who should carry the burden of addressing the risks of students who dropout or fail to complete the programmes or courses in ODL institutions (Scholes, 2016). Such findings are presented and discussed in forthcoming tables (4.7, 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10). In each of these tables, the left pane (column) contains the unveiled reasons, which account for dropouts of honours students in an ODL institution, and the right pane (column) presents perceptions, experiences and suggestions on possible dropout mitigation strategies.

Table 4.5: Strategies to mitigate dropout factors that are associated with students' personal circumstances

Dropout factors	Unveiled mitigation strategies (support)
unpreparedness	Many students drop out from their studies because there were underprepared to study at the university level. In in-depth interviews with lecturers to explore their perceptions upon dropouts of honours students in ODL universities, one of the participants (L9) has suggested that the problem of unpreparedness can be avoided by a complete change in an undergraduate curriculum design that should include research methodology as a subject. Implicit in the assumption made by this finding is that an introductory research module will help undergraduate students to gain the necessary theoretical base on research that can ultimately reduce the rate of dropout at an honours level. Although not entirely similar, previous studies, such as Heift (2016), have reported related findings that put an emphasis on supporting first-year students more as compared to intermediary students.

Students' lack of self-directedness (autonomy)	From the transactional theory of distance which has also guided this study, the transactional distance is a psychological isolation (Moore and Kearsley, 2005), taking place amongst students, between students and lecturers as well as between students and institutions. With this postulation in mind, it is thus clear that bridging the transactional distance between ODL students and university structures require support intervention. Lecturers' perceptions on support interventions for possible dropouts revealed that in order to mitigate dropouts, which are influenced by students' lack of autonomy, more interactions with students are necessary. Others have suggested that structures of honours modules should take into account the form of education delivery. This is exemplified by one of the lecturers' view below: L11: *"Because in open and distance learning students have to be in charge of the learning process, determining how to study and at what speed, it is important to design the modules in such a way that they become usable. They should contain, for instance, a lot of examples and scenarios and never use jargons, allowing students to interact with the contents."* Interactions and structures of the module alike, confirm Moore (2007, p. 101) and Reyes (2013, p. 44) assertion that dialogues, course structures and students' autonomy determine the transactional distance between students and lecturers. The ability to exercise independency in learning depends on the level of transactional distance. The more the transactional distance is, the more students have to become self-directed in learning (Moore, 1991, p. 5).
Lack of time management	Suggestions that have been put forward to avoid dropouts that are caused by students' inability to manage time have identified holding orientations with students during the registration periods. Similar to the finding made by this study, Lockhart (2004) also noted that a skill to manage time in learning one of the essential methods through which higher education institutions could address student dropout. Other participants have felt that the university library services should include support programmes that partly contain time management

	workshops. This implies that student dropout can probably decrease if time management skills have been successfully transferred to students.
Lack of technological skill and readiness	Again, the notion of conduct an orientation with students was proposed as a means to address lack of technological skill and readiness. Two of the participants (L6 and L10) in this study advocated that an annual orientation on the honours programme in which COM4809 is part is necessary and must be held at an early stage after every registration. To these participants, the orientation programme should entail workshops to impart the variety of skills, which encompass, among others, how to use technology for effective learning in an ODL institution and how to use different library online facilities to search for study materials. This finding suggests that skill transfer as well as encouraging honours students to use pertinent technologies in learning may reduce the alarming dropout proportion.
Lack of access to technological resources	Though many of the lecturers have felt that many of their honours students do not appear to have problems relating to access to technology, few of them argued that there are still students who have no access to appropriate technologies. The finding has uncovered that the university had once put a plan to support students in this regard by including tablets and modems in the study material packages and their costs will be included in the registration fees. The challenge, however, was that this mitigation strategy means that there will an increase in study fees, something which students have been fighting against during 2015 and 2016 in what became popularly known as "FeesMustFall" national protest.
Students' poor relationship with lecturers	Building good relationships with supervisors is important for postgraduate students to ensure positive learning experiences and to minimise the likelihood of dropout incidences in higher education. While the student-instructor relationship in postgraduate studies has gained renewed interest in the related academic discourse, there has not been sufficient research to enrich it. This study has found that ODL honours students who do not create good relationships with their lecturers usually experience negative learning trajectories and end up

	dropping out of their studies as a result. Ferreira (2006) has reported the same finding that negative relationships between the students and their supervisors account for dropouts. To address the dropout problem, Pearson (2012, p. 187) advocates for more positive student-lecturer relationships to encourage student retention and stimulate programme completion rates. Both Pearson (2012) and the findings unveiled by this study confirmed the philosophical stance held by Tinto's (1975) landmark student integration model which contended that students who able to integrate into the institutional cultures and communities are more likely to accomplished their studies. Thus, they are more likely to overcome challenging and unfavourable factors that may probably influence them to withdraw from their studies. In this study, lecturers were of the view that the creation of good relationships with lecturers, involves holding frequent dialogues with their supervisors on a vast array of difficulties, which they encounter in learning pathways.
Low academic achievement	Mitigation strategies to reduce dropout through promoting good academic performance have also emerged in the findings and were varied. Two groups of lecturers have differed on the issue of exercising lenience when giving feedbacks to the students. The first group have indicated that they have been lenient when marking assignments. To them, being lenient has to a certain degree, encouraged students to improve their performance levels in the forthcoming assignments. Commenting on the value of lenience when giving feedbacks, Lecturer 5 said the following statement: *"I have been lenient when I mark assignments and it looks like it worked for me because my students usually progress better in the next assignments. For leniency has the power to prevent dropout."* Criticising this leniency in academia, the other group was of the view that lenience makes students feel that they are performing well and makes then relax, resulting in no improvement in their next assignments. As have been commented by one of the lecturers (L6) who uttered the following:

	"Leniency is an unethical support strategy. Why giving students marks for what they have not worked. Why pass students who have failed? Marks should reflect the correct students' performance standard." While lenience in marking student's work may have encouraged some students and reduced the dropout rate, as have been divulged in this study, Harris et al (2013) posits that support intervention should not be in such a way that students may end up being unprepared for life after programme completion. However, implicit and substantial in these contradicting views towards lecturers' lenience in the provision of feedbacks is the reflection that mitigation strategies differ and its effectiveness is based on students' characters and their needs. Whereas other students may get encouraged by means of leniency others may miss the meaning inherit in marks, see them as a reflection of their true academic performances. Another form of support that was suggested was that the undergraduate curriculum should be modified and includes research modules, particularly at the third year level in order to equip students with foundational research skills. This, in the avowal by one of the participants (L11), *"…will be able to provide students with the theoretical base on research and they can meet what we expect of them at an honours level."* The quote infers that a theoretical base can help diminish the rate of dropout at an honours level.
Poor academic writing skill	University students are expected to demonstrate academic writing competency (Wingate, 2007, p. 392) in order to successfully complete their studies. However, the issue of poor academic writing skill has been divulged in this research as an increasing concern that has been contributing to dropout at postgraduate level and, generally in an ODL environment. This study has further found that there are no programmes, which have been put into place in the department in which the case module (COM4809) is taught to tackle the issue of poor academic writing for students. As a form of student support that has been envisaged to address this deep-rooted concern properly, participants have identified undertaking training for honours students as a potential dropout mitigation strategy. This finding

	implies that by conducting trainings, which are aimed at enhancing students' academic writing abilities, the prevalent dropout ratio will probably drop.
Racism	Even though it was an observation of few lecturers, one of the findings which came as a surprise and which also accounts for dropout of honours students in ODL learning environment was the problem of racism. This finding has confirmed postulations held by Museus (2008) and Sue (2010) that racist micro-aggressions are caused by racism, causing feeling of isolation for students of colour, disturbing them from focusing on their academic goals and making them feel less motivated in their studies – all of which, in turn, lead to dropouts for the affected cohort. Ong and Burrow (2017) define micro-aggression as a subtle type of prejudice and discrimination which is encountered by people of side-lined ethnic groups. When probing participants (L1, L3, L6 and L8) who have mentioned it as to what can be done to curb it, views included that racism is a national issue and should therefore be dealt with at that level and that the ministry of higher education, universities and departments need to hold robust discourses on it as a means to address it. All of them have asserted that it is a complex national factor that must also be addressed politically. The statements below illustrate the concern on racism. L1: *"…This issue, according to me, can best be addressed by debating it in the DMC, the institution and the national department of higher education. Surely the perpetrators will refrain from being racists."* L3: *"Although it is a small percentage, some students who left COM4809 were not really comfortable to be supervised by lecturers from a different race. Many of these students are whites and have perceptions that a black man has a teaching deficiency. To me this is a national problem and it needs a political intervention at a national level because I believe it is not only this university that experience racism from students."* This finding postulates that racism is still prevalent in higher education landscape and can affect the development of human capital. The finding further serves to propose that a continuous debate that is aimed at curtailing racism must be

	undertaken at different levels, that subsume, among other, the departmental, institutional and in government.
Students' lack of interactions with lecturers	This study found complementing findings to Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance that is grounded on philosophy that interactions between lecturers and students are vital to support learning environment and to reduce isolation between them. Parallel to that, in a study that was confined within the doctoral postgraduate level of study, Golde (2005, p. 680) found that the isolation between students and the academic department has little influence to the dropout of doctoral candidates. Regarding students' lack of interactions with lecturers as one of the dropout influential attributes, the majority of lecturers have indicated that students have always been given information relating to contact details which they may use when they encounter specific problems in learning or when they want to know more about something relating to their studies. Participants further indicated that such information has always been available in tutorial letters and they contain telephones of lecturers who are in charge of the subjects they are registered for, assignment department, examination department, registration department, library and more other contact information. Since communicating contact details through tutorial letters has not be encouraging the majority of students to interact with lecturers, as has been articulated by L10 below: *"Students have adopted a culture of not reading and when they have study problems they don't know who to contact, yet they have every form of information they need in their tutorial letters"* …it is deducible to state that the use of tutorial letters as a means to make students aware of various contact details for support (such as e-mails, office numbers, telephone numbers, and addresses) until recently, has been infective. This finding shows that there is a need for new support strategies to address students' failure to have perusals over their tutorial letters. This may include what L10 have suggested, *"maybe supplementing the use of tutorial letters, lecturers can use SMSs and post information in myUnisa as well."*

Death of a family member or someone close to the student	It is given that everyone will die. Thus, deaths as a factor that causes dropout problem for students who have died while in the process of learning remain inescapable. However, when a family member of registered students has just died, dropout problem can adversely affect the students, depending on the period in which it has occurred and it may result in some of them dropping out of their studies. This position was revealed by the findings of this study. Perceived possible mitigation strategy, which has been identified by the majority of lecturers as an approach towards the preclusion of dropout for the affected students, was the provision of counselling form of support. However, coming to know if students have just recently experienced death in the family has been pronounced a serious challenge for lecturers. This was evident in lecturer 7's response which is as follows: *"A student can regain an interest to continue with studies if professional counselling services were given, but the problem is that they rarely share personal problems like death in the family with lecturers. You will only realise that something is not right when the submission deadlines have long passed or the exam has already been written."* When asked what needs to be done, L7 suggested that contacting the student immediately after deadlines of assignments would be a good move because counselling intervention can then be pursued at that time. These findings offer a suggestion that lecturers have to communicate with students regularly, check who submitted assignment and who did not, and make follow-ups with students to determine the cause of non-submission and conclude the process by referring a student for counselling.
Pregnancy	To address female dropouts associated with pregnancy, those who have identified it posited that it can be better dealt with by imparting students with time management skill that should be part of the orientation programme during registrations. Others have suggested that training on time management should be the responsibility of library department as one of the support services that they should provide. Inherent in this finding is the implication that orientation

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	programmes at an early phase after registration can help curtail a pregnancy-related dropout factor.
Health-related problems	Perceptions of lecturers have revealed that another gripping dropout determinant was a student ill health. Many of the interviewed lecturers have claimed that some students drop out because they have been ill. To reduce health-related dropouts, the bigger fraction of participants was of the view that, despite being a complex problem to tackle, the university should allow those who have proofs that they could not submit assignments or examination portfolios because of ill-health difficulties to submit their work. This finding implies that permission to submit assignments or examination portfolios has the probable capability to address health-related problems. Although health-related problems have also been documented in the literature (Woolf, 2007; Breier, 2010; O'Keeffe, 2013) as determinants of student dropout, no study was found to have dealt with mitigation strategies on this problem. This research lacuna suggests that future research should investigate possible dropout mitigation strategies, which will be used in the context of open and distance learning environment to deal with student dropout.
Inability to pay for study fees (financial constraints)	The need for financial support for the variety of student cohorts is widely acknowledged in the plethora of related literature. Concerned with dropouts of first-year students, Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 546-547) assert that there is need to embed internships within the university curricular as a support intervention to address financial challenges and to minimize dropout rate in higher education landscape. In this study too, students' financial constraints have expectedly been found to be among the reasons for honours students in ODL environments. Suggested mitigation strategies, which were believed to have the ability to minimise dropout concern, have incorporated that the university should have bursaries that are focused to support honours students who have financial problems. Other participants suggested that the tutorial letters should also contain list of bursaries that help the qualifying honours students to finance their studies. In addition, the study also uncovered views that

	suggest that lecturers should be knowledgeable about financial sources which lower-postgraduate students can apply. As implied by this finding, dropouts of honours students can also be lessened by means of providing financial support to those who have shown constraints.
Students' workload	In addition, captivatingly to unveil was the issue of high volume of work for honours students who study through open and distance learning institutions. Lecturers' perceptions have revealed that COM4809 module contains a big amount of work, which students must go through in a year. In line with this finding, Manik's (2014) study to determine attributes, which cause student dropout in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, has found that factors, which lead to dropouts, include high academic amount of work that students must do. For the employed student cohort, additional work-related activities were also perceived in this study to be making learning a challenging experience. Interpreting findings from the deficit school of thought which has guided this study, it is inferable to state that the finding (high volume of work) is in concord with the philosophical dogma that blames students' home contexts for their failure, in which student dropout is part. Ingrained from this finding, the majority of lecturers have stressed that the transfer of time management skill, collaborative learning amongst students, frequent interactions with lecturers and evading registering all honours modules at once can help improve students' academic performance levels, and ultimately diminish the dropout proportion in ODL institutions. When applying Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance as a lens to explain the proposed frequent interactions in a student-lecturer relationship, it is worthy to note that this mitigation strategy concurs with the postulation held by the theory that the dialogue can reduce the transactional distance and improve student-learning experience. Inherent in this finding is the postulation that greater student workloads, lack of interactions with their lecturers, non-availability of collaborative learning and work-related activities account for dropouts in ODL environment. Thus, for ODL academic institutions that want to address dropout problem at an honours level, it is vital to train students on how they can manage their time to study, encourage them to engage into collaborative learning as well as to take fewer subjects, which they will be able to manage.

Table 4.6: Strategies to mitigate dropout factors that are associated with lecturers' circumstances

Dropout factors	Unveiled mitigation strategies (support)
Inadequate provision of academic support	Within the general emergent theme of dropout factors associated with 'lecturers' circumstances', dropouts of honours students have been found to be the result of, amongst other reasons, little or no adequate academic support from lecturers. This implies that although lecturers might be extremely committed on executing the teaching role as per the required performance standard of the university, dropout rate may rise if no sufficient inspirational learning support is provided to the students. Participants' views have further regarded academic support by the lecturers as a possible responsive mitigation strategy, suggesting that there is a need to make awareness that will promulgate the essence of providing academic support and the negative impact of dropout on the university performance. This finding reinforced the assertion made by Naude and Bezuidenhout (2015, p. 222) who indicated that South African universities have been using a range of support interventions, which entail, among others, providing students with foundation and bridging modules and academic support. At programme level, related literature showed that having a vast array of programmes could lead to dropout reduction. Di Pietro and Cutillo (2007, p. 547) reported that the Italian university system's 2001 reform recommended that a range of programmes must be provided to ensure student retention, to increase completion rates and to curtail the dropout concern. Another popular viewpoint from lecturers has advocated for the need for workshops on research that are aimed at equipping honours students with research skill. Lecturer 4 identified a homogenous supervision as another cause of dropout for COM4809 students and have suggested that the approach be rid of, to use her words below:

	"A more personal contact between the lecturer and student, than the homogenous supervision, can make things better because, then, the discussion will deal with an area where a student has found challenging in depth." To others a single or few workshops are problematic because, as per the point of view of another lecturer (L9), *"few workshops do not take into account that human beings are multifaceted earthlings who differ in cognitive strengths and therefore do not learn at the same pace."* These findings mean that dropout can possibly be minimised by opting to use a one-to-one supervision in a lecturer-student relationship as opposed to the current homogeneous approach. In addition, there should be more workshops on the research to support honours students enrolled in an ODL institution.
Lecturers' workloads	Too many students to supervise per annum has been found in this study to be another prevailing concern for many lecturers who are teaching an honours research module at an ODL environment. This has also been cited as a major contributing factor to an escalating dropout rate of honours students who have registered for an advanced communication research module. When asked how the problem should be addressed, many of the lecturers indicated that the number students to supervise must be kept low or more supervisors have to be employed to provide additional academic support for honours students. One of the participants (L9) offered the suggestion as to how dropout problem that results from a high volume of supervision can be circumvented: *"… to achieve that we need to reduce the amount of intake to be in par with the departmental capacity to supervise or alternatively we have to hire more external qualified supervisors if we have necessary resources because supervising more than five is a huge responsibility. That, to me, will also reduce the dropout rate of COM4809 students."*

	This finding conquered with those, which Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008) and Sittichai (2012) reported that keeping student-lecturer ratio and the class size low in higher education institutions could positively address the dropout problem. The idea of expanding the supervision capacity in the Department of Communication Science (DCS) where COM4809 is taught was reflected by many of the participants as an already discussed and contemplated approach to address the high amount of work for lecturers. Additional support intervention available in the university, despite being directed to undergraduates was also reported and found relevant for honours students as well. This form of support is performed by e-tutors who have been hired to work online, providing extra guidance to the undergraduate students. The majority of lecturers also felt that it must also be done for honours students registered for a research module. In relation to that, participant (L10) commented as follows: *"Some undergraduate modules have e-tutors who are employed to provide students with additional academic support online. I think the rate at which students leave COM4809 will be history if we follow the same student support method."* Drawing a conclusive remark from the findings which have been presented within the ambiance of lecturer' workload category, it can be inferable to state that while it is important for lecturers to offer as much academic support to students as possible in order to shrink the scope of dropout incidences, they must also be supported by employing additional qualified supervisors. In that way, the finding suggests that likelihood of dropout incidences will drop, resulting in increased student pass rate for honours students.
Absence of self-reflection of lecturers on teaching pedagogies	Another attribute that, in the views of lecturers, leads to dropout of honours students in ODL environment was the absence of lecturers' self-reflections on their teaching methodologies. Highlighting the role of self-reflection exercises for lecturers, one of the participants has avowed the following suggestion:

	L1: *"… if we can develop a habit to thoroughly check how we teach; it can enhance the quality of our teaching methods."* To address the issue of inappropriate teaching approach and lack of self-reflection, another participant (lecturer 9) proposed an alternative approach to dealing with dropout of honours students which advocates for a complete alteration of the undergraduate programme to include more of research modules that will incorporate stats as an introductory research course to deepen the foundation of students' knowledge on quantitative research. Dealing with the dropout concern encountered by the Italian university system, dropout was reduced by altering the content, the timeframe and the structure of the programme into a more flexible programme led to a change in student behaviour and, later, in shrinkage of dropout risk landscape (Di Pietro and Cutillo, 2008). Another imperative dropout mitigation strategy that was suggested was the reduction of students to supervise by hiring additional qualified people who can help with the academic supervisory mandate.
Supervisors' poor relationships with students	Building enabling relationships with postgraduate students is not only the responsibility of the students. In Golde's (2005) contention, the ability of lecturers to ensure positive relationships with their students can lead to positive learning experience. Such relationships must be characterised by regular academic support, interaction and trust (Golde's (2005, p. 686). In congruence with this viewpoint, this study uncovered that a dropout occurrence of an honours student in the context of ODL can be successfully precluded by creating a good supervisor-student relationship. Further to this, lecturers suggested that supervisors must be encouraged to build healthy relationships with their students. This includes shifting from see student as a reactionary response towards adopting preventive measures, such as by contacting students every time to remind them to submit their assignments. It has also been suggested that the institutions should make the learning environment enabling for students. These findings imply that dropout is a complicated phenomenon that can be uprooted by means of varied approaches, which,

	among others, entail the ability of lecturers to relate to students in such a way that the academic environment becomes enabling and encouraging learning to them.
Lack of lecturers' interactions (dialogues) with students	The need to encourage lecturers to hold regular interactions has been found in this study as one of the prominent and trending views among the participants. Lack of interactions with students makes students feel lonely and isolated from their lecturers and the university at large and those who are unable to cope with the academic demands often fail or leave the module or the entire honours programme. From the perspectives of lecturers, this study has found that regular interactions with students have the capacity to build a good relationship with the students, make them feel a sense of belonging and ultimately play a role in the reduction of dropout ratio for honours students who are furthering their studies with ODL institutions.

Table 4.7: Strategies to mitigate dropout factors that are associated with institutional circumstances

Dropout factors	Unveiled mitigation strategies
Lack of subject librarians	It was attention grabbing to uncover that lack of library support services was perceived to be one of factors, which results in dropouts for honours students in ODL environments. Lecturers' perceptions have indicated that there is a need to employ subject librarians to address the issue of dropout in the institution further. This finding confirmed Stewart et al' (Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004, p. 56; 2013, p. 294) claim that, among the distinct support services for students, library support services are essential. Implicit in the finding uncovered by this study is the notion that the subject librarian support is one of the core mitigation strategies that may help institution to minimise the growing dropout rate of honours students in ODL institutions.
Lack of awareness on available support services	Lack of awareness on the available support services in higher education institutions can cause students' dropouts. Manik's (2014) study to determine reasons for dropout at UKZN has found that some students dropped out

	because they were not aware of various options of educational programmes, which they could go for and had limited knowledge about those, which they have chosen. To address the problem of insufficient awareness on support interventions, which have been put into place and the general concern of dropout, proposed mitigation strategies from lecturers included that ODL institutions should make adequate awareness of support interventions, which they offer to the students. Other lecturers' suggestions advocate for the use of different channels, which the university use to communicate with students as a means to make awareness of available support services.
Lack of financial support programmes in the university	In relation to the lack of financial support, the majority of participants have indicated that most of honours students studying through ODL institutions usually drop out because of financial constraints. To curb this problem, participants have suggested that the university should have bursaries for honours students. Others have suggested that a list of financial support sources outside that university should be compiled and be disseminated to all students.
Lack of emotional support	Supporting higher education students emotionally is important in mitigating dropouts in higher education. Depending on the types of difficulties, which students experience in learning, interventions vary. From the perceptions of lecturers on how dropouts of honours students can be successfully dealt with in ODL environments, this study has found that students who are likely to drop out of their studies because they are not given emotional support in the institution can be supported through the use of counselling. In the same vein, Manik's (2014) study that looked into causes that lead to student dropout in the University of KwaZulu-Natal attributed dropout to various reasons which included lack of counselling to reduce student academic and personal stress. In their study, Vergara et al (2010) also accentuated the significance of emotional support, asserting that students who require emotional support suffer from homesickness – a feeling of loneliness (p. 1499). In this study too, the importance of offering emotional support to students was also evident. For

	example, one of the participants (L12) said the following: L12: *"I believe counselling, especially when a student has just had a problem such as death of a family member, can really help."* Since this study was limited to understanding dropouts of honours students in ODL environments from the perceptions of lecturers and administrative officers who are involved in COM4809 as well as from the experiences of students who have dropped out, future research should include staff members whose duties include counselling to determine much richer findings.

Table 4.8: Strategies to mitigate dropouts, which are associated with external factors

Dropout factor	Mitigation strategy
Lack of access to the required research data	With regard to the problem relating to failure to obtain permission to conduct the study, this study found lecturers' experiences that show that they support the students they are supervising by preparing letters to assist them to request permission to conduct their studies in organisations of their choices. This was against the backdrop, as noted by Creswell and Poth (2017, p. 172), that getting access to the targeted organisation and participants, sway participants to partake into the study and to establish trust with participants are challenging tasks in a research process. This confirmed Kondowe and Booyens's (2014) study that investigated experiences of students on accessing sites in order to conduct the qualitative inquiry and found that an inability to gain access to the site may put paid to the entire research project. Supporting students to gain access to the organisation is vital. In line with this view, one of the participants (L7) has confirmed through the following assertion: *"To assist student get permission to conduct a research project in organisations of their choices, we write students letters to request organisations to grant approvals to conduct their research projects, …"* For those who are studying with Unisa, students fill all the sections applicable to their research projects in order to assist them to get ethical clearance in an

	already prepared form. The findings hold an assumption that by helping students with letters to request permission to conduct a study, the rate of dropout in COM4809 can be condensed.

4.3.1.8 Measuring the effectiveness of students support interventions

The eighth question of the lecturers' interview guide sought to solicit lecturers' views regarding the way they measure the effectiveness level of support interventions. To get that type of data, the following question was asked:

How do ODL universities measure the effectiveness of a dropout mitigation strategy for COM4809 LPSs?

Determining the impact of a support intervention on students is a crucial undertaking in dealing with dropout in ODL institutions. However, the finding made by this study has revealed that there are no formal procedures on how to measure the extent to which support interventions might have been effective. In their student service process model (SSPM), Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004, p. 58) have suggested measuring the effectiveness of the support services, which have been provided to the students as the last of the five stages in the process of service delivery. In a similar vein, this study has found that the majority of lecturers are of the view that that there is a need to undertake research to determine the degree of effectiveness that a particular given support might have had on students.

4.3.1.9 Creating awareness of available support services

Lecturers have mentioned the use of myUnisa to post messages about any available research workshops in the department, massages to remind students of the deadlines for assignments, etc. Other lecturers indicated that they use SMSs to make any announcement relating to the course. The analysis also revealed that lecturers include contact details in the first tutorial letter which subsume, among others, telephones, departments, and people that may be contacted by students should they encounter problems.

4.3.2 Analysis of findings from interviews with administrative officers

Responses from the only two purposely-selected administrative officers who have been involved into the administration of an advanced communication research (COM4809) between 2011 and 2016 were generated on April 6, 2017 at 9:30 and 11:00 antemeridian respectively through semi-structured in-depth interviews. As in cases of data collection from lecturers, interviews with administrative officers were conducted in their offices. While the first in-depth interview has lasted for only 29 minutes, the second interview took 47 minutes. Administrative officers were requested to take part in the study two days prior to the interviews through e-mails and they accepted the requests. The e-mails which were sent to participants were accompanied by attachments which involved the interview schedule, the consent form, ethics approval form the University of Limpopo (UL), ethical clearance from the University of South Africa (Unisa) and the permission to collect data given by Unisa. Before the interviews commence, the nature of the study, the anticipated benefits, how anonymity of participants and confidentiality of responses will be ensured as well as the procedure that has been followed in the study were expounded to participants. Having been briefed about the essentiality of conducting the study, participants consented to partake as interviewees verbally, and in writing by completing the consent forms, which were handed to them before the actual interviewing processes, begin. Participants also consented that the interviews be recorded. A laptop was used as the recording instrument while notes taking was performed as participants were responding to the questions from the interview guide. The use of recording as the data collection method was chosen to ensure that all responses are captured in full and to allow extractions of fitting verbatim quotes to support the interpretations assigned to findings, which would have been uncovered. Notes taking, on the other hand, was deemed salient to capture the emerging themes and to enable the researcher to ask probing questions to determine clarity of unclear responses.

4.3.2.1 Demographic information

The demographic data that were collected from administrative officers relate to experiences, which they have in the administrative positions within the context of ODL, experiences in working at a postgraduate level and experiences in working in an

advanced communication research module. These types of data were significant to measure the potential linkages between the experience level in providing support services to students and the outcomes of interventions offered – dropout or retention. It was interesting to reveal that all participants have over five years of experience working as administrative officers in the university, at a postgraduate level and in an advanced communication research module. While the first participant (A1) has indicated to have 23 years of experience working in ODL environment and with postgraduate students as well as five years working in COM4809, the second participant (A2) has indicated to have six years working in ODL, with postgraduates as well as with honours students who are enrolled in COM4809 module. Ingrained from these extensive levels of experiences, it is inferable to report that the data solicited by this study from the administrative officers is rich. The findings revealed that the level of experience, either in the institution, at postgraduate level or in an advanced research module has no bearing on student dropout. Thus, no dropout was perceived to be linked to experience levels of the administrative officers. Unlike in the findings derived from lecturers' responses, which included dropout factors associated with lecturers' weaknesses, implying that lecturers also emerge as the cause of dropout for honours students in the context of ODL, the administrative officers who are involved in COM4809 were not found to be one of the reasons for dropouts.

In the forthcoming section, the discussion is on findings, which relate to reasons for dropout in ODL institutions, which were indicated by the administrative officers.

4.3.2.2 Administrative officers' perceived reasons which account for dropout in open and distance learning institution

Unlike in the analysis of lecturers' responses were four broad themes were found (dropout factors associated with students' personal reasons, lecturers' weaknesses, institutional shortcomings and external factors), an analysis of data collected from administrative officers confirmed two of them, namely: students' personal reasons and lecturers' weaknesses. Thus from administrative officers' perceptions, student dropout is caused by problems evolving from students' home and institutional contexts. Also intriguing to divulge was that other factors, which influence dropouts in ODL institutions, are determined by lecturers' weaknesses such as being unavailable in their offices and through telephones when students want them. These findings are,

partly, in opposition to the philosophical postulation held by the deficit theoretical lens which has also guided this study, together with Moore's (1993) transactional theory of distance, that students' failures in their studies, including a failure to successfully complete the course or the programme (dropout), are the results of problems emanating only from students' home contexts (personal circumstances) and not institutional contexts. However, they agree with the part of the deficit dogma which claims that student' home context influences dropout. Consistent with the findings made this study and the deficit theory' doctrine, Mgwebi et al (2017) also assert that students' backgrounds (students' personal reasons or home contexts) account for dropouts in the South African university domain.

The next discussion focuses on dropout causes, which are associated with students' personal circumstances as, have been found in the analysis of data collected from administrative officers.

4.3.2.2.1 Students' personal reasons

In this section, the focus is on categories of dropout determinants which have emerged from the analysis of administrative officers' interview data and which are associated with honours students' personal situations in ODL institutions as were divulged by this study, namely: technological challenges and financial constraints.

Technological challenges

During the analysis of lecturers' in-depth interview data in this study it was uncovered that student dropout in ODL institutions are also attributed to lack of technological skills and readiness to use technologies for learning purposes. In a similar vein, findings from the administrative officers' views generated the same postulation. These findings, both from lecturers and administrative officers, concurred with those which Benson and Samarawickrema (2009, p. 7) reported that, among other variables, dropouts can be influenced by whether staff members and students have the required technological skills and whether they are ready or willing to use such technologies. From the standpoints of administrative officers, this study has further unveiled that unreliable student management systems, such as myUnisa - Unisa's student management system - are major causes of dropouts for most of the students who are furthering their

postgraduate studies in ODL institutions. Participants have also shared that those technologically based student management systems that are present students with challenges, such as a temporary dysfunctionality of online platform through which to submit assignments during the final dates. As an example, this is reflected in the first participant's (A1) avowal below:

A1: *"…myUnisa student management system often crushes during the last few days before the deadlines of submission of assignments. This problem makes many of our students fail to submit assignments, and some have dropped out because of that."*

Adding to the problems, which students experience when using myUnisa, another participant (A2) has reflected that some students have been reporting that they have been encountering technological challenges during the use of the system.

A2: *"Sometimes students submit parts of their assignments, for example, only the first pages. This to me shows that they may not be really knowing how to use myUnisa system or that they are just careless."*

One other area that was found attributable to dropouts of honours students in ODL environments relate to technological challenges, which students experience when registering modules and educational programmes. The administrative officers have indicated that many students have been complaining to them that they could not be able to register for modules and programmes. This finding suggests that myUnisa student system is not user-friendly to some students or that students lack the required technological skills to use myUnisa effectively.

This is the void that future studies have to research. In the ensuing section, student's financial difficulty as an additional dropout factor is discussed.

Students' financial constraints

In the same tone with finding that has been divulged by the analysis of perceptions solicited from lecturers, administrative officers also held the view that student dropout at an honours level within the confines of ODL institutions is influenced by students' financial constraints. This finding concurred with the theoretical postulation held by Murray (2014, p. 1) that, amongst other factors, financial backgrounds potentially have

a causative effect on student dropout. Empirical evidences have also been presented in the literature. A typical example of such empirical studies is the investigation that was undertaken by Breier (2010) in the University of Western Cape and concluded that the majority of students drop out of their studies due to financial problems (p. 657). In the same vein, Manik (2014) investigated attributes, which account for student attrition within the University of KwaZulu-Natal and found that lack of financial support amongst the students was the principal reason for dropouts. However, the degree to which students' financial constraints determine dropout differs. In line with this assertion, this study has found that while lecturers perceive financial constraints as a key dropout factor for most of honours students in ODL, the administrative officers regarded enrolling for many modules (workload) as the major dropout determinant. Thus from the administrative officers' perceptions, financial constraints have little contribution to student dropout. This position was also found in the reviewed literature. For instance, Cunha et al' (2006) cited that access to higher education can be minimally attributed to students' home contexts, such as poor financial backgrounds.

Lecturers' weaknesses

This section reports and discusses dropout reasons, which were found to be associated with lecturers' weaknesses. Unavailability of lecturers and taking longer to provide students with feedbacks were the sole two reasons, which administrative officers have provided.

Unavailability of lecturers

While student dropout is attributed to an array of reasons in higher education, the administrative officers' views, which were solicited by this study, have revealed that lecturers' unavailability through phones and in their offices has been one of the reasons, which account for dropouts of honours students in ODL environments. This finding has supported Terentyev et al' (2015) investigation which has explored the reasons for dropouts within the Russian University system and found that administrative officers and professors also influence student dropout. In relation to lecturers' non-availability factor, one of the participants (A1) commented as follows:

"Although most of our lecturers are good supervisors, the problem is that some do not make students aware that they will not be available during specific time by posting announcements on myUnisa or using student system available in oracle to notify students via SMSs."

From the solicited standpoint of administrative officers, supervisors of honours students have the required supervision skills. However, they are not able to communicate with their students adequately through a repertoire of communication platforms that incorporate posting announcements on myUnisa and SMSs about lecturers' non-availability. Inherent in this finding is the implication that even if lecturers may be excellent in teaching, factors such as lack of communication with students may still influence dropout in ODL environment. Hence lecturers and open and distance learning universities which want to address the dropout concern amongst honours students must be able to offer both academic support and to hold regular communications with students. Such communications, as suggested by the finding, have to go beyond study-related correspondences to embrace informative messages about when and when not to find the supervisors.

Taking longer time to provide students with feedbacks

In addition to other dropout factors, the administrative officers have cited that most of the lecturers are not able to provide feedbacks to students within the required timeframe of three weeks as stipulated in the university policy. Although there has been a considerable scarcity of studies, which have reported lecturers' behaviours as a prime dropout determinant, particularly from the administrative officers' perspectives, lack of prompt feedback has not come as a surprise. Juneby's (2007) study that has looked into student dropout within the landscape of distance education has also unveiled the corresponding finding that lack of teacher feedback and support contributed significantly to the increased dropout rate of 75%. Both the administrative officers' perceived lack of prompt feedbacks and that of Juneby (2007) imply that student dropout is determined by lecturers' behaviours. This finding discredits the deficit theory that theorises that dropouts are only influenced by students' home contexts and their learning limitations. Late feedbacks, in the popular view of participants, have had a negative effect on students' learning experiences. In relation to this problem, the second participant (A2) said the following:

A2: *"We are not responsible to our students. I always receive complaints from frustrated students who claim that they have sent e-mails to their supervisors but they were not responded to. Others claimed that their supervisors take too much time to give them feedbacks on assignments."*

This finding was also found to be in consistent with that which was revealed from interviews which lecturers. However, lecturers have indicated that some assignments arrive to them late, making it difficult for them to mark those assignments within three weeks as required by the university regulation. Thus even though some lecturers take longer time to provide feedbacks, to a certain extent they cannot be blamed to have taken much longer time if the distribution of assignments are not in their control. The makes the problem even more complex. It is clear that some problems are the result of institutional structural arrangements. Very worthy to note is that this finding reflects that factors which are attributable to dropouts in ODL contexts are determined by students' personal, lecturers' and institutional circumstances. Deep-rooted from this implication, it is inferable to posit that effective ways to deal with this mammoth dropout concern require concerted and collective efforts of students, lecturers and ODL institutions themselves. A comprehensive review of related literature has shown that even though the existing literature has a high volume of studies, which looked into the dropout phenomenon in higher education, fewer has ever found 'taking longer time to provide feedbacks' as a dropout influence, particularly those which investigated the phenomenon through lecturers' and administrative officers' lived experiences and perceptions. In light of this, it is essential to direct future studies into this research void to study the dropout phenomenon from the perspectives of the students who dropped out of honours module. Since this study was anchored within the qualitative design, such studies may follow the quantitative methodological approach and mixed-methods to study the impact of lecturers' behaviours on honours students' dropout in the context of ODL.

4.3.2.3 Administrative officers' perceptions of student dropout

Although the understanding of dropout at a conceptual level was not asked in in-depth interviews with administrative officers, an attention-grabbing finding that has been revealed by this study was that 'dropout' is an indefinable term. This was because it is

usually viewed as a temporary occurrence. Evident of such finding is inherent in the response given below:

A2*: "It is difficult for me to say students have dropped out. Most of them come back again and register for the module or the programme. You may find that they have cancelled the module after realising that there is a lot of work that comes with the module or that they face financial constraints, but they come back again to register for the module."*

This finding concurred with that which Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon (2014) have reported on that one of the difficulties in gaining insights into dropout is that it is a complex and multidimensional problem which, even though students did not register for more than one consecutive semesters, labelling such a failure as a dropout becomes questionable owing to the fact that some students might have decided to have a longer period of break in their studies (p. 292 and 304).

As in the case of lecturers' opinions, the administrative officers' perceptions did not attribute student dropout to administrative officers' weaknesses. Whereas the findings, which were unveiled from lecturers' perspectives, collapsed dropout causes into students' personal reasons, factors arising from lecturers' circumstances and institutional variables, the perspectives of administrative officers have revealed two categories that only relate to personal reasons and lecturers' weaknesses. Nonetheless, it is worthy to note that both findings from lecturers and administrative officers have rejected the finding that was divulged by Tas et al' (2013, p. 1563) study that looked into the attributes leading to student dropout and found, among the reasons, that lecturers' and administrative officers' behaviours and attitudes are prime dropout influences. This conclusion was further strengthened by other studies, which have dealt with the same phenomenon. Such studies include Terentyev et al' (2015) inquiry that was confined within the Russian University system to determine student dropout accounts and their root causes. Terentyev et al (2015) also arrived at the compatible conclusion that university administrative officers and professors are the major reasons for student dropout. Despite an ample of studies on dropout, many have dealt with the phenomenon within the undergraduate terrain. While this qualitative study has limited its scope to student dropout at an honours postgraduate level in ODL institutions, future ODL-oriented studies should study the impact of administrative

officers' behaviours on dropout problem from integrated methodological paradigms at other postgraduate levels of study within ODL environments.

Next, an analysis of findings from the administrative officers is provided. Then presentation has been concluded with an analysis of data collected from the students.

4.3.2.4 Administrative officers' perceptions of support services

From the perspectives of the administrative officers, this study has found that there have not been satisfactory support interventions across the entire university, particularly for honours students. Thought-provokingly, the findings have further uncovered that there had been no workshops on research for honours students in 2016 offered by the department in which COM4809 module is taught. Participants have shown concern over the unavailability of such type workshops. This was evident in the assertion below:

A2: *"I think it is bad. We haven't done workshops yet this year and even last year no workshop was held to assist our students with research."*

Implicit in the views offered was that participants were unhappy with the department's failure to not to academically help their students on research. The finding posits that research workshop can help curtail the rate of dropouts for honours students in ODL institutions. This is particularly important for students who might have entered the honours level unprepared or without the expected theoretical base as it came forth in the analysis of lecturers' responses.

4.3.2.5 Ways by which administrative officers identify students who need support intervention

Regarding methods which administrative officers use to identify students who require some support interventions in their honours postgraduate level, all participants have indicated that students call them first through telephones or send e-mails, complaining about lecturers or asking about something relating to their studies, such as how to register for an honours programme or course online. This finding suggests that the type of support that administrative officers intervene with is reactionary. Thus, they are not able to detect dropout possibility unless students have reported that they are

encountering some hurdles. For those students who have not reported problems with regard to registrations or studies, it becomes hard to assist them, failure of which may result in dropout. With this reflection in mind, it is imperative for ODL institutions to determine students who are at risk and to measure dropout possibility as well as to provide the necessary support.

4.3.2.6 Postgraduate support services available in the university

Although the finding made by this study has shown that there had not been a workshop on research for honours students in 2016, it was interesting to note that this form of support has been a dominant academic support available in the department years prior to 2016. This finding was congruent to those, which were uncovered by the desktop reviews, which the study undertook along the traditional design of literature review. For example, Ikusasalethu was found having interventions, which are aimed at imparting students with the repertoire of skills to study that embrace tuition lessons, motivational sessions, and workshops to prepare students for the examinations. In reviewing the literature, it became evident that despite the essence of conducting workshops to address student dropout concern in higher education, studies that have looked into workshops as a support intervention for honours students in open and distance learning institutions have been scant. Hence, it is important that future research have to focus on this lacuna.

Participants have also indicated that they were not aware of any form of support services that the university has for postgraduate students.

4.3.2.7 Means by which open and distance learning universities mitigate dropout of honours students

Also interesting to divulge in this study was the finding that administrative officers reduce students' chances to withdraw from their studies by referring them to the relevant person or department were they can receive assistance and by sending e-mails about their concerns to the relevant person, having copied the administrative officer. For example, one of the participants (A1) said:

A1: *"If students struggle to get their supervisors and bring the concerns to me, I ask them to write e-mails to lecturers and copy me and the head of the department. In this way, lecturers*

will react to the concern quickly. As for those who struggle with registrations, I always refer them to relevant and specific people working in the registration department to attend to their problems."

Another fundamental method that one of the administrative officers uses to address the dropout problem at an honours level was to warn students from registering all five honours modules and to encourage them to take at least COM4809 with one other module. As was explicit in administrative officers' responses, this strategy of mitigation was informed by the fact that COM4809 module has a high amount of work that students are faced with during the course of the year. This strategy was believed to have the potential to improve students' performance levels, in addition to mitigating dropouts, on one hand. On the other hand, explicating the high volume of work that students will struggle with in COM4809 module has worsened the dropout concern. This finding has mirrored that mitigating dropouts of honours students in ODL domain is complex and challenging support intervention. Reflecting the degree to which it is complex, one of the participants (A2) responded as follows:

A2: *"Some students leave the module in fear that they will not cope with its huge amount of work. But to others, they drop other modules and continue with COM4809 with few other modules and they usually perform better."*

Encouraging students to enrol for few modules at an honours level has complemented the finding that was uncovered through soliciting lecturers' views regarding factors that lead to dropouts of honours students in ODL institutions as well as views on how they have been mitigating dropouts of honours students. This finding suggests that to address the dropout concern of honours students in ODL environment, detailed information is necessary to prospective students on the amount of work entailed in honours courses before they even register for them. This, as implicitly became inherent in the finding that has emerged, shows that dropouts can be reduced at an honours level.

Although there was no suggestion from the administrative officers with regard to how lack of technological challenges, which students usually encounter can be addressed, the existing body of literature contain assertions, which reveal the significance of ensuring technological support intervention. For example, Bailey (2013, p. 144) posits

that the need for instructors and librarians to provide students with technological support has increased in the higher education landscape in order to impart students with relevant technological skills. Rooted from this point of view, it is thus important for ODL institutions to mitigate dropouts that are influenced by lack of technological skills by ensuring technological skills transfer to students who have shown inabilities to use technological tools for learning purposes.

4.3.2.8 Measuring the effectiveness level of mitigation strategies for dropouts of honours students

There were no formal dropout mitigation strategies, which administrative officers use to assist honours students registered for COM4809. However, the identified informal support services they offer, such as referring students to relevant and specific people and departments, were perceived to have positive impact on students' learning pathways. The first participant to be interviewed has indicated that some students send e-mails or make telephone calls to thank the administrative officer for having assisted them. Such telephone calls and e-mails of appreciations were viewed as ways by which administrative officers measure the extent of the effectiveness of the assistance they have provided. Another participant (A2) cited an improvement in students' assignments as another means by which it becomes evident that their support services had positively impacted on of students' performances and low attrition rate.

4.3.2.9 Awareness on the available support services

In relation to building awareness on the support services available in the university, administrative officers have indicated that the department posts announcements on the workshops organised on myUnisa. They further revealed that, by referring students to certain relevant staff members and departments where the matter which students are concerned with is dealt with is another form of making students aware of the available support services. By so doing, the administrative officers believe that students who have found support services invaluable to them are likely to refer other students as well. These findings added to those which have been cited by the lecturers that awareness is mostly through tutorial letters in which contact details of departments where students can receive support services are provided. Administrative officers'

perspectives have shown that many students are not aware of the support services, which the university offer. Not only did this finding complemented those, which were uncovered through the analysis of lecturers' perceptions and experiences, but also supported existing findings reported in the literature. For example, Heagney and Benson (2017) conducted a study to understand how mature-age students become successful in higher education studies and found that some students were not aware of the support services offered in the academic institution. There is, therefore, a need to develop awareness campaigns that will help promulgate various support services available in the university.

4.3.3 Analysis of findings from interviews with dropout students

This section presents and discusses findings from dropout students who have left the case module, which epitomised the existence of honours students' dropouts – COM4809 in open and distance learning environment. Participants were found using snowball and purposive sampling methods they were suggested by lecturers who were supervising them (snowballing) and were also found by requesting the ICT department to offer the 2011-2016 dropout statistical information (datasets) on COM4809. Sixteen dropout students were interviewed. While ten dropout students have participated into the study in telephonic interviews, only six were interviewed through focus-group interview. This was because some have indicated not to be available for interviewing in persons, citing challenges, which related to work-related commitments and longer distance to be travelled to come to the campus were interviews were to be held. The interview was held in the researcher's office situated in TvW buiding at Unisa's Mucleneuk Campus on Saturday, 11 March 2017 at 11:30. Ingrained from the fact that participants were all typical dropouts, serving as key informants, it was important to include them both. Similar to in-depth interviews which were held with lecturers and administrative officers, the nature and the purpose of the study were expounded to them, and the request to record interviews using a laptop and a tablet as well as to have consent forms signed was also made prior to the commencement of the interview process. They all consented to participate and to have the interview proceeding recorded.

4.3.3.1 Students' demographic profiles

Five types of students' demographic data that were collected in this study were relating to age, gender, employment, race and marital status. These data were influenced, firstly, by findings of related preceding studies, and secondly, by the philosophical dogma inherent in the deficit model which has also guided this study.

Next, the age, gender, employment, race and marital status are presented and discussed below as were unveiled in the study. Their relevance into this study is substantiated by highlighting what previous studies have dealt with and have found as well as by the philosophical canon held by the deficit school of thought that, along with the transactional distance theory, has driven the study.

4.3.3.1.1 Age and gender

The majority of dropouts who have participated into the study were females, aged twenty-five years and less and have indicated that they left COM4809 module between 2014 and 2016. They have raised concerns that included highly discouraging comments in assignments, inaccessibility of lecturers, poor academic performances and higher amount of work in COM4809 module as prime factors, which have caused them to drop out. Thus, age and gender were not found to have an impact upon student dropout. This contradicted the finding of the study that was conducted by Hovdhaugen et al (2013) have investigated the relationship between age and student dropout and reported that older students usually drop out of their studies because of economic constraints. Also in contradiction to the finding of this study, yet stepping upon Hovdhaugen's (2013) footprints, Murray (2014, p. 1) have conducted a similar study and found that dropout attributes at the university level encompass student's age, gender and financial backgrounds.

Despite having contemplated to find higher dropout rate of students who were aged twenty-five years, high dropout rate of those with less than twenty-five years was found as a surprise. For example, the study that which was conducted by Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008) have reported that the dropout probability for students aged twenty-five and older was higher than for those who were aged twenty-one and less.

4.3.3.1.2 Race

Secondly, the collection of demographic data was also influenced by the philosophical dogma inherent in the deficit model that has also guided this study. The model is grounded on the philosophical canon that students of colour (black student community) have some learning limitations, which cause, not only their failures, but also dropouts (Valencia, 1997; Valencia, 2012, p. 8). In the South African higher education system, HRPULSE (2013, p. 1; Mastropieri, 2007) has indicated that most of the students who usually become victims of attrition are from black community. In the same vein, this study has found that the majority of dropouts who have left COM4809 module between 2011 and 2016 were black students. Nevertheless, this does not serve to confirm the deficit model's postulation that attritions are the results of some students' learning deficiencies and problems arising from their home contexts. Uncovered dropout factors, such as demoralising comments in feedbacks and inaccessibility of lecturers have shown that attrition can also be determined by factors emanating from the institutional contexts, in which lecturers are part.

4.3.3.1.3 Employment

Another crucial student's demographic trait that was examined in this study was employment. It was essential because poor economic background has been cited in the proliferated literature as a key root cause of student dropout. As an epitome, in a related study on dropout, Letseka and Maile (2008, p. 1) has found higher attrition rate in students which are coming from economically deprived families where low-incomes prevail. This study has found that many of dropouts were employed during the period of studying COM4809. Supporting Letseka and Maile's (2008) findings, this study has unveiled, also from students' perspectives, that financial constraints contribute to an increased dropout rate of honours students in an ODL institution. In an effort to address the challenge, getting an employment has been a way to get rid of financial problems for many students studying in higher education in order to prevaricate dropping out and to maximise retention and completion rate. Despite its importance in addressing poor economic circumstances and probable attritions, being employees and students at the same time present further challenges in learning trajectories. Pierrakeas et al (2004, p. 1) and Hovdhaugen et al (2013, p. 167) have cited being

employed as one of the main dropout determinants for the majority of students who are already absorbed into the labour market. In the same vein, Tladi (2013) has indicated that work-related activities tend to encroach on students' time to study, resulting in some of them being unable to manage their time and, consequently, drop out.

4.3.3.1.4 Marital status

Many of dropout students who took part into this study were found to be unmarried. In an attempt to examine the influence of marital status on student attrition from the perspectives of honours students who have dropped out of COM4809, it was thought provoking to divulge that there is no association between the marital status and the attrition. As have already been shown, dropout students have cited lecturers' inaccessibility, discouraging feedbacks (low academic performance and inspirational comments in assignments), workload and financial constraints as principal reasons which account for attritions in an ODL environment. This finding contravened Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008, p. 552) who have reported that students who are cohabiting or married are more likely to drop out of their studies than those who are unmarried or not in cohabitation. Over again, this finding has shown that dropouts of honours students in ODL were not only caused by personal reasons such as marital status, but also by lecturers' behaviours. Hence, it is inferable to posit that in an ODL context, honours students' marital status has no or little influence of student dropout. However, a profound experimental research is necessary to look into the relationship between marital status and dropout, using a more representative sample and to study the phenomenon from mixed-methods and quantitative methodological paradigms.

The forthcoming section reports on reasons, which dropout students have cited as dropout determinants in open and distance learning institutions.

4.3.3.2 Students' reasons for dropout

Several reasons for student dropout have emerged from an analysis of students' perceptions and experiences. While collecting data, two groups of students were identified – those who have dropped out without having been supported and those who have dropped out having been supported. Both groups were deemed salient in

this this study. Whereas those who did not receive support interventions have provided their perceptions of why honours students drop out, those who have received some support services shared their experiences.

4.3.3.2.1 Students' experiences on dropout factors

Students who dropped out of COM4809 without having been supported have numerous reasons, which are as follows:

Workload

The majority of students have experienced a high workload as a major reason for dropout. They have indicated that COM4809 has more work to do than other four honours modules. Other students have stated that they have struggled to cope with all five modules in one year, resulting in them dropping out the one that has more work than others do. The following quotes illustrate these findings:

S2*: For me I cancelled COM4809 because I learned that it has a lot to do. Otherwise, I wouldn't not pass it.*

S7: *…I work and it was not going to be easy for me to conduct a research project, especially when there were other two modules that I registered. After registering, I realised that COM4809 needs more time because of the amount of work and many assignments and I decided to leave it.*

S8: *I regretted that I took it with other modules, instead of just taking it alone. Some of my friends who took all the modules and passed them in one year warned me not to take all five modules, emphasising that COM4809 needs more time and would be best to take it alone. I thought I would successfully pass it as well. I ended up dropping out because, indeed it, it is demanding.*

These findings complemented lecturers' and administrative officers' perceived reasons for dropouts of honours students in the context of ODL. They indicate that information about what modules cover is crucial to enable students to make informed decision during registration. From the findings, it is evident that many of the students who have dropped out of COM4809 were not fully aware of the amount of work

inherent in the module. It is, thus, important to provide full information about its scope during the registration period to reduce the dropout rate honours level.

Low academic achievement in assignments

Some students have cited scoring low marks in assignments as have been another cause for dropout.

S6: *"I did not perform well in some of the assignments and I realised that I am not going to make it. I then decided to just leave the module."*

S10: "*I left the module because I did not submit some of the assignments, and obviously I got zeros. The chance to fail was already high. I felt it would be a waste of time to continue with it. It was a good choice for me to leave the module and that's how I dropped it."*

Low academic achievement confirmed the findings uncovered in the analysis of lecturers' perceived dropout factors of honours students in ODL. Students have suggested that integrated online and face-to-face workshops may assist them academically and ultimately lower the dropout rate.

Unclear and discouraging comments on feedbacks

Consistent with lecturers' perceptions, some dropouts have indicated that they have left COM4809 because the comments given in assignments have demotivated them to continue with their studies. Others have added that some of comments were unclear, unreflective of what their supervisors expect from them and what they must do. Views below are in line with such unveiled findings:

S1: *"I thought I reviewed the literature quite adequately but my supervisor commented that I didn't read it and that I do not read his comments. I felt entirely confused because I spent days and days reading articles and books."*

S9: *"My supervisor commented many times that I was not using the correct referencing style, without telling me how to reference correctly. Some sometimes I was told that I am not serious because I have repeated the same mistakes again. I decided to stop the module because I was always confused."*

This finding highlights the importance of offering encouraging comments as a source of students' motivation. It also signifies that lecturers must be able to explain in detail where students got the work wrong and how they should make improvements. Like other findings, which this study has divulged, it is evident that dropouts are caused by various factors, which are inherent in, not only students' personal contexts, but also lecturers' behaviours and institutional circumstances. Drawing an inference from this findings, it is clear that the philosophical dogma inherent in the deficit theory in which student' context is posited as the only source of failure and dropout is further discredited by honours students' experiences on attrition within the ODL institution. However, to address the dropout concern, the majority of students have perceived that frequent interactions with supervisors can help, and good student-lecturer relationships can be built from such interactions, which may, in turn, motivate them to study harder. Other dropouts have suggested that the university should support lecturers by providing training on how to teach students effectively from diverse backgrounds. Through the finding and the suggestion put forward, dropouts have mirrored out that attritions are also the results of lecturers' abilities to teach, opposing the notion that discontinuity in studies can only be reduced to students' learning deficiencies.

4.3.3.2.2 Students' perceived reasons on dropout

Dropouts who did not receive support services have contributed to the study by offering the following perceived reasons, which account for attritions of honours students in an open and distance education institution:

Financial problems

One of the perceived dominant factor that honours students have indicated as a dropout determinant in ODL context was lack of financial support.

From the views of the students, many students are from families, which are characterised by low-incomes and poverty. Such students, as were perceived by dropouts, discontinue their studies because they do not have financial support to finance their studies. This finding supported both lecturers' and administrative officers' perceived reasons of students' dropout at an honours level in ODL.

Inaccessibility of lecturers

Some students have indicated that they have dropped out of COM4809 module because they were encountering some difficulties in trying to access their supervisors using phones and e-mails. While others have indicated that their supervisors took time to reply even to their e-mails, another camp said that sometimes their e-mails were not responded to at all. This finding complemented that which has emerged from administrative officers. Both these two groups of participants have reflected lecturers' behaviours as another cause of dropout for honours students studying through and ODL institution. Not only did this finding show the essentiality of providing prompt feedbacks to the students, it also highlights the importance of academic support and interactions between students and lecturers.

4.3.3.3. Support services for honours students available in the university

While the third question of the interview guide for students who have dropped out of COM4809 was designed to generate data on the available support services for honours students in an ODL institution, the fourth question wanted to find out how the university have tried to support them. Findings have revealed mixed perceptions and experiences. Many students, especially those who left COM4809 module because of personal reasons, have indicated that much of the support services they have received before dropping out was academic support. They have indicated that they were receiving encouraging feedbacks and their supervisors were always available for them whenever they needed them. Others, however, have indicated that they the university did not help them with academic support and financial support. They have also revealed that they used to receive very demoralising comments whenever their performance levels were low.

4.3.3.4 Measuring the effectiveness of a support intervention

The firth question of the interview guide for dropouts sought to collect data about methods, which are used in the university to assess the responsiveness of the support services, offered to honours students in ODL environment. Only dropouts who have indicated that they have received academic support have responded to this question. However, they have given their perceptions and not their experiences since they have

indicated that they were never involved in any form of evaluation of support services, which might have been undertaken by the university. Their perceptions regarding how the university evaluate the impact of a support it has offered to students were salient in that they suggest what the university must consider in future evaluation strategies. Students perceived an increased pass rate, both in assignments and examinations, as another method the university might be using to measure the degree to which academic support has been effective. The majority of them were of the view that satisfaction surveys with students on student-supervisor relationships can be invaluable in predicting potential dropouts as well as in mitigating them.

4.3.3.5 Identifying students who require support

Dropouts have indicated that the university does nothing to find out students who are struggling with financial and personal problems, which students might be experiencing. They have, however, perceived that lecturers identify students who need academic support by checking their performance records. As was inherent in the analysed experiences of administrative officers that students contact them whenever they experience problems, findings uncovered from dropouts imply that providing support services is usually a reactionary activity. This became more explicit when others indicate that they did not reveal personal problems, which have led them to dropping out of COM4809. These findings have reflected that unless students share their problems with pertinent lecturers, administrative officers and other university structures and they are less likely to be supported. However, they have contradicted part of findings from lecturers which has shown that pre-emptive measures to curb attrition are executed through posting messages on organised research workshops, messages to remind students of due dates for the submission of assignments and examination portfolios and providing contact information which show where they can go when they need support services.

4.3.3.6 Awareness on the support services

The seventh question was salient to solicit dropouts' views regarding whether they were aware of any support service available in the university or not. Many of them have expressed disappointments on the paucity of awareness on support services available in the university. This finding has supported Minnaar's (2011) postulation

that some students do not use the available support services mainly because they are unaware of them. Others have indicated a divergent viewpoint that they were aware of career counselling offered by the university but have never used it because it was not necessary for them. These findings were not surprises. They have highlighted the fundamentality of increasing awareness on support services inherent in the university. They were not only consistent to findings which were divulged by analyses of data collected lecturers and administrative officers, but have also corresponded to those which were reported by Durkin and Main (2002), Tas et al (2013), Harris et al (2016) and, more recently, Heagney and Benson (2017). These researchers have asserted that most of the students become aware of various support services, which are provided in academic institutions, but decide not to make use of them. Even though lecturers have shown that they make students aware of various support services by providing a range of information on departments, lecturers, administrative officers in the tutorial letters, they were concerned that the majority of students do not read them. Thus although it is salient to create awareness of available support services for students, it is less useful if students do not value them significant. These findings further reflect that student dropout in open and distance learning context is a complex problem to deal with.

4.4 TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED SUPPORT MODEL FOR HONOURS STUDENTS IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION

As an aim, this case study has investigated student dropout in ODL environments, focusing at an honours postgraduate level. It is essential to reiterate the rationale for selecting the ODL institution, the postgraduate level of higher education, the honours postgraduate level of study, the case module and the ultimate goal that the study wanted to realise. To this end, the following questions for which answers were sought were crucial to ask: Why did ODL context became significant to pay attention to? Why did this study focus on postgraduate level? Why did the study choose honours postgraduate level? Moreover, what was the ultimate goal that the study was set to achieve?

4.4.1 Why ODL context was significant to pay attention to?

The choice to confine the study within ODL contexts was stirred by the void that even though there is a high volume of studies, which have widely researched on the dropout phenomenon, Willging and Johnson (2004) have observed that studies, which have looked into this phenomenon within the ODL parameters were very scant. Congruent to that observation, Tello (2007), Smith-Jaggar and Xu (2010) and Xu and Smith-Jaggar (2011) have asserted that students' dropouts adversely affect ODL institutions more than on-campus academic institutions. In grained from this lacuna, it was invaluable to focus attention on dropout in the context of ODL.

4.4.2 Why did this study focus on postgraduate level?

The choice for studying dropouts of postgraduates in ODL landscape has originated from the background that up until this epoch, sufficient attention was paid to the problem within the undergraduate domain (CHE, 2010; Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007), yet little attention has been given to the postgraduate level (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). Grounded on this theoretical evidence, the study had to be based on the postgraduate level of study.

4.4.3 Why did the study choose honours postgraduate level?

Worse off to note, in the corpus amount of literature, was the popular assertion that despite the bothering scant attention on dropout within the postgraduate terrain in its entirety, the proliferation of those studies have failed to pay attention to dropouts in the honours postgraduate area (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). Hence, this study has dealt with the honours students' dropouts in an ODL environment.

4.4.4 What was the ultimate goal that the study was set to achieve?

The ultimate idea to conduct the study was to quest for responsive student support model. Hence the topic 'student dropout in ODL environment: a quest for a responsive support framework'. This was against the backdrop that the prevailing student support models which were proposed by several seminal pundits such as Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), Bean and Metzner (1985), Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) and Wingate

(2007); have failed to address the problem and that the greater proportion of them have dealt with dropouts of first-year students while attention on dropouts of honours students has been lagging (Kritzinger and Loock, 2012, p. 12). As have already been observed, many of those support models were designed for undergraduate students (CHE, 2010; Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007). However, the non-effectiveness of the existing support models in addressing the dropout concern at an honours level warrant new support framework. In the forthcoming section, the proposed student support model for honours students in ODL institutions is presented and explicated on.

4.5 PROPOSED HONOURS STUDENT SUPPORT MODEL

The proposed support framework drew an extrapolation from the broad discourse on student dropout that was found theoretically evident in the reviewed literature and the findings, which were uncovered by this study. Blending the theoretical evidence (literature) with findings, which were divulged by this study (empirical evidence), has offered an opportunity to design a more comprehensive student support model. However, the extent to which it is responsive in addressing attritions of honours students in ODL an institution is a scope for future research. The proposed student support model for honours students in open and distance learning institutions is named an 'Integrated honours student-centred support model' (IHSCM) for an ODL institution'.
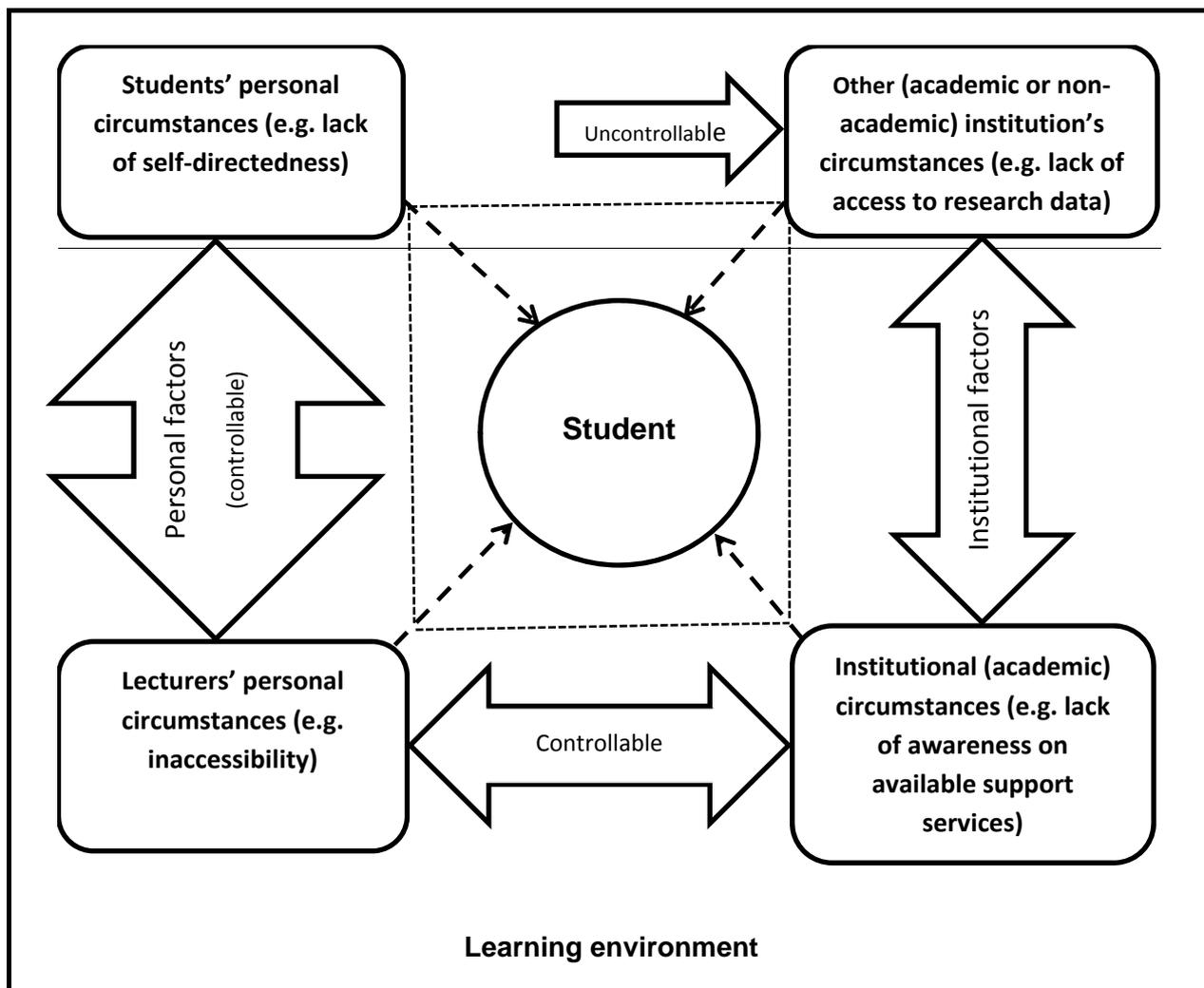
Figure 4.2 Honours student-centred support model for an ODL institution
Source: Researcher's own compilation

4.5.1 Components of the honours student-centred model for ODL an institution

This section explains components which constitute the proposed IHSCM, namely: student, learning environment, students' personal circumstances, lecturers' personal circumstances, academic (institutional) circumstances in which the student is enrolled in an honours programme and other institutional (academic or non-academic) circumstances where the student wants to conduct the study.

4.5.1.1 Student

At the centre of the model is an honours student who may be venerable to the dropout problem. The IHSCM postulates that, throughout the learning process, the student is

in constant battle for survival in the broader learning environment, trying to learn towards the completion of the programme. To avoid dropout and to stimulate programme completion, student should receive supported throughout the entire learning trajectory.

4.5.1.2 Student learning environment

The IHSCM further theorises that the student-learning environment is the world within which the learning process occurs. It is characterised by distinct learning circumstances, which can be broadly classified as personal and institutional. While personal circumstances embrace students' personal reasons and lecturers' personals circumstances which push the student out of the studies, institutional circumstances refer to factors which emanating from the academic institution in which the student is registered for an honours programme. In terms of the IHSCM, unfavourable students' and institutional circumstances can be transformed into enabling environments by supporting the student. To achieve an optimal dropout reduction, the learning environment should be made enabling and both students and institutions should be active participants, providing peer and instructor support.

4.5.1.2 Personal reasons (circumstances)

In the IHSCM, the personal space consists of dropout attributes, which can be caused by unfavourable students' circumstances and lecturers' circumstances. Unfavourable students' circumstances refer to all factors that are caused by students' home contexts, such as lack of financial support from the family, inability to manage time to study, lack of autonomy in learning and lack of motivation, to mention but few. Unfavourable lecturers' circumstances refer to all factors, which determine dropouts and are influenced by lecturers' non-caring behaviours such as, inter alia, inability to teach in an ODL institution, inability to interact with students, inability to create good relationships with students, inability to manage workload, unavailability and inaccessibility.

4.5.1.3 Institutional reasons (circumstances)

The model posits that ODL institutions constitute the institutional universe and other external (private and public) organisations in which honours students want to contextualize their studies. I define institutional circumstances as all preventable (controllable) and uncurtailable (uncontrollable) root causes which lead to dropouts in ODL institutions. Whereas by preventable dropout causes I mean all factors, which are within the control of the ODL institution, uncurtailable causes of dropouts are those factors, which are beyond the academic institution's control. In line with this assertion, Burnett (1999, p. 46) observed that certain reasons which lead to non-completion of doctoral programmes are beyond the university educators' control. Citing an example of the finding which was uncovered by this study, namely: lack of access to the required data, an ODL institution or a lecturer can attempt to assist honours students by granting them ethics approvals, write endorsement letters which serve to support them in their applications for permissions to conduct their research projects using certain organisations, but final decisions on those applications rest in those organisations in which students want to conduct their studies.

4.5.2 Philosophical canons

In this model, a student who is prone to attrition and who requires support services is the central point at which every preclusive measure has to be planned with him or her in mind. The model is grounded upon the philosophy that dropping out is a decision that is characterised by dynamic processes, which differ from one student to the other. This postulation is illustrated by arrows, which connect to the central point (student), qualifying the model to be an integrative approach towards enriching an understanding of dropout attributes and their mitigating strategies. Hence, it is called an 'honours student - centred support model for an ODL institution'. In this model, the student is the most linked facet of all the five components. This theorises that the student is surrounded by various challenges, which are posed by unfavourable lecturers' circumstances, academic institutional environment and other non-academic (private or public) organisations, all of which can result in attrition if not made enabling. It also implies that the student academic success can also be determined by other components' circumstances.

4.5.4 Implications of the model

This model has shown that dropout is a many-sided issue in an ODL institution. It shows that a complete curtailing of the problem is not possible. Rather, it can be minimised. Lack of the required research data as was found in this study, particularly from non-academic institutions, which honours students use as contexts of their research projects served as a typical epitome of the challenge faced in addressing dropouts. However, the module is important for ODL institutions, which want to reduce the dropout rate of honours students thereby showing possible sources of attritions and support interventions, suggesting that an optimal reduction of the dropouts can be achieved by approaching the problem from a holistic point of view. This requires an ODL institution, lecturers, students and other organisations to become cognisant that building a human capital through education transfer for economic development is the responsibility of all pertinent stakeholders.

4.5.5 The uniqueness of the integrated honours student-centred support model

It is worthy to note that a profound review of literature that was conducted on student support models did not uncover any model that was designed to explain the dropout at an honours level in the context of ODL and to address it. This suggests that attention into the student support models to address dropouts of honours students in the ODL environment has been scant. Thus, the IHSCM can be seen as the contribution to the neglected area of research, but the extent to which it effective in addressing the dropout can be tested by future research.

This section discusses the degree to which the IHSCM is unique from the existing student support models, which were based on other levels of study such as the doctoral and undergraduate levels. To this end, some models, which were found in the literature, are used as examples to show how unique IHSCM is.

4.5.5.1 Burnett's (1999) collaborative cohort model (CCM)

Looking at the doctoral level, Burnett's (1999) collaborative cohort model (CCM) posited that the majority of postgraduates fail to finish their doctoral degrees because of various reasons such as personal reasons, financial constraints, and feeling being

isolated and family accountabilities. Despite the fact that Burnett's model was designed to support doctoral students in order to achieve an increased degree completion rate, these dropout factors were also confirmed by the findings unveiled by this study and subsequently, by the proposed model (IHSCM). However, while Burnett's model reduces personal reasons to only students, the IHSCM added lecturers' personal circumstances towards the description of personal reasons.

4.5.5.2 Lee et al' (2011) framework of student support learning

Unlike Lee et al' (2011) framework of student support learning which consists of only instructional, peer and technical supports, the proposed IHSCM argues that four learning contexts are important to consider, namely, students', lecturers', institutional circumstances and non-academic institutions. It posits that these learning contexts determine student dropout that can best be addressed by approaching it from a holistic point of view, with students, lecturers, academic and non-academic institutions as salient stakeholders to generate collective efforts towards responding to the problem.

4.5.5.3 Wingate's (2007) student support framework for transition

The IHSCM also differs from Wingate's (2007) student support framework for transition. Wingate's (2007) model is oriented to first-year students while the IHSCM is designed for honours students in an ODL institution. Wingate's (2007) support framework aims at transferring academic skills to students in their transition from schools to universities so that they are able to adjust with the demand that comes with studying at the university level.

4.5.5.4 Floyd and Casey-Powell's (2004) integrated student service processes model (SSPM)

The IHSCM also differ from Floyd and Casey-Powell's (2004) integrated student service processes model (SSPM). Firstly, the SSPM was designed to support first-year students in face-to-face and distance education academic institutions, while the HSCM is for honours students in an ODL context. Secondly, Floyd and Casey-Powell's (2004) model describes the process that must be followed when supporting first-year students, while this one aims at enriching insights into attributes which determine dropouts of honours students in ODL and to suggest mitigations strategies to address the problem. However, they share the same characteristic when it comes to the

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dogma that different support services are required during certain time in students' learning trajectories. For example, whereas Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) argue that in the learner intake stage, students may be supported through various services, which embrace financial assistance, assisting them to register and showing them how use ICTs, (Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004, p. 58), the proposed model value lecturers, administrative staff, students, academic and non-academic institutions as significant sources of support services. In addition, Floyd and Casey-Powell's (2004) model has an interest in providing support to promote success rate, while the honours student-centred model attempts to address issue of dropouts.

4.6 SUMMARY

As part of the previous chapter on research methodology, I indicated that O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) qualitative data analytic method was adapted into the study and illustrated how it has been applied. This qualitative case study investigated dropouts of honours students in the context of ODL using Unisa as a case university and COM4809 as a case module. This chapter presented and interpreted the findings, which have emerged during the analysis of the data collected from lecturers, administrative officers and dropout students.

The chapter presented four groups of controllable and uncontrollable dropout reasons, which were uncovered using the inductive approach to analyse data, namely, dropout attributes associated with students' personal circumstances, lecturers' circumstances, institutional (academic) circumstances and other institutional (academic and non-academic) circumstances. The chapter has also described processes, which were followed in the presentation of findings and ascription of meanings to them. Findings were reported in accordance with the sequence in which data were collected. The first group of findings were derived from the perceptions of lecturers on student dropout that yielded 15 different dropout reasons. Findings on various mitigation strategies for these factors were presented as well. The second group of findings presented were from administrative officers. The third group of findings presented were from dropout students. Together these findings have shown that student dropout at an honours level in the context of ODL is a complex and a multidimensional phenomenon that is

influenced by numerous attributes. They have further shown that a complete avoidance of dropout problem is not possible, inferring from the revelation that certain causes are beyond the students', lecturers', administrative officers' and the academic institutions' control. However, it can be reduced by involving all relevant stakeholders in higher education such as tutors, students, policy makers, university management and families. Since the study wanted to develop a support model to help an ODL institution to address the problem, an integrated honours student-centred model has been proposed and its elements, philosophical canons and how different it is from other related models and frameworks were discussed.

In the next chapter, the salient points, which have been discussed in the study, are summarised, concluded upon and based on the empirical study and theoretical evidence, recommendations and directions for future research are suggested.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
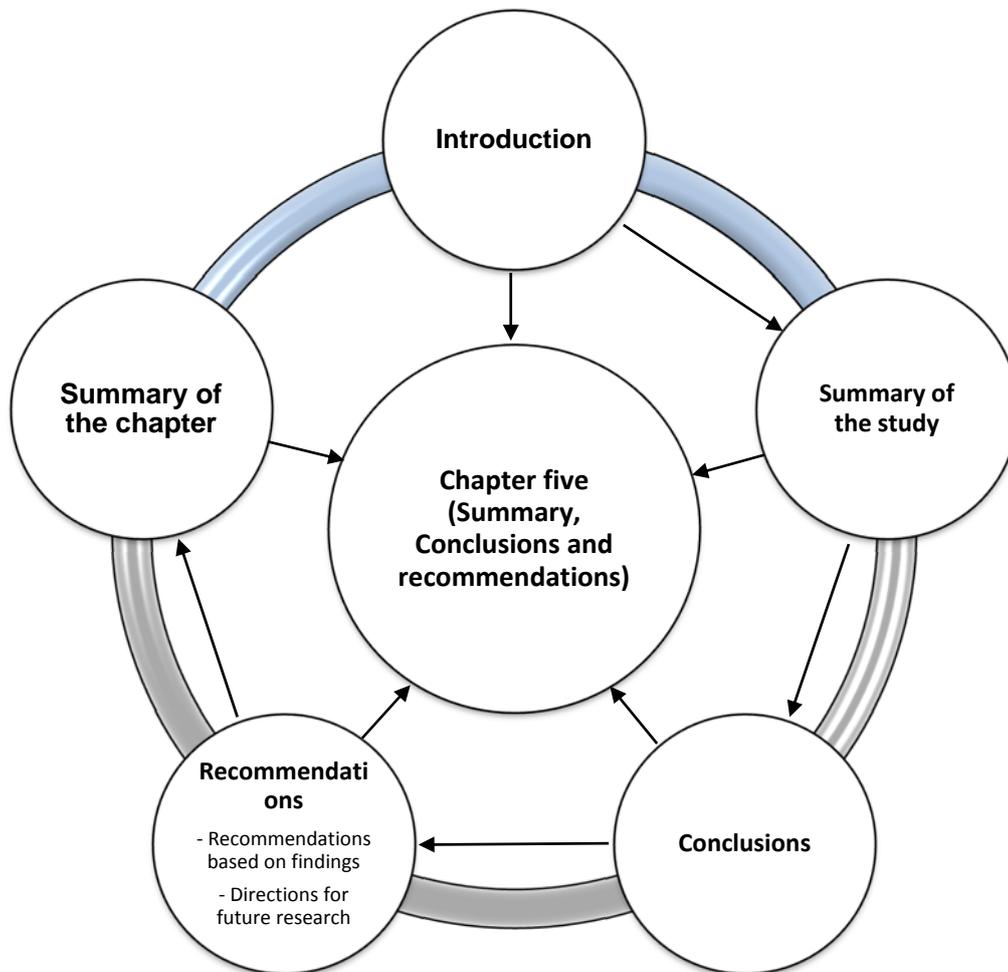
Figure 5.1 Schematic representation of chapter five (conclusion and recommendations)
Source: Researcher's own compilation

As other preceding chapters of this study, the schematic representation of chapter five (summary, conclusions and recommendations) which is depicted above provides an executive summary of the structure of this chapter and how it has unfolded. The chapter begins with an introduction of what it focuses upon. Thereafter, it provides the summary of important aspects, which have been discussed in the entire study. This will be followed by conclusions inferred from findings and literature, both upon which

recommendations are given. The chapter ends with a summary that specifically provides an overview of what have been discussed in chapter five.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study has shown the significance of providing support services to honours students who are enrolled in an ODL institution. It has looked into the student dropout from a qualitative methodological paradigm, examining the problem from lecturers', administrative officers' and dropout students' perspectives. The ultimate goal was to develop an integrated student support model that will enhance insights into honours students' dropouts within the ODL environment and to suggest possible mitigation strategies to address the problem. This was the research lacuna that many of the related studies have failed to attend sufficiently. Instead, they demonstrated higher level of attention on dropouts of undergraduate students, particularly the first-year students, and less so on dropouts of postgraduate level, especially the honours students in the context of ODL. Owing to this background, it became significant to contribute to the plethora of academic debate on student dropout within the scope of higher education, more so in the distance education landscape.

This chapter provides the summary of essential points which the study has addressed, conclusive meanings of what the divulged findings articulate, recommendations on what an ODL institution can focus on in its endeavour to deal with honours students' dropouts and what further research on the same phenomenon should be focused on. While the summary part of this chapter is arranged according to the respective chapters and what they have discussed on, conclusion and recommendations have been drawn from the findings (empirical evidences) which were uncovered in this study and discourses inherent in preceding studies (theoretical evidence).

5.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to enhance an understanding on student attrition in higher education by investigating honours students' dropouts in an ODL institution, demonstrating its prevalence by using Unisa as the case university and the COM4809

module of the honours programme offered in the department of communication science as a case subject. The introductory part of this study has provided the context, which has stirred the undertaking of this qualitative case study, reflecting, from a theoretical and practical point of views, the need to investigate student dropout at an honours level in the ODL environment, and the extent to which the prevailing support models and frameworks have failed to address the problem. O'Keeffe (2013, p. 605) has posited that student dropout is a worldwide concern in higher education institutions throughout the world (Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya, 2013, p. 1562). As part of the background, paucity of studies on student dropout at an honours level was also reflected with evidences from the literature conducted through the application of a traditional (narrative) literature design. This literature design allows the researcher to use various sources, which are pertinent to support claims made in the study.

Chapter one and chapter two have discussed the deficit theory and the transactional theory of distance which, in tandem, have served as the theoretical framework in which the study is anchored and the degree to which they are relevant and salient to guide the research process. The deficit theory explains student dropout as an event that is influenced by students' limitations to study that result in failure. It defines failure, not only as an underachieved performance that does not meet the pass standard, but also as a dropout. The theory of transactional distance, on the other hand, posits that there are some difficulties, which students encounter as they learn through distance education institutions, arising from lack of interactions with lecturers and feelings of isolation, to cite few examples.

The selection of lecturers has followed the purposive sampling approach owing to the fact that it allows the researcher to sample only participants who are key informants. Hence, only lecturers who have been involved in teaching and administration of the COM4809 module between 2011 and 2016 were selected to partake into the study.

A census approach was used to include all administrative officers involved in CMO4809 since there were only two.

Dropout students were sampled through the amalgamation of snowball and purposive sampling techniques. The use and the effectiveness of a snowball sampling technique was achieved by requesting lecturers to retrieve from their personal records and give names of students who have dropped out of COM4809 between 2011 and 2016.

Various ethical issues were taken into account in different stages of the research process. Throughout the entire process of this study, sources used were acknowledged, both in the text and in the list of references. Applications for ethics approvals were made to both the University of Limpopo and the University of South Africa and approvals were granted. In order to collect data at Unisa, permission to conduct the study was also applied for and was granted. During the collection of data, participants were assured that they will be treated anonymous and that their contributions will be kept private and confidential. During the data analysis stage, this was achieved by using pseudonyms to refer to them.

During the data collection stage, an increased reliability of data collection instruments (interview guides) was achieved by ensuring the triangulation of lecturers, administrative officers and students as primary sources of data; the triangulation of recording interviews using the laptop, tablet and notes-taking; and the triangulation of in-depth interviews with lecturers and focus-group interviews with dropout students.

Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the qualitative thematic content analysis and O'Connor and Gibson's (n.d) design to analyse qualitative data. In accordance with different questions asked in the interview guides, a number of findings were uncovered.

Regarding demographic profiles of the participants, the study has divulged that many of the lecturers who have participated into the study have acquired an educational level above the honours postgraduate level which is required as an entry qualification level, and have taught COM4809 for a period of between five and seven years. This implies that they have extensive experience in teaching at an ODL environment.

Similarly, all the administrative officers were found to have over five years of experience in working as administrative officers, at a postgraduate level and in the administration of COM4809. They too, have the extensive experience level in ODL.

With regard to students' demographic profiles, age and gender were not found to have an effect upon student dropout. Many of the students who took part in the study were females, aged twenty-five years and less and have left COM4809 module between 2014 and 2016. The study further uncovered that dropout students were employed and unmarried during the period of studying COM4809 module.

From the perspectives from lecturers, administrative officers and students, four themes of findings on dropout factors have emerged from the analysis of data. Those were, to mention them, factors which are associated with students' circumstances (personal reasons), factors which are associated with lecturers' personal circumstances (behaviours), factors which are associated with institutional (academic) circumstances and factors which are associated with circumstances of other institutions (academic and non-academic) or units of analysis. It was found that certain dropout factors could be controlled while others are beyond the students', lecturers', administrative officers' control. Those which students, lecturers and administrative officers can control involved factors, which are associated with students' personal reasons, with lecturers' behaviours (circumstances) and with institutional (academic) circumstances. Those that are out of students', lecturers', administrative officers' control emanate from other research contexts (academic institutions, non-academic institutions and other units of analysis).

With regard to students' personal reasons, the study revealed a considerable amount of findings, which embrace, inter alia, financial constraints, technological challenges, lack of self-directedness, unpreparedness, health-related problems and lack of interactions between students and their lecturers.

Examples of factors which were found to be part of the reasons for dropouts emerging from lecturers' circumstances included, to cite few, inadequate provision of academic support, high amount of work (workload), inaccessibility of lecturers, unclear and discouraging comments on feedbacks, taking longer time to give feedbacks on assignments and poor relationships with students.

Typical examples that demonstrated institutional circumstances encompassed factors, such as lack of financial support in the university, lack of awareness on available support services, lack of subject library support. Only one factor was found to be outside the control of the university, students and staff members' abilities, namely: lack of the required research data.

Students' financial constraints and workload were common to all groups of participants while inaccessibility of lecturers were common to only administrative officers' perceived and students' perceived and experienced dropout attributes.

All groups of participants were concerned about the lack of support services available for honours students. However, the study has found that there are numerous support services available in the institutions, such as workshops, counselling and assistance with registration, which students are not aware of them because of insufficient awareness done upon them. The study further found that some students choose not to use such support services because they deem them less invaluable to them. Much of the support services, which are offered tend to be reactionary to the possible dropout.

With regard to the way in which an ODL institution determine at-risk students, the study has unveiled that lecturers use student' failure to submit an assignment, low academic performance at an undergraduate research module and low academic performance at a course (COM4809) to identify potential students to drop out. Administrative officers, on the other hand, predict possible dropouts by receiving complaints relating to the module through telephone calls, e-mails and personal visit. Students have perceived that lecturers becomes aware of possible dropouts by tracing students' performance records using the student learning management system (myUnisa).

While lecturers have shown that there is no formal procedure to measure the effectiveness of the support services offered, students have perceived an increased pass rate as a method that lecturers might be using to measure the effectiveness of support services. Receiving telephone calls and e-mails to thank administrative officers were only shared means by which administrative officers are able to measure the degree of effectiveness of the support they have given to the honours students.

Table 5.1 (Summary of the study) portrays salient aspects which were covered by this in all chapters. As depicted in the table, those were the research problem, the research void, the aim of the study, the ultimate goal which the study was set to achieve, the methodological approach in which the study was anchored, research questions which drove data collection, university community members who were targeted, the size of the sample, techniques used to sample participants, techniques which have been followed to gather data from different groups of participants, the method which was used to analyse data, the contribution which the study has made to the broader body of knowledge on student dropout and support provision and various principal themes of findings which were found.

Table 5.1: Summary of the study

Source: Researcher's own compilation

Research problem	Research lacuna	Research aim	Research Goal	Methodology/ Design	Research questions	Target populations	Sample size	Sampling techniques	Data collection techniques	Data analytic techniques	Contribution to the body of knowledge	Major findings
Honours student dropout in ODL institutions	Insufficient attention of dropout at honours level and unresponsive support models in ODL institutions	To enhance an understanding on student dropout at an honours level in ODL institutions	To develop a responsive support for honours students in ODL institutions	Qualitative	How do lecturers and administrative officers perceive dropouts of honours students in open and distance learning institutions?	Lecturers	15	Purposive	Focus-group interviews In-depth interviews	Qualitative thematic content analysis	The proposed integrated honours student-centred support model (IHSCM) for an ODL institution	Controllable dropout factors associated with: students' personal circumstances
					How did honours students experience dropouts in open and distance learning institutions?	Administrative officers	02	Census	In-depth interviews	Qualitative thematic content analysis		lecturers' personal circumstances
					What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of lecturers and administrative officers in ODL institutions? What perceptions and experiences on support interventions are of honours students who have dropped out of their studies in ODL institutions?	Dropout students	16	Purposive Snowball	Focus-group interviews Telephonic interviews	Qualitative thematic content analysis		institutional (academic) circumstances Uncontrollable other units of analysis or contexts of research
01 ontological issue	01 research gap	01 aim	01 goal	01 methodology	04 research questions	03 groups of participants	33 participants	03 sampling techniques	03 data collection techniques	01 analytic technique		

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5.3 CONCLUSION

The results of the study might contribute to addressing the dropout rate in higher education institutions. Based on the narrative (traditional) review that has been conducted for this study, it is clear that student dropout is a multidimensional and an elusive term to describe. Its correct definition is measured by the purpose for which the study wants to achieve and the context in which the study is undertaken. Student dropout is a long-standing and a global problem that has infiltrated both face-to-face higher education and ODL institutions and has over, many years, been a complex issue to deal with. As was unveiled by this study, student dropout cannot be completely being obliterated. It can, rather, be minimised. In the case of ODL environment, student dropout is determined by various attributes, with some being controllable and others not, demanding every higher education stakeholder (such as, students, administrative officers, lecturers, counsellors, policy makers, university management and government) to be involved in endeavours to address it if the goal is to achieve an optimal reduction.

Although student dropout is acknowledged as a pervasive problem in higher education, by both the related plethora of literature and the empirical evidence shown by this study, there is a considerable paucity in support services for honours students in ODL context. The study has revealed the significance of providing support services to honours students in an ODL environment in order to lower student dropout proportion. To achieve a reduced dropout rate, various types of support services are required to address the concern effectively and embrace, among others, emotional support, financial support and academic support. Ingrained from the findings, which have been unveiled by this study, the importance of lecturers to offer academic support is evident. They have to be often accessible, be inspirational by giving encouraging feedbacks, respond to students' queries within an acceptable timeframe as recommended by the university policies and procedures, create an ongoing interactions and enabling relationships with students. Also evident from the findings is that institutional failure to provide financial support and to build awareness of an array of support services available for students have an adverse effect on an increased

dropout rate. In addition, an ODL institution requires students to demonstrate certain level of self-directedness in learning, time management skill and academic skills.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the circumstance that a total student dropout circumvention has been shown to be unmanageable by the empirical evidence of this study, collective efforts to minimise it can result in considerable benefits to students, academic institutions, society and governments. Literature has shown that student dropout account for numerous negative consequences which entail a decreased graduation rate and the subsequent less subsidy from the government, increased employment rate, increased crime rate and financial loss by funding organisations (such as NSFAS and NRF), to cite few. All these consequences have highlighted the essence of identifying potential dropouts', providing them with tailor-made support interventions and evaluating such support services for continuous enhancement of quality interventions. Against this background, and along with the findings revealed by this study, an array of thought-provoking recommendations which are aimed at maximising attention of the community of interest on honours students' dropouts in open and distance education and to encourage further robust academic discourses on the student dropout concern in general have been identified, namely: recommendations based on findings to address honours students' dropout in ODL and directions for future research:

5.4.1 Recommendations based on findings

This section provides recommendations drawn from findings, which have been divulged.

5.4.1.1 Students' unpreparedness for an honours programme

- Introduce a research module at an undergraduate level to strengthen the theoretical base
- Include a module on statistics to enrich students' comprehensions on quantitative research
- Offer research workshops to all undergraduate and postgraduate students

5.4.1.2 Students' lack of autonomy in learning and Students' lack of time management skill

- Encourage lecturers to interact with students on regular basis
- Organise an orientation programme in which basic learning skills must be transferred
- Provide a detailed information on how learning in ODL occurs
- Include a programme on how to manage time to study in an orientation programme which should be offered at an early stage of registration

5.4.1.3 Lack of technological skill and readiness

- Encourage students to learn through a range of information and communication channels such as the public internet and its various applications (for example, e-mails and discussion forums), short message services.
- As part of orientation by the library department, impart students with skills of how to search for study materials online such as e-books, articles, theses and dissertations

5.4.1.4 Poor relationships and lack of interactions between students and supervisors (lecturers)

- Develop a support programme that will transfer skills, which students should have to create good relationships with their supervisors and how they should effectively integrate into the overarching learning environment.
- Ensure active learning by encouraging students to engage their supervisors through questing for clarities on any part of the material content which they seek to enhance their understandings.

5.4.1.5 Low academic achievements and poor academic writing skills

- Promote an increased academic performance standard by providing detailed, unambiguous and stimulating comments in feedbacks of assignments
- Organise workshops of how to learn effectively in higher education

- Offer a range of academic writing skills which should incorporate referencing correctly
- Trace students' progress by holding regular interactions with students
- Encourage collaborative learning amongst students using the variety of channels such as through online discussion forums and face-to-face learning

5.4.1.6 Pregnancy, ill-health and death of a family member or any person close to the students

Once more, transferring time management skill to students was suggested to have potential preclusion to dropout. This implies that when a female student has designed a timeframe within which to successfully study and complete the programme, pregnancy, as well, can be avoidable. Thus, students must be encouraged to abstain from participating in unprotected sexual life. Such a move will also prevent dropouts, which are associate with health-related challenges such as being infected with sexual transmitted diseases. Emotional support is necessary for those who demoralised to continue with their studies because they experience health-related problems and those whose family member, or a friend has passed away. Diagnostic tools must be used, such as students' records to check the submissions of assignments and to make follow-ups with students to determine causes for their failures. Depending on the type of problems found, appropriate tailor-made support interventions should be determined and executed by the relevant department.

5.4.1.7 Students' financial constraints

In the country that is characterised by poverty where the majority of students come from low-income families, which cannot afford to pay for the exorbitant study fees, it is appropriate to recommend that:

- Institutions of higher learning, government and other private organisations should collectively assist students by sourcing funds and supporting them financially.
- Embed internships into the university curricular

5.4.1.8 Students' workload

- Lecturers should encourage honours students to enrol for few honours subjects so that students can be able to manage their studies.
- Lecturers should have frequent interactions with students to support them academically.
- Encourage collaborative learning amongst students using virtual learning environment such as online discussion forums, e-mails, and face-to-face learning participation.
- Impart students with skills to manage time to study

5.4.1.9 Inadequate provision of academic support

- Lecturers should offer academic support by constantly communicating with students on the subject using a range of available communication platforms
- The institution should also attempt to reduce the rate of dropout by maximising awareness to the staff, aimed at promulgating the fundamentality of quality academic support services, the negative effects of dropouts on the university's financial status and the performance of the university in terms of programme completion rate.

5.4.1.10 Lecturers' workloads

- Reduce the amount of work for lecturers by keeping the number of students to supervise low and manageable.
- This can be ensured by reducing an intake during admission or by employing more qualified supervisors if resources.
- Manageable size of students can also be achieved by employing e-tutors who will be responsible in providing extra academic support online.

5.4.1.11 Absence of self-reflection of lecturers on teaching methods

- Consider making changes to an undergraduate programme on include more of research modules which should embrace a module on statistics as an introductory quantitative research subject

- Reduce the number of honours students to supervise per each lecturer by employing additional qualified supervisors and e-tutors to offer online additional academic support.

5.4.1.12 Lack of subject librarians

- Hire more subject librarians who assist students on a range of library services such as search for study materials online.

5.4.1.13 Lack of awareness on the available support services

- Create more awareness on support services, which students can access in the university through using a range of communication channels to disseminate information all students.

5.4.1.14 Lack of financial support in the university

- Have bursaries for honours students in the university.
- Compile a list of other potential financial support sources and disseminate information to all honours students.

5.4.1.15 Lack of emotional support

- Offer counselling to affected students.

5.4.2 Directions for future research

Despite a considerable volume of literature on student dropout, its numerous consequences and the importance of support services to address the problem, CHE (2010), Scott, Yeld and Hendry, (2007) and Koen (2015) have claimed that there has been a paucity of studies, which are focused on dropout at postgraduate level, and Kritzinger and Loock (2012, p. 12) asserted that honours postgraduate level is neglected. Deep-rooted from this background, a number of recommendations for future research are suggested below.

5.4.2.1 Research context for future dropout investigation

While this study has attempted to respond to the claims made by investigating student dropout at an honours postgraduate level in the context of an ODL institution, future studies should take into account dropouts of honours students in other types of the universities such as face-to-face academic institutions.

5.4.2.2 Research void for future dropout investigation

Although this study has unveiled various dropout determinants from a triangulation of lecturers, administrative officers and students – an approach that can be viewed as the strength of this study, one of its shortcomings is that the study did look into the impact of suggested dropout mitigation approaches. Therefore, future research should investigate the impact of suggested mitigation strategies on dropouts of honours students in within the ODL terrain to determine the extent to which they contribute to addressing the problem.

Although this study intended to, ultimately, develop a responsive student support model owing to the claims that the existing support frameworks have failed to address the dropout problem (Department of Higher Education and Training , 2013, p. 17), the extent to which the proposed honours student-centred model for an ODL institution is effective in reducing or curtailing dropouts should be the focus for future research.

5.4.2.3 Methodological phenomena for considerations in future research

This section provides recommendations, which relate to the limitations of the study emanating from the adopted research methodology.

5.4.2.3.1 Methodology

It is generally believed that the strengths of an integration of quantitative and qualitative methodologies enables the researcher to study the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, to validate the results and to complement the results, this study has followed a qualitative methodological paradigm. Turner et al (2017, p. 243) argue that the use of one methodology makes the study flawed, aserting that the methodological triangulation which, as viewed by Denzin's (2012), is based upon the notion of enriched understandings of phenomena, can help preclude the potential

weaknesses of using a single research methodology. To heighten the level of trustworthiness on findings, future research on student dropout in ODL institution should attempt to increase the credibility and dependability of findings by adopting a mixed-methods approach.

5.4.2.3.2 Units of analysis

This study has solicited perceptions of lecturers and administrative officers on student dropout and their experiences on support services for honours students. It has investigated dropout from the perceptions and experiences of dropout students. Thus the perceptions of students who successfully completed the course which served as a case module was outside the scope of the research focus. Time constraints and resources led to exclusions of various ODL institutions, educational programmes and honours modules. Hence, it is important to recommend that future research should investigate the problem from the perspectives of students who have successfully completed an honours course. Furthermore, support services were found to be executed by various non-academic departments such as the registration department, library department, research department and the institutional management. Therefore, it is appropriate to suggest further that future research should consider studying dropout from the perspectives of librarians, counsellors, university management, and staff members from the registration department to widen the understanding of the problem and to mitigate it.

5.4.2.3.3 Sample size

While there are many ODL institutions across the entire global higher education system, this research was a case study of the University of South Africa, focusing on one module to demonstrate the ubiquity of student dropout in ODL environment. The use of one university and one module is by far a highly condensed scope to investigate student dropout in the global higher education system.

Another limitation of this study was the use of a far less amount of dropout students as participants (small sample size). Key sourced dropout students which could have been interviewed were 240. 21 were sampled through the use of a snowball technique and 219 were inherent in the requested dataset (statistical information from the ICT

department), but out of this considerable sample magnitude, only sixteen were interviewed to increase the manageability of data collected. This does not only negatively affect the credibility of findings, but also question the transferability of such findings into other similar contexts. Engrained from this observation, it is inferable to suggest that future research should increase the sample size, both of the case institutions, educational programmes, subjects and participants to further study the problem.

5.5 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

While the previous chapter has presented, discussed and interpreted the findings of this study, this chapter was narrowed to focus on the summary, conclusions and recommendations. In the summary part, the main aim was to provide an overview of the most salient points, which have been discussed in the preceding chapters of the study. To this end, the summary of the study has indicated the research design or plan, how the research problem has arisen from the literature and the practical context, what the study was focused on and what it was set to achieve, how it was conducted (methodology) and the variety of findings which were uncovered.

Based on the literature review that applied the traditional (narrative) design and the finding of the empirical study, conclusions were drawn. The major purpose of conclusions was to indicate what the overreaching views imply, drawn largely from the divulged findings and less so from the literature that was conducted.

The third part of this chapter provided various recommendations, which, also, were informed by findings that were unveiled, and the limitations of the methodology adopted for the study that related to qualitative case study, units of analysis and sample size. In this section, recommendations, which have been provided, indicated how the divulged dropout factors could be mitigated in the context of ODL as were postulated by the participants. Part of the recommendations was the research void which future research should take into account.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Faculty Approval of Proposal from the University of Limpopo (UL)

University of Limpopo
Faculty of Humanities
Executive Dean
Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa
Tel: (015) 268 4895, Fax: (015) 268 3425, Email:richard.madadzhe@ul.ac.za

DATE: 15 September 2016

NAME OF STUDENT: NETANDA, RS
STUDENT NUMBER: [201501822]
DEPARTMENT: PhD – Educational Studies
SCHOOL: Education

Dear Student

FACULTY APPROVAL OF PROPOSAL (PROPOSAL NO. FHDC2016/712)

I have pleasure in informing you that your PhD proposal served at the Faculty Higher Degrees Meeting on

16 March 2016 and your title was approved as follows:

TITLE: AN INVESTIGATION INTO STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A QUEST FOR RESPONSIVE STUDENT FRAMEWORK

Note the following:

Ethical Clearance	Tick One
Requires no ethical clearance Proceed with the study	
Requires ethical clearance (Human) (TREC) (apply online) Proceed with the study only after receipt of ethical clearance certificate	√
Requires ethical clearance (Animal) (AREC) Proceed with the study only after receipt of ethical clearance certificate	

Yours faithfully

Prof RN Madadzhe

Executive Dean: Faculty of Humanities

Director: Dr RS Maoto

Supervisor: Dr JM Mamabolo

Co-Supervisor: Prof MJ Themane

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Appendix 2: Application for Human Experimentation

UNIVERSITY OF THE LIMPOPO
ETHICS COMMITTEE

APPLICATION FOR HUMAN EXPERIMENTATION: PART I

PROJECT TITLE

STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

PROJECT LEADER/SUPERVISOR

Dr. JM Mamabolo (supervisor) and Prof MJ Themane (Co-supervisor)

DECLARATION

I, the signatory, hereby apply for approval to conduct research described in the attached research proposal and declare that:

1.   I am fully aware of the guidelines and regulations for ethical research and that I will abide by these guidelines and regulations as set out in documents (available from the Secretary of the Ethics Committee); and

2.   I undertake to provide every person who participates in this research project with the relevant information in Part III. Every participant will be requested to sign Part IV.

Name of Researcher: Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda

Signature:

Date: 28 November 2016

For Official use by the Ethics Committee:

Approved∕Not approved

Remarks:……………………………………………………………………………………………………...

………

……..

……

Signature of Chairperson:……………………………………………………………………

Date:……………………………………………………………………………………………

APPLICATION FOR HUMAN EXPERIMENTATION: PART II PROJECT TITLE

STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

PROJECT LEADER/SUPERVISOR: Dr. JM Mamabolo (supervisor) and Prof MJ Themane (Co-supervisor)

Protocol for conducting research using human participants

1.   **Department:** Faculty of Humanities (School of Education)

2.   **Title of project**

     STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

3.   Full name, surname and qualifications of project leader

Full name(s)	qualifications
Dr Moketla Joel Mababolo	Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in the School of Education, Postgraduate Certificate in Research in Education (PGCRE)
Prof Mahlapahlapana Johannes Themane	(B.A, B.A (Hons.) B.Ed. (Hons), M.Ed. (History of Education), M.Ed. (Curriculum Studies), PhD

4.   List the name(s) of all persons (Researchers and Technical Staff) involved with the project and identifies their role(s) in the conduct of the experiment:

Persons involved	Qualifications	Role

Rendani Sipho Netanda (Student)	MA	Researcher
Dr Moketla Joel Mababolo	PhD	Supervisor
Prof Mahlapahlapana Johannes Themane	PhD	Co-Supervisor

5. Name and address of principal researcher:

Name: Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda
Addresses: 16497 Muvhale Street,
Extension 12B, Soshanguve South,
0152 or 417 Block VV,
Soshaguve, 0152

6. Procedures to be followed: N/A

7. Nature of discomfort: None

8. Description of the advantages that may be expected from the results of the study: The main purpose of this study is to investigate an increasing concern on the incessant attrition phenomenon within the ambiance of higher education. The study is expected to divulge the experiences of lecturers, administrative staff and students on student attrition in an open and distance education environment. It is anticipated that the findings will enable the researcher to develop a student support framework for lower-postgraduate students.

Signature of Project Leader/Supervisor:............................

Date: 28 November 2016
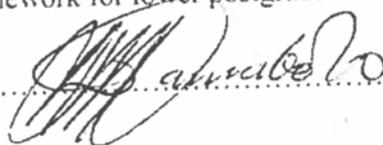
Appendix 3: First decision of the TREC: Conditional Ethics Approval

University of Limpopo
Department of Research Administration and Development
Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa
Tel: (015) 268 2212, Fax: (015) 268 2306, Email:noko.monene@ul.ac.za

22 November 2016

Mr RS Netanda
School of Education
UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

Dear Mr Netanda

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

Researcher:	**Mr RS Netanda**
Title:	**An investigation into student dropout in an open and distance learning environment: A quest for responsive student framework**
Supervisor:	**Dr JM Mamabolo** - University of Limpopo
Co-Supervisor:	**Prof MJ Themane** - University of Limpopo
Served at TREC on:	03 November 2016
Decision of TREC:	**Conditional Approval:**

Conditions:

(i) The researcher should write a one page ethical considerations, and include that permission will be requested from TREC and address participants who may experience emotional risk.

(ii) The researcher should use the consent from the old TREC application forms and adjust it to the study.

(iii) The researcher should ensure that he is in control of the study and delete the following, "I cannot offer assurance that other participants in the interviews will treat information Confidentially."

(iv) Section A: Theme 1: Demographic information should be male and female.

Kindly make the necessary correction and submit the required information as soon as possible so that your ethical clearance certificate can be processed.

N Monene
Secretary: Turfloop Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix 4: Second decision of TREC: Ethics Approval

University of Limpopo
Department of Research Administration and Development
Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa
Tel: (015) 268 2212, Fax: (015) 268 2306, Email:noko.monene@ul.ac.za

> **TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS**
> **COMMITTEE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE**

MEETING: 03 November 2016

PROJECT NUMBER: TREC/227/2016: PG

PROJECT:

Title: An investigation into student dropout in an open and distance
                        learning environment: A quest for a responsive student framework
Researchers: Mr RS Netanda
Supervisor: Dr MJ Mamabolo
Co-Supervisor: Prof MJ Themane
School: Education
Degree: PhD in Curriculum Studies

PROF TAB MASHEGO
CHAIRPERSON: TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

The Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC) is registered with the National Health Research Ethics
Council, Registration Number: REC-0310111-031

> **Note:**
> i)   Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, the
>   researcher(s) must re-submit the protocol to the committee.
> ii)   The budget for the research will be considered separately from the protocol.
>   PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.

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Appendix 5: First Information Sheet (adapted from UL template)

University of Limpopo
Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa

INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

PROJECT TITLE: STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

PROJECT LEADER/SUPERVISOR: Dr. JM Mamabolo (supervisor) and Prof MJ Themane (Co-supervisor)

You are invited to participate in the following research project:

STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

2. Participation in the project is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project (without providing any reasons) at any time.

3. It is possible that you might not personally experience any advantages during the project, although the knowledge that may be accumulated through the project might prove advantageous to others.

4. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you might have in connection with this project at any stage. The project leader and her/his staff will gladly answer your question. They will also discuss the project in detail with you.

5. This is a qualitative study to determine the experiences of the students and the

perceptions of lecturers and administrative officers on student dropout in an open and distance education environment. There are not alleged risk-factors, factors that might possibly cause discomfort, side-effects. The study will not harm the students, lecturers, administrative officers, the researched institution and the society at large. It will optimize the understanding of student dropout and how mitigate it within open and distance learning environments.

6. Should you at any stage feel unhappy, uncomfortable or is concerned about the research, please contact **Ms Noko Shai-Ragoboya at the University of Limpopo, Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, tel: 015 268 2401**.

Appendix 6: Information Sheet (adapted from Unisa template)

University of Limpopo

Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa

TEMPLATE DOCUMENTS

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Ethics clearance reference numbers:

1. Turfloop Research Ethics Committee Clearance Certificate (Ref: TREC/227/2016:PG)
2. Unisa Ethics Approval (Ref: 2016-CHS-018)

Research permission reference number:

TITLE: **AN INVESTIGATION INTO STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE STUDENT FRAMEWORK**

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is **Rendani Sipho Netanda** and I am doing research with Dr MJ Mamabolo and Prof MJ Themane, Senior Lecturers in the Department of Education Studies (University of Limpopo) towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Education Studies at the University of South Africa. I have funding from Academic Qualification Improvement Programme (AQIP) for purchasing the Laptop, paying for the internet, data collection, data analysis, tuition fees, transport fare and accommodation fees during consultation with the supervisor. I am inviting you to participate in a study entitled "an investigation into student dropout in an open and distance learning environment: a quest for a responsive student framework."

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approach will be adopted. This means that the entire sample frame of students who dropped out between 2011 and 2015 will become the sample size to be used for the data collection about causes of dropout and interventions required to curb the problem.

In the qualitative ph as e, the sampling technique will follow a purposive sampling technique to select lecturers and administrative staff. Participants in this phase should have been involved into teaching of or administration for postgraduate students doing COM4809 honours module between 2011 and 2015.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The study involves questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The questionnaire survey will collect data from the students while the in-depth interviews will collect data from the administrative and academic staff. Questions will relate to factors that lead to student dropout. The interviews are expected to take 30-45 minutes. The data collection stage of the study is planned to be between September and February 2016.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participation is voluntary and there will be no penalty for non-participation. Participating in this study is voluntary and if you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Participants will not be able to withdraw once they have returned the questionnaire. The questionnaire will not identify the participants.

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

This study will make a contribution to the field of education studies. It will advance the understanding of a dropout problem of postgraduate students registered for honours modules, and student support interventions that are necessary to promote student success rate within the context of open and distance education. The study will develop a student support framework for the ODL institutions, using the findings of the COM4809 as an exemplary module, to suggest best intervention practises to curb student dropout from the university. Reviewed literature supports the need and the significance to conduct this study. For example, while Wingate (2007, p. 395)

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reports that many academics and tutors do not want to provide student with supports they need other than executing the tutoring duty, Dhillon, McGowan and Wang (2008, p. 284) also reflect the significance of the study by pointing out that the documented literature on student support is relatively few. In addition to these influential views, the South African White Paper for Post-school system also indicated that low success rates of the students in higher education sector is attributed to inadequate academic and social supports (White Paper, 2013, p. 32).

ARE THEIR ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

There are no foreseeable risks of harm or side-effects to the potential participants.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Confidentiality of information and anonymity of the participants will be stringently maintained.

The names of the participants will not be recorded anywhere and no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research. No one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a code number or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings

Your answers will also be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

Participants' anonymous data may be used for other purposes, such as a research report, journal articles and/or conference proceedings. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

While every effort will be made by the researcher to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the in-depth interviews, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the interviews will treat information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all

participants to do so. For this reason I advise you not to disclose personally sensitive information in the interviews.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at the Researcher's home for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Hard copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the hard drive of the computer.

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

The participation is voluntary

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

Yes

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda on 0732183802. The findings are accessible for five years after the study had been completed.

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please send your e-mail to sipho25@webmail.co.za

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr MJ Mamabolo at 0720510986.

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Thank you!

Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda

(Student)

Appendix 7: Consent to participate in the study (adapted from Unisa template)

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

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

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the in-depth interviews

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

Participant Name & Surname.. (Please print) Participant

Signature..Date....................

Researcher's Name & Surname. ………………………………….......(Please print)

Researcher's signature.....................................Date......................

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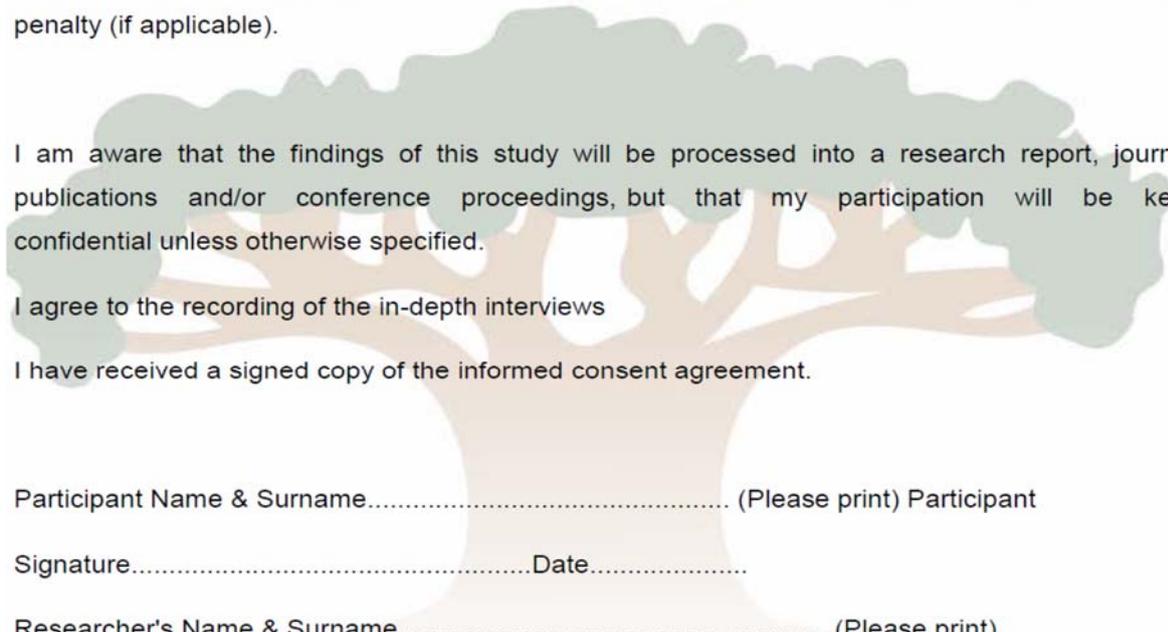
Appendix 8: Permission Letter (adapted from Unisa template)

TEMPLATE PERMISSION LETTER

Request for permission to conduct research at UNISA

Title: An investigation into student dropout in an open and distance learning environment: A quest for a responsive student framework

24/01/2017

Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda

6-88, TvW building, Unisa.

Department of Communication Science

0732183802

Work: netanrs@unisa.ac.za or personal: Sipho25@webmail.co.za

Dear Dr Retha Visagie (Manager: Research Integrity Research Support Directorate Unisa)

I, Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda, am doing research with Dr Mamabolo (supervisor) and Prof Themane (co-supervisor), senior lecturers in the Department of Education Studies at the University of Limpopo towards a "An investigation into student dropout in an open and distance learning environment: A quest for a responsive student framework, PhD at the University of South Africa." We have funding from an Academic Qualification Improvement Programme (AQIP) for financing the study (e.g. tuition fees, data transcription, data analysis, etc.) We are inviting you to participate in a study.

Finding solutions for Africa

The main purpose of this study is to investigate an increasing concern on the incessant dropout phenomenon within the ambiance of higher education.

Unisa has been selected (using a purposive sampling technique) because it is an ideal ODL environment and the study will investigate student dropout in an open and distance learning institution.

The study will entail students, administrative staff and lecturers at UNISA. The questionnaire survey will be used to collected data from the students while in-depth interviews will be held with the administrative and academic staff.

This study will make a contribution to the field of education studies. It will advance the understanding of a dropout problem of postgraduate students registered for honours modules, and student support interventions that are necessary to promote student success rate within the context of open and distance education. The study will develop a student support framework for the ODL institutions, using the findings of the COM4809 as an exemplary module, to suggest best intervention practices to curb student dropout from the university.

There are no potential risks associated with the study

Feedback procedure will entail the completed thesis, publication in journals and presentation in conferences.

Yours sincerely

'Mr Rendani Sipho Netanda

(Researcher, Student at University of Limpopo, Lecturer at UNISA)

Finding solutions for Africa

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Appendix 9: Consent Form (adapted from UL template)

University of Limpopo

Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa

CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE: STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

PROJECT LEADER/PROMOTER: Dr. JM Mamabolo (promoter) and Prof MJ Themane (Co-promoter)

I……………………………. hereby voluntarily consent to participate in the following
project:_____
_____
_____

I realise that:

1. The study deals with

_____
_____

(e.g. effect of certain medication on the human body)

2. The procedure or treatment envisaged may hold some risk for me that cannot be foreseen at this stage.

3. The Ethics Committee has approved that individuals may be approached to participate in the study.

4. The research project, i.e. the extent, aims and methods of the research, has been explained to me.

5. The project sets out the risks that can be reasonably expected as well as possible discomfort for persons participating in the research, an explanation of the anticipated advantages for myself or others that are reasonably expected from the research and alternative procedures that may be to my advantage.

6. I will be informed of any new information that may become available during the research that may influence my willingness to continue my participation.

7. Access to the records that pertain to my participation in the study will be restricted to persons directly involved in the research.

8. Any questions that I may have regarding the research, or related matters, will be answered by the researcher/s.

9. If I have any questions about, or problems regarding the study, or experience any undesirable effects, I may contact a member of the research team or Ms Noko Shai-Ragoboya.

10. Participation in this research is voluntary and I can withdraw my participation at any stage.

11. If any medical problem is identified at any stage during the research, or when I am vetted for participation, such condition will be discussed with me in confidence by a qualified person and/or I will be referred to my doctor.

12. I indemnify the University of Limpopo and all persons involved with the above project from any liability that may arise from my participation in the above project or that may be related to it, for whatever reasons, including negligence on the part of the mentioned persons.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHED PERSON

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

SIGNATURE OF PERSON THAT INFORMED   SIGNATURE OF PARENT/GUARDIAN

THE RESEARCHED PERSON

Signed at_____ this _____ day of _____ 20__

Appendix 10: Ethics Approval letter from University of South Africa (UNISA)

UNISA | university of south africa

COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

8 June 2016

> 2016-CHS-018
> Mr RS Netanda
> Staff Number: 90172035

Dear Mr RS Netanda

Decision: Ethics Approval

Name: Mr RS Netanda
               Department of Communication Science
               netanrs@unisa.ac.za
               012 429 3993

Proposal: An investigation into students dropout in an open and distance learning environment: A quest for a responsive student framework

Qualification: MA Communication Science

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee. Final approval is granted for the duration of the research period.

.

For expedited review: The application was reviewed in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics by the Chair: College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee on 7 June 2016. The decision will be tabled at the next RERC meeting on 4 July 2016 for notification/ratification.

The proposed research may commence with the proviso that:

1) The researcher/s will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.

2) Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study, as well as changes in the methodology, should be communicated in writing to the CHS Ethics Review Committee. An amended application could be requested if there are substantial existing proposal, especially if those changes affect any of the study-related risks for the research participants.

3) The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable

3) The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study.

Note:

The reference number [top right corner of this communiqué] should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication [e.g. Webmail, E-mail messages, letters] with the intended research participants, as well as with the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee.

Kind regards,

Professor AH Mavhandu-Mudzusi
Chair: CHS Ethics Review Committee
Department of Health Studies
Tel: 012 429 2055
Cell: 082 406 2494
Email:mmudza@unisa.ac.za

Professor RMH Moeketsi
Executive Dean: College of Human Sciences

Appendix 11: Interview Guide/Schedule for students

UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

<u>INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE STUDENTS</u>

STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

My name is Rendani Sipho Netanda and I am conducting a research with Dr MJ Mamabolo and Prof M Themane, Senior Lecturers in the Department of Educational Studies (University of Limpopo) towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum Studies at the University of South Africa. I am conducting this research to find out the reasons for incessant student dropout on an advanced communication research (COM4809) in order to develop a responsive student support model for open and distance learning institution (ODL). I am inviting you to participate in a study entitled *"STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL."*

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES ON DROPOUTS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Demographic information

Q1. Students' demographic traits

Traits									
Gender		Female		Male					
Employment		Yes		No					
Married		Yes		No					
Age		Less than 25 years		26-30		31-35		36-40		41 and above
Race		Black		White		Coloured		Indian	

Q2: Why have dropped out of an advanced communication research (COM4809) in ODL universities?
_____
_____
_____

Q3: What are support services for honours students available in the university?
_____
_____
_____

Q4: How did the university try to support you (mitigate dropout) before you withdraw from COM4809?
_____
_____
_____

Q5: How do ODL universities measure the effectiveness of a dropout mitigation strategy for COM4809 LPSs?
_____
_____
_____

Q6: How did the university find out that you require support intervention?
_____
_____
_____

Q7: How did you become aware of the support services available for honours students in the university?

_____
_____
_____

Q8: If there is any other information relating to your experience on dropout in ODL institution, please share them with me.

_____
_____
_____

Thank you for your participation!!

Appendix 12: Interview Guide/Schedule for lecturers

UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE LECTURERS

STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

My name is Rendani Sipho Netanda and I am conducting a research with Dr MJ Mamabolo and Prof M Themane, Senior Lecturers in the Department of Educational Studies (University of Limpopo) towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum Studies at the University of South Africa. I am conducting this research to find out the reasons for incessant student dropout on an advanced communication research (COM4809) in order to develop a responsive student support model for open and distance learning institution (ODL). I am inviting you to participate in a study entitled *"Student dropout in an open and distance learning institution: A quest for a responsive support model."*

LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS ON DROPOUTS OF HONOURS STUDENTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES ON SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Demographic information

Q1. What level is of your education, occupation and experience?

Education			
Level	Honours	Masters	Doctorate (PhD)

Occupation					
	Junior lecturer	Lecturer	Senior lecturer	Associate professor	Full professor
Level					

Experience				
	Less than 1 year	1-3 years	3-5 years	5 years and above
Experience in teaching at ODL institution				
Experience in teaching at a postgraduate level of study				
Experience in teaching an advanced communication research module (COM4809)				

Q2: With reference to COM4809, Why do LPSs drop out in ODL universities?

_____
_____
_____

Q3: How do you perceive dropouts of honours students in ODL institutions?

_____
_____
_____

Q4: How do you perceive support intervention of honours students in ODL institutions?

_____
_____
_____

Q5: How do you identify postgraduate students who need support services?

_____
_____
_____

Q6: What are the postgraduate support services available in the university?

_____
_____
_____

Q7: How do ODL universities mitigate dropout of LPSs doing COM4809?

_____
_____
_____

Q8: How do ODL universities measure the effectiveness of a dropout mitigation strategy for COM4809 LPSs?

_____
_____
_____

Q9: How do ODL universities create awareness on the available support services?

_____
_____
_____

Q10: General comments

_____
_____
_____

Thank you for your participation!!

Appendix 13: Interview Guide/Schedule for the administrative officers

UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS

STUDENT DROPOUT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A QUEST FOR A RESPONSIVE SUPPORT MODEL

My name is Rendani Sipho Netanda and I am conducting a research with Dr MJ Mamabolo and Prof M Themane, Senior Lecturers in the Department of Educational Studies (University of Limpopo) towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum Studies at the University of South Africa. I am conducting this research to find out the reasons for incessant student dropout on an advanced communication research (COM4809) in order to develop a responsive student support model for an open and distance learning institution (ODL). I am inviting you to participate in a study *entitled "Student dropout in an open and distance learning institution: A quest for a responsive support model."*

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS ON DROPOUTS OF HONOURS STUDENTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES ON SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Demographic information

Q1. What level is of your occupation and experience?

Occupation				
Level		Junior administrative officer		Senior administrative officer

Experience				
	Less than 1 year	**1-3 years**	**3-5 years**	**5 years and above**
Experience in administration at ODL institution				
Experience in working at a postgraduate level of study				
Experience in the administration of an advanced communication research module (COM4809)				

Q2: With reference to COM4809, Why do LPSs drop out in ODL universities?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Q3: How do you perceive dropouts of honours students in ODL institutions?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Q4: How do you perceive support intervention of honours students in ODL institutions?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Q5: How do you identify postgraduate students who need support services?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Q6: What are the postgraduate support services available in the university?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Q7: How do ODL universities mitigate dropout of LPSs doing COM4809?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Q8: How do ODL universities measure the effectiveness of a dropout mitigation strategy for COM4809 LPSs?

_____
_____

_____
_____
_____

Q9: How do ODL universities create awareness on the available support services?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Q10: General comments

_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for your participation!!

Appendix 14: Research Permission

UNISA | university of south africa

RESEARCH PERMISSION SUB-COMMITTEE (RPSC) OF THE SENATE
RESEARCH, INNOVATION, POSTGRADUATE DEGREES AND
COMMERCIALISATION COMMITTEE (SRIPCC)

16 March 2017

Decision: Research Permission Approval from 14 March 2017 until 30 June 2017.	Ref #: 2017_RPSC_012 Mr. Rendani Netanda Student #: N/A Staff #: 90142035

Principal Investigator:
    Mr. Rendani Netanda
    Department of Communication Sciences
    School of Arts
    College of Human Sciences
    UNISA
    netanrs@unisa.ac.za, (012) 429-3993/ 073 218 3802

Supervisors: Dr. Joel Mamabolo
    Joel.mamabolo@ul.ac.za, 072 051 0986

    Prof Johannes Themane
    Mahlapahlapana.themane@ul.ac.za, (015) 268-3149/2928

A study titled: "An investigation into student dropout in an Open and Distance Learni
environment: A quest for a responsive framework."

Your application regarding permission to conduct research involving UNISA employe
students and data in respect of the above study has been received and was considered by
Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC) of the UNISA Senate, Research, Innovati
Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC) on 13 March 2017.

It is my pleasure to inform you that permission has been granted. You may:

    1. Request ICT to send out a sms invite to the lecturers and the administrative staff t

was involved in the COM4809 module between 2011 and 2016, as well as the students who dropped out of this module during the same time period.

2. Conduct interviews with the lecturers, administrative staff and former students that respond.

You are requested to submit a report of the study to the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC@unisa.ac.za) within 3 months of completion of the study.

The personal information made available to the researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) will only be used for the advancement of this research project as indicated and for the purpose as described in this permission letter. The researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) must take all appropriate precautionary measures to protect the personal information given to him/her/them in good faith and it must not be passed on to third parties. The dissemination of research instruments through the use of electronic mail should strictly be through blind copying, so as to protect the participants' right of privacy. The researcher hereby indemnifies and holds UNISA harmless from any and all penalties, claims, loss or damage arising from any claim or action brought against UNISA and arising from or due to the researcher's breach of his/her information protection obligations.

Note:

The reference number **2017_RPSC_012** *should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants and the Research Permission Subcommittee.*

We would like to wish you well in your research undertaking.

Kind regards,

pp. Dr Retha Visagie – Acting Chairperson
Email: visagrg@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-2478

_____

Prof A Davis – Acting Executive Director
Email: davisa@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-8357

Appendix 15: Letter from the editor

Mr Makala Jeffrey Ngaka
PO BOX 56314
ARCADIA
0007
ngakamj@gmail.com/
JeffreyN@daff.gov.za
Tel/Cell: 084 815 7858

Mr R.S. Netanda
University of South Africa
Muckleneuk Campus
PO Box 392
PRETORIA
0003

Dear Mr Netanda,

Re: Thesis reference No. *Netanda/01/2017*

Please find attached an edited version of your thesis "***Student dropout in an open and distance learning environment (ODL): A quest for a responsive model***", for your attention.

It was a greatest pleasure to review and edit your thesis and I hope that it will enable you to improve the quality of your thesis.

Revisions in the text are shown using yellow highlight for additions, and strikethrough font *[example]* for deletions. We hope that the revisions in the thesis will be sufficient to make your work suitable for submission to relevant structures for consideration.

We thank you once again for doing business with us.

Yours sincerely,

Mr M.J Ngaka
22 August 2017

Appendix 16: Verbatim interview transcript (Sample 1)

Interviewer (Researcher): Mr RS Netanda (Student)

Interviewee (L1): Senior Lecturer

Interview Setting: The interview was conducted in the Senior lecturer's office at Unisa Mucleneuk Campus in TvW building at 11:30 am on Thursday, 16 March 2017.

THE ACTUAL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIBED VEBARTIM

Interviewer	**We may spend roughly between 20 and 30 minutes**
L1	Ah it's a lot (laughing)
Interviewer	**Or less that that. I am a PhD student at the university of Limpopo and the topic that I am doing is an investigation into student dropout in an open and distance learning environment: A quest for a responsive support framework. Um. I think the first question that I can ask Dr… (the name is removed). In your opinion why do student dropout from an advanced research module.**
L1	There are number of reasons which include among other lack of..what we can call lack academic preparedness. That is to say that students are ill-prepared for the module given the fact that there is little or no training in research methodology at the undergraduate level. Something that this department or the university should look at to make that students are prepared in terms of the research methodology at undergraduate level before they register an honours module. em…number 2, I think another factor is that there is little support from the supervisor or the lecturers due to the fact that lecturers have most of them have heavy teaching loads. As a result you find that they hopefully supervise they also teach undergraduate students. Others are also involved in recurriculation projects, which means they have limited time to attend to honours, in particular. And of course other students drop out because of issues such as health problems or sick during the course of the studies even pregnant problems. I once supervised a student who later dropped out of COM4809 because she was pregnant and was expecting a baby few weeks before the closing date for the submission of portfolio. So' she couldn't submit her

	portfolio because pregnancy had taken much of her attention. Another factor I think which I relate to financial support, lack of money. Some dropout because of, I think financial problem. And another problem that I think is time management. Most of the students who are doing the honours are also working. And Most of them don't manage their time properly. So it also talks to dropping out.
Interviewer	**So I think…**
L1	Those are some of the factors, which lead to student dropping out at honours level. em.. In terms of, I will talk about little support or insufficient support and are due to the fact that lecturers have had heavy loads and you find that they don't have time for consultation with the students. They only provide written feedback. And another thing is that our students don't read feedback. Students have adopted a culture of not reading and when they have study problems they don't know who to contact, yet they have every form of information they need in their tutorial letters. But lecturers, I think, they have to talk to students or to take students through the feedback I think we will be able to retain most of the students because I think the problem where they have their frustration because of the limited support or insufficient student support from lecturers. Another thing I think has to do with the library literacy. Some students are frustrated when the searching for relevant materials and even issues of technologies because at honours level students are expected, independently. And most of students are not ready in terms of the library literacy. they are not ready in terms of ICT literacy and which I think has the negative on their performance and subsequently some of them get frustrated in to the extent that they decide to stop ee. So In other words, the point I am trying to make is that there is limited academic… I mean support from the academics as well as the administrative support from people such as subject librarians. A lot can ne done in terms of that area of support for our students to make sure that they don't feel lonely in the journey and yah. Em..I think yah. I think I am done.
Interviewer	**Okay Er looking at the nature of the institution. The university of South Africa is different form these other residential universities. Em.. Don't you think, perhaps, the could be some reasons that relate to the nature of the university. I am not sure whether I am putting…**
L1	No.. Yes! The… Yay as I have indicated I think in an ODL you need more support from the academics and the administrators and which at the moment, I think it is till intense, em so the university doesn't do much in terms of providing more support, more guidance. I think if it si possible we should have what? E-tutors for this module. People who will assist or take

	students by hand through all stages of their research projects which is not the case. Like we have e-tutors who provide support to our students almost on a daily basis and which is not the case in terms of the honours programme and here we are about students who are not, most of them, are not ready in terms of the research methodology and they are ill-prepared and they need more guidance and to that end, I think the university should hire more e-tutors who will then provide support to these students. But I think we will talk about the intervention that I think should made when we talk about strategies for mitigating. What needs to be in order to assist students or to retain to make sure that students who start the programme complete it with success.
Interviewer	**Are there any support interventions that put into place in the university or in the department?**
L1	I think there are. We use to have the workshops, the COM4809 workshops where students were introduced to all facets of the research and significantly, we also use to have the workshops on report writing. I don't know whether this year or last year we had workshops. I think workshops are important and eer yah but we also some lecturers have face-to-face consultations, which are also helpful, and telephonic conversations with students are also helpful and there are also lecturers now who are already employing technologies like google hangout to communicate with their students. I think that is a step in the right direction in terms of ensuring that we keep in touch with our students and our students doesn't feel lonely in the journey. So I think there a number of initiatives and we the lab which is equipped and operational which some of colleagues are using to the benefit of our students in general and COM4809 students in particular. I think something has been done and I think people are coming up with initiatives to…
Interviewer	**Okay And student dropout continues to exist even in the presence of different interventions programmes included what you have just mentioned. Is there any reason you can provide or share with me as to why the available intervention programmes remain unresponsive.**
L1	Em… I think you see a human being is a multifaceted being and as a university and as a department, I think we are operating at a level where we are providing academic support but the students' problems go beyond what I can tell, academic problems. There are social problems that students encounter. like for instance financial difficulties, health issues and therefore some of the problems at this stage we are not… em… But of course we know that we also have the directorate for counselling I think at the

	university which of course looks at a eer…which provides social services counselling and like …but are we doing enough in terms of publicising or promoting the services thereof. I don't think so. I don't think our students are aware that there are other services that they can access by virtue of being students at unisa when they encounter a plenty of personal problems. Do they know where to go? Ee..instead of dropping out they know the support that they can get from the university. So ee.. the point is think we need to do more in terms…even in our tutorial letters do we talk to em..em..services provided by the administrative functions of the university of departments of the university such as counselling. The answer, at this stage I think is 'no' because we tend to focus on academics and to, to yah. We know the other social issues that have the impact of the performances our students.
Interviewer:	**Okay! I had you said lack of awareness about the available intervention programmes. What are the channels that the university utile to communicate more often with the students. It can be academic-related or administrative- related. Something like that.**
L1:	I think we use SMS technology, muUnisa plartforms as well as e-mails. I think even the website is also used as a …as a communication tool to communicate with our students. Not only that. There are number of publications that are em..published at the university which seek to keep our students community informed of the programmes that we have in the university.
Interviewer:	**It is seems as if we have covered what is contained within the interview guide unless if you wish to have another input add**
L1:	To address the intervention, going forward, I think one of the things that we need to do recurriculate our undergraduate offerings to ensure that they are biased toward research methodology. Research methodology should be a full module of undergraduate, a BA degree, and if possible we can introduce basis stats as part of the undergraduate programme to prepare students for postgraduate training. Fortunately the department is embarking on a recurriculation project and as I have said we need a, one call, research assistant to provide more support to students or alternatively reduce the number of students per lecturers, almost students per lecturers. Instead of ten rather than..em maybe two or more so that they can pay attention to the students. If it is possible the university should assist student to gain access to technologies like internet. Em..and the subject librarians I think should proactively, I think, train students on how they should search

	for relevant materials because of the frustrations, problems relates to the inability of our students to search for…, I think the know-how. How to search for relevant materials and I think another salient intervention is financial assistance. I think let us provide bursaries for honours students. We often lament about the number of students at the postgraduate level that there are few students who complete their honours, masters and doctoral degrees but I think we should provide financial assistance and of course the workshops. Ideally we should have an orientation programme for..for honour students where we orientate them about what the programme is about and what are the challenges and how they can overcome those challenges.
Interviewer	**There is only aspect, which is left here. Let us say you have different support programmes. How then do you measure their effectiveness? Do you have some means to measure as to whether those interventions are effective or not or you just give support as per it was planned and never do anything about that.**
L1	Again we should evaluate ee …remember these intervention should form part of our departmental strategy. No action for the year and we should able to monitor and evaluate those programmes as part of the overall plan of the department and make a key corrective action if be. If they are deviation from – say- the targets or set objectives then we should be able to corrective actions at the end of the day. Another thing that we can to do is to have a quarterly review of the progress of the students who are doing COM4809 and make interventions if need be, not at an individual level, as a department as a team or the module coordinator should be able to evaluate the progress of each student and make the necessary intervention before it is too late.
Interviewer	**But currently the are no measurement strategies in place**
L1	No because we don't report anywhere if the student is not submitting the assignments or is not doing he or she was supposed to be doing so that the.. and we don't contact them telephonically to find out what the problems are. So it means that we are not providing enough support. Because if the student is not submitting his or her assignment then as a lecturer you should phone him or her to find out the reasons. Remember the study is about reasons for dropping out so that you intervene early don't wait for September. If a student did not submit the assignment in April or March you find out the reasons. Are we doing that? No!

Interviewer	No I think we are done. I want to thank you for allowing me to come and have a bit of time to interview you, to collect this important data. I want to assure you that there is nowhere in the reporting of the results where you are going to be mentioned by name. Everything is gonna be confidential, even in publications. Thank you so much!
L1	You are welcome! Good luck!
Interviewer	Thank you!

Appendix 17: Verbatim Interview Transcript (Sample 2)

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT: SAMPLE 2

Interviewer (Researcher): Mr RS Netanda

Interviewee (L3): Lecturer

Interview Setting: The interview was conducted in the lecturer's office at Unisa Mucleneuk Campus in TvW building at 11:30 am in the morning of Tuesday, 08 March 2017

THE ACTUAL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIBED VEBARTIM

Researcher	Yah! Ee. Basically what I am trying to out are here the reasons why students dropout in advanced research module, the COM4809.
Interviewee	Thank you very much Mr Netanda. There are several reasons that can be attributed to a dropout in an advanced research module in which it is commonly known as COM4809. First reason could be probably how has the student performed in his or her research

	module at the third year level and if we go deeper how the student has performed in social science research which is the college- sort of signature module or---which deals with research because the college module which is done in--- year module feeds into communication research which is done into third year level which is COM 3…something, and if a student has done well in those two modules, they will…the possibility of errr being successful in this module which is COM 4809 might be high and some of the reasons except those two modules could be attributed to the content. I am not talking about research method or the research desired method content, here i am talking about the actual content of the module. it's communication it will be… organisational communication it will be.. theoretical base of the student. It is unfortunate that unisa as open and distance learning institution is unable to… what?.. to give what the students who are in the face-to-face university or contact university are able to. For example, there is no theoretical inspiration which could be derived on contact universities and therefore our students will lack to such an extent that inspiration to be theoretical and they end up not being ground to the theory and some of the…problems could be inherent of the education system as a whole probably, the writing skills are not as good as one would wish, and instead of dealing with content you end up dealing with grammar and…and by the time which you reach the level of dealing with content the time is up and student end up failing, and i think this….this is how aaaa…..h!! the main reasons i think they are contributing to… say… dropout rate to these particular module.
Researcher	**Eeee!!! I heard you also touch the other reasons that relate to the nature of the university explaining eee!!! indirectly the disparity between this university and others. I wonder if you will be able to have some other reasons looking at the nature of the university being an ODL as opposed to being a student in a residential university.**

Interviewee	I think one of the reasons which I am of the view, strong view that it affects it's lack of access to material. There is diversity of materials that students can use. For example in an organisational communication we went to an extent of having a uniform of topic for all students doing their so-called mini dissertations. However, after you have given them a list of materials which they must engage with, they end up not reaching all of them. Obviously due to limitations of computer skills they are unable to follow through the links which they could get those computer skills, but as we explain we also assist in the sense that if a student send an e-mail or in myUnisa discussion forum raising issue of not being able to access materials we download the and send them via e-mail but in most instances it is convenience to the students as opposite to if it was a residential university, so those are some of the things, but lack of human interaction in the whole process, it is what …. our students. I will give an example, most of the people who have been successful in academia or in some in professional life will tell you that… content which was taught in class but the inspiration of the lecturer guided them more than the content which was provided in class, so that's lacking in ODL environmental.
Researcher	**Thank you very much for your responses. The third theme deals with challenges associated with students' dropout either from the side of the academics or the students themselves, surely you might have two or three reasons. I know that you have mentioned some of them but if there are any other left behind i would happily you know…allow you to provide more challenges that academics are facing or students are facing specifically on this COM4809.**
Interviewee	Thanks probably on a technical level I have got a challenge with the phrasing of the theme because to me the challenge is negative and the dropout is also negative. They can't be in one sentence. So, probably could be the reasons associated with dropout. I think

that's what probably you wanted to add to mean, reasons will be associated with the dropout. The reasons as I have alluded earlier would be that lack of access to materials. I am just refreshing what I have said and we shouldn't forget that this is an ODL. Being an ODL institution means that students are mostly on their own in learning processes and they must be able to manage their time. Our students do not really understand how an ODL university functions. They are supposed to know that in an ODL learning institution, they have to take charge of learning processes, including consulting lecturers whenever they encounter some difficulties and building a good bond with them, not to keep quiet and wait for us to detect that they have problems. We have many responsibilities that go beyond just teaching.

Ee..ee, lack of inspirations especially at the theoretical level and content level and, as I have said, lack of time management from student perspective because our deadlines are very tight and it is unfortunate that we are in a so-called bureaucratic university instead of environment where we are…mhm.. it would be desirable to be flexible because what you might be aware of that an M&D level a student could go through a process over and over again without necessary having failed but fine-tuning the product but at the end of the honours level there is no such grey bevelled (words were unclear)….redoing your work. You do it, you don't make the minimum requirement you fail and that's all. I think to a certain extent to explain this bureaucratic system of …which I have failed to marry qualitative approach of teaching and learning, to a certain extent its failing people because instead of managing education as a learning process we are sort of managing teaching and learning as a …and skilled project of which non revised the whole thing of learning because individually we don't learn on the same pace and we are not capacitated on the same levels then it becomes a challenge.

Researcher	So what are you proposing to be appropriate strategies to address the dropout ….
Interview	I think our students it's a challenge again that we are in a distance learning but a maximum use of directorate of career development and counselling could be health because some of the students are doing …or modules on advance level because they have done certain particular field of study in the undergraduate level, not to say that they are passionate of they have got what contribute into a particular field of study, so counselling could assist, but gain it is limited that counselling because it will probably via email or via whatever the portal which the department of dean will be having. And probably the maximum use of our readings, using things like basic teachings on how to use the library, basing teaching on how be the computer literate, basic to teaching on how to be efficient in time management, basic teaching on softer skills including things of emotional intelligence, things of how to handle pressure so that we have got the total of human management lot on the managing the academic part of a human being, so some services if our readings can be empowered to offer it and becomes probably sort of an orientation package because (words were unclear)….. me when a student probably at an honours level is unable to access the materials it means in one way or another (words were unclear)…in our orientation, if our orientation addresses those basic things which students struggle and in our…. it will be….basic skills and all the systems we use at unisa which are of assistance to students, if they are ushered upon registration it will cab lot of problems. The other thing, that I think no one ever spoke about, is the race issue. Although it is a small percentage, some students who left COM4809 were not really comfortable to be supervised by lecturers from a different race. Many of these students are whites and have perceptions that a black man has a teaching deficiency. To me this is a national problem and it needs a political intervention at a national level because I believe it is not only this university that

	experience racism from students. For example, students from black community prefer to be supervised by lecturers who are also black and those from white community want to be supervised by white people. For instance, I was once allocated a white student who had a negative attitude to me as a black person and showed no trust that I am qualified to teach an honours module. He used to indignantly argue with me over the comments I have made on feedbacks, telling me that I do not understand research. That student ended up dropping out. It worried me because I was doing the best I could and wanted him to successfully complete the course like others, but I couldn't sense that racism still exists after over twenty years of democracy in South Africa.
Researcher	**Okay, let me just word this, if they are ushered during registration, it can prevent all those things. You have mentioned different in which the institution or the department can provide support interventions to the students, I wonder if you also have some strategies to measure the effectiveness of those various means to support the students because it does happens that you find that the student have been supported but there is no follow up or monitoring to determine if the progress is becoming you know positive to an extent that you can…pass rate that is higher other than the dropout.**
Interviewee	I think the introduction of e-tutors to a certain extent assist even though it which is around….students who are active online. However, for those who are online it assist at a big deal and for those who are in our region, that is those who are not working, who visit the readings frequently, I think those are the most empowered students because as much as they are in an ODL environment but that interaction with the infrastructure and the personnel in the university those might be the administrative stuff but it … that sense

	of learning environment whereas one who is working…be such liberty to have interaction with fellow students collaboratively for example it doesn't work if it is not in the contact university. We can predict dropout if we want. For example, by checking who submit assignment and who does not. I am worried because sometimes students do not submit their assignments and lecturers do not bother to contact them and find why. We are not doing enough to encourage our students to learn. Some of us, especially senior lecturers, are forever unavailable in our offices and those students who personally come to university premises end up not being assisted. This is very bad and no student would want to be supervised by such a non-caring lecturer. The other problem is that: With the increasing volume of students we supervise annually, the manner in which we teach and the quality of our teaching must also be assessed. Otherwise we will just carryon with inappropriate teaching methods and fail our students. Of course, if they feel that they have not been taught properly, they cannot come to register in the next registration period. They will go to other universities.
Researcher	**You spoke of support intervention such as counselling and others. How does the university make awareness? Are you sure there is a maximum awareness of the support programmes available for the students because they might be there and students are not utilizing them if they are not aware of them.**
Interviewee	Mhm…ee..I think it goes down to our, to our pedagogy because we are an ODL environment and also the things are done online and the counselling services…ee is not something which can be easily be online except the frequently asked questions. So we got that limitation but those students who are able to access the region, regional call centres could visit the region and get such kind of services.

Researcher	**I think we have covered everything that is contained within the interview guide unless if you have some few recommendations that you want the university to focus on in order to prevent the dropout from occurring or suggestions on how support can be …ee, you know provided to the students. Something like that. As part of the recommendations what you think can benefit the students of the university to an extent that, eventually, dropout doesn't occur?**
Interviewee	Ee, I think.., I think if we approach from that perspective of total elimination of dropout we will be…will be moving to free for all… (Participant answered his phone)… I was still saying that the approach of total elimination to dropout is not good because, that's my view because it derails the whole sense of learning but the high dropout is worrisome, but it doesn't necessarily mean that we must totally eliminate dropout because as we will be moving towards administration because education on its own it's a…it's from the background being elite, survival of the fittest. So if you assume that everyone should be the fittest, then you are …you are removing the whole essence of education. What must happen is to have low rate of dropout and make sure that the students are supported but to totally eliminate dropout, it would be a wasteful thinking to be against the ethos of academia.
Researcher	**Okay well ! Let me say I would like to thank so much for having participated in this interview for my PhD study. And once more the information that you have shared with me is going to be treated confidential and even when we publish part of this as an article of conference proceeding and so on, we will make sure that this information is treated confidential and that's all. Unless if you have some questions to ask. THANK YOU!**
Interviewee	Thank you Mr Netanda!

Appendix 18: Verbatim Interview Transcript (Sample 3)

Interviewer (Researcher): Mr RS Netanda (Student)

Interviewee (A1): Administrative officer

Interview Setting: The interview was conducted in the administrator's office at Unisa Mucleneuk Campus in TvW building at 11:30 am on Thursday, 14 March 2017.

THE ACTUAL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIBED VEBARTIM

Interviewer	**This study just to give a background it's about student dropout and what I want to develop at the end is the student support framework for specifically honors students. I have to collect data from admin stuff from lecturers as well as from the students who dropped out. So, roughly the interview will take 15 to 20 minutes or less than that. All what I request you is to provide as honest information as possible whatever you feel you have met as you are working as an administrative officer. In your opinion, what are really the reasons for the honors students to dropout, if you can share with me?**
A1	Unreliable systems like myUnisa. myUnisa student management system often crushes during the last few days before the deadlines of submission of assignments. This problem makes many of our students fail to submit assignments, and some have dropped out because of that. We receive calls from the first year students who want to register but the systems because they are offline or inaccessible to students that frustrates the students….not registering with our institution at all and those who will be luck to register will struggle at the end towards accessing information, like an example on submission of assignments days our system crushes myUnisa crushes and when the students can't online what do they do? They call the admin offices to complain. So imagine if you have to complain for all the submissions of your assignments at an institution where you expect to receive proper service you still failed, you get demoralised.
Interviewer	**Any complaints students could have raised with you regarding how the stuffs are teaching and so on, haven't you at**

	something like that maybe students complaining about lecturer not available in the office and so on.
A1	Yes, availability of lecturers to students and lectures not responding to emails students emails on time and students not receiving feedback assignments before the exam time in order for them to prepare, those are the complaints I receive normally. Although most of our lecturers are good supervisors, the problem is that some do not make students aware that they will not be available during specific time by posting announcements on myUnisa or using student system available in oracle to notify students via SMSs.
Interviewer	**Okay, students not receiving assignments.**
A1	Feedback assignments on time.
Interviewer	**Okay on time**
A1	Before the exam.
Interviewer	**Right!!!! and…..?**
A1	Lecturers not responding to their emails.
Interviewer	**Eeee… Lecturer not responding to their emails**
A1	Yaaa!!! and lecturer not available two days prior to the exam.
Interviewer	**Okay**
A1	Yes, and the students end up calling the admins
Interviewer	**Okay, and then have you tried somehow to assist them?**
A1	Yes Sir where I can I go out of my way and submit them.
Interviewer	**In which way if you can just share with me?**
A1	I ask the student to send an email to a particular lecturer and copy me then I will do the follow up with the lecturer or the student or alternatively if the student is now enough that I can't keep on sending emails students can send on their own, as example, I say send an email to me, I will forward the email to the lecturer copying the COD then within five minutes the student will receive the respond.
Interviewer	**Okay!**

A1	If you escalate the problem, the student problem, it gets response,
Interviewer	**Okay!**
A1	I do follow up.
Interviewer	**You do follow up?**
A1	When I, for instance, I sent the student enquiry to the lecturer I always request to be copied so that should the student call me back I say but Mr Netanda or Mr so and so responded to you
Interviewer	**Okay, but other than those students who would have availed themselves here in your office speaking of different problems, are you able as, in the capacity as an administrator to determine those who have the probability to drop out, just to identify prior…before they can come and share with you the problems they are facing. Are you able to identify...**
A1	Yes… yes… yes. As you are speaking you can feel and hear that the student is demoralised by the institution and I try most of the time, where possible, to the particular student that this is not the institution operates. That is where jump in to make the point that the student gets satisfactory service for that I do get thank you emails.
Interviewer	**Thank you very much for sharing with me such an important information. The next question that I have here in the interview guide relates to the support services that are available in the entire university eeh…because it is possible that in the department we may not able to assist students as per what they expect us on everything…But eeh if there are any other support intervention that the university normally offer to students who need some particular kind of assistance for them to continue with their studies so that we prevent dropout you can share with me but if there are nothing, still you can also indicate to me whether you are aware of some of not.**
A1	Eeh Sir not. I am not aware of any services which the university can do to prevent students from dropping out. What I think is salient that will depend also on how the…on what the problem is. If the problem is regarding late study material which is unreceived, there is a section, study material by Mrs Salome Kgwadi. She makes it a point students who are complaining about not having received the

	study materials once they call Salome or I forward the inquiry to Salome. Within two minutes I receive an e-mail from that particular student saying thank so much I struggled for so long to get the study material. By speaking to you could assist me Mrs Kgwadi have advised me that the study material is at the Post Office or is back at Unisa which the exact status. And the other thing I forgot to mention about what causes the students to drop out is receiving the study material late. Some of the students don't receive the study material up until the assignment is due. Hence all the extensions. And they give extensions for an assignment but there is never an extension for an for… for... an exam which us…which disadvantages our students. Another point is that If students struggle to get their supervisors and bring the concerns to me, I ask them to write e-mails to lecturers and copy me and the head of the department. In this way, lecturers will react to the concern quickly. As for those who struggle with registrations, I always refer them to relevant and specific people working in the registration department to attend to their problems.
Interviewer	**But for COM4809 since there are no study materials, are there any other reasons why students often drop out from COM4809 as a moduel…just as a module.**
A1	Eeh...COM4809 the best to answer that question will be Mrs Van Gas since she is the module coordinator for postgraduate studies
Interviewer	**Otherwise thank you very much for sharing with me such a valuable information gain that you have provided me with. I think, in summary you have captured all the important questions that underpins the essence of this study as a whole mhm…**
A1	And if I have to mention something else, ever since the study material was posted to students that rate of dropout has increased than when the study material was received over the counter. I would recommend over the counter submission of students…of…of…of study materials
Interviewer	**Over the counter**
A1	Yah the over the counter option was the best

Interviewer	Okay!
A1	Yes
Interviewer	**So in other words we shouldn't move towards…you know, em…an era in which technology is being preferred because it change…**
A1	If your technology is not going to fail students I can say you can move to it but since then these systems are not reliable…I like the idea of sending electronically and via courier services but then if the system like myUnisa are not reliable …are very much unreliable, you can't rely on them and not every student has access to myUnisa. You must bear in mind that Unisa students…not all of them are employed. Some are from the rural area. The very remote areas where there is no technology. The students have to travel two kilometres to get to the nearest internet café which is going to spend money
Interviewer	**And failure to have access to the relevant technologies can also lead to dropout**
A1	Yes…yes!
Interviewer	**Okay! I think without wasting much of time, we have discussed all the questions that I was here to ask and I would like to thank you very much for participating unless you have additional information that you can offer relating to the reasons and how the university have been mitigating dropping out of students at all levels, including postgraduate students I will be happy. Eeh…if there is no any other information I feel it is imperative for my study to also include the demographic information of which I drafted this page all data I need is relating to occupation. I am not sure whether as you are working as an administrative officer or secretary, do we have levels where we can say junior administrator or senior administrator as I have compiled here or it is just administrative officer.**

A1	I think the levels of seniority of administration depends on the post grade. Here we are administrative officers even though we do different tasks and likely with us now we are on the same post grade.
Interviewer	**Okay! And your experience…I think is more than one year. I think it is here…about five years**
A1	Yes…Yes! I am 22 years on the post
Interviewer	**22 years?**
A1	22 years of services
Interviewer	**This is too much!**
A1	Next month it will be 23 years
Interviewer	**Wow! Working with the students, perhaps in COM4809 you joined those who are involved in the module later on. Roughly in terms of the experience?**
A1	I can say I joined those who are on it later. I can say I have five years there.
Interviewer	**I am happy that you have given me an opportunity to come and solicit views regarding dropout of COM4809 students and I want to highly thank you for your participation. My study is really useless in the absence of people like you honest opinions and so on and so on. I am humbled. I think you maintain this character. It reflects peace. It reflects mercy. It so welcoming to an extent that I feel like this is going to be successful as much as I am getting people like you who make this happen.**
A1	Thank very much Mr Netanda!
Interviewer	**Thank you!**

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT: SAMPLE 3

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Interviewer (Researcher): Mr RS Netanda

Interviewees (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6): Dropout students

Interview Setting: The interview was conducted in the lecturer's office at Unisa Mucleneuk Campus in TvW building at 11:30 am in the morning of Saturday, 11 March 2017.

THE ACTUAL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIBED VEBARTIM

Researcher	**Good morning ladies and gentlemen! Indeed it is an honour to have you as participants on this Saturday. I really appreciate that! Okay…basically, I am studying a PhD programme in education, researching student dropout in open and distance learning institution, focusing at the honours level. I am using Unisa as the context of study and COM4809 as the case module. You guys were registered for COM4809 but did not complete it. am I correct?**
S1-S6	Yes!
	What were the reasons for not completing the module? I mean COM4809!
S1	You know what, Mr Netanda…sometimes, we as students fail to do our work but sometimes lecturers contribute to our failure and even a dropout. I was supervised by…(name is removed)..whose comments are discouraging. I was on chapter 2 when left the

	module. I thought I did everything right on that chapter. I am not saying I should have just been given a high mark when I don't deserve it. I mean…ah.. I thought I reviewed the literature quite adequately but my supervisor commented that I didn't read it and that I do not read his comments. I felt entirely confused because I spent days and days reading articles and books. So most of the comments were just discouraging.
S2	I think there are many reasons why sometimes students dropout. I don't know for others, but for me I underestimated the volume of the work on the module. Had I known before, I could have not even registered it, I am quite certain I would have taken it alone because it really wants more time and I did have it because I am working also. For me I cancelled COM4809 because I learned that it has a lot to do. Otherwise, I wouldn't not pass it.
S3	Can I add on what has been said?
Researcher	**Yes!**
S3	Bad comments can leave student confused and those who view them as personal normally face challenges and competed weakened. Many times in my studentship, I felt so stupid when comments happen to be negative, but this is not what why I left COM4809. Yes… I have BA in communication but I just don't feel it because even the type of work I am doing is not related to communication and I have been applying, yet nothing comes out, even a mere internship programme. I think this is mainly because I had no information on what one can choose to do because I felt that I did not receive career guidance. I have always needed to do LLB and I can't explain…I really can't explain why I could not register for it. The field of media and marketing or communication is not in my blood. I am now doing LLB although I feel that most of

	the subjects are difficult. This will be second degree if I complete it. So I can't say I am a dropout because I just don't see it as a problem to have left the COM4809.
Researcher	**Any one with additional reasons if they there!**
S4	Yah…look…ee this I agree with other speakers who talked about the workload, work and how lecturers sometimes discourage us to study, and surely they aren't aware of the negative impact they have on students. Unisa must start to look at how it can improve its academic services, including giving feedbacks on time and arranging classes where we can personally engage with our lecturers…
Researcher	**But you can make an appointment with you supervisors and ask questions…**
S4	No, no, no… I am talking about a class itself. I know this a distance education university, but a class is always better because other than only asking questions on what you feel you are struggling to understand, other students will ask questions you never pondered about and that helps a lot. So, organise classes as you used to. We won't have a problem with paying extra fees because they are useful. Maybe I am speaking for myself because I am used to face-to-face learning methods in which the teaching happens….I mean where I seeing my teacher. This form of teaching…I am telling has the potential to minimize dropout especially for those who leave studying because subjects are difficult. Also improve the methods used for interacting with us on that module. I am saying this because it is difficult and interactions with lecturers and students on myUnisa, maybe a forum, can help us. Meeting the lecturer in his office, for me is not a good platform because more often, you will find that he is oversee or at a conference outside the university.

	So if I have a time during those circumstances what should I do? Whe'n he is back, I don't have time. At least use tutors for this module so that if lecturers are too busy on other matters, they can assist.
Researcher	**I appreciate your suggestion for improvement. We use to have tutorial classes back then and video conferencing and many of our students would come in numbers and ask participate actively in learning. So thank you for that input. If I can ask, what was the specific reason for your withdrawal of the COM48O9.**
S4	(He laughed). I realised I will not be able to finance myself and there was no one to rely on. Besides, I also had family problems. Yah… that's all I can say!
Researcher	**My brother here. Don't want to say something or you are agreeing with them on everything?**
S5	I can't say I agree or disagree because my situation was different. So I have a different reason. All I can say is that I thought they will provide study materials as in the case of undergraduate level. But the other thing was that I was based in remote rural area then and I couldn't figure out how will do it without visiting the supervisor, without easily accessing the internet because in research one has to have access to internet. Because of this it was not going to be easy for. (Laughing) I might have been lazy to think of alternative technologies I can use rather than the internet café.
S6	My problem with COM4809 is that it requires more time as it has more work. I didn't have enough time to read different sources and to write assignments and I should like, some of us here who have mentioned the issue of heavy workload, attest to the fact that module must be registered alone or with one additional module, not

	more than that. If I am not mistaken, I think I only wrote the three assignments and stopped and I did not perform well in some of the assignments and I realised that I am not going to make it. I then decided to just leave the module. My supervisor never wrote me an e-mail or just to give me a call to say why didn't submit the third one. So yes while it seems easy to blame a student for having dropped out, the reality is that lecturers too are maximising the dropout rate by not having an interest to assist their students. Many people think teaching is a calling and I think it can be regarded as a calling only if lecturers have an interest to serve students to the best of their ability. Some lecturers do not avail themselves, both through the phone and through e-mails. If you just come without an appointment they tell you they are busy and that you should make an appointment. Others you can tell as they try to explain that they don't master their field. I mean this is worrisome. So I think the results of this study should be shared with the university to help the institution do better.
S1	I believe one important way to improve teaching style is through training and I think they lecturers must be constantly trained to meet the demands of the fast changing higher education sphere and technological world. As for students, collaborative learning is essential but the problem with many of Unisa modules is that, especially at a postgraduate level, one does not know who is registered for the module. If we were having access to such information it was gonna be easier because when you encounter a challenge you would just ask you fellow student and share understandings. So Unisa operates in its own way even though it accommodates those who are working.
Researcher	**Thank you for your participation!**