

FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENT RETENTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF  
NAMIBIA

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## ABSTRACT

Student retention is one of major challenges confronting universities worldwide because some students leave university before completing their studies. This continues to be a concern for higher education institutions. If unaddressed, this could negatively impact student retention rates. The purpose of this study was to identify factors influencing student retention at the University of Namibia. The study used a mixed methods approach and a convergent parallel design. The research was guided by the theoretical framework of Tinto's (1975) model of student departure. Data were collected during the 2018 to 2020 academic years. The pragmatist paradigm was suitable for this study in using quantitative and qualitative techniques to collect and analyse data. The target population was all first- and second-year students from all Faculties of the University of Namibia's Main Campus enrolled in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years and those who dropped out in the preceding years. The population also included academic and administrative staff, sampled from departments related to the students and their study programmes. The data were collected using interview guides with thirty persister students who were grouped into six focus groups for discussions which had five to six students in each group. Fourteen non-persister students completed survey questionnaires. Academic and administrative staff members completed a staff survey questionnaire. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, whereas the qualitative data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach. The study revealed that the most important factors that influence student drop out at the University of Namibia include difficulty in getting assistance from staff and negative staff attitude, difficulty in selecting the desired major, difficulty in making the transition from high school to university, students' timetabling and workload, the lecturing style, and financial problems. Another issue which emerged during the time of this study was the outbreak of Covid-19. Based on the findings, this study proposes a framework to inform researchers undertaking future research in this area to help with improvements on student retention rates as a way to contribute to the reduction of dropout rates at institutions.

**Keywords:** Student retention, Higher Education Institutions, Persister, Non-persister

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## **List of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

CHE	Council on Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MoEAC	Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture
NUST	Namibia University of Science and Technology
OUT	Open University of Tanzania
QUAL	Qualitative
QUAN	Quantitative
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UNAM	University of Namibia
UREC	UNAM Research and Ethics Committee

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## **Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all my teachers at the Rhenish Primary School (Rynse Laerskool), Origo Primary School, Little Flower High School, Dr. Lemmer High School, my colleagues at both the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) and the University of Namibia (UNAM), and my family members for their support over the years.*

## **Declaration**

I, Basil Albert Rickerts, hereby declare that this study is my own work and is a true reflection of my research, and that this work, or any part thereof has not been submitted for a degree at any other institution.

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October 2023

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1 Introduction

This study identified challenges and strategies for student retention at the University of Namibia. Internationally, student retention is a big and challenging concern confronting the higher education sectors. Student retention is measured as the return rates of students from one academic year to another (Soika, 2020). In this study the term “student retention” was used to refer to students’ continued study until successful completion (Fowler & Luna, 2009; Jones, 2008) and it is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education (Powell, 2009) as cited in Zerna et al., 2014), but such studies on student retention have not been exhaustively conducted at the University of Namibia (UNAM). Retention rate refers to the outcome of how many students remained enrolled from one year to the following year in a particular cohort. A cohort is a group of people, including students and adults, that interact with one another during the normal day at university (Robles, 2020). Attrition/Dropout/Withdrawal refers to when a student leaves a study programme before graduation.

It is generally accepted that the retention rate of a higher education institution reflects its standard and quality of training (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Consequently, low student retention rates do not only affect the students who drop out but they also have negative effects on institutional credibility, legacy, reputation, and prestige (Aljohani, 2014). Theories and research indicate that students’ academic, social, and cultural

integration are major determining factors of student retention at higher education institutions (Jensen, 2011).

The current study contributes to the understanding of some of the challenges and strategies for student retention at UNAM. The study aim was to identify the factors leading to student withdrawal or dropout as perceived by students and staff members of UNAM. Furthermore, the study sought to provide a framework to improve student retention based on international best practices identified in the literature.

## **1.2 Background of the study**

Low student retention rates affect institutions financially as they lose incomes which should have come through student fees (Aljohani, 2014), and low or small increases in retention rates can have dramatic effects on the finances of an academic institution. As such, this issue remains a big concern confronting higher education institutions (Haverila et al., 2020). It also has an effect on a country's economic growth and future plans due to low return on investment in education. Despite the financial implications, there is great concern as to why students drop out or do not complete their study programmes at UNAM, therefore the present study set out to look at the factors that lead to the problem in order to assist students to achieve their goal of graduating.

Internationally, the reviewed literature indicates that low student retention is an international phenomenon. For example, data collected from 2513 higher education institutions in the United States and Canada shows that the first-year retention rates are about 20% to 25% (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009). According to the Research Centre's Persistence and Retention Report (2020) only 76% of first-year students in

2018 returned to university for their second year in the United States. This rate represented the third straight year of little improvement in this important early success indicator. According to the United States Department of Education, an average of 79% of first-time students return to college for a subsequent year at four-year institutions, and 60% return to two-year institutions. This means that a substantial number of students who enter colleges and universities each autumn will not return the next year (Heizenrader, 2013).

Another example is indicated in the statistics published in the United Kingdom by the Higher Education Statistics Agency which revealed that over 32 000 students, including mature undergraduates, dropped out of university after a year of study in 2012/13. Of those who dropped out, 7420 transferred to another university, while 24 745 were no longer in higher education. Between 2016/17 and 2017/18, the non-continuation rate for young full-time first-degree students increased from 6.5% to 6.8% (Hillman, 2021).

In Saudi Arabia, it was estimated that 35% of students would leave higher education institutions before completing their studies (Al-Saud, 2006, as cited in Al-Dossary, 2008). Low student retention rates reflect negatively on the image of an institution and its academic reputation. This in turn might affect the institution financially (Aljohani, 2014), but there is greater concern about the reasons why university students do not complete their studies. Low retention not only affects the students who drop out but also their institutions and the broader educational sector (Ascend Learning, 2012; Griffith University, 2006, 2012, as cited in Aljohani, 2014).

On the African continent, a study conducted by Capital Campus (2014, as cited in Gathoni et al., 2019) pointed out that the student dropout rate in universities in Kenya is a fact that should attract the attention of the education authorities and the government. Furthermore, Chacha (2015) reported that the dropout rate for dental and medical school students in Nairobi University was at 50%.

In the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) as a region, South Africa is one of the countries with the highest first-year university dropout rates in the world due to economic inequalities and other socio-economic factors (Moodley & Singh, 2015). According to Viljoen (2019), university dropout rates in South Africa are incredibly high, with between 50%-60% of first year students dropping out. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) report issued in the year 2000 stated that large numbers of first-year students drop out each year at higher education institutions (CHE, 2000). A study by Scott et al. (2007) found that 25% of all students dropped out in their first year of study, with only 21% being able to graduate within the minimum amount of time that has been allocated for the degree.

In a 2013 report released by the CHE in South Africa, again it was found that only one in four students was able to graduate within the minimum prescribed period for that degree. A total of 58% of students that were enrolled fulltime at an institution needed an extra 2 years to complete a 3-year degree, and this figure increased to 91% for a non-contact based institution (Murray, 2014).

A study by Letseka and Maile (as cited in Murray, 2014), found that South Africa's graduation rate is amongst the lowest in the world (15% across all South African based

universities). The Department of Higher Education in South Africa released a report in 2015 highlighting that 47.9% of university students did not complete their degrees. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 24% of all students at universities in South Africa dropped out in their first year of study in 2015; and 14% dropped out in their third year of study. Fifty-two percent of students took seven years to attain an undergraduate qualification, and 48% never graduated (Yoganathan, 2017).

In Namibia, a few studies have been conducted on student retention rate in the three biggest universities in Namibia. Shikulo (2018) conducted a study titled an “Evaluation of student support services at the Namibia University of Science and Technology’s (NUST) Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning” to identify the problems and challenges experienced with the current implementation of Student Support Services (SSS) as well as the needs of the distance students and the study proposed some recommendations for the improvement of SSS at the regional centres. The researcher was concerned with the uniform implementation of SSS at the regional centres and believed that the way the student support services were implemented at regional centres might be the contributory factors in the high dropout rate and low success and throughput rates.

Hako and Shikongo (2019) examined three factors hindering students from completing their studies within the prescribed duration at UNAM. These factors are educational factors, student support services, and psychosocial factors. The study found that a lack of study skills, poor time management, inability to prioritise schoolwork, and lack of a mentoring programme were the major factors that hinder

student completion of their studies. The study further revealed that the university does not have well-coordinated student support services in place to help students to succeed within the given time frame. The study recommended that students be provided with a conducive and supportive environment where factors impeding their academic progress are minimised.

An annual report of the National Council for Higher Education has reported on the success rate over the years as follows: “The success rate indicates that the respective graduation and repetition rates of 18.8 and 28.6 per cent recorded in public higher education institutions in 2015 are alarming” (National Council for Higher Education, 2017, p.11). This dismal state of affairs is worthy a scientific investigation, thus the justification of the present study. According to the Namibia Higher Education Statistical Yearbook (NHESY) (2018), the total number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Namibia in 2016 was 14 (three public and eleven private) with a total enrolment of 53,661 students. However, the number of students who graduated was 9888 (18,4%).

In 2017, the total number of HEIs was 16 (three public and thirteen private) with a total enrolment of 56,047 students. The number of students who graduated was 9786 (17,5%), while in 2018 the number of HEIs was 17 (three public and fourteen private) with a total enrolment of 59,208. The number of students who graduated was 10,791 (18.2%).

Furthermore, in 2019, the total number of HEIs was 17 (three public and fourteen private) with a total enrolment of 66,428. The number of students who graduated was 11,528 (17.4%). The statistics, however, did not indicate the actual graduation figures of the public and private institutions to determine the number with regards to the public institutions, of which UNAM is the main one.

Namibia, just like governments across the world, allocates a large portion of their annual budget to education. Namibia's allocation of its national budget for education has increased from 22.4% in 2008/9 to 29% in 2012/13. Despite this allocation, the output of the system does not match the input (Shalyefu, 2012). The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, whose budget allocation was nearly N\$14 billion for the 2019/20 fiscal year, received the largest allocation, which at N\$13 767 697, accounts for 21 per cent of the government's budget for that financial year (New Era, 2019). The government acknowledges that education is a good investment to fulfil the country's development plan. However, this massive investment in education and training could be a futile exercise if there is no return on investment due to the high student drop-out rate. The country may continue to experience a shortage of the human resource capacity that is dearly required for social and economic development.

At UNAM, a study titled "Student success study: University of Namibia - Draft report 1" (2018) administered by the Strategic and Physical Planning Unit, aimed at identifying the factors negatively impacting on the completion and graduation rates of students of the 2008 - 2011 first time cohort intakes of the University of Namibia. The preliminary findings of such a low success rate were worrying, and therefore necessitated establishing why this was the case and bringing forth some possible

interventions that can overcome it. The results of the study would be used for planning and decision making for improved student success at UNAM. However, it is not clear whether such a report was provided to UNAM management, together with informed recommendations for the improvement of student success rates and retention. The findings from this study and others mentioned above therefore, raise the question why students choose to leave their study programmes before graduating from universities, and this specifically applies to UNAM.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

As indicated in the background to this study, student retention is a big challenge for most higher education institutions internationally (Al-Dossary, 2008; Gathoni, et al., 2019; Hako & Shikongo, 2019; Parkin & Baldwin, 2009; Viljoen, 2019). Just like other higher education institutions internationally, the University of Namibia is experiencing a problem with the retention of students. The 2008 to 2012 figures indicate that 48.2% of the students did not complete or return or dropped out of the university system (UNAM Statistics, Strategy & Physical Planning, 2016). In 2018 and 2019, the total enrolment at UNAM Main campus was 13,460 and 13,276 respectively. The total number of dropouts was 4307 (32%) and 2655 (20%). This was followed by an enrolment of 13,191 in 2020 with a total drop-out of 3297 (25%). The total enrolment at all UNAM campuses in 2018 was 28,320 and about 13,027 (46%) dropped out. In 2019, the total enrolment was 28,955 and 4343 (15%) did not return in the following year. In 2020, the number of students who enrolled at all UNAM campuses was 29,146 and 6703 (23%) dropped out.

UNAM is aware of this problem with regards to the retention of students and:

*the University will continue to provide equitable access to higher education. Accordingly, the University will strive for internal efficiency by analysing the relationship between input (enrolment, programmes, etc.) and output (graduation, products, etc.) by putting measures in place to manage enrolment, reduce student repetition, increase graduation, improve academic programming, and manage enrolment planning based on available resources, facilities and physical space.”*

(UNAM Strategic Plan 2018-2024, p. 17).

Most of the studies conducted in higher education institutions (Chrysikos & Catterall, 2020; Crosling et al., 2009; Fell, 2017; Tambone, 2012) have identified factors influencing student retention. However, there is little evidence on the studies that have looked at challenges and strategies for student retention that are put in place, particularly in the Namibian context. At UNAM, the statistics given above confirm that the problem of low retention at the University of Namibia is a worrisome reality. The purpose of the current study was therefore to identify the factors influencing student retention rates at the University of Namibia and ultimately to suggest some mitigating strategies. A gap in the available content seems to exist due to a limited amount of empirical research in this area. Therefore, the present study was conducted to identify the challenges experienced by UNAM regarding student retention, and strategies that have been put in place to deal with such challenges. The study proposed a framework based on international best practices identified in the literature. This framework could be adopted by UNAM or any other higher education institution in Namibia and the world, as a strategy to enhance student retention.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to identify the current challenges being experienced by UNAM with regards to student retention and the strategies that can be employed to deal with such challenges. Based on the findings, the study developed a framework for student retention, and benchmarked them it international good practices as an outcome of the study.

#### **1.5 Research questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore and gain in-depth understanding of the challenge of student retention and strategies that UNAM may put in place for promoting student retention. To meet this main objective, the following research questions were pursued

1. Why does UNAM experience a high student dropout rate?
2. How does UNAM deal with the high student dropout rate to enhance student retention?
3. What are the enablers and potential barriers for the realisation of effective student retention strategies at UNAM?
4. What can UNAM learn from the existing best practices in student retention to enhance its current student retention strategy?

#### **1.6 Significance of the study**

This study is significant as it contributes to the current body of knowledge in the literature on student retention. Since most studies only looked at factors influencing student retention but did not focus on the best strategies to deal with challenges related to student retention, the current study offers a possible solution in the form of a

proposed framework. The findings can provide UNAM with information which may help to improve practice, in particular, academic support services that are provided to students and university lecturers. The proposed framework can serve as a blueprint for enhancing student retention at UNAM or any other higher education institution which is considering devising strategies for enhancing student retention. The findings may inform policy makers to review and/or formulate policies that promote student retention. Finally, the findings from this study may stimulate the debate about student retention and inform further research.

### **1.7 Limitations of the study**

The response rate to questionnaires by non-persisters and staff members was initially low as there was no incentive to motivate the non-persisters and staff members to complete the questionnaire. The researcher sent follow-up emails requesting them to participate and this contributed to the increased number of returned questionnaires.

Furthermore, the questionnaire also did not ask whether the non-persisters actually transferred to another institution after leaving UNAM or whether they never returned for studies at UNAM or another institution. Gathering this information was made difficult owing to time constraints and also the fact that the approach was changed from telephone interviews to questionnaires, because the non-persisters were difficult to trace as their telephone numbers had changed, and or they did not have the time or willingness to be interviewed and audio recorded. The impact that the Corona Virus pandemic had on retention was just as great as educational institutions such as UNAM were temporarily closed in an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic. This led to many students leaving for their homes in parts of Namibia with poor or no internet

access. As such, getting students to complete the questionnaire was rather difficult under the prevailing circumstances. The implication of the study findings is limited to UNAM Main campus, but the framework may be useful to other similar study findings.

### **1.8 Delimitations of the study**

The geographical location of the twelve campuses of the University of Namibia posed challenges as this would have required a lot of time and finances to visit these campuses for the purpose of collecting data. As such, the researcher decided to conduct the study at UNAM main campus only. The selected sample was from the Faculties with the highest dropout rate.

### **1.9 Clarification of terms**

Concepts may mean differently in different contexts. In this study, the following concepts refer to the following:

**Attrition/Dropout/Withdrawal** – refers to the state when a student leaves a study programme before graduation

**Retention** – outcome of how many students who remain enrolled at a university and stayed there from one year to the next

**Returned students** – the total number of students from the base year who registered in the preceding year

**Persister** – refers to a student who stays in a study programme until graduation

**Non-persister** – refers to a student who leaves a study programme before graduation

**Social integration** – the interaction of a student with other members of the university community

**Goal commitment** – refers to the degree to which the student is committed or motivated to get a university degree in general (Tinto, 1993).

**Institutional commitment** – refers to the degree to which the student is motivated to persist and complete their degree from a specific university (Tinto, 1993).

### **1.10 Dissertation structure and organisation**

This study is divided into the following six chapters:

Chapter One: Introduction – This chapter introduces the problem of student retention, presents the statement of the problem, the research questions, the significance of the study, limitations of the study, delimitations of the study and definitions of key terminology.

Chapter Two: Theoretical framework and Literature Review – This chapter provides a review of the literature related to the study.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology – This chapter presents the methodology used and the methods adopted for this study.

Chapter Four: Quantitative and qualitative data analysis – This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the data.

Chapter Five: Discussion – This chapter discusses the findings of the study.

Chapter Six: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion – This chapter summarises the study, discusses the implications, provides recommendations and conclusions.

### **1.11 Chapter summary**

This chapter introduced and discussed the background of the study. The chapter looked at the topic for research, identified the research problem, stated the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, limitations and delimitations of the study, definitions of key terminology, and dissertation structure and organisation.

The next chapter presents a review of the related literature to the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of literature on student retention. It is divided into four parts. The first part provides perspectives on student retention, that is, internationally, continentally, and nationally. The second part highlights the challenges facing higher education regarding student retention, and the third part reviews the theoretical framework and models that address the problem of student retention. Theories of departure provide an explanation as to why students drop out of university. The theories that address the problem of student retention are reviewed and studies on student retention internationally, regionally and in the local context. The final part discusses the limitations of the student retention theories.

#### **2.2. Perspectives on student retention**

This section discusses factors that may contribute to student retention or attrition at universities from international, regional and national perspectives. The analysis of the literature is based on official reports from universities and empirical studies.

##### **2.2.1 International perspectives**

The reviewed literature indicates that low student retention is an international phenomenon. Research on student retention includes studies that have extensively explored student retention (Berger et al.; Tinto, 2010; Voigt & Hundrieser, 2008). Some of these studies tried to collect information about factors that might influence students to withdraw from their studies while other studies focused on factors that

might improve student retention to support students to graduate. Calderon (2012, as cited in Burkholder & Holland, 2014) reported that the number of students enrolled in tertiary education worldwide will likely increase 314% between 2000 and 2030.

Data collected from 2513 higher education institutions in the United States and Canada shows that the first-year retention rates are about 20% to 25% (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009). According to the Research Centre's Persistence and Retention Report (2020), only 76% of first-year students in 2018 returned to university for their second year in the United States. This rate represented the third straight year of little improvement in the return rate of students. According to the U.S. Department of Education, an average of 79 percent of first-time students return to college for a subsequent year at four-year institutions, and 60 percent return to two-year institutions. This means that a substantial number of students who enter colleges and universities each autumn will not return the next year (Heizenrader, 2013).

The rate of attrition in doctoral programmes has also been historically high. Approximately 50 percent of all doctoral students in the US fail to complete their programmes, and this number has remained constant for the past fifty years (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Lovitts, 1996). Almost universally, residential doctoral programmes have reported attrition rates of up to 50% for face-to-face programmes and 50-70% for online doctoral programmes (Rigler et al., 2017). The purpose of a critical review of studies on doctoral persistence was to review current literature for doctoral attrition and persistence to identify the reasons and attributes for improved persistence to completion. A sample of 79 studies based on doctoral attrition and persistence were analysed. Four constructs emerged, namely, chair agency and chair-candidate

relationship, candidate socialisation and support systems, candidate preparedness, and financial considerations. These constructs indicated that internal factors from within the doctoral programme have affected attrition. Doctoral leadership was thus encouraged to implement strategies to improve dissertation chair practices through professional development, increased candidate support and socialisation opportunities, the creation of clearer pathways from academic to dissertation research coursework, and improved financial opportunities and support for candidates (Rigler et al., 2017). Doctoral students perceive human factors to be of the utmost importance in doctoral programme completion. In the review of the literature, the human factors of the programme culture, staff-student relationships, and cohort structure were found to be key factors in programme success (Bair, 1999; Parent, 1999). However, these studies only looked at doctoral students and not first-year undergraduate students.

Student retention is also an enormous problem in the United Kingdom, where the administrators of academic institutions now focus most of their efforts on decreasing student attrition, because the ability to retain students has become a determining factor in obtaining outside funding (Nash, 1996).

The relevant literature on student retention has found a wide range of factors which are associated with student retention. In a large-scale study of 8500 students in 33 colleges, Martinez and Munday (1998) found a few factors which were associated with higher dropout among students. Data were collected through interviews with college managers, staff, and students. A review was done of data and accessing pertinent internal documents at each college, and a survey of current and withdrawn students. It was concluded that students are more likely to drop out if they believe that

they had not been placed on the most appropriate course, students were late in applying for their course, are less (compared with their peers) satisfied with the quality of teaching, their course timetable, and/or available help getting a job, are male, and have difficult financial circumstances. The current study focused only on first-year students at UNAM and results could differ because of the number of students interviewed compared to the large-scale study by Martinez and Munday (1998).

Winiiecki et al. (1999) interviewed students (both withdrawals and continuing) on a distance master's programme and found that the main factor which contributed to the decision on whether to continue or withdraw constituted the student's level of satisfaction with the first or second course in the programme. Specific reasons for withdrawal included being dissatisfied with the learning environment, separation between professional and personal interest and the structure of the course, low confidence in distance learning, hesitations about successfully communicating online, lack of competence in utilising distance education software, and feeling overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge and information. Thompson (1997) found that the level of satisfaction of students with the quality of communication with their instructor was one of the key factors that differentiated between students who dropped out and students who continued with their studies. This study only looked at distance students and not full-time students as in the case of the current study.

Astleitner (2000) found that not only communication and social interaction between students and instructors but also the level of social interaction between students and peers was an important factor in students' decision to withdraw from an online course. Park et al. (2011) made similar observations and argue that online students face

potential feelings of isolation as they do not have conventional opportunities to regularly meet face-to-face with educators and peers. Students feeling isolated are at risk of early dropout and regular contact with students, for instance through short motivational messages, as well as meaningful online opportunities for communication and collaboration, can lessen or decrease the risk of isolating students. Communication between institutions of higher education and students also serves the purpose of building effective relationships. These studies focused on online students and results could differ from the current study (Astleitner, 2000; Park et al., 2011).

Ivankova and Stick (2007) and also Bocchi et al, (2004) found that timely and appropriate staff feedback to students, involving students in interactive activities and promptly supporting struggling students were associated with higher retention rates. A qualitative study by Perry et al. (2008) of dropout among online graduate students reported that personal reasons and programme reasons were the most commonly stated reasons for withdrawal. Personal reasons included life or work commitments whereas programme reasons revolved around whether personal and programme learning styles matched the programme with career goals. These studies were conducted with doctoral, masters and online students.

Aldosary and Garba (1999) conducted an investigation into the high student dropout rate particularly during the summer period in the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The objectives of the study were to identify the most important factors perceived to contribute to the dropout problem, establish the ranking of these factors, and assess the implication of the factors for institutional planning and practices. A questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 600

students. The study found the students to be generally motivated and committed to the institution. There was some level of dissatisfaction with social facilities and channels for students to express their personal and academic difficulties to both academic staff and the university administration appear inadequate. Academic performance, the appeal of courses and course instructors appear to be influencing factors in the students' decision to persist or dropout. The current study may build on the results of this study and may address some of the problems highlighted in more detail.

In Saudi Arabia, it was estimated that 35% of students would leave higher education institutions before completing their studies (Al-Saud, 2006 as cited in Al-Dossary, 2008). Low student retention rates reflect negatively on the image of an institution and its academic reputation. This in turn might affect the institution financially (Aljohani, 2014), but there is greater concern about the reasons why university students do not complete their studies. Low retention also affects the students who drop out but also their institutions and the broader educational sector (Ascend Learning, 2012; Griffith University, 2006, 2012, as cited in Aljohani (2014).

Al-Abdulkareem (2012) conducted a study on the factors leading to high attrition rates among trainees in Saudi technical colleges. The completion rate was as low as 24.1% of the total number of students who enrolled in the same year. The study only obtained the views of staff members at 36 technical colleges and responses were analysed quantitatively. The main findings as perceived by staff members were the level of qualification, the students' poor institutional commitment and the low reputation of technical colleges in the society. The current study utilised a mixed method approach and the views of non-persisters, persisters and staff were obtained.

### **2.2.2 Continental perspectives**

A study conducted by Capital Campus (2014, as cited in Gathoni et al., 2019) pointed out that the student dropout rate in universities in Kenya is a fact that should draw the attention of the education authorities and the government. The study was conducted to assess the extent to which counselling services in universities in Kenya influence students' retention rate. The study was carried out in 2018 where one hundred and one medical students in first year second semester from two public universities were studied to determine the effectiveness of counselling services on the retention rate of undergraduate students. Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires while qualitative data were collected using focus group discussions. From the results, it was ascertained that counselling equipped students with knowledge and skills that helped them deal with developmental issues that often interfere with their studies hence the higher retention rate. Counselling can also influence their decision making in switching to other courses, discontinuing studies, or transferring to other institutions. However, the study did not identify factors that influence student retention but only the influence of counselling on student retention rate.

Moreover, Tarimo (2013) conducted a study on factors affecting student enrolment and dropout at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), Lindi Region, to suggest strategies for increasing enrolment while reducing dropout. Quantitative and qualitative methods that involved documentary survey, questionnaires and interviews were used to collect the data. The overall findings revealed that as the students' enrolment increased, the dropout also increased. Identified dropout problems were related to social, personal, financial, academic, students support services and cultural factors.

In summary, insufficient academic support and cultural background barriers were found to be the main reasons for the dropout from studies at OUT Lindi Regional centre. This study has a lot of similarities to what the current study sought to investigate.

According to Moodley and Singh (2015), South Africa has one of the highest first-year university dropout rates in the world. Viljoen (2019) also affirmed that the university dropout rates in South Africa are incredibly high, with between 50-60% of first year students dropping out. Even more so, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) Report issued in 2000 states that large numbers of first-year students drop out each year at higher education institutions (CHE, 2000). A study by Scott et al. (2007) found that 25% of all students dropped out in their first year of study, with only 21% were able to graduate within the minimum amount of time that had been allocated for the degree. In a 2013 report released by the Council of Higher Education in South Africa, again it was found that only one in four students was able to graduate within the minimum prescribed period for that degree. A total of 58% of students enrolled fulltime at an institution needed an extra 2 years to complete a 3-year degree, and this figure increased to 91% for a non-contact-based institution (Murray, 2014).

In addition to those studies, a study by Letseka and Maile (as cited in Murray, 2014) found that South Africa's graduation rate is amongst the lowest in the world (15% across all South African based universities). Furthermore, the Department of Higher Education in South Africa released a report in 2015 highlighting that 47.9% of university students did not complete their degrees. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 24% of all students at universities in South

Africa dropped out in their first year of study in 2015; and 14% dropped out in their third year of study. Fifty-two percent of students took seven years to attain an undergraduate qualification, and 48% never graduated (Yoganathan, 2017).

### **2.2.3 National perspectives**

Nationally, a few studies have been conducted on student retention rate in the three biggest universities in Namibia. The University of Namibia conducted a comprehensive study titled, “Student success study: University of Namibia – Draft report 1” (2018) and the purpose of this study was to identify the factors hindering student success, recommend interventions for improving student success, and develop a scientific tool for measuring the university’s student success and dropout. The study aimed to identify the factors impacting negatively on the completion and graduation rates of students of the 2008 - 2011 first time cohort intakes of the University of Namibia. The preliminary findings of such low success rates were worrisome, and this therefore necessitated establishing why this was the case and the interventions that could help to overcome it. The results of this study would be used for planning and decision making for improved student success at UNAM. It is not stated whether the report was published or provided to the UNAM management with informed recommendations for the improvement of student success rates and retention. The study identified factors hindering student success. The results of this study (Student success study: University of Namibia – Draft report 1 (2018)) could be compared to the findings of the current study to improve student success at UNAM.

Shikulo (2018) conducted a study titled “Evaluation of student support services at the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning” to identify the problems and challenges experienced with the then

current implementation of Student Support Services (SSS), the needs of the distance students, and suggest recommendations for the improvement of SSS at the regional centres. Shikulo was concerned with the uniform implementation of SSS at the regional centres and believed that the way the student support services were implemented at regional centres might be the contributory factors in the high dropout rate and low success and throughput rates. Shikulo proposed that the current model of SSS should be redesigned to respond to the challenges facing distance education students at the regional centres. A model for implementation of SSS was developed to pave the way for effective implementation geared towards reducing the dropout rates and increasing success rates. The study by Shikulo only focused on distance students.

In a research project titled “Students’ dropout in continuing education: A Namibian case study”, Murangi (1996) investigated the causes for student dropouts in continuing education face-to-face centres. The sample in the study consisted of one hundred and seventy learners (including both current and non-continuing learners), and sixty tutors. In this context, dropout refers to those students enrolling for a course (Grade 10) at face-to-face centres and discontinuing their studies before completing the entire course. Murangi found that the students' decision to withdraw from face-to-face centres was based on the demographic, environmental, psychological, and institutional factors. Although gender and age as background information are reported in the study, these were not considered as significant factors influencing the students' decision to withdraw from centres. Predominantly, the results of Murangi’s (1996) study indicated that the large numbers of students who dropped out of the programme did so because of some personal reasons rather than reasons based on the institution

or tutors. The study focused on learners at the Namibia College for Open Learning (NAMCOL) and not university students.

Hako and Shikongo (2019) examined three factors hindering students from the completion of the Bachelor of Education programme within the prescribed duration at UNAM. These factors are educational factors, student support services, and psychosocial factors. The study found that a lack of study skills, poor time management, inability to prioritise schoolwork, and lack of a mentoring programme were the major factors that hinder students' completion of their study. The study further revealed that the university has no well-coordinated student support services in place to help students to succeed within the given time frame. The study recommended that students be provided with a conducive and supportive environment where factors impeding their academic progress are minimised. This study examined factors hindering students from completing a programme in the prescribed time and not why students drop out in the first year or do not return in the following year.

The annual reports of the National Council for Higher Education have also reported on the success rate over the years. The success rate indicates that “the respective graduation and repetition rates of 18.8 and 28.6 per cent recorded in public higher education institutions in 2015 are alarming” (National Council for Higher Education, 2017, p.11), and therefore it is worthy of scientific investigation.

Namibia, just like many governments across the world, allocates a large portion of its annual budget to education. Namibia's allocation of its national budget for education has increased from 22.4% in 2008/9 to 29% in 2012/13. Despite this allocation, the

output of the system does not match the input (Shalyefu, 2012). The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, whose budget allocation was nearly N\$14 billion for the 2019/20 fiscal year, has requested that additional funding be availed to it during the mid-year budget review. The Ministry received the largest allocation, which at N\$13 767 697 accounts for 21 per cent of the government's budget for the current financial year. The government believes that education is a good investment to fulfil the country's development plan (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, (MoEAC), 2020).

The studies and statistics cited above raise the question as to why students choose to leave their study programmes before graduation from universities, more specifically, UNAM.

### **2.3 Challenges facing higher education regarding student retention**

Students may not continue with their studies for a variety of factors (Crosling et al., 2009). Research exploring the reasons for student withdrawal tends to conclude that there is rarely a single reason why students leave. In most cases, students leave because of a combination of inter-related factors. These factors can include poor quality of instruction at the institution, the image of the institution, ineffective study skills, poor support services, difficulty adjusting to university or college life, poor extracurricular activities, poor advice, poor housing or accommodation, and lack of social integration (Haverila et al., 2020).

Jones (2008) and Long et al. (2006) identified the following categories of reasons why students withdraw: poor preparation for higher education, weak institutional and/or course match, poor fit and lack of commitment, unsatisfactory academic experience,

lack of social integration, financial issues, and personal circumstances. Evidence from national and international studies points to the lack of preparation for Higher Education (HE) in the UK as a major factor for students' non-completion of courses. The findings illustrate that allowing pre-entry students to develop a transparent understanding of the expectations of HE studies, that they can be supported in the transition to HE by parents or carers or friends (Murtagh, 2012).

McInnis et al. (2000) and Yorke (2000) report that students frequently receive poor information before entering HE and this can result in students making inappropriate decisions about which institutions to attend and which courses to embark upon. Thus, some students withdraw for personal reasons and changed personal circumstances, wrong or 'second choice' course selection and movement to other courses that meet their interests and aspirations more directly.

Sydow and Sandel (1998) conducted a study titled, "Making student retention an institutional priority" to determine the reasons behind the unusually high rate of student attrition at Mountain Empire Community College in the US. The challenges and obstacles cited included poor academic preparation, poor study habits, low grades, poor advice, inadequate orientation, heavy class loads, poor class attendance, and lack of awareness of the demands of college.

A great deal of research literature provides evidence that study habits and study attitudes are both significant variables which determine the academic performance of students (Boehler et al., 2001; Hussain, 2006; Ogunyemi & Hassan, 2011, as cited in Aquino, 2011). Despite the perceived importance of study habits and study attitudes

to educational achievement, very little attention was given by academic institutions to improve these factors thus far. Results of the study show that students generally do not approve teacher methods and classroom management, and they have inefficient time management.

In the US, as cited in U-Planner (2020), the following challenges have been identified: Personal difficulties with the most common challenges identified pertaining to health, finances, family, work, and problems to fit in or making friends. Secondly, where there is a lack of academic preparedness, weak academic knowledge, or specific study skills required to tackle the demands of university study. It has also been observed that part-time students are significantly less likely to continue into the second year of study compared to full-time students. Dropout is further linked to the student making an uncertain or the wrong subject/programme/university choice. This may be a result of insufficient information being provided before enrolment or inadequate consideration of educational and career goals. Students also do not get into the university degree of their first choice and as such, they lose interest in the programme or subject area.

According to Richițeanu-Năstase and Stăiculescu (2018) factors leading to university dropout may be of a social nature (student background, income level), psychopedagogical (inadequate academic training, inconsistency between prior training and university studies, lack of counselling services) and personal reasons (poor adaptability to the university, low levels of socio-emotional intelligence). Universities need to cope with this phenomenon, adapt and develop prevention and intervention services so that students' retention rate can improve.

In a study titled, “Addressing student dropout rates at South African Universities”, Moodley and Singh (2015) concluded their study by stating several reasons why students leave Higher Education Institutions (HEI) prior to graduating. These reasons are the affordability to attend a HEI, a lack of academic support and the lack of career guidance and being a first-generation student. Commitment from both the student and the institution is paramount if the various strategies proposed can be effectively implemented (Moodley & Singh, 2015).

Earlier research has shown that an excessive workload has a substantial negative effect on students' well-being and study success. Excessive workload has been associated with many problems such as decreased performance and motivation to study, burnout, anxiety, and depression (Bachman & Bachman, 2006). The goal of their study titled “Student perceptions of academic workload in architectural education” was to devise a metric by which an undergraduate architecture curriculum could work towards an optimal balance between stimulating workload stress on one hand and productive learning with high student satisfaction on the other. A thematic model was established to explain the relations of academic workload, job employment, performance, and satisfaction, and to provide a framework for analysis. Findings showed that excessive stress due to workload (study time and job hours) decreased performance and increased anxiety and depression and self-efficacy and social support mediated the effects of stress. Thus, excessive workload can have a severe negative effect on the students' well-being and study success and the means to reduce students' perceived workload should be introduced at institutions.

## **2.4 Factors associated with student attrition**

Common factors affecting student retention were investigated and discussed using different student retention models. Aljohani (2014) mentioned that the quality of the student's institutional experience and the level of the student's integration into the academic and social system of the academic institution were the most influential variables as reported by the major student retention models (Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Some of the most common factors that contribute to influencing a student's decision to withdraw from their study programmes and university as mentioned by Sagenmüller (2018, as cited in U-Planner, 2020) are personal difficulties experienced by students as the most commonly given explanation. These include health, finances, family, work and difficulties fitting in or making friends. Lack of being academically prepared, poor academic knowledge or specific study skills required to deal with the demands of the programme, further add to the difficulties experienced. The students struggle to deal with the pressure of the workload, and they experience an inability to manage time and workload demands. As a result, they fall behind in their studies. This all leads to the student becoming dissatisfied with their university experience, the quality of the curriculum or the teaching provided by the lecturers.

As can be seen, there are many factors that have some influence in how this problem is being experienced in every university around the world. Several causes are related to social factors that belong to a certain society and there could be some extant differences from factors of a society from another country, or even another continent.

Terenzini et al. (1994) mention several reasons as to why first-year students do not return to an institution in their second year of study. Firstly, some students leave because of financial problems, struggle to fit into the institution, and their academic or career goals or unrelated personal circumstances have changed. Secondly, students leave because an institution has failed to create a conducive environment to fulfil their learning and educational needs. The students might therefore be unhappy with the education that they are receiving. Thirdly, they can have trouble managing the workload or assimilating within the student population and become discouraged to return the following year.

Fourthly, students may lack the motivation to perform well because they may not understand the importance of education and/or do not know how to apply the learnt theories to real-life problems. Finally, Terenzini et al. (1994) are of the opinion that first-year students might become stressed by the sudden changes because of the transition between school and the higher institution of learning even before they complete their first year of study.

In an article titled, “Factors contributing to student retention in online learning and recommended strategies for improvement: A systematic literature review”, Muljana and Luo (2019) investigated the underlying factors that influence the gap between the popularity of online learning and its completion rate. The student retention rates in online learning are significantly lower than those in the traditional environment. A systematic literature review was conducted on 40 studies published between 2010 and 2018.

The findings revealed factors that include institutional support, the level of difficulty of the programmes, the promotion of a sense of belonging, facilitation of learning, course design, student behavioural characteristics, and demographic variables along with other personal variables. The recommended strategies identified for improving student retention are early interventions, at-all-times support for students, effective communication, support for staff teaching online classes, high-quality instructional feedback and strategies, guidance to foster positive behavioural characteristics, and collaboration among stakeholders to support online students.

Roberts (2018) published a paper titled “Professional staff contributions to student retention and success in higher education.” The paper focussed on the contributions that professional staff make within the student lifecycle and how they can most readily plan and direct their contributions to student retention and success. The paper indicates that student retention remains a persistent problem within the Australian higher education sector. Contributing factors include financial, reputational, and quality issues, which can pose significant risks for a university’s sustainability. Therefore, student retention requires a sustained and deeply embedded commitment from all parts of the institution, placing the student experience at the forefront of all activities of the student. Applying a student lifecycle approach to the way in which institutions think about student retention can have benefits to students as the institution provides comprehensive and consistent support.

## **2.5 Strategies to improve student retention rates**

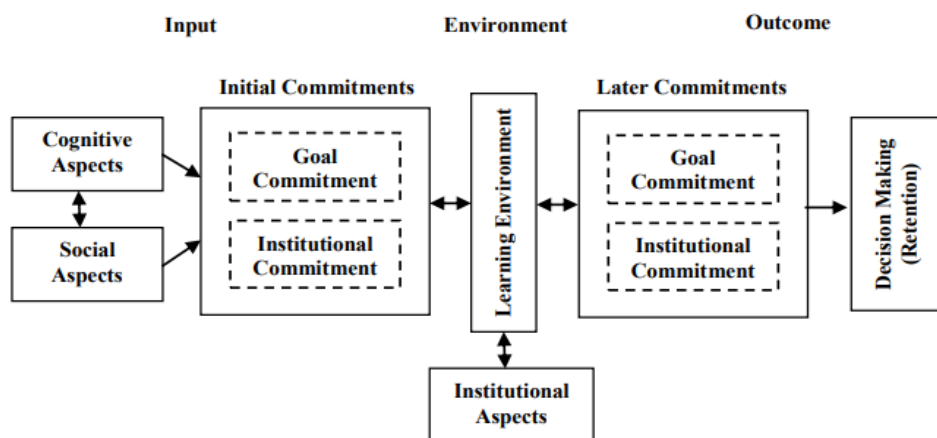
Various studies also identified and documented various strategies that the institutions were using to improve student retention rates (Harvey & Williams, 1989; Noel et al.,

1985). Such strategies include special courses, special counselling and orientation programmes, individual counselling and mentoring, learning skills and tutoring programmes, and staff development and training as examples.

A few studies were conducted to determine the reasons behind the high rate of student drop-out at their respective institutions. The findings or results were then used to develop a student retention plan. Sydow and Sandel (1998) conducted a study titled “Making student retention an institutional priority” to develop a comprehensive retention plan to improve student persistence at an institution in Virginia, USA. All students who withdrew from classes before the end of the semester were contacted and requested to participate in a telephone survey. Staff were asked to complete a staff opinion survey. The prevailing opinion was that the institution needed a retention plan and that a task force be formed to work on such a plan. The main focus of the plan was on classroom strategies for improving retention. Several of the recommendations of the task force have already been implemented such as a retention-conscious orientation programme, improving interaction between students and staff, improving class and programme accessibility to students, introducing weekend classes and expansion of distance learning alternatives. The efforts were being monitored and it was envisaged that the College’s Fall-to-Spring Overall Retention Rate will increase to 70% and the Fall-to-Spring Retention Rates for first-time, curricular students will increase to 75% by 2015 (Mountain Empire Community College, 2022). Efforts to establish whether the envisaged improvement in the retention rate has materialised at MECC have been unsuccessful.

In another study titled “A student retention model: Empirical, theoretical and pragmatic considerations” Atif et al. (2013) conducted a study to develop a student retention model utilising student demographic data and a combination of data from student information systems, course management systems and other similar tools to accurately predict academic success of students at Macquarie University, Australia. Their research builds on Tinto’s model by incorporating a number of components from Bean’s, Astin’s and Swail’s models. A mixed-methods concurrent triangulation strategy was used, and the results were expected to indicate which factors were most important in developing a student retention model or system to predict and suggest interventions to improve student retention.

A model consisting of seven components was proposed. The components are cognitive aspects, social aspects, initial commitment, learning environment, institutional aspects, later commitments and decision to persist or retain. It is believed that this model can provide a solid foundation for student growth, development, and retention. It can help institutions to work proactively to support student retention and achievement.



**Figure 2.1: Proposed Eclectic Model of Student Retention**

Source: Atif et al. (2013)

The above study also proposed that in order to identify factors affecting student retention, a mixed-methods approach would be used where quantitative and qualitative approaches are combined and data from both approaches are collected and analysed at the same time. Such an approach can also provide strong evidence for conclusions and increase the validity of the results and conclusions (Atif et al. 2013). This framework would be implemented using an information system (IS) to suggest interventions.

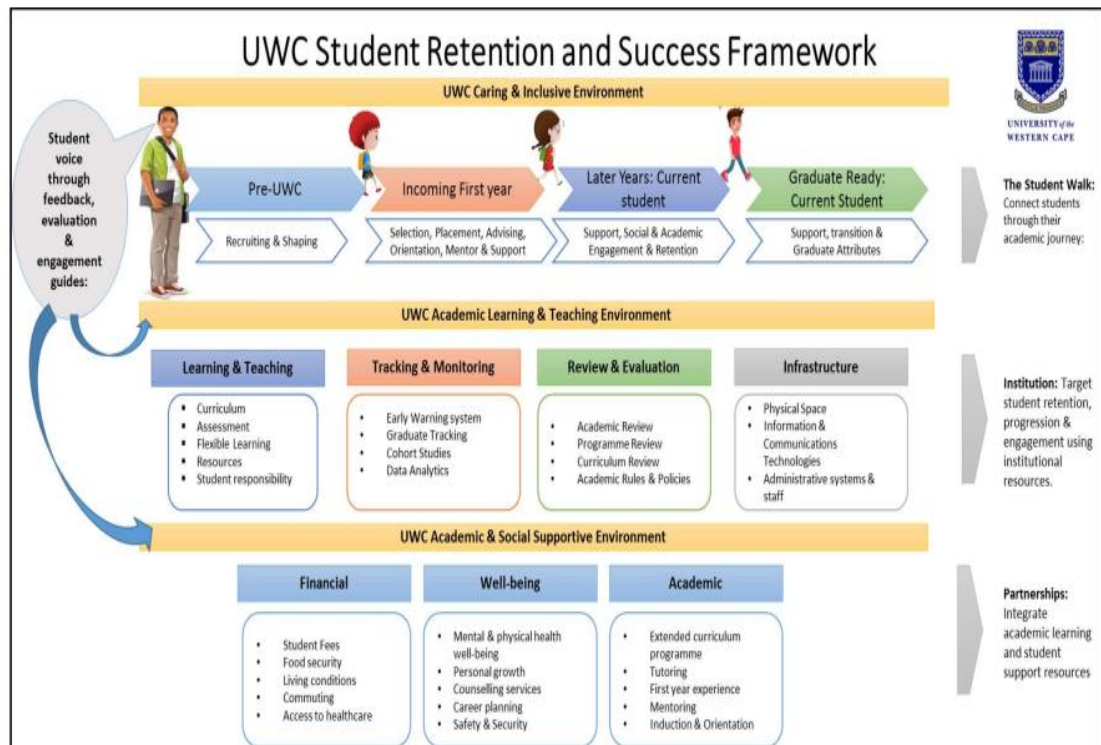
The University of Western Cape's (UWC) study on retention and success, entitled 'Operation Student Success (2016-2018)' similarly found evidence of high attrition and low retention rates. A significant number of students drop-out of university and fewer complete in regulation time, i.e., the standard duration of study. UWC's Student Retention and Success Framework attempts to prioritise the retention and success of undergraduate students. It is hoped that the framework will be followed by Student Retention Action Plans that will identify action steps, responsible parties, timelines and intended outcomes.

The university's statistical data shows that on average, UWC loses around 20% of students by the start of their second year; and an additional 20% of students in the following two years. Thus, UWC has implemented two projects namely, First Year Experience (FYE) and First Year Transition Programme (FYTP) under the banner Operation Student Success to address first year student transition and success. The First Year Experience at UWC is a new initiative at the institution. It is anticipated to foster a successful undergraduate student experience through strategic programming that focuses on positive academic transitions and the development of learning communities. The aim of UWC's FYE is to provide student-centred initiatives to

enhance FY student transition and a quality student experience, thereby enabling students to stay and succeed at UWC.

The First Year Transition Programme (FYTP) is a second new initiative at UWC. The focus is to provide first year undergraduate students with mentorship to promote student success through engagement. The goal is to support all first-year students to help them reach their full potential in their university experience. The FYTP assists students with a smooth transition beyond first year at university so that they can graduate within the minimum possible period. The retention and throughput of students is facilitated using different strategies and interventions in the FYTP.

Subotsky and Prinsloo (2011) employed the concept of the student walk at UWC which begins with recruitment and application and then proceeds through selection, registration, and orientation, and includes every phase of the student journey to graduation.



**Figure 2.2: UWC student retention and success framework**

Source: University of the Western Cape Student Retention and Success Framework (Brown & Pather, 2018)

Over the past few years, institutions have been experiencing declining enrolment and they are looking to strategically attract and retain more students (Ohrablo, 2017). In a paper titled “The role of proactive advising in student success and retention” Ohrablo argues that academic advisors can play a critical role in promoting students’ success to retain them. In Ohrablo’s view, students who feel connected to an institution, feel cared about, understand their purpose, and have clear academic and career goals tend to persist in their academic endeavours. Academic advisors can therefore assist students in the areas of engagement, academic planning, decision making, and problem resolution. This strategy for engaging students in purposeful discussions is through proactive advising. Historically known as intrusive advising, proactive

advising is characterised by institution-initiated contact with students to achieve a specific goal. That goal may be enrolment, academic support, or student engagement.

Fares (2020) conducted a study titled “The relationship between academic advising and student motivation on the persistence of freshman exploratory studies students.” The research was guided by the theoretical framework of Tinto's (1975) model of student departure and Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate a relationship with the student-advisor relationship and locus of control as an essential variable to understand Exploratory Studies students' success. The results of this study suggest that both the academic advising experience in association with Exploratory Studies students' motivation impacts their persistence beyond their first-year in college. The findings support the work of Astin and Tinto, with regards to students' experiences and involvement, specifically in their first year of college. It further influences their persistence or departure as a reflection of their success or failure. Student engagement is a variable in student retention, and therefore students' interaction with their academic advisor results in the probability of first-year persistence for students.

A study by Muljana and Lou (2019) titled “Factors contributing to student retention in online learning and recommended strategies for improvement: A systematic literature review,” adds to literature regarding student retention strategies within the higher education setting. Factors that were identified include institutional support, the level difficulty of the programmes, the promotion of a sense of belonging, facilitation of learning, course design, student behavioural characteristics, and demographic variables as well as other personal factors. The recommended strategies by the researchers for improving student retention are early interventions, at-all-times

support for students, effective communication, support for staff teaching online classes, high-quality instructional feedback and strategies, guidance to foster positive behavioural characteristics, and collaboration among stakeholders to support online students.

A study conducted by Aquino (2011), titled “Study habits and attitudes of freshmen students: Implications for academic intervention programmes” suggests comprehensive academic interventions to improve the study habits and attitudes of the students. The provision of remedial courses, academic learning centres, academic advising, personal counselling, and academic and career skills can be regarded as helpful in improving students’ study habits and attitudes to improve students’ performance and subsequently student retention (Patrick et al., 1988, as cited in Aquino, 2011). Moreover, the findings of this study were derived from a single cohort of first-year students from the University of Saint Louis. Thus, the extent to which results are generalisable to other content areas and institutions, therefore, calls for further investigation.

Swail (1995, as cited in Moodley & Singh, 2015) states that the “focus of academic services in terms of student retention should be based on providing supplementary support to students, in addition to class contact” (p. 98). This entails providing academic advising, supplementary instruction, tutoring and mentoring, research opportunities, pre-university programming and bridging programmes. Swail states that the university should provide proper guidance that addresses the needs of the students.

Heaney and Fisher (2011) in a case study titled “Supporting conditionally-admitted students: A case study of assessing persistence in a learning community” believe that newly admitted students feel less confident in their ability to succeed in academic settings and as such they need additional help in developing habits that are favourable to academic success. Thus, orientation programmes are organised to facilitate academic and social interactions. The orientation programmes increase students’ involvement and enhance students’ sense of belonging to the learning community (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2011 as cited in Heany & Fisher, 2011). Orientation programmes are essential in helping students to persist and they are believed to increase retention. They are also the bridge between the last stages of student recruitment and the first stage of retention. Orientation programmes are geared towards introducing new students to university services that support their educational and personal goals. In addition, they also assist students in gaining the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them to adjust and make a smooth transition into the university community.

Larabi-Marie-Sainte et al.’s (2021) study investigated the impact of the timetable on students’ absence from classes and their performance. Students’ academic performance can be affected by several factors and one of them is student absences. This is when they miss lectures and other class activities. Studies related to university timetabling investigate the different techniques and algorithms to design course timetables without analysing the relationship between student attendance and timetable design. The article by Larabi-Marie-Sainte et al. (2021) firstly aimed at demonstrating the impact of absences and timetabling design on students’ academic performance. Secondly, this study showed that the number of absences can be caused

by three main timetable design factors, namely, (1) the number of courses per semester, (2) the average number of lectures per day and (3) the average number of free timeslots per day. This was demonstrated using Educational Data Mining on a large dataset collected from Prince Sultan University. The results demonstrated the importance of designing course timetables in view of student absence behaviour. Some suggestions were reported such as limiting the number of enrolled courses based on the student's GPA, avoiding busy and almost free days and using automated timetabling to minimise the number of predicted absences. This in turn will help in generating balanced student timetables, and thus improving student academic performance.

Identifying barriers to persistence requires a collective effort to honestly identify and consider systemic issues that impede student progress (Banks & Dohy, 2018). Seven constructs or enablers can influence student retention. These are academic advising, social connectedness, student involvement, staff approachability, business procedures, learning experiences, and student support services (Hanover Research, 2014). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could learn from the following existing best practices in student retention to enhance their current student retention strategy. For any institution focused on improving student success outcomes, reviewing data and developing a definition of success for a particular campus is an essential first step (Fishman et al., 2017). Once this is clearly formulated, the institution can develop a student-centred strategy including the classroom, support services, campus operations, and relationships that integrate with the broader community as every part of the campus community contributes to the ultimate success of the student. Strategies

for improving retention must reflect student needs and circumstances and must be designed and implemented to support the students in reaching their academic goals.

One of the greatest challenges to improving student success is overcoming obstacles on how to effectively identify and implement the changes needed. The University of South Florida in the US first developed its own predictive analytic tools to track and monitor student retention and success and retention rates did not improve. Only 60% of student services positively impact student retention, according to a new analysis of more than 1,000 initiatives across 55 colleges from Civitas Learning. Of the remaining 40% initiatives that had a "neutral impact," however, 15% of participating students saw a lift in their persistence rates.

Florida International University invested in professional advisors focused on course planning and navigation and they have seen substantial increases in both retention and completion. Peer-to-peer support systems are also in place in many institutions. These may be peer tutoring, peer mentoring or peer counselling. Examples exist throughout the US, and many are shown to create additional support for students, especially first generation students. Within the University of Main System in the US (a university system is a set of multiple affiliated universities and colleges that are usually geographically distributed), a peer-to-peer financial literacy programme, peer tutoring across many campuses, and peer counselling are in place in specific areas such as student affairs. They believe that knowing students on a deeper level is the first step towards designing effective retention strategies and choosing adequate technology to manage the student's journey (U-Planner, 2020).

In addition to the enablers mentioned above, supporting students to persevere in higher education requires a detailed understanding of what makes them stay enrolled and focused on their studies. Monash University, Australia's largest university in their "Student retention strategy (2019)" details findings of a comprehensive analysis that was undertaken which demonstrated that multiple and complementary retention strategies are needed. The results indicated that student networks present an opportunity to increase feedback channels, and greatly improve student outcomes. Academic performance was also found to be a key driver of student retention, with students who were underperforming academically at a much-increased risk of dropout.

Another key factor associated with student retention is a strong sense of belonging to an institution. The lower an undergraduate student's sense of belonging, the more likely they are to consider leaving university. Undergraduate students are most likely to indicate that drop-out was due to health or stress, boredom/lack of interest, study/life balance, workload difficulties, which highlight the importance of providing students with timely and relevant support. Furthermore, attention should be given to these students before considering leaving the institution which results in actual discontinuation. The Student Success Advisor model developed by the Faculty of Education at Monash University, in which students receive regular proactive contact from a dedicated team, is one example of ongoing support enabling successful early intervention (Monash University, Student retention strategy (2019)).

Boyd and Mckendry (2012) conducted a study titled “Staying the course: Examining enablers and barriers to student success within undergraduate nursing programmes” to examine retention enablers at a Scottish university. The aim of the research was to gain a better understanding of the factors which allowed students to overcome potential difficulties and resolve to persist in their studies. Evidence from research into the experiences of nursing students suggests a variety of related variables. Within the literature, the familiar causes of academic failure (White et al., 1999), balancing personal commitment with work and study (Glossop, 2001) and the impact of financial difficulties (Glossop, 2002; Last & Fulbrook, 2003) were all mentioned. These factors could potentially have a significant enough effect on the student experience to result in withdrawal from a programme of study. The literature also mentions the role played by placement (Bouden, 2008; Last & Fulbrook, 2003) and how this may affect the levels of stress amongst nursing students (Steele, 2005, as cited in Boyd & Mckendry, 2012).

A few factors emerged from the study that appear to play a major role in positively influencing students’ decisions to stay on with their studies. Firstly, all students noted the usefulness of problem based learning (PBL) as a learning strategy. They mentioned its effectiveness in developing critical skills, learner confidence in using research to inform decision-making and enhancing students’ ability to participate in group work. Secondly, students experienced difficulties balancing placement and university, but this provided the necessary variation in routine and stimulus within their programme of study, thus helping them to maintain interest and motivation to continue. Thirdly, there was a feeling of not quite being ready for them to start work,

but many of the students pinned their hope on their final year placement in consolidating their knowledge, experience and confidence.

Fourthly, several students spoke not only of the importance of choosing their right area of study or profession, but also of the role it played in maintaining momentum and remaining motivated when they had considered withdrawal. Fifthly, all students had at some point considered withdrawing from their programme of study, and many highlighted moments in their student journey which were particularly difficult. During these problematic times, the support and guidance of members of academic staff was indicated as vital in the continuation of their studies. They also used language pertaining to persistence or perseverance in describing how they set themselves goals to be motivated. Finally, students encouraged one another to stay on their programme when experiencing academic, personal or placement-related difficulties as a form of peer-support. These enablers can play an important role in student retention at UNAM.

## **2.6 Conceptual framework**

There are at least three primary applications of theory in qualitative research: (1) theory of research paradigm and method (Glesne, 2011), (2) theory building as a result of data collection (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010), and (3) theory as a framework to guide the study (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Tinto's (1975, 1993) Institutional Departure Model and Bean's (1980, 1980) Student Attrition Model have been widely recognised and used as theoretical models in student retention studies. They provide a framework to study retention and they have been useful in the design of this study as well as data

collection using questions that were developed from Tinto's theory. They were also used in the analysis of the data.

Researchers have developed several theories of student retention to identify and analyse the factors affecting student retention. Researchers and higher education practitioners have employed the work of Vincent Tinto (1975) to gain more knowledge around issues of student success (Dornan, 2015). Many of the theories used in student retention have thus been developed using Tinto's (1975) model of student persistence. The theory states that student persistence occurs when a student successfully integrates socially and academically into an institution and this is influenced by factors such as characteristics and goals, interaction with other students and university staff members, and social and external factors. Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) wrote that since 1970, the main theoretical tradition in the study of student retention has been sociological, focusing on the behaviour that distinguishes groups of students who stay at institutions from groups of students who leave. Psychological and socio-psychological approaches began to develop after 1980. The focus here was concerned with how individuals assess themselves in an educational context. In the 1990s, the focus shifted to an interest in how economic factors affect retention and how the cultural factors that are characteristic of subgroups of students affect retention decisions, particularly in terms of minority student retention.

Tinto's (1993) student integration theory is the most widely cited retention theory. In the current study, Tinto's (1993) student integration theory has therefore been used. The main points of Tinto's (1993) student integration theory are social and academic integration in relation to a student's commitment to the institution and/or outside

efforts (Chrysikos et al., 2017). Tinto (1993) also categorised student retention theories into three types, that is, psychological, environmental and interactional. Psychological theories focus on individual personality attributes and they link any given behaviour (in this case, retention) with similar past behaviour, normative values, attitudes, and intentions. Student drop-out is viewed as a shortcoming or weakness in the individual. Key theories in this category are Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory and Bean and Eaton's (2000) Psychological Theory.

Environmental theories focus on the social, economic, and organisational forces that impact student retention (Tinto, 1993). According to Tinto, the environmental theories are those that emphasise the role of factors other than the individual (psychological) characteristics of the students on their behaviours within their academic institutions. Social forces such as social status, race, prestige and opportunity which have an effect on student retention are emphasised. Among the social factors affecting retention are close friends on campus, peer culture, social involvement, informal contact with staff, identification with a group on campus, and social integration.

Economic theories stress the importance of finances and financial assistance in student retention (Tinto, 1993). Tinto argues that financial problems are not the most important factor in a student's decision to drop out but rather other factors that are not related to finance. Even though students may experience financial problems but still have a positive experience at university, they are likely to continue their studies.

Organisational theories focus on the effect of organisational factors like institutional resources and goals, orientation programmes, rules and regulations, involvement in decision-making, counselling, and staff attitudes towards students. Despite the fact that organisational theories are useful in explaining student retention between higher education institutions, Tinto (1993) believes that they are less useful in explaining retention within institutions. The key theory in this category is Bean and Metzner's (1985) Student Attrition Theory.

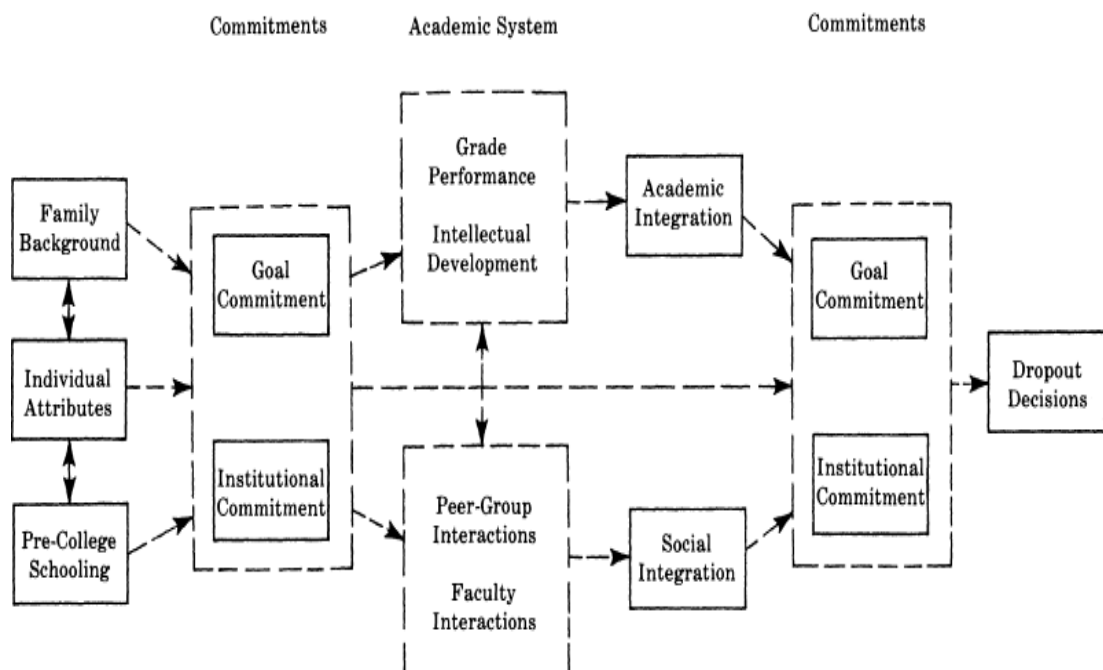
Interactional theories' main focus is on the influence of individual and environmental factors on student retention and Tinto's (1975, 1993) Student Integration Theory is the key theory in this category on student retention. There is a consensus among scholars of the validity of Tinto's theory and this is evident in the high number of citations of Tinto's (1975) original theory (Braxton et al., 2004 as cited in Reisinger, 2016).

Higher Education has long had an interest in student retention and withdrawal. Models of withdrawal by Spady (1970, 1971); Terenzini and Pascarella (1980); Tinto (1975, 1982, 1993) and have investigated the impact of various aspects of the student experience in the decision to stay on or withdraw from an academic programme of study. Bean and Metzner (1985) identify four such areas where a connection or relationship could be noted. These are academic achievement, learner confidence and engagement, previous educational experiences, and environmental variables, such as finance or employment.

More recent studies have identified additional variables such as assessment and approaches to new forms of learning and teaching (Packham et al., 2004), attendance (Dancer & Fiebig, 2004), the significance of peer support and social networks (Wilcox et al., 2005), appropriateness of choice of programme (Davies & Elias, 2003), as well as variances in background characteristics such as gender, race, ability and work experience and the demographic characteristics of families and students' activities and prior achievements (Bank et al., 1992).

Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Theory is the most recognised and researched model of student retention.

### 2.6.1 Tinto's (1975, 1993) Student Integration Theory



**Figure 2.3: Tinto's (1975, 1993) Student Integration Theory**

Source: Schutts (2016). The use of receiver operating characteristic curve analysis for academic progress and degree completion)

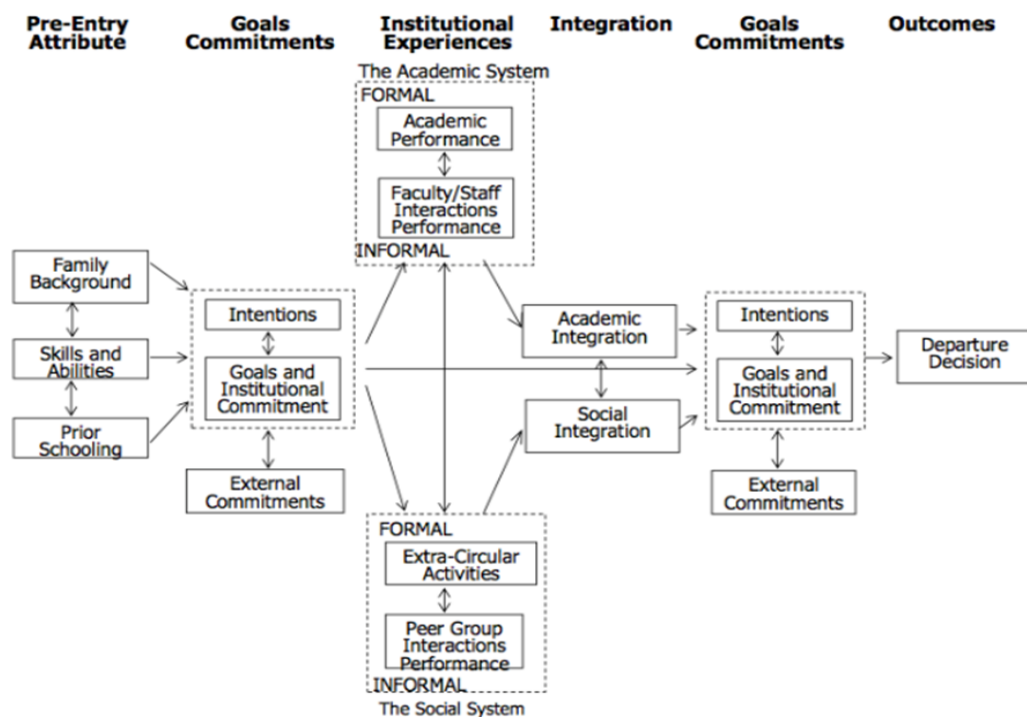
Tinto's (1975, 1993) model of student retention is recognised in literature as one of the most comprehensive explanations of why students leave university. The model draws on the work of sociologists Emile Durkheim (1951) and Arnold Van Gennep (1960), and states that persistence is a function of the fit between a student's motivation and academic ability and the institution's academic and social characteristics. Therefore, it appears that the stronger a student's institutional commitment, the more likely that student is to persist in his/her studies to ultimately graduate. Tinto wanted to demonstrate the effect of various all-round interactions within the system on student persistence. He referred to as "the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out" (Tinto, 1975, p. 96). The central idea is "integration" stating that the student's decision to persist or drop out is strongly influenced by the degree of academic and social integration. Academic and social integration influence goal and institutional commitments which lead to the decision made by the student to remain at the institution or drop out of the institution.

The student's experience at the institution contributes towards their decision to persist or drop out. If the student is successful in integrating into the community of the institution or fails to incorporate the processes or stages of transition, it may influence the decision to persist or drop out. The student must detach themselves from people, that is, separation from their family and friends and try to acquire the norms and values of the new environment and people and once this has been achieved which is termed by Tinto as the transition stage, the student can then begin the process of integration into the new institution or community.

The next is the actual process of transition into a new environment where they separate from their family community and starting to interact with the new group on campus. Then follows incorporation into the new community and the final stage is persistence and graduation. So what leads to student departure or drop out? Forced departure is described by Tinto as being caused by poor grades, financial problems and being called back home by their families. Then there is voluntary departure. These include isolation from other students, homesickness, transfer to another institution and cost benefit especially among low-income students.

### 2.6.2 Tinto's Revised Theory (1993)

The final version of Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1993) regards student retention as the degree to which a student becomes integrated into the social and academic life of the academic institution.



**Figure 2.4: Tinto's Revised Theory**

Source: (Tinto (1993, p. 114)

This theory states that students would remain at the institution if they separate themselves from the family and high school friends. Tinto (1993) identifies three major sources of student departure. These are academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). According to his modified theory, families, neighbourhoods, peer groups and work environments can also have a direct influence on students' goals and commitments.

This "Model of Institutional Departure" states that in order for students to persist, they need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems. He proposed that the stronger the individual's level of social and academic integration, the greater his or her subsequent commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation (Pascarella et al., 1986). If the academic system is strong, even though the social system and other external forces are weak, the student can still be successful. If the social system is much stronger than the academic system, the student is less likely to be successful.

Tinto (1987) suggested that an "institutional assessment is a crucial pre-requisite for the establishment of institutional retention policy" (p. 138). The present study, therefore, focuses on the application of Tinto's model to assess the differences of academic and social integration climate as perceived by the students between subject groups at various stages of their undergraduate studies at UNAM.

To summarise, student retention has been studied from five theoretical perspectives namely, psychological, social, economic, organisational, and interactional. The focus of the psychological perspective was on individual personality attributes. On the other hand, the social perspective focuses on social issues such as social status, race, and prestige. The economic perspective focuses on financial problems and the financial assistance that affects student retention. The organisational perspective is concerned with the effect of organisational factors such as bureaucratic structure, size, and staff-student ratios on student retention. The interactional perspective focuses on the influence of the interaction of individual and environmental factors on student retention (Al-Dossery, 2008).

## **2.7 Studies testing Tinto's model**

Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM) (Tinto, 1975) remains the most influential model of dropout from tertiary education (McCubbin, 2003). Brunsten et al.'s (2000) study, "Why do HE students drop out? A test of Tinto's model" examined Tinto's (1975) model of student attrition. Findings showed that the model does not provide an acceptable description of the data. The findings were based on a test of the model as a whole, as well as tests of individual paths within the model. Investigations conducted earlier had been largely supportive, and reasons were considered for the disparity between previous and current findings. It is suggested that Tinto's view may not be the most appropriate for research to determine the reduction in numbers of students attending courses at a university. A review of the literature indicates that the Student Integration Model has prompted research which has validated Tinto's model across different types of institutions with differing student populations. Despite this shortcoming Tinto's model is still largely used by high level educational

institutions as a reference model for dealing with student dropout, providing educational institutions with a way of organising and directing both the study and the analysis of the problem, and aiming at solving it.

Some researchers have tested Tinto's model with the addition of other constructs to improve the explanatory power of the model and to provide information about potential sources and influences on social and academic integration for students. Pascarella et al. (1986) examined the influence of an institutional intervention on student retention within Tinto's model. It was measured by asking students to indicate whether or not they had attended orientation. It was hypothesised that attending an orientation programme might have a small positive effect on academic integration, but would have a strong effect on both social integration and later institutional commitment. The results indicated that attending an orientation programme did not have a direct effect on retention. However, it was found that students attending an orientation programme had higher levels of social integration and later institutional commitment than those students not attending an orientation programme.

Choi et al. (2019) conducted a study to understand students' lived experiences of academic difficulties in the pharmacy school in relation to Tinto's conceptual schema of student departure and the unit of analysis (case) in this study was the experience of academic difficulty. Among the four students who participated in the case study, seven main themes were identified, namely, student background, goal of becoming a pharmacist, academic integration, social integration, retention and departure, roles and responsibilities during the pharmacy school and wellness. The results suggest that Tinto's theory of student departure is applicable to students' experiences of academic

difficulty. The results further suggest that the early identification of student support needs may help pharmacy programmes to improve student retention.

The purpose of a paper titled “Analysis of Tinto’s student integration theory in first year undergraduate computing students of a UK Higher Education Institution” (Chrysikos et al., 2017) was to identify the causes leading to low retention rates for first-year undergraduate computing students in a UK higher education institution (HEI). The study applied Tinto’s student integration theory. Data were collected from 901 students using Pascarella and Terenzini’s questionnaire (integration scales). The study results indicate that Tinto’s student integration theory is useful in analysing student retention, but this accounts for only a modest amount of variance in retention. Nevertheless, important relationships amongst student’s initial and later academic goals and commitments have been identified through this new approach to analysing retention. The largest direct effect on retention was accounted for by initial goals and institutional commitments, followed by later goals and institutional commitments.

The study identified students’ social and learning experiences within the context of a UK HEI by employing Tinto’s model. This is the first time the model has been tested in the context of a UK HEI. The quantitative data analysis outcomes indicated that Tinto’s student integration theory provided a modest explanation of the student retention process in the UK university which was examined. Thus, major constructs of this theory, such as academic integration and social integration, did not differentiate significantly between those who showed persistence and those who dropped out.

All of the relationships in Tinto's model are insightful. This confirms that, for instance, the positive effect of developing relationships with academic staff and classmates, the negative impact of missing classes, and the positive effect of interacting with instructors, are all justified as predictors of persistence. The amount of explained variance in the model, although modest, is at a level comparable with similar research projects, as described in the previous paragraph, as well as with other researchers' studies who conducted similar research on persistence (Braxton & Milem, 1999).

An additional possible explanation might be that Tinto's student integration theory was developed in order to interpret the student retention process in the context of US higher education, and there are many differences between the UK and the US higher education systems. The results showed that the family background was significantly related with the students' initial goals and institutional commitments. This revealed that students whose parents had high levels of formal education were more likely to have high levels of initial goals and institutional commitments. This is consistent with Tinto's theoretical expectations as well as other researchers' works, such as Braxton et al. (1995); Braxton et al. (2000) and Pascarella et al. (1983). Furthermore, the participant students' family background predicted positive and indirect student retention. These findings were also found to be consistent with several studies conducted at other UK and non-UK institutions, which addressed similar conclusions (Braxton & Brier, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Terenzini et al., 1985).

In addition, the results revealed that the initial commitments had a significant effect on later goals and initial commitments. This indicated that the participating students who had high levels of initial commitments were predicted to have high levels of later commitments. Again, this proved to be consistent with Tinto's (1993) student integration theory, as well as other studies conducted by other researchers in UK and non-UK institutions (Bray & Berger, 2000; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Braxton et al., 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). Similarly, initial goals and institutional commitments proved to be a significant academic integration predictor, followed by a modest significance regarding social integration. This revealed that students with high levels of initial commitments were more likely to have high levels of academic and social integration.

Similar findings were also reported in previous studies that were conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) and Mallette and Cabrera (1991). Moreover, it was hypothesised that students' academic integration and social integration had a positive effect on their later goals and institutional commitments. The results showed that both types of integration performed a modest role in expressing either later commitments or student retention. An important identification of the prior research findings was that they were consistent with Tinto's (1993) student integration theory and other researchers' investigations (Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton et al., 1995; Munro, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). The findings revealed why student academic integration and social integration can have an important role in predicting student retention, and as such, can have a significant influence on the student retention process. Finally, students' later goals and institutional commitments revealed positive effects on student retention. This suggests that students who present high levels of

later commitments were more likely to persist than those with low levels. This can be tested through tracking students who continued their studies. The authors could only identify a subset of this, therefore this hypothesis was partially proven. Despite that, this finding was consistent with Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory, as well as other studies conducted in other institutions (Braxton, Bray & Berger, 2000; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000).

Overall, the results suggest that Tinto's (1993) student integration theory was useful in analysing student retention at the University that was involved in this study. However, this was not at its maximum potential, as the variables in the model accounted for only a modest amount of variance in retention.

While there are obvious and extensive differences between South Africa's, Namibia's and America's (where Vincent Tinto hails from) context, history and demography, there are theoretically sound principles and exemplary interventions that are applicable in promoting student success in these countries, especially among less privileged students. In the years ahead, Namibia will need to build her own theories and models for student success. But Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Model has provided a firm foundation on which to build and improve the success of students in Namibia as a country.

According to Aljohani (2014), "other theoretical models and empirical studies have gained consideration in the literature of student retention in higher education. Some of these theoretical models have not been subjected to the same extensive application and examination" (p.63) as the models discussed above in this chapter. Other studies

used some of the variables of earlier models to develop new models such as Cabrera et al. (1992) which merged the models of Tinto (1975, 1987) and Bean's (1982). The purpose was to determine how merging the two could enhance the understanding of student attrition in higher education. Data derived from 446 participants and the findings of Cabrera et al. (1993) study indicated that the integration of the two models by Tinto and Bean provided a better explanation and understanding of the student attrition process. In addition, the statistical analysis confirmed that environmental variables have a more complex role in the student retention formula than was perceived by Tinto. This supports Bean's claims on the importance of such factors (Aljohani, 2016).

Watson's Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement (1995 - updated 2004) differs from other models including Tinto's by placing the student at the centre of the model. The fundamental elements of the conceptual model are cognitive, social and institutional factors. Cognitive factors relate to the intelligence, knowledge and academic ability that a student brings with him or her to the university environment. Social factors are the external factors that characterise the students. These include the ability to interact effectively with other people, family and peer support, personal attitudes, cultural history, the development or existence of career goals, educational legacy and the ability to cope in social situations. Institutional factors refer to the practices, strategies, culture and ability of the institution to provide appropriate support to students during their years of study, both academically and socially (Atif et al., 2013).

The choice of Tinto's model for the current study was motivated by the fact that such a model has been cited in a considerable number of research works (Aldossery, 2008; Aljohani, 2016), it has been used in many educational scenarios for investigating the dropout problem (Chrysikos et al., 2017) and it has contributed to the proposal of hybrid models that share its goal (Kerby, 2015; Rovai, 2003, as cited in Nicoletti, 2019).

### **2.8 Limitations and gaps of the student retention theories**

Studies on student retention in higher education, including the theoretical models, have their shortcomings and limitations (Aljohani, 2016). One of the main limitations of these studies is their generalisability (Jeffreys, 2012). Most student retention studies are undertaken in particular institutions and their findings are usually not easily generalised to other institutions (Boston & Ice, 2011). However, the high frequency of these theoretical models and distinguished empirical studies being tested and replicated in other contexts should enhance their generalisability (Yu et al., 2010).

Another limitation of student retention studies includes the research strategies used and the types of sample institutions and participants. Studies have mainly focused on traditional academic institutions and traditional types of students (Braxton & Lee, 2005). It is mentioned that most of the early studies were conducted in ordinary four-year institutions with students of average age group and social background. Moreover, there was a lack of studies on students of minority groups and part-time older students.

Also, a shortcoming of the student retention literature has been the dependence of the leading theoretical models and early studies on the quantitative research techniques (Jones, 2008). As a result, students' experiences in the academic and social systems of their academic institutions and in their outside communities might have been inadequately explored. The data of most theoretical models reviewed in the above sections were collected through quantitative instruments. The studies also used statistical techniques and similar data collection and analysis strategies and techniques. Harvey-Smith (2002) recommended that more qualitative research strategies should be adopted in student retention studies as they can result in more in-depth knowledge of the problem of student retention.

As a result, many PhD dissertations and masters' theses have investigated the student retention phenomenon utilising qualitative strategies as an exclusive method or part of a mixed methods approach (Aljohani, 2014). These studies have produced more information about the quality of students' experiences in the university and off-campus environment. However, among all of the variables of student attrition, the quality of the students' institutional experience and the level of his or her integration into the academic and social system of the academic institution were the most influential variables as reported by the major student retention models (Cabrera et al., 1993; Castaneda et al., 1992; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

The above information made it possible for the present researcher to identify gaps in the field of student retention and to link the current study to what has been published and researched on in the field. One such gap that was identified is the shortage of studies investigating student retention at HEIs in Namibia. Another gap was that many

of the studies used statistical techniques while others focused mainly on the perceptions of staff members and not the experiences of non-persisters and persisters. This information contributed to the choice and formulation of the research questions, the methodology, the study instruments for the current study and informed the model that this study proposes to deal with student retention. The findings from the literature addressed the gap in knowledge about student retention at UNAM. This study provides a clearer picture of factors affecting student retention so as to develop programmes that are tailored to prevent students from dropping out at UNAM. It further provides information to staff, students and parents on factors contributing to student drop-out.

## **2.9 Chapter summary**

This chapter provided a review of the literature on student retention in higher education. It was divided into four sections. The first reviewed perspectives on student retention, that is, internationally, continentally and nationally. The second part highlighted the challenges facing Higher Education Institutions regarding student retention and the third part reviewed the theoretical framework and models that address the problem of student retention.

The next chapter presents a description of the research design and methodology used in this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors for student retention at the University of Namibia. The present chapter provides a description of the research design and research methodology used for this study. It further describes the setting of the study, the research participants, and research paradigm. The chapter consists of the following sections: introduction, research paradigm, research approach, research design, population, sample and sampling procedures, research instruments, procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

#### **3.2. Research paradigm**

A suitable paradigm needs to be selected before deciding on the appropriate methodology to conduct the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mertens, 2005). A paradigm is a basic belief system and theoretical framework with assumptions that guide research (Antwi & Hamza, 2015).

The design of a research study begins with the selection of a topic and a paradigm. A research paradigm is a philosophy, methodology, epistemology, and ontology that provides complete guidelines to conduct research. A research paradigm gives direction to conduct the research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Kuhn (1962) first used the word to refer to the philosophical way of thinking. A paradigm is essentially a worldview, a whole framework of beliefs, values and methods within which research

takes place. It is this world view or belief system within which researchers work (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Bryman (2004) identifies a paradigm as a cluster of beliefs and dictates which, for scientists in a particular discipline, influence what should be studied, how research should be done and how results should be interpreted. The research paradigm is the one that addresses what should be the method to follow for the research and not the other way around. It has been used in research in different ways. These include that a paradigm means, the worldview, an epistemological stance, a set of shared beliefs among members of a specialty area and, a model example of research (Morgan, 2007). To determine the suitable paradigm, it is important to understand the three philosophical assumptions, namely, ontology, epistemology and methodology (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007; Guba, 1990). It is therefore important to explain what each of these assumptions or elements mean as the research will uphold and be guided by assumptions, beliefs, norms and values of a chosen paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Ontology refers to the researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality. Epistemology examines the relationship between knowledge and the researcher during discovery. It refers to how we come to know what we know. Methodology refers to the way we go about discovering knowledge in a systematic way (Killam, 2013). Three major paradigms are discussed, namely, pragmatism, positivism and constructivism. (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016) and its relevance to the current study.

### **3.2.1. Pragmatist paradigm**

Pragmatism as a paradigm claims to bridge the gap between the scientific method and structuralist orientation of older approaches as well as the naturalistic methods and freewheeling orientation of newer approaches (Creswell 2013; Creswell & Clark 2011). It is the oldest paradigm and it is sometimes referred to as the ‘scientific method’. A major underpinning of the pragmatist philosophy is that knowledge and reality are based on beliefs and habits that are socially constructed (Yefimov, 2004). This method assumes that a mixed methods methodology, that is, quantitative and qualitative methods, are compatible and useful as a research method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The pragmatist paradigm is suitable for this study in using quantitative and qualitative techniques to collect and analyse data and the purposes for the convergent design are to obtain a more complete understanding from two databases, corroborate results from different methods and compare multiple levels within a system (Creswell, 2008). The current study therefore falls into this paradigm.

### **3.2.2. Positivist paradigm**

The positivist paradigm was first proposed and based on the philosophical ideas of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and is referred to as the oldest in the social sciences. This paradigm implies that the overall approach to research is that different data collection methods are used as well as data analysis procedures within that research process (Creswell, 2003). The positivist position is grounded in the theoretical belief that there is an objective reality that can be known to the researcher if they use the correct methods and apply these methods in a correct manner. Positivism can be referred to as a scientific method and in positivism studies, the researcher is independent from the study.

Positivist approaches rely heavily on experiments and the researcher operates independently of the research and it is assumed that the research is done objectively. There is very little communication or direct involvement with someone or something when carrying out your research. This generally involves hypothesis generation and testing and it is purely based on facts. It is the preferred worldview for research. It tries to interpret observations in terms of facts or measurable outcomes (Fadhel, 2002). Therefore, a scientific study will typically adopt a quantitative research approach.

### **3.2.3. Constructivist paradigm**

Constructivism is a paradigm in qualitative research that has been propagated by Guba (1994). Constructivism is associated with qualitative methods in which the researcher relies as much as possible on the participants' view and develops subjective meanings of the phenomena. Constructivists use qualitative methods to try and understand human experiences in a specific setting. The instrumentation usually administered in this philosophical paradigm is through interview, observation, document review and visual data analysis (Kalender, 2007 as cited in Adom et al., 2016). This paradigm therefore was not sufficient and suitable for the present study.

### **3.3 Research approach**

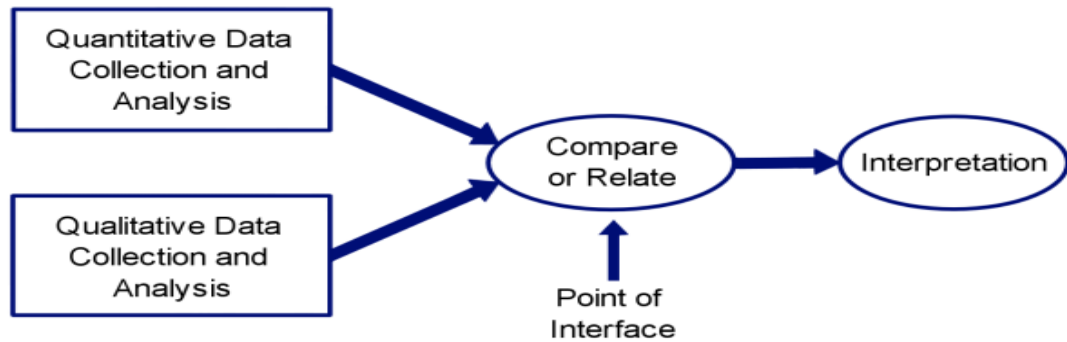
This study used a mixed methods approach. Edmonds and Kennedy (2016) explain that the convergent-parallel approach is a concurrent approach and it involves the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data (usually both QUAL and QUAN are the emphasis), followed by the combination and comparisons of these

multiple data sources (i.e., the two methods are ultimately merged). This approach involves the collection of different but complementary data on the same phenomena. Thus, it is used for the converging and subsequent interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data. This approach is also referred to as the concurrent triangulation design (single-phase) because the data is collected and analysed individually but at the same time.

### **3.4 Research design**

A research design is intended to provide an appropriate framework for a study. A very important decision in the research design process is the choice regarding the research approach since it determines how relevant information for a study will be obtained (Aaker et al., 2000).

The study utilised a mixed methods convergent-parallel design. A convergent parallel-design entails that the researcher concurrently conducts the quantitative and qualitative elements in the same phase of the research process, weighs the methods equally, analyses the two components independently, and interprets the results together (Creswell & Clark, 2011). According to Creswell et al., (2011) a mixed methods research design should be used when a single method would not yield a complete understanding of the research questions. It is a procedure for collecting, analysing, and “mixing” both quantitative and qualitative research and methods in a single study to understand a research problem. Figure 3.1 shows an outline of the design:



**Figure 3.1: Convergent parallel design**

Source: Adapted from Creswell & Clark (2011)

A case study was conducted using a mixed-methods design, with a qualitative component giving context to the quantitative results. “A mixed methods case study design is a type of mixed methods study in which the quantitative and qualitative data collection, results, and integration are used to provide in-depth evidence for a case(s) or develop cases for comparative analysis” (Creswell & Clarke, 2018, p. 116).

### **3.5 Methodology: Sampling and Instruments**

#### **3.5.1 Population**

The target population was all first- and second-year students from all Faculties of the University of Namibia Main campus enrolled in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years and those who dropped out in the preceding year. They were selected from the three Faculties with the highest dropout rates at UNAM. They comprised a total of 3227 students. This included both persisters and non-persisters who voluntarily withdrew from their study programmes during the year of the data collection. Research has shown that most students drop out during their first year of study and that drop-out rates in the first year of university are high worldwide (Van Rooij et al., 2018). First-year students shared factors that students may come with to

the university that may have potential to influence dropout. Students who progressed to the second year may reveal survival strategies that helped them to persist. Drop-out students will reveal reasons for dropping out, whether institutional, personal or external (Astin, 1993; Behr et al., 2020; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

The population also included academic and administrative staff from departments related to students and their study programmes. It is therefore of interest to find out the views and thoughts of academics and administrative staff at the university that can help to improve student retention and add to existing literature (Pilkington et al., 2018). These groups of participants provided insights into reasons for the high rate of student dropout and mitigating measures in place at UNAM.

### **3.5.2 Sample and sampling procedure**

The sample is the group of individuals who will actually participate in the research (McCombes, 2019). Students were from three faculties with the highest dropout at the University of Namibia, namely, Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences (375 students), Faculty of Science (260 students) and Faculty of Law (140 students). Judgmental sampling, also called purposive sampling or authoritative sampling was used to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest to answer the research questions. Purposive sampling was used where quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously for the purpose of developing a conceptual model (Zazelli et al., 2008). The total number of participants in this study consisted of 14 non-persisters who completed a questionnaire, 30 students who participated in the focus group discussion interviews, and 17 academic staff from the

three Faculties with the highest dropout rates at UNAM and three administrative staff, i.e., a faculty officer, library staff and the Dean of Students who completed the staff survey questionnaire.

### **3.5.3 Research instruments**

A research instrument is a tool that is used to collect, measure, and analyse data related to your subject (DiscoverPhDs, 2020). Research instruments can be tests, surveys, scales, questionnaires, or even checklists. The following instruments were used to collect data, i.e., a questionnaire for non-persisters, an interview guide for the focus group discussion with persisters and survey questionnaire for staff.

The interview and questionnaire were used as research instruments. In focus groups, the participants are invited to talk about their views, attitudes, and beliefs in relation to a particular subject, concept or idea. The focus group discussion interviews followed a specific pattern in which the questions posed to participants were the same, or where the interview conditions were the same to minimise differences between interviews, which would make them comparable (Canals, 2017).

### **3.5.4 Semi-structured interviews**

The first technique used was the in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews with non-persister students. Interviewing is a useful technique for collecting information about people's experiences, as they enable the researcher to collect information or facts that are unreachable in quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The researcher planned to use interviews to collect information from non-persisters about their reasons for dropping out. Liamputtong (2013) states that interviewing is the most

commonly known and adopted data collection technique in qualitative research. Structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are the three types of interviews mostly used and the present study chose the semi-structured interview as the most suitable type. The semi-structured interview allows participants to be asked questions about themes and for them to express their experiences more freely. Semi-structured interviews were used in this research. In qualitative research interviews are usually less structured than they are in quantitative research (Bryman, 2012). Using semi-structured interviews allowed participants to be asked some confirmatory questions about the predetermined themes while they were also being encouraged to talk about their experiences more freely using their own expressions, thoughts and ideas, helping to provide a broader view of the topic (Esterberg, 2002). The non-persisters were requested to complete a questionnaire since they were not registered students at the time of the research.

### **3.5.5 Focus group discussions**

Focus group discussions used an interview guide to investigate the views and perspectives of students on student retention. During a focus group discussion, individuals, usually 6-12 people, are brought together to engage in a guided discussion about a topic (Kohn & Christiaens, 2018). The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a way where other methods are not applicable. The researcher used focus group discussions to interview the persisters because with the focus group research, more information and other valuable views and opinions can be collected as well in a short period of time. The respondents could also mention

information that may not have been part of the interview questions. Thus, the choice of focus group discussions with persisters students in the current study.

### **3.5.6 Survey questionnaire**

A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Questionnaires can be thought of as a kind of written interview (McLeod, 2018). Survey research is defined as "the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions" (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 160). A survey questionnaire is a kind of research or a method and tool of research for collecting data. It is a type of research where people are asked questions about their opinions and experiences. The three most popular and applied methods using a survey questionnaire are the self-administered, the group-administered, and the household drop-off. The self-administered questionnaire method is often used by researchers when collecting data. The staff survey questionnaire was used in this study to investigate the views of staff on student retention due to time constraints in the selection and organising of interviews with staff in their already busy daily schedules. The questionnaire solicited the perceptions of staff on student retention, the strategies used to prevent dropout and the actions that UNAM could take to improve student retention.

## **3.6 Data collection procedure**

### **3.6.1 Pilot studies**

A pilot study, pilot project, or pilot experiment is a small-scale preliminary study that is conducted in order to evaluate the feasibility, time, cost, adverse events, and improve upon the study design prior to the performance of a full-scale research

project. Yin (2003) encourages the use of a pilot study when conducting qualitative research. Conducting a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study, but it does increase the likelihood of success. Pilot studies play a pivotal role in deciding whether a main study can be undertaken thereby helping in the appropriate framing of time, cost and study methods (Kannan & Gowri, 2015). Pilot studies fulfil a range of important functions and they can provide valuable insights for other researchers.

Pilot studies can play an important role prior to conducting a full-scale research project. These pilot studies are usually small-scale, preliminary studies which aim to investigate whether crucial components of a main study will be feasible. This further prevents falsified work from being accepted within an area of study and provides valuable feedback so that researchers can revise and improve their papers or studies before final publication.

The data collection instruments were tried and tested with a small sample of larger target sample of the study, namely, non-persisters, the persisters, and academic and administrative staff. The administering of the questionnaire, focus group discussion interviews and staff survey questionnaire were done in order to determine whether it was necessary to change the wording of questions or the questions used in the interviews and questionnaire. The laptop and audio recorder used in the focus group interviews were also tested to check their reliability and efficiency.

The first pilot studies were conducted in April 2019 with five (5) persisters using a focus group discussion and eleven academic and administrative staff members completed the staff survey questionnaire. The next round of pilot studies was

conducted in August 2019 with five (5) persisters who were selected at random. The interview was conducted in a classroom at the Language Centre of the University of Namibia Main campus.

At the beginning of each session, a consent form was handed to each participant for them to sign and they were informed that their participation in this study was voluntarily. The participants were further informed that they could leave the focus group interview at any point and that they could only respond to questions that they felt comfortable responding to. Students were advised that the interview would be audio-recorded and that the confidentiality of each participant would be respected. Once the participants signed the consent form, the interviews commenced.

The interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes and they were audio-recorded by the researcher. It was found that a few questions were not clearly formulated and were thus modified for subsequent focus group interviews which followed. The pilot study also informed the researcher about the use of audio equipment and how to conduct telephone interviews with voice recording techniques and group discussions.

Eleven questionnaires were sent to academic and administrative staff members in April 2019 as part of the pilot procedure and eight forms were returned. The questions were clear and well understood and as such, they did not require any modification.

### **3.6.2 Main study**

Data for this study was collected in September 2019 and April to August 2020 from the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years. The questionnaires were emailed to

non-persisters and they were selected from students who had left the University of Namibia in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic year. The University of Namibia provided a list of names, email addresses and telephone numbers of students in the sample. The researcher also requested the library staff to assist in providing the names and contact details of non-persisters. Many of the telephone numbers were not active anymore as well as email addresses provided of non-persisters by the University. In addition, some mentioned that they did not have time to participate in the study. During the 2017-2018 academic years the faculties with the highest dropout rates were the Faculties of Economics and Management Sciences, Science and Law.

### **3.6.3 Questionnaire used with non-persister students**

The participants were students who had dropped out or did not return to UNAM in the following year of study. Instead of using telephone interviews, a questionnaire was emailed to the non-persisters for reasons mentioned earlier in this Chapter. The questionnaires were emailed to students requesting them to answer and send back using a provided email address. Interview questions were developed as guided from Tinto's theory. The questions focused on students' reasons for dropping out of UNAM, whether it was permanent, temporary, or whether they might be seeking entry to some other course or programme in future. Non-persisters were also asked whether they had discussed their withdrawal with anyone else, and their academic and social experiences and what changes UNAM could make to assist students experiencing difficulties. There was also a question on how UNAM could increase student retention. Fourteen non-persisters completed the questionnaire.

### **3.6.4 Focus group discussions interviews with persister students**

Focus group discussion interviews with persisters were conducted by the researcher in October 2019 and February 2020 and March 2020. Focus groups were chosen as they have a number of benefits. The researcher can interview a larger number of participants in a short time (Krueger, 1994). The responses by students in the focus groups might also encourage the other students to talk more by supporting ideas or contrasting ideas and thus come up with information that may not have been anticipated (Collucci, 2008). The focus group also makes it possible to collect data that may not have been anticipated or accessible when using quantitative data collection tools (Morgan, 1997).

The participants were full time students at the University of Namibia. Six focus groups were conducted with five to six students in a group. The students were from the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences, the Faculty of Science, and the Faculty of Law. The focus groups took place in October 2019 and February 2020 and March of 2020. The students of the focus groups consisted of students who completed their first year of study in 2018 and others who completed their first year of study in 2019. This means that some of them were in their second year of study and the rest in their third year of study. The students were requested to participate through the researcher getting permission from the lecturers in their Faculty or Programmes to address these students during lecture times and providing them with a short background to the purpose of the study. The students were then invited to participate and focus group discussion interview times were provided by the researcher from which students could choose to attend to participate in the interviews.

All focus group discussion interviews were conducted at the Language Centre of the University of Namibia's Main campus at a time that did not interfere with their class attendance or busy schedules. The students once again received information about the purpose of the study and granted permission that the interviews could be audio recorded and that their responses would be dealt with in a confidential manner. The participants were then requested to sign a consent form (Appendix C). The interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and the interviews were conducted in English and were then later transcribed by the researcher.

The topics and questions for the focus groups were developed and adapted from Tinto's theory and the same topics and questions were also used in the interviews with the non-persister students with additional questions about their current experiences and what had influenced them to continue their studies at UNAM. (Appendices D and E).

### **3.6.5 Staff survey questionnaire**

In November 2019, a staff survey questionnaire was distributed and staff members at the University of Namibia were asked to complete it. The questionnaire was emailed to staff in the Faculties of Science, Law, Economics and Management Sciences, Education, Humanities, the Language Centre, Library, and the Office of the Registrar to complete at their convenience in order not to interfere in their daily job schedule by interviewing them face-to-face. These academic and administrative staff members occupied positions related to dealing with students. The staff survey questionnaire consisted of three open-ended questions asking for their views on student retention and what they perceived as the primary reasons for drop-out among UNAM first-year

students, what techniques/methods/approaches they employ as a lecturer/registrar/faculty officer/student counsellor to encourage students to persist in completion of their studies, and what actions they think UNAM should take to increase student retention (Appendix F).

The staff or departmental email was used to ensure that all staff in a particular faculty or department would receive the questionnaire. Instructions and a deadline were provided but due to the fact that most of the staff members were busy with end-of-year examinations and examination-related matters, or the difficulty conducting interviews with staff during lecture hours, a reminder was sent out after the first deadline which yielded a very poor response or return of completed questionnaires. The researcher then sought assistance from the deans of faculty and heads of departments of some faculties in February 2020 requesting assistance to remind their staff to access, read and complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to more than 180 staff and only twenty (20) forms were returned by seventeen (17) academic and three (3) administrative staff from the faculties that received the questionnaire.

### **3.7 Types of research interviews**

In research (Burnard et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2008; Morse & Corbin, 2003), there are three fundamental types of research interviews which are structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

### **3.7.1 Structured interviews**

According to Gill et al. (2008), the structured interview is defined as a questionnaire which is administered verbally, and which does not use prompts, thus providing very little scope for follow up questions. In-depth interviews were conducted. The aim of this approach is to ensure that each participant is presented with the same questions in the same order. Very often, the questions require more depth and detail, but the questions are asked in the same order and even the words hardly differ. In-depth interviews were conducted in order to get students to elaborate more on a particular issue and to provide additional information on the topic of student retention. An interview is generally a qualitative research technique which involves asking open-ended questions to converse with respondents and collect data about a subject. Thus, the use of questionnaires helps to explain, better understand, and explore research subjects' opinions, behaviour and experiences. The qualitative research in the form of face-to-face or focus group interviews, aims to gather in-depth opinions and to identify new issues and perspectives that may have been overlooked in the literature review.

### **3.7.2 Unstructured interview (In-depth interview)**

The opposite of the structured interview is the unstructured interview. Legard et al., (2003) describe the unstructured interview as a “conversation with a purpose” (p. 138) as the participants are allowed to speak freely. Legard et al. (2003) further state that one of the “main advantages of the in-depth interview is the ability to combine structure with flexibility” (p. 141). A disadvantage, however, in conducting an unstructured interview and analysing the qualitative data (using methods such as thematic analysis) is that the process can be very time-consuming.

### **3.7.3 Semi-structured interviews**

The last interview approach is the semi-structured interview. According to Gill et al. (2008), this approach has several key questions which help to define the areas to be explored. These key questions further allow the researcher the possibility to follow up a response in more detail. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used by avoiding questions that were close ended but rather employing questions that were formulated and piloted ahead of the interviews and which could also be modified when required.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

The researcher collected the quantitative and the qualitative data concurrently, analysed the two data sets separately and mixed the two databases by merging the results during interpretation.

Quantitative data is usually collected for statistical analysis using surveys, polls or questionnaires that are sent to a specific section of a population. Creswell (2002) points out that a quantitative approach is useful when attempting to test a theory or explain or identify factors that influence results. The strengths of a quantitative approach are that it can produce factual and reliable data that is usually generalisable to some larger population (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). Its main limitation is that the results provide less detail on human behaviour, attitudes, and motivation (Gorard, 2003). It is relatively easy to analyse and data can be very consistent, precise and reliable.

Qualitative data can be obtained through open-ended questions which gives opportunity to the participants to provide information that does not restrict the participants' opinion (Creswell & Clark, 2011) and the most widely recognised and most widely used qualitative research approaches are ethnographic, interviews, focus group discussions and observations. There is, however, no single approach to analyse qualitative data although several guidelines exist for the process. It is an eclectic process. There is no one right way to work with qualitative data. Essentially, qualitative data analysis is a process best 'learnt by doing' (Froggatt, 2001).

The data from the questionnaires, focus groups and staff survey questionnaires collected were analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as: "A method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data" (p. 79). Thematic analysis is a widely used method of analysis in qualitative research. It is about making sense of collected data (Merriam, 1988). Braun and Clarke (2006) published an article that described to novice researchers how to use thematic analysis in a step-by-step manner. They stated that thematic analysis is a foundational method of analysis that needs to be defined and described to solidify its place in qualitative research. The data for this study was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data and it is usually applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts.

The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes or patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. Creswell (2005) discusses six steps that are commonly used in analysing qualitative data, namely, preparing and organising the

data, exploring and coding the database, describing, finding and forming themes, representing and reporting findings, interpreting the meaning of the findings and validating the accuracy of the findings.

In the convergent-parallel design, the data collection and analysis are carried out at the same time. This is different from quantitative research where the collection of data comes before analysis. The first step in this phase involves reading and re-reading the data, to become familiar with its content in order to prepare and organise the data by transcribing the notes from the interviews. The data from the non-persister questionnaires and staff survey questionnaires and focus group discussions were transcribed by the researcher.

The second step as discussed by Creswell (2005) is for the researcher to identify and code the transcribed data to describe the findings from the study. “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). Qualitative data are textual, non-numerical and unstructured and coding plays a crucial role in the analysis of such data to organise and make sense of the textual data (Basit, 2003). Coding of the data is an essential tool at this stage as codes are used to place data into themes or categories. This phase involves coding, which identifies important features of the data that might be relevant to answering the research question. It involves coding the entire transcripts for later stages of analysis. The researcher read through the data and coded it in order to describe the content and categorise the data into themes.

Thirdly, the transcribed notes from the different interviews that needed to be searched for patterns or themes by looking at the codes that were assigned earlier in order to describe, find and form themes (Creswell, 2005). The researcher grouped the data under similar categories and themes and analysed the data by reading it over several times and conducting an analysis each time. Reviewing the material allows the researcher to identify more details and patterns related to each common theme. Once the process of categorising the data under themes has been completed, the findings need to be reported which will be followed by the interpretation of the findings. Then finally, the accuracy of the findings should be validated (Creswell, 2005).

Figuring out what to do with the data once they are collected is one of ‘the most paralysing moments’ in qualitative analysis (Jennings, 2007) and researchers often focus too quickly and exclusively on coding the data and entering the codes into qualitative software packages. Researchers often do not take the necessary time to read and reread the material and reflect on what has been read in order to grasp the general themes (Hunter et al., 2002).

The researcher decided to analyse the data manually rather than employing specialised analysis software. The data were collected from the focus group discussion interviews, questionnaire with non-persisters and a staff questionnaire from the University of Namibia. The researcher then transcribed the data from the questionnaires of non-persisters and the data from the focus group discussion interviews with persisters and staff survey questionnaires.

### **3.9 Ethical considerations**

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Namibia. It was received in March 2019 and a copy of the Permission Letter is provided as Appendix B. The University of Namibia's Main campus was selected as the sample for this research because the institution's annual statistics (UNAM Statistics, Strategy & Physical Planning, 2016; 2018-2020) confirmed that there was a high student drop-out rate. All procedures and strategies used in this study were approved by UNAM's Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Permission letters and research ethical clearance (Appendix A) to access research sites were issued by respective authorities.

Careful ethical considerations were implemented throughout the study. The researcher first obtained consent from the participants to freely participate in the study. The researcher ensured that the selected participants received relevant information about the study accompanying the consent form. The consent form contained information that explained to them that participation was voluntary and that they may exit the study at any time should they wish to do so. The participants were treated with respect from the time they were approached or contacted throughout the process and even when their participation ended.

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were honoured and procedures to ensure this were implemented from the onset such as securing data, locking away audio recordings and coding responses. All participants were explicitly informed about all details pertaining to how their identities would be concealed and how responses would be used anonymously in the study. Interviews were conducted in secured venues where they could express themselves freely without fear of being

overheard. The researcher ensured that participants understood the purpose and objectives of the study before the commencement of focus group discussions for them to make an informed decision to participate or not. All participants were treated fairly at all times. The researcher obtained permission from participants to make voice recordings. The recordings will be destroyed/erased after five years. The researcher ensured that there would be no physical or psychological harm to the participants.

### **3.10 Chapter summary**

The chapter explained the research paradigm, research approach, research design, population, sample and sampling procedures, research instruments, procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations used in the study to identify the factors that influence student retention at the University of Namibia, and ethical considerations. A convergent parallel design approach was used. The research instruments were questionnaires for the persisters and non-persisters and a staff survey questionnaire. Before the start of the main study, a pilot study was carried out. The purpose of the pilot study was to check whether the questions were clear, to eliminate ambiguities in wording, and to estimate the length of time a participant would take to complete the questionnaire (Cohen et al., 2000). After the pilot study the main study was conducted and the data were collected from the focus group discussion interviews, questionnaire with non-persisters and a staff questionnaire for respondents from the University of Namibia. The researcher then transcribed the data from the questionnaires of non-persisters and the data from the focus group discussion interviews with persisters and staff survey questionnaires. The next chapter presents the analysis and presentation of the results of the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the emergent themes. The data from the questionnaires from non-persister students, the focus group discussion interviews with persister students and staff survey questionnaires are analysed. The chapter further presents the most frequent factors mentioned that affected student retention at UNAM. The perspectives of the three groups of participants are presented. Furthermore, new themes are presented that emerged from the data as well as predetermined themes from the student retention models and studies of student retention in HEIs. The chapter consists of the following sections: the introduction, the emergent themes from the non-persisters, the persisters and staff members, and major findings from each group of participants.

#### **4.2 Progression success drop-out rates at UNAM**

In 2008, the total number of students who enrolled for Bachelor/Honours, Certificate and Diploma programmes at the University of Namibia was 1968. The number of students who graduated within the normal years (N) was 539 and 622 graduated after the normal period. Therefore, 807 (41%) did not complete or return or dropped out. Similarly, in 2009, from 2652 students who enrolled, a total of 1081 (41%) students did not graduate after the normal period of two plus more years. In 2010, the total number of students who enrolled for the Bachelor/Honours, Certificate and Diploma programmes at the University of Namibia was 3 930. The number of students who

graduated within the normal years (N) was 1241 and 833 graduated after the normal period. Therefore, 1856 (47.2) did not complete or return or dropped out.

In 2011, the total number of students who enrolled for the Bachelor/Honours, Certificate and Diploma programmes at the University of Namibia was 4716. The number of students who graduated within the normal years (N) was 1419 and 986 graduated after the normal period. Therefore, 2311 (49%) did not complete or return or dropped out. In 2012, the percentage of students who did not graduate or complete rose to 62.8% (UNAM Statistics, Strategy & Physical Planning, 2016). So, for the period 2008-2012, the percentage of students who did not complete or return or dropped out was 48.2%. The three faculties with the highest dropout were the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences (25.2%) followed by the Faculty of Science (23.0%) and the Faculty of Law (22.9%) for the period 2017-2018.

The total number of enrolments at UNAM for the period 2018-2020 was 86,421 and a total of 24,117 (28%) dropped out. The total number of students who registered at UNAM Main campus only for the period 2018-2020 was 39,927 students. A total of 10,259 (26%) dropped out during that period. The Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences recorded a total dropout of 5025 (30.6%) from a total of 16,390 students in the period 2018-2020. The Faculty of Science experienced a dropout of 1478 (25.6%) from a number of 5762 students who enrolled, while in the Faculty of Law the dropout rate was 639 (18%) out of 3555 students in the same period.

**Table 4.1: Overall completion rate**

<b>Cohort year</b>	<b>Qualification type</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N+1</b>	<b>N+2</b>	<b>N++</b>
<b>2008</b>	<b>Bachelor Honours</b>	1 441	25%	44%	54%	55%
	<b>Certificate</b>	111	44%	59%	65%	67%
	<b>Diploma</b>	416	33%	50%	63%	70%
<b>2008 Total</b>		1 968	27%	46%	56%	59%
<b>2009</b>	<b>Bachelor Honours</b>	1 653	26%	46%	47%	56%
	<b>Certificate</b>	424	28%	46%	50%	56%
	<b>Diploma</b>	575	37%	53%	63%	71%
<b>2009 Total</b>		2 652	29%	48%	51%	59%
<b>2010</b>	<b>Bachelor Honours</b>	2 111	27%	44%	44%	44%
	<b>Certificate</b>	687	25%	42%	48%	50%
	<b>Diploma</b>	1 132	45%	60%	68%	71%
<b>2010 Total</b>		3 930	32%	48%	52%	53%
<b>2011</b>	<b>Bachelor Honours</b>	3 095	32%	48%	48%	48%
	<b>Certificate</b>	694	19%	41%	46%	51%
	<b>Diploma</b>	927	31%	50%	57%	59%
<b>2011 Total</b>		4 716	30%	47%	50%	51%
<b>2012</b>	<b>Bachelor Honours</b>	2393	30%	30%	30%	30%
	<b>Certificate</b>	400	32%	43%	46%	49%
	<b>Diploma</b>	856	33%	48%	52%	52%
<b>2012 Total</b>		3 649	31%	35%	37%	37%
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>16 915</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>51%</b>

Source: UNAM Statistics - Strategy & Physical Planning (2016)

**Table 4.2: Student dropout, retention and faculty change rate by academic year**

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Enrolment</b>	<b>Dropped</b>	<b>No Faculty Change</b>	<b>Changed Faculty</b>	<b>Retained</b>	<b>Drop Rate</b>	<b>Faculty Change Rate</b>
<b>2011</b>	16 332	2 731	13 031	570	79.8%	16.7%	3.5%
<b>2012</b>	16 819	2 935	13 365	519	79.5%	17.5%	3.1%
<b>2013</b>	17 536	2 482	14 577	477	83.1%	14.2%	2.7%
<b>2014</b>	19 506	2 754	16 292	460	83.5%	14.1%	2.4%
<b>2015</b>	21 012	2 826	17 568	618	83.6%	13.4%	2.9%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>91 205</b>	<b>13 728</b>	<b>74 833</b>	<b>2 644</b>	<b>82.0%</b>	<b>15.1%</b>	<b>2.9%</b>

Source: UNAM Statistics - Strategy & Physical Planning (2016)

Table 4.2 shows that the total enrolment from 2011 to 2015 was 91,205 students at the University of Namibia. A total number of 13,728 (15.1%) students dropped out since 2011. The figures therefore provide evidence that the University of Namibia is experiencing a problem with the retention of students (UNAM Statistics - Strategy & Physical Planning, 2016).

**Table 4.3: Student dropout, retention and faculty change rate by faculty for the period 2017-2018**

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>Dropout</b>	<b>Dropout Rates</b>
<b>Economics &amp; Management Sciences</b>	1 487	375	25.2%
<b>Science</b>	1 128	260	23.0%
<b>Law</b>	612	140	22.9%
<b>Humanities and Social Sciences</b>	933	172	18.4%
<b>Agriculture &amp; Natural Resource</b>	309	51	16.5%
<b>Education</b>	4 447	483	10.9%
<b>Engineering &amp; IT</b>	156	8	5.1%
<b>Health Sciences</b>	1 241	45	3.6%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>20 543</b>	<b>3 783</b>	<b>18.4%</b>

Source: UNAM Statistics - Strategy & Physical Planning (2018-2020)

Table 4.3 shows student dropout, retention and faculty change rate by faculty for the period 2017-2018. The three faculties with the highest dropout were the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences (25.2%) followed by the Faculty of Science (23.0%) and the Faculty of Law (22.9%).

**Student dropout, retention and faculty change rate by qualification/programme for the period 2017-2018**

**Table 4.4: Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences**

<b>Qualification Name: ECONOMIC &amp; MANAGEMENT SCIENCES</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>Dropout</b>	<b>Dropout Rates</b>
<b>Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours)</b>	634	225	35.5%
<b>Bachelor of Accounting (Honours)</b>	357	78	21.8%
<b>Bachelor of Public Management (Honours)</b>	117	21	17.9%
<b>Bachelor of Accounting - Chartered Accountancy</b>	163	25	15.3%
<b>Bachelor of Economics (Honours)</b>	216	26	12.0%

Source: UNAM Statistics - Strategy & Physical Planning (2018-2020)

The three qualifications/programmes within the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences with the highest dropout rate for the period 2017-2018 were the Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours) with 35%, the Bachelor of Accounting (Honours) with 21.8% and the Bachelor of Public Management (Honours) with 17.9%.

**Table 4.5: Faculty of Science**

<b>Qualification Name: SCIENCE</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>Dropout</b>	<b>Dropout Rates</b>
<b>BSc in Computer Science (Honours) Art</b>	1	1	100.0%
<b>BSc in Physics (Honours) Art</b>	1	1	100.0%
<b>BSc in Statistics (Honours) Art</b>	1	1	100.0%
<b>BSc in Physics (Honours) Computer</b>	6	3	50.0%
<b>BSc in Population Studies (Honours) Art</b>	2	1	50.0%
<b>BSc in Physics (Honours) Maths</b>	22	10	45.5%
<b>BSc in Physics (Honours) Chemistry</b>	19	7	36.8%
<b>BSc in Applied Biochemistry (Honours) Environment</b>	72	22	30.6%
<b>BSc in Chemistry (Honours) Medicinal</b>	114	33	28.9%
<b>BSc in Chemistry (Honours) Geochem</b>	28	8	28.6%
<b>BSc in Applied Biochemistry (Honours) Biomedical</b>	133	37	27.8%
<b>BSc in Chemistry (Honours) Environmental</b>	44	12	27.3%
<b>BSc in Physics (Honours) Geology</b>	26	7	26.9%
<b>BSc in Military Science Army (Honours)</b>	49	13	26.5%
<b>BSc in Mathematics (Honours) Physics</b>	8	2	25.0%
<b>BSc in Information Technology (Honours)</b>	74	16	21.6%
<b>BSc – Microbiology (Honours)</b>	120	25	20.8%
<b>BSc in Geology (Honours)</b>	47	9	19.1%
<b>BSc in Computer Science (Honours)</b>	123	21	17.1%
<b>BSc in Mathematics (Honours) Computer</b>	7	1	14.3%
<b>BSc - Population Studies (Honours)</b>	21	3	14.3%
<b>BSc Environmental Biology (Honours)</b>	93	13	14.0%
<b>BSc in Mathematics (Honours) Statistics</b>	22	3	13.6%
<b>BSc in Financial Mathematics (Honours)</b>	38	5	13.2%
<b>BSc in Statistics (Honours)</b>	38	5	13.2%
<b>BSc in Information Systems (Honours)</b>	16	1	6.3%
<b>BSc in Microbiology (Honours) Art</b>	3		0.0%

Source: UNAM Statistics- Strategy & Physical Planning (2018-2020)

The three qualifications/programmes within the Faculty of Science with the highest dropout rate for the period 2017-2018 were the Bachelor in Computer Science (Honours), Bachelor in Physics (Honours) Art, and Bachelor in Statistics (Honours) Art. All the three qualifications had a drop-out rate of 100%.

**Table 4.6: Faculty of Law**

<b>Qualification Name: LAWS</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>Dropout</b>	<b>Dropout Rates</b>
<b>Bachelor of Laws (Honours)</b>	<b>612</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>35.5%</b>

Source: UNAM Statistics- Strategy & Physical Planning (2018-2020)

The Faculty of Law offers only one qualification, namely, Bachelor of Laws (Honours), with a drop-out rate of 35.5% in the 2017-2018 academic year.

**Table 4.7: Student enrolment, dropout total and dropout percentages at UNAM Main campus for the period 2018-2020**

<b>Enrolment Year</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>Dropout</b>	<b>Dropout Percentage</b>
<b>2018</b>	<b>13 460</b>	<b>4 307</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>2019</b>	<b>13 276</b>	<b>2 655</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>2020</b>	<b>13 191</b>	<b>3 297</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39 927</b>	<b>10 259</b>	<b>26%</b>

Source: UNAM Statistics- Strategy & Physical Planning (2018-2020)

The total number of students who registered at UNAM Main campus for the period 2018-2020 was 39,927 students. A total of 10,259 (26%) dropped out during that period.

**Table 4.8: Student dropout, retention and faculty change rate by qualification/programme for the period 2018-2020**

	FACULTY		
	FEMS	SCIENCE	LAW
<b>TOTAL ENROL. 2018</b>	5 695	1 930	1 135
<b>TOTAL ENROL. 2019</b>	5 412	2 026	1 157
<b>TOTAL ENROL. 2020</b>	5 283	1 806	1 263
<b>TOTAL DROP OUT 2018</b>	1 647	439	221
<b>TOTAL DROP OUT 2019</b>	1 370	588	212
<b>TOTAL DROP OUT 2020</b>	2 006	458	197
<b>TOTAL DROP OUT RATES 2018</b>	29%	23%	19%
<b>TOTAL DROP OUT RATES 2019</b>	25%	29%	18%
<b>TOTAL DROP OUT RATES 2020</b>	38%	25%	16%

Source: UNAM Statistics- Strategy & Physical Planning (2018-2020)

The Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences recorded a total dropout of 5025 (30.6%) from a total of 16,390 students in the period 2018-2020. The Faculty of

Science experienced a dropout of 1478 (25.6%) from a number of 5762 students who enrolled while in the Faculty of Law the dropout rate was 639 (18%) out of 3555 students in the same period.

#### **4.3 The emergent themes from the non-persister questionnaire**

Three programmes per faculty with high dropout rates were selected. Five non-persisters per programme were selected to participate in the study. A questionnaire was emailed to non-persisters. Telephone interviews were initially planned to be conducted with non-persisters to get their views on student retention but due to the difficulties experienced as mentioned in the research methodology chapter, the non-persisters were asked to complete a questionnaire which was emailed to them in order not to further delay the data collection process. Fourteen (14) non-persister students eventually completed the questionnaire and returned it. The students who completed the questionnaire were five (5) from the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences, seven (7) from the Faculty of Science and two (2) from the Faculty of Law.

One common way to organise quantitative or qualitative data is in a frequency distribution. A frequency distribution lists the number of occurrences for each category of data. The number of times an observation occurs (frequency) for a data item (variable) can be shown for both quantitative and qualitative data. This is used in addition to counts and percentages provided because it helps to organise the data in order to make it to be understood more easily by giving the count of distinct values.

Most frequent factors stated in the persisters' focus group discussion interviews, non-persisters' questionnaire and staff survey questionnaires are provided in this way.

The data were further analysed using thematic analysis which is a method of analysing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kuckartz, 2014). It is usually applied to a set of texts such as interview transcripts. The researcher closely examined the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that came up repeatedly.

The responses in the transcripts were coded as categories or factors affecting student retention resulting in these students to drop out of university. Thereafter, the codes were labelled according to similarities under eleven (11) statements as the major factors that might have affected their decision to withdraw from their respective study programmes at the University of Namibia.

Table 4.9 shows the eleven factors and their count and frequencies.

**Table 4.9: Most frequent factors in the non-persister students' questionnaires****Frequency out of 14**

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1. Financial problems	5	<b>36%</b>
2. Workload	10	<b>71%</b>
3. Getting admitted to another university	5	<b>36%</b>
4. Difficulties finding a job after graduating	2	<b>14%</b>
5. Difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication/Negative staff attitude	10	<b>71%</b>
6. Lack of resources/ Poor student facilities	7	<b>50%</b>
7. Lecturing	12	<b>86%</b>
8. Social problems (Personal and living away from home)	7	<b>50%</b>
9. Difficulties in selecting the desired major or programme	4	<b>29%</b>
10. Getting a job or taking a gap year	4	<b>29%</b>
11. Lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week	7	<b>50%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>73</b>	

The non-persisters experienced difficulties in finances (36%), workload (71%), getting admitted to another university (36%), difficulties finding a job after graduating (14%), difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication/negative staff attitude (71%), lack of university resources/poor student facilities (50%), lecturing (86%), social problems (50%), difficulties in selecting the desired major or programme (29%), getting a job or taking a gap year (29%), and a lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week (50%).

These results suggest that the most important variables affecting student retention as perceived from non-persister students are lecturing (86%), difficulties getting assistance from staff (71%) and workload (71%).

The eleven subcategories were again regrouped according to their similarities under the following five categories, namely, poor system, staff attitude, timetabling, student goals and external influences. After re-reading the responses in the questionnaires and the above statements and categories, they were grouped under the following two main themes:

- Poor institutional experience
- Student characteristics

Table 4.10 shows all the subcategories, categories and main themes from the data of the non-persisters' questionnaires.

**Table 4.10: Non-persister questionnaire themes**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Subcategories</b>
<b>Poor Institutional Experience</b>		
	<i>Poor system</i>	Non-academic environment Administrative system needs reform Lecturing
	<i>Staff attitude</i>	Negative staff attitude Do not care about students Disrespecting students Lack of communication Difficulties getting assistance from staff
	<i>Timetabling</i>	Too many classes and gaps between classes
<b>Student characteristic</b>		
	<i>Student goals</i>	The sample university was not my first choice
	<i>External influences</i>	Family/Friends support withdrawal Decision

The following section details each of the themes from the responses from the interviews of the non-persister students as per Table 4.10.

#### **4.3.1 Poor institutional experience**

This theme emerged as a result of the non-persisters' responses. These are the factors related to students' experiences with lecturers, faculty officers, student councillors and other administrative staff. These responses refer to the factors that contribute to

the non-persisters' decision to withdraw and they were grouped under the following five categories:

#### **4.3.1.1 Poor system**

This category describes the students' perception and their experiences of the university environment. The non-persisters pointed out the difficulties getting assistance from staff, lack of communication and negative staff attitude. One student described the environment as being too strict and that prerequisites in some courses made it difficult for students to continue in the second semester or the following year (2<sup>nd</sup> year) if they fail. The University rules were too strict and they hardly considered the students and did not care whether they passed or failed for students to continue or in the case of the non-persister students, deciding to drop out.

The students also mentioned that they had difficulty in selecting their majors or in some cases transferring to other majors. This problem was worsened as sometimes could only do so if there were places that were available in the programme they wanted to do. They therefore enrolled at UNAM with the aim to transfer to another programme in the following year which was not always possible. Academic advice seemed to lack and this contributed to the students' decision to withdraw.

Lecturing was a major factor contributing to non-persisters' decision to drop out. A few lecturers were reported by students not to show up for classes regularly and very often they did not inform students about their absence from lectures. Their expectations of students were too high as some tend to forget that students are in their first year and they are not familiar with all the concepts. One student said that he had

lost interest in Science because of the way lectures were conducted. The lecturers rush through lectures and yet they expected students to understand everything right from the very first time. It was reported that most lecturers use PowerPoint and just read from the notes and do not know how to explain effectively.

#### **4.3.1.2 Staff attitude**

All the non-persisters' experience with staff was mostly negative judging by the responses from the interviews. They strongly objected to the way the faculty officers dealt with them. They were found to be very impatient, rude and did not always treat the students with respect. They felt that the administrative staff did not seem to care about their problems. Changes to majors and exemptions were not processed within an expected time often leading to unpleasant situations and consequences. Some of the actual student responses are highlighted in the next section dealing with an examination of Tinto's constructs from both non-persister and persister students. Non-persisters expressed the opinion that administrative staff needed to be trained and that they should keep in mind that the students were their clients and that they needed to be treated with a lot more respect, patience, and diligence.

#### **4.3.1.3 Timetabling**

Timetabling presented another problem. All non-persisters pointed out that they had basically no time for any extra-curricular activities. There were clubs and societies, but they decided not to join and one student stopped taking part in athletics as a result of the timetable and the workload being too much to handle. Non-persisters were attending classes from 7H30 in the morning to 17H30 in the afternoon and this resulted in them not being able to complete homework activities, submit assignments

on time, as well as doing proper revision or preparing for tests. In the Faculty of Science, one student described his experience as being too challenging and so stressful that a lot of students thought about suicide. The student further mentioned that the everyday workload required too many hours of his attention and he was struggling to cope while at the same time receiving very little help from his lecturers. Students felt that there were very few breaks between classes or sometimes too long breaks which made it difficult for them to attend to their studies the way they would have wanted to do. They felt exhausted at the end of every day.

### **4.3.2 Student characteristics**

The second theme identified was student characteristics. This theme refers to the factors related to non-persister students' goals, personal life (family and home), social factors and living away from home. These were grouped under two factors, namely, student goals and external influences.

#### **4.3.2.1 Student goals**

This category highlights the issues that are related to the students' goals, motivations, and expectations. The students' main goal and what influenced them to study at UNAM were examined during the analysis. Six non-persister students (43%) stated that UNAM's good reputation of providing quality education and the fact that it is one of the best universities in the country influenced their decision to study at the university. Four students mentioned that UNAM was their only option available as it was the only institution offering their preferred programme. One non-persister's reason for choosing UNAM was influenced by his parents as they had insisted that he should study a particular course and do so at UNAM. It is interesting to note that one

student enrolled for a course that was not his preferred choice because he did not meet the requirements while two students came from another institution to try and complete a qualification that they had previously enrolled for but did not finish.

All non-persisters' main goal was to complete and acquire a qualification. Two students wanted to complete their studies which had previously been interrupted. Ten students mentioned that they wanted to continue beyond the bachelor's degree and enrol for a master degree and four wanted to pursue a PhD. This unfortunately did not happen as they dropped out due to the workload which was described by one student as depressing. Two students got admitted to study at another institution while five students experienced financial difficulties and four took a gap year due to personal reasons. They are currently enrolled at UNAM but for a different programme.

#### **4.3.2.2 External influences**

This category investigated the influence of students' family and friends on their decisions to leave the University of Namibia. It was found that the people around students can encourage them to continue in their study programmes or push them to drop out or transfer to other institutions.

Seven of the non-persister students mentioned that the expectations from parents were very high and that there was too much pressure from home. Two students who dropped out had to work while enrolled at UNAM. They found it very difficult to support themselves and their families and go to classes at the same time. There was a lack of adequate support from parents and five students had trouble getting financial assistance. Only one non-persister student discussed the decision to drop out with the

parents. One student stated that he discussed his decision to withdraw with his family and friends but they did not provide him with any explanation and just advised him to continue studying. Eleven non-persisters did not discuss their decision to withdraw with either family or friends. They had already decided and stuck by it while four students' reasons for dropping out was influenced by the fact that they found employment.

Six (6) focus groups were undertaken with persisters with five (5) students in a group. A total of thirty (30) persisters were interviewed. The first group consisted of fifteen (15) students from the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences, the second consisted of five (5) students from the Faculty of Science and, the third consisted of ten (10) students from the Faculty of Law. Data were collected from the thirty (30) persisters who participated in this study.

Academic and administrative staff members were asked to complete a staff questionnaire in order to indicate their views of the factors affecting student retention at the University of Namibia. This was the preferred method as staff could complete the questionnaires at their convenience and the questionnaire form containing only three questions was sent to staff in November 2019 as well as in 2020. Staff members were asked to complete a staff questionnaire and of the more than 180 questionnaire forms that were distributed, only twenty (20) were returned. These included seventeen (17) academic staff members, (1) administrative staff member and two (2) librarians. They were all from the University of Namibia.

#### **4.4 The emergent themes from the persister students' focus groups**

Data were collected from the thirty (30) persister students who participated in this study. The researcher interviewed the persisters from the three Faculties selected and the responses were transcribed after the focus group discussions. Statements, phrases and signal words were highlighted and identified as codes. There were 103 statements in the transcripts coded as variables related to student retention. These codes were later labelled according to their similarities under ten (10) statements as the major issues and factors that might affect student retention at the University of Namibia from the perspective of the persister students. Table 4.11 lists the 10 most frequently mentioned statements.

**Table 4.11: Most frequent factors in the persister students' focus groups**

<b>Frequency out of 30</b>		
<b>Statements</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1. Financial problems	9	<b>30%</b>
2. Workload	16	<b>53%</b>
3. Difficulties making the transition from high school to university	12	<b>40%</b>
4. Difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication	24	<b>80%</b>
5. Lack of resources	10	<b>33%</b>
6. Lecturing	6	<b>20%</b>
7. Social problems (Personal and living away from home)	11	<b>37%</b>
8. Difficulties in selecting the desired major or programme	4	<b>17%</b>
9. Getting a job or taking a gap year	5	<b>13%</b>
10. Lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week	6	<b>20%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	

The participants experienced difficulties in financial problems (30%), workload (53%), difficulties making the transition from high school to university (40%), difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication (80%), lack of resources (33%), lecturing (20%), social problems (37%), difficulties in selecting the desired majors or programme (17%), getting a job or taking a gap year (13%), and lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week (20%).

These results suggest that the most important variables affecting student retention as perceived by persisters are difficulties in getting assistance from staff and lack of communication (80%) and workload (53%).

To establish the thematic analysis process, these 103 most frequent issues were labelled as subcategories and they were regrouped according to their similarities under ten categories. The interviews were read a number of times and grouped into themes. The outcome of the thematic analysis was the following two main themes:

- Poor institutional experience
- Student characteristics

Table 4.12 shows persister student group themes.

**Table 4.12: Persister students focus groups themes**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Subcategories</b>
<b>Poor institutional Experience</b>	<i>Poor system</i>	Poor student facilities Lack of communication with administration
	<i>Poor orientation</i>	Negative first impression
	<i>Timetabling</i>	Workload
	<i>Staff attitude</i>	Negative staff attitude Disrespecting students Intimidate students if they complain
<b>Student Characteristics</b>	<i>Student goals</i>	Difficulty making the transition Difficulty in choosing the desired major or programme Another study opportunity Getting a job
	<i>Student commitments</i>	External commitments

The following section details each of the themes from the responses from the interviews of the persisters as per Table 4.12.

#### **4.4.1 Poor institutional experience**

This theme emerged as a result of the persisters' responses. These are the factors related to students' experiences with lecturers, faculty officers, student councillors and other administrative staff. These responses refer to the factors that contribute to

the students' decision to withdraw at the University of Namibia. These factors were grouped under the following seven categories: poor system, poor orientation, timetabling, staff attitude, student goals and student commitments.

#### **4.4.1.1 Poor system**

The persisters were asked whether UNAM had a student-friendly environment and its effect on student retention. This is broadly characterised by its facilities, classrooms, health support system, disciplinary policies and practices. Ten out of thirty persister students (33%) stated that a lack of resources was a problem. They mentioned that some classrooms/venues were too small and that they had to compete for a seat. Most classes had large numbers of students and not all venues were equipped with sound equipment and as a result they had difficulty hearing the lecturer clearly. Microphone systems and overhead projectors were also not functioning properly in many of the lecture venues and this resulted in students not attending classes or losing interest in lectures. They responded that UNAM appeared not to make provisions for the increase in the number of incoming students annually. In most venues, the air-conditioners were not functioning or not functioning properly and it was very hot in classrooms/venues, especially during the summer months.

In courses like Law, ten (10) students agreed with a response by one of their peers that the course had too much research and that the availability of sources and resources was a problem. They could not do proper research and they mentioned that the library lacked the necessary books and that they could almost never find a book that was prescribed.

A big concern for students was that UNAM sometimes had no water on campus and that the bathrooms were then inaccessible and smelly. The toilets, as well as some lecture rooms on campus were sometimes not cleaned regularly as well as some of the lecture rooms. The persisters agreed that the health facilities on campus were good but they had no knowledge of UNAM's disciplinary policies and practices. The majority of the participants in the focus groups believed that the student facilities at UNAM were not as good as those of other institutions like NUST. They believed that the quality of the student facilities compared to other local institutions could provide a bad or negative experience to students and influence their decision to transfer to another institution.

#### **4.4.1.2 Poor orientation**

Orientation is a chance for students to learn how things work at their new school and meeting other students as well as faculty and staff members. Orientation programmes are aimed at familiarising the students to an unknown campus environment, its faculties and infrastructure. It enables them to make an essential connection with studies and developing networks among other peers (Nelson, 2012).

Six out of thirty (20%) persisters did not attend the orientation week. They were not informed about the orientation and they were assisted by other first-year or senior students when they received the timetable for them to be able to attend classes. One group (5 students) stated that the orientation did not help much. The groups were too big and they could not hear properly. In addition, the sound system was very poor. However, the persisters were in agreement that they benefitted greatly from the orientation programme. There were activities to familiarise the students with the

campus, lecture rooms and facilities, and they were introduced to staff members and they stated that the orientation week was well organised. This helped them to settle in and they did not experience difficulties in finding the venues. One student remarked that the orientation week was the best experience. The responses therefore show that the majority of persisters were happy with their experience of the orientation week.

#### **4.4.1.3 Timetabling**

Sixteen persister students (56%) responded that their biggest challenges were timetabling and the workload in the first year. They mentioned that these issues had negatively affected their studies and performance at the University of Namibia. It is clear from the participants' responses that they were struggling with the workload. They felt that the workload was demotivating and that they had too many modules and classes to attend from 7H30 in the morning until 17H30 in the afternoon. This restricted their time to do the homework given and to study effectively. Some modules were perceived as being too difficult and they stated that they were not adequately informed that it would be a lot of work and that the modules would be so difficult.

#### **4.4.1.4 Staff attitude**

Eighty percent (80%) of the persisters mentioned that they experienced difficulties getting assistance from staff and that there was a lack of communication. Administrative staff were described as being impatient and unfriendly and not always willing to assist students. The respondents felt that the administrative staff appeared to be unapproachable and the students feel neglected. Their offices were often closed as if they deliberately wanted to shut students out.

It is in general, difficult to approach the faculty officers as one student mentioned that they “make you feel lower than you are.” They often do not get any feedback from them and four students stated that they only had bad experiences with faculty officers. They complained that their applications for exemptions did not get processed or they got lost and they had to go back to the different lecturers to complete another exemption form. It was mentioned by two students that their examination scripts got lost and they therefore had to rewrite the module which they then failed. All the persisters from one Faculty agreed to the following statement by one of the students: “Our faculty officer is rude, stressed and we are scared of the person’s reaction. They don’t care about our education.” More of the students’ actual responses are provided in the section in this chapter when examining Tinto’s constructs from both non-persister and persister students.

#### **4.4.2 Student characteristics**

This includes the students’ educational and job goals that are related to the academic and administrative systems of the University of Namibia.

##### **4.4.2.1 Student goals**

Twelve persisters (40%) found the transition from high school to university difficult. The expectations vs the reality is different. The biggest factor according to the twelve students was trying to adjust and they described the shift as “too much.” The workload was a lot more and heavier than at school. Five students agreed with a comment that the students were perhaps not ready mentally and perhaps not disciplined enough. Thus, they struggle to adjust.

Four students (17%) realised too late that the course was not for them. They mentioned that other students then realised their mistake and dropped out during the year or did not return because they had failed and thus they did not want to continue. The persisters also stated that not enough research was done about the programme that students chose and that the expectations and reality were in conflict.

Five persisters (13%) mentioned that withdrawal can be attributed to students getting a job or getting admitted to another institution. They felt that students came to UNAM because they were not admitted to the institution of their choice and as such they would leave at the first opportunity if they were to apply again be admitted. They would also leave their studies if presented with a job opportunity.

#### **4.4.2.2 Student commitment**

The students' characteristics theme discussed how students' external commitments could affect their ability to persist in their study programmes. These factors included the students' family and work commitments and other life responsibilities outside the University. Eleven persisters (37%) attributed students' decision to drop out to teenage pregnancies which mostly occurred in the first year of study, living away from home and difficulty getting to campus daily. Students got homesick because most of them were attending University far from home. They were forced to live with families where they had no choice but to share a room or rooms with other persons which may not always be family members.

Students were forced to do courses or programmes because it was what parents wanted them to do because the parents or family members paid for their studies. Six students

agreed that this situation and the ones mentioned above forced students to get a job to get money and they then decided to drop out once that happened.

#### **4.5 The emergent themes from the staff survey questionnaire**

Staff members were requested to indicate their perceptions of the factors affecting student retention at the University of Namibia. There were sixty-seven (67) statements in the transcripts coded as variables affecting student retention. These variables were reduced to eight (8) categories or factors. Table 4.13 shows a description of the factors and their count and percentage (frequencies).

**Table 4.13: Most frequent factors in the staff members' survey questionnaire**

		<b>Frequency out of 20</b>	
	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Workload	4	<b>20%</b>
2	Difficulties selecting the desired major or programme	10	<b>50%</b>
3	Difficulties adjusting to university climate and a lack of knowledge of the university system	14	<b>70%</b>
4	Lecturing and resources	6	<b>30%</b>
5	Social problems	8	<b>40%</b>
6	Family problems	9	<b>45%</b>
7	Financial problems	13	<b>65%</b>
8	Lack of guidance and advice	4	<b>20%</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	

Table 4.13 shows that the staff felt that workload (20%), difficulties selecting the desired major or programme (50%), difficulties adjusting to the university climate and a lack of knowledge of the university system (70%), lecturing and resources (30%), social problems (40%), family problems (45%), financial problems (65%), and lack of guidance and advice (20%) all contribute to student retention at UNAM.

The results indicate that the most important variables affecting student retention as perceived by staff members at the University of Namibia are difficulties adjusting to university climate and a lack of knowledge of the university system (70%), financial problems (65%), difficulties selecting the desired major (50%).

Table 4.14 shows all of these subcategories, categories and themes.

**Table 4.14: Staff survey questionnaire themes**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Subcategories</b>
<b>Poor institutional Experience</b>	<i>Timetabling</i>	Workload
	<i>Student services</i>	Lecturing and resources Lack of guidance and advice
<b>Student Characteristics</b>	<i>Student goals</i>	Getting a job  Transferring to another institution Difficulty adjusting to the university climate making the transition and lack of knowledge of the university system Difficulty in choosing the desired major or programme
	<i>External influences</i>	Family/friends support/Social problems
		Finances

The following section details each of the themes from the responses from the staff questionnaire. The themes that emerged were poor institutional experience and student characteristics. Under each theme, there are categories and subcategories that group the factors affecting student retention at the University of Namibia from the perspective of the university's academic and administrative staff.

These factors were grouped under the following four categories: timetabling, student services, student goals and external influences.

The following sections detail the findings of each theme from the academic and administrative staff's responses to the survey questions as per Table 4.14.

#### **4.5.1 Poor institutional experience**

Poor institutional experience are those factors related to students' experiences with the university administrative system that might influence their retention. These issues were grouped according to their similarities into the following five categories:

##### **4.5.1.1 Timetabling**

Four out of twenty staff members (20%) stated that students normally had a heavy workload in the first year. They struggled to cope and as such they ended up dropping out. Alternatively, they may have failed their courses and were not willing to repeat.

##### **4.5.1.2 Student services**

This category discusses the issues affecting retention as perceived by the academic and administrative staff. These issues were classified under the following two subcategories: lecturing and lack of resources, and lack of guidance and advice.

###### **4.5.1.2.1 Lecturing and lack of resources**

Six out of twenty staff members (30%) responded that students were not happy with some lecturers and the way they taught. Students lied about various things when they failed and staff viewed this as a corrupt, immoral and unethical situation.

Stricter action should be taken against students who did not adhere to the rules and regulations of the university. It was mentioned that it was too much effort to reprimand and punish a student who continually copied. Students did not understand the rationale of a PowerPoint presentation and they could not take notes effectively.

Student resources are of great importance to students during their study. They are not always attending lectures and practical classes and they need access to a number of resources and facilities. If these facilities are not up to standard or lacking, it may force them to drop out and enrol at another institution with better resources and facilities. A lack of supporting infrastructure was mentioned by only one staff member and also that improvement was needed.

#### **4.5.1.2.2 Lack of guidance and advice**

Four staff members (20%) stated that there was a lack of academic support at UNAM and that students needed mentoring as they were unprepared to undertake higher education. They also lacked the necessary time-skills to achieve success.

#### **4.5.2 Student characteristics**

This includes the students' educational and job goals, and other factors that are not related to the academic and administrative systems of the sample college.

##### **4.5.2.1 Student goals**

This category groups all the issues that are related to the students' goals.

#### **4.5.2.1.1 Getting a job and transferring to another institution**

The first issue under the student goals category is getting a job and transferring to another institution. Staff responded that one of the reasons for student drop-out from UNAM is that they get a job and decide to give up their studies for this reason. Fourteen students in the questionnaires and focus group discussions mentioned that they would leave UNAM should they get a job or should they get admitted to another institution.

#### **4.5.2.1.2 Difficulty adjusting to the university climate and a lack of knowledge of the university system**

Fourteen staff members (70%) mentioned that one of the major reasons for students to drop out from UNAM was that they had trouble adjusting to the university climate and a lack of knowledge of the university system.

Staff mentioned that the transition from high school to university was usually a big step and that students found it difficult to cope with academic demands. They entered UNAM with high grades but with mainly one skill, that is, memorising and reproduction. They mostly possessed a weak academic background and a lack of skill to function in an academic background to use information resources, how to collect information for and structure an assignment, and how to prepare for an examination.

Students further had trouble with the medium of instruction, English, as they did not have sufficient command of the English language. They experienced difficulty in the comprehension of reading and listening in order to make the necessary analysis. Further responses from staff pointed out that students lacked cognitive and

behavioural growth to identify and figure things out and that they also lacked time management skills to achieve success.

Finally, some staff mentioned that students could not take notes, and as such, they felt overwhelmed by the amount of work as many of them did not attend orientation, they therefore had a poor knowledge of the university structure.

#### **4.5.2.1.3 Difficulty in choosing the desired major or programme**

Ten staff members (50%) attributed the student drop-out to students selecting the wrong programme or field of study. As a result, they ended up doing an alternative programme because they did not get admitted to the programme of their choice. This led to a wrong decision of field of study which was a mismatch in the course that the student applied for and the student's real interest. This can be ascribed to a lack of proper guidance (40%) when it came to selecting the best career option. Students would apply for any course just to get into the university and then drop out of the course and apply or register for what they wanted to do.

One lecturer ascribed the decision by the student to drop out to the way UNAM dealt with many students during registration. Due to a lack of space in a particular programme, UNAM allowed a student to register for an alternative course in the first year and later the student would quit and apply for their original first choice of study in the following year.

According to one staff member, the lack of a proper institutional retention plan or policy to retain students contributed to students' decision to drop out at UNAM or to

help students to persist in their study programmes. It appears that no steps were taken by UNAM to address this problem over the years.

#### **4.5.3 External influences**

This section investigates the influence of students' family and friends and financial problems on their decisions to leave UNAM.

##### **4.5.3.1 Family and friends support and social problems**

Nine staff members (45%) and eight staff members (40%) respectively mentioned family and friends as well as social problems to be contributing factors to students' decision to drop out. One main factor identified was parents forcing children to take a course that they did not want to study. It was noticed also by staff members that some students were not able to afford a meal during the day on campus. Many of the students had found accommodation with family and friends in the capital city and they lived in small houses in informal settlements with no water and electricity. They had to travel long distances from these residential areas to campus and they lacked the necessary finances to attend classes on a daily basis. There have been incidents of attempted suicide, poverty, emotional and sexual abuse related to these living conditions. If the breadwinner, who was supporting them, dies, the students then also had no choice but to drop out.

Some staff stated that many students could not manage the social freedom that came with living on one's own. Students joined other young people and found it hard to fit in. They started clubbing, engaging in unprotected sex, ventured into all kinds of toxic behaviour and in the process compromised their studies. They gave in to peer-

pressure and they were misled by older friends who had previously failed in their own education. In addition, they often struggled to integrate into social groups or making friends and eventually chose to leave university. Cases of alcohol abuse among students as well as pregnancy were also reported by members of staff. Decisions to drop out were also reported to be as a result of a few cases related to personal and medical reasons.

#### **4.5.3.2 Finances**

Thirteen staff (64%) mentioned financial difficulty one of the contributing factors to student drop-out. Eight out of twenty staff mentioned that not all the students had the financial means to stay on in a programme. They had student transport and housing expenses. They lacked secured funding and it was difficult for them to access loans and scholarships. Students could not cope with costs for transport to and from campus, food, cosmetics, and other necessities they needed on a daily basis. It was expensive to live in the city and they just did not have the funds.

Five staff members mentioned that not all students had the money to repeat a course when they had failed. The parents could not afford to pay for tuition fees and students had no means to pay for their own studies. Students also registered on the promise of family members that they would take care of payments but then the family members abandoned these students. Some family members promised to support them financially but they could not assist them later. Getting assistance from NSFAP was not guaranteed and very often students were allowed to register by NSFAP only to be informed later that their tuition cannot be paid. So, finances or lack of finances is thus another contributing factor to students' decision to drop out.

## **4.6 Examining Tinto's constructs from both non-persister and persister students**

In this section, a comparison of Tinto's constructs or factors affecting student retention between non-persisters and persisters is undertaken. These factors are background characteristics, goal and institutional commitments, academic integration, and social integration.

### **4.6.1 Background characteristics**

According to Tinto's student integration model, students enter a university with a variety of background characteristics. These include family backgrounds, individual attitudes, and their schooling before coming to university. This study did not focus on the family background by measuring the levels of students' parent formal education; individual attitude by students' general reasoning test scores; and pre-university schooling by looking at the students' high school test scores. The study questionnaire did not cater for these factors. From UNAM statistics, it was however noticed that most of these students completed Grade 12 at Namibian schools with other students originating from countries like Angola, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

### **4.6.2 Initial goal and institutional commitments**

Students were asked about their main educational goal when they enrolled at the University of Namibia Main campus.

The following quotes provide the responses to the question with regards to what the non-persisters' main goal was when they decided to come and study at UNAM's main campus:

*To obtain the highest qualification*

*To complete my degree and eventually obtain a PhD*

*To pass all my modules and finish my dream which was a BSc in Biochemistry*

*To study Medicine and enjoy me varsity years at UNAM*

*To be successful during and after my studies*

*To complete a pending course of study*

*To complete my undergraduate degree in Law*

*To acquire a diploma*

*To finish a degree*

*To acquire my qualification as an accountant*

*To obtain my honours degree*

*To graduate with a degree in a finance-related course*

The above responses indicate that the majority of non-persisters mentioned that their main goal was to obtain a qualification.

The following quotes provide the responses to the question regarding what the persisters' main goal was when they decided to come and study at the UNAM main campus:

*To study and get a job*

*To make my family proud*

*To start my own business after completing my studies*

*To make my family proud (all agree)*

*To finish my honours and then my Master's degree*

*To finish this degree and continue at the School of Medicine*

*To finish my degree and do a Master's and then a PhD*

*To graduate first class and get a job in Namibia as I am from Zimbabwe*

*To come back to UNAM in the future and improve even more*

*To become a CEO, I want to be my own boss*

The majority of non-persisters and persisters stated that their main goal was to obtain a qualification and further their studies to a higher level or degree.

#### **4.6.3 Institutional commitment**

“Institutional commitment represents the degree to which the student is motivated to graduate from a specific university or major” (Al Dossary, 2008, p. 229).

The students were further asked to indicate what motivated them to choose UNAM.

Responses from the non-persisters were as follows:

*UNAM was one of the best universities in Namibia and it gives experience and qualifications*

*It was my only option*

*It had what I wanted to study*

*UNAM was the only institution that offered the desired course*

*UNAM is a well-known university*

*The available infrastructure and expertise of the lecturers*

*My parents wanted me to enrol at UNAM*

*UNAM has a good reputation of providing quality education*

*It is one of the best universities in the country*

*NUST did not offer honours in my field*

*Close to home*

The persister students were also interviewed about what motivated them to choose UNAM. Responses from the persister students were as follows:

*UNAM is the biggest national university*

*UNAM provides quality education*

*UNAM is closer to home and it is easier to get into UNAM*

*UNAM is the only institution that offers Law*

*Where I come from, which is Angola, almost all accountants there studied at UNAM*

*Main campus*

*UNAM offered Law*

*Coming to UNAM is more convenient*

*Did not get enough points to study Medicine, so I opted for Law*

*My course was offered at UNAM*

*First option was Education, but I did not get admitted*

Most of the non-persisters and persisters as shown above had decided to choose UNAM because they perceived the institution as one of the best universities in Namibia. Similarly, as was found by Al Dossery in Saudi Arabia, it was close to their family homes and was more convenient. In addition, both non-persisters and persisters mentioned that UNAM was the only institution that offered their programme when they were asked why they had chosen their majors. Most of the students enrolled for the course they initially set out to do. Three students from the Faculty of Science could not choose their desired majors because they did not obtain enough points or good enough results in the Grade 12 examinations to enrol for a degree in Medicine which they had planned to enrol for.

Both groups of students, that is non-persisters and persisters, were admitted for their desired majors or programme and this suggests that both groups had a high degree of institutional commitment.

#### **4.6.4 Academic integration**

Academic integration is defined as a student's perceived academic performance and intellectual development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, as cited by Al Dossery, 2014). Both groups of students were asked if they attended the orientation week and whether it had helped them to settle in. Seven non-persisters said they that attended the orientation week. The remaining non-persisters did not attend because they enrolled late or did not know about the orientation programme offered at UNAM. They also could not offer suggestions on how the orientation week could be improved when they were asked whether there was anything missing during the orientation week.

The following quotes from the non-persisters indicate that the orientation week helped students to settle in:

*Yes, it was encouraging and helpful*

*Yes, it was well-informing and well-structured*

*Yes, I did and it was very helpful*

*Yes, and I was able to find my way around afterwards*

*Yes, it was an exposure to the university world*

Twenty persisters said that they attended the orientation week. The remaining persisters did not attend because they enrolled late or did not know about the orientation programme offered at UNAM, or were not informed about it.

The following quotes from the persister students provide evidence that the orientation week helped them to settle in:

*Yes, there were activities organised to get to know campus*

*My first year was little easier*

*I knew where the lecture rooms were*

*Did not have problems finding classes*

*Our orientation week was the best*

*The orientation week was well-organised*

*We were introduced to staff members*

*We were shown how to use the library and search for books*

There were three persisters who mentioned that the orientation did not help much as they could not hear properly because of the poor sound system and that the group was too big. They suggested that UNAM should make provision to accommodate students in venues during orientation as student numbers are increasing on an annual basis. More students should be encouraged to attend. One student felt that the orientation week was too long.

Persister students were asked whether they seek or have sought assistance from lecturers, faculty officers, student councillors or other administrative staff. All persisters mentioned that they sought assistance from lecturers, as well faculty officers and other administrative staff. No student mentioned asking a student councillor for assistance.

The non-persister students were asked whether they had sought assistance from lecturers, faculty officers, student councillors or other administrative staff. All non-persisters, with the exception of five non-persisters, responded that they had sought assistance from them. In addition, the non-persisters were asked if they had discussed their decision with anybody on or off campus.

The following quotes provide responses to whether non-persisters discussed their decision to withdraw with anybody:

*I discussed it with my parents, but they did not listen*

*They advised me to continue but my mind and body had already dropped out*

*I did not discuss it with anybody*

*I did not as I had no clue who to turn to*

*Yes, I approached a student councillor who advised me to talk to my lecturers*

*I talked with my lecturers and tutors but nothing changed*

*I told my parents that I was starting to feel depressed and that the course wasn't for me*

*No, the decision was made by myself to proceed in another direction*

*Only with close friends and relatives*

The majority of non-persisters did not discuss their decision to withdraw with anybody. Those who did discussed it mainly with their parents or relatives and to a lesser degree with a student councillor or lecturer or tutor. In all cases, this did not stop them from dropping out.

#### 4.6.5 Social integration

Academic and social integration constructs can have an influence on the academic and social integration and processes and can define whether the student chooses to leave (Tinto, 1993). Social integration is also defined as the quality of a student's relationships with both the peer group and the faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

Non-persister and persister students were asked to describe their relationship with the staff members. Both groups responded that they experienced difficulties getting assistance from lecturers, faculty officers and other administrative staff. Seventy-one percent (71%) of non-persisters and eighty percent (80%) of the persisters experienced difficulties getting assistance from lecturers, faculty officers and other administrative staff:

*They are not willing to assist students and their offices are almost always closed*

*They are shutting students out*

*They are not patient and friendly*

*It is very hard approaching or going to see the Faculty Officer*

*Not with lecturers but mainly with faculty officers*

*Our marks do not appear, exemptions are not done, subjects do not appear*

*Faculty officers are rude, stressed and we are scared of their reaction*

The non-persisters complained about their relationship with the staff members. For example:

*The Dean of Students was most of the time not available or in a meeting*

*The Faculty Officer for Science was very rude, unhelpful and never able to assist*

*I received help from the Faculty Officer but they can be somehow arrogant, almost always*

*Our queries are not taken into account by administrative staff*

*Some care, some don't*

*They are sometimes not in their offices*

*Communication is a problem*

*Admin staff treat students badly*

*The biggest challenge was getting assistance from faculty officers*

*Some admin staff do not solve our problem of missing marks*

*Some faculty officers make you feel lower than you are*

*UNAM's admin staff are not up to standard*

With regards to lecturers, the non-persisters and persisters had the following to say:

*They just don't show interest or are mean at times*

*They mostly focus on students who are performing*

*Not many lecturers walk the extra mile for students*

*Some lecturers are very impatient*

*A lecturer shut the door in my face*

*Lecturers were very friendly, helpful, there was positive interaction*

*Lecturers appear to be not approachable*

*They should improve their communication with students*

*Create a better lecturer-student relationship as it is bad at the moment*

*They don't inform us when they do not come for a class or cancel a class*

The above responses provided by the non-persisters and persisters indicate that there were no differences on how they perceived their relationships with staff members.

Both groups complained about their relationship with the staff members and in some

instances they provided evidence of particular situations in support of their comments. They do however, appear to have a better relationship with lecturers in general.

The students were asked what type of social interaction they had at UNAM and with whom:

*I've had encounters with both lecturers and other students who gave me good advice*

*Study groups between students and to catch up with friends at the cafeteria*

*We mainly interact in study groups*

*Mostly had interaction during practical classes and in the dining hall and cafeteria*

*I mostly interacted with my friends from high school*

*We mostly interact during classes and Winter school*

*Our main interaction is with fellow students doing the same course*

*With friends or fellow students to discuss assignments on campus and on forums*

The majority of students' main form of interaction was with classmates and this happened on campus. There were a few students who said that they preferred to work alone and they did not have much interaction with other students or lecturers and therefore showed low levels of social integration in relation to university activities.

Both groups of students were asked whether UNAM offers enough extra-curricular activities and to indicate the types of extra-curricular activities they had engaged in while attending UNAM Main campus. All the non-persisters and persisters said that they did not engage in any kind of extra-social activities.

When asked for the reasons why they did not engage in any form of extra-curricular activities they stated that they did not have the time to spend engaging in this activity and they did not know about these activities or how to join. For example:

*We were informed but UNAM does not really encourage students to take part*

*They need to broaden it up by offering softball and swimming as well*

*UNAM does not do enough with regards to sport and cultural activities*

*They do, but I never participated in sports*

*There are many clubs and societies but we did not join*

*I joined the athletics club but decided to cancel because of my workload*

*We want to join clubs but cannot as we don't have time*

*Most of our classes run from 7H30 to 17H30, no time for sports*

None of the non-persisters and persisters had taken part in any kind of sport at the time of the interviews.

#### **4.7. Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the results of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis using the data from the non-persister students, persister students, and staff members. The most important factors affecting student retention as perceived from the three sources were: difficulty in getting assistance from staff and negative staff attitude, difficulty selecting the desired major, difficulty making the transition from high school to university, workload, lecturing and financial problems.

The next chapter discusses the study findings.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

#### 5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors influencing student retention at the University of Namibia. This was done through a set of research questions in order to reach an understanding of the problem and to address the questions that guided the study. The previous chapter presented the findings obtained utilising quantitative and qualitative data. Table 5.1 outlines the factors affecting student retention at the University of Namibia. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss these findings and relate them to prior research, suggest possible interventions and propose a plan for student retention as an outcome of the study based on best practices identified in the literature.

The study had the following research questions:

1. Why does UNAM experience a high student dropout rate?
2. How does UNAM deal with the high student dropout rate to enhance student retention?
3. What are the enablers and potential barriers for the realisation of effective student retention strategies at UNAM?
4. What can UNAM learn from the existing best practices in student retention to enhance its current student retention strategy?

The study utilised a mixed methods approach and the convergent-parallel design. The research questions were analysed using thematic analysis. This entailed identifying the most frequently mentioned factors as perceived by non-persister students, persister students and staff members. These factors were then grouped under subcategories, categories and finally, under themes according to similarities as discussed in Chapter four.

## **5.2 Discussion of the findings**

The study employed a mixed methods approach and convergent parallel design which was also a single holistic case study design. The case study is best suited when considering the how and why questions, or when the investigator has little control over events. The case study is the most flexible of all research designs, allowing the researcher to retain the holistic characteristics of real-life events while investigating empirical events (Yin, 2009).

The data for this study were collected from non-persisters using a questionnaire as difficulties were experienced with in-depth telephone interviews. The study also used focus group interview discussions with persisters and a staff survey questionnaire. The three groups that were used to collect data were 14 non-persisters, 30 persisters and 20 academic and administrative staff.

The responses were organised according to their similarities into subcategories, categories and themes. The analysis of the data of the non-persisters resulted in 11 subcategories which were regrouped under five categories, namely, poor system, staff

attitude, timetabling, student goals and external influences. These were then classified under two themes: poor institutional experience and student characteristics.

The analysis of the data of the persisters resulted in ten subcategories which were regrouped under six categories, namely, poor system, poor orientation, timetabling, staff attitude, student goals and student commitments. These were then classified under two themes: poor institutional experience and student characteristics.

The analysis of the data of the staff survey questionnaire resulted in eight subcategories which were regrouped under four categories, namely, timetabling, student services, student goals and external influences. These were then classified under two themes: poor institutional experience and student characteristics.

The non-persisters, persisters and staff members were all asked to indicate what they perceived to be the major factors affecting student retention at the University of Namibia.

The major factors as perceived by the non-persisters were: Finances (36%), workload (71%), getting admitted to another university (36%), difficulties finding a job after graduating (14%), difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication/negative staff attitude (71%), lack of university resources/poor student facilities (50%), lecturing (86%), social problems (50%), difficulties in selecting the desired major or programme (29%), getting a job or taking a gap year (29%), and a lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week (50%).

The results therefore indicate that the biggest variables or factors affecting student retention perceived by non-persisters are lecturing, workload, difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication, lack of resources, social problems, and lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week.

The major factors perceived by the persisters were:

Financial problems (30%), workload (53%), difficulties making the transition from high school to university (40%), difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication (80%), lack of resources (33%), lecturing (20%), social problems (37%), difficulties in selecting the desired majors or programme (17%), getting a job or taking a gap year (13%), and lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week (20%).

The major factors as perceived by staff members were:

Workload (20%), difficulties selecting the desired major or programme (50%), difficulties adjusting to university climate and a lack of knowledge of the university system (70%), lecturing and resources (30%), social problems (40%), family problems (64%), and lack of guidance and advice (20%).

These factors are not independent since one may be the cause of another but together they give an overall impression of what goes wrong in a student's life when they make the decision to leave university early. Due to the timetable and workload, the non-persisters and persisters complained that they had very little time or no time to do other activities. Students needed time for studying. They therefore required adequate time to manage their daily and weekly workload.

Once this is achieved, the student can plan and set the necessary actions in place to manage the workload and achieve their goal. Blended learning classrooms can help lecturers to reduce class time by as much as one-half and use class time more efficiently (Marcum et al., 2014). In this way, at-risk students can master content twice as fast as they would with lectures, and their pass rates can increase by one-third. UNAM can consider introducing more student-friendly class schedules.

Financial problems in this study as mentioned by non-persisters and persisters were an important variable affecting student retention. Since tuition fees have increased significantly over the years, the debt that students incur when pursuing their higher education is an important issue (Thomas, 2002). The results of this study support these findings. The study found a relationship between financial problems and student persistence as was also found in another study conducted by Stewart, Lim and Kim (2015). The results suggest that financial problems may predict persistence at UNAM. However, while students are already experiencing financial problems, other factors resulting from a lack of finances as well as significant family events (illness or death of a parent, unemployment of a parent, marriage, termination of financial assistance by a sponsor) can prompt them to withdraw from UNAM. Another reason why students drop out can be attributed to the inability to fund their tuition and books. However, in a study conducted by Braunstein, McGrath & Pescatrice (2000) financial aid did not have a significant impact on first-year persistence. Braunstein et al. (2000) found that students from families with greater incomes tended to persist in their studies.

Prior research has revealed that students are likely to discontinue their studies at an institution due to unsatisfactory academic performance (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004; Ryan & Glenn, 2002). However, the findings of this study are contrary. The respondents did not mention that their academic performance had an impact on students' dropout intentions.

The results of this research revealed that the desire to transfer to another academic institution was not a particularly important reason affecting retention. Also, there were no significant differences between non-persisters and persisters in this regard. It appears that once the programme selection decision has been made, the transfer to another academic institution is not very likely to occur (Bansal, Taylor & James, 2005). These findings indicate that the decision of student participants in this study to transfer to another institution is low.

Family issues and social problems are also factors causing students to decide to discontinue their studies. The findings of this study indicate that family issues are a contributing factor towards dropout intentions. In addition, medical reasons can also affect students' decision to discontinue their studies. However, the current research findings indicate that medical reasons had a minor impact on the students' decision to drop out from UNAM.

Another factor that potentially impacts retention intentions is the issue of unpreparedness for living away from home and accommodation. Students may have issues in finding accommodation, especially in the case of students who are from other regions and who come to UNAM campus in Windhoek as the results of this research

indicate. This may pose a problem as a student living in unsuitable off-campus accommodation would have a greater chance of not wanting to continue (Grayson, 1998). Thompson Samiratedu and Rafter (1993) determined that first-year students with adequate campus accommodation indicated higher retention intentions, better academic performance and continuity, as well as student satisfaction (Pike & Kuh, 2005). The results of previous research align with results of the current study. Accommodation was considered to be a somewhat important factor affecting retention for some of the students.

Students' perception of their workload has a major effect on their study success. “Excessive workload has been associated with many problems, such as decreased performance and motivation to study, burnout, anxiety, and depression” (Hernesniemi et al., 2017, p. 42). Similarly, in the current study, workload has been mentioned as a major problem for non-persisters and persisters. It is argued by Giles (2009) that if lecturers are aiming to achieve quality learning outcomes and student persistence, it is desirable to find out how students perceive their workload. One should also consider the effect this has on their approach to learning. Students' perceptions should change to one that their workload is manageable and that they have the time to understand what they are studying.

The degree of student involvement in academic advisory services, either with academic staff or advising personnel can be vital to student persistence (Wang & Wharton, 2010). Research suggests that university support services are a key determinant of whether students can choose to withdraw from an institution or not. A substantial amount of commitment and a variety of student support services, defined

as services providing assistance to students in their studies, are needed (Thomas, 2002). These services include academic help, financial support, and career growth and mentoring services. Lack of proper and effective student support services can have an impact on the retention intentions of students. The degree to which students interact with academic and social communities at a university directly correlates to their likelihood of finishing college (Tinto, 1975). When students no longer feel connected to their staff and student peers, they are likely to withdraw from the institution (Tinto, 1975). The findings of this research indicate that support services are a major contributing factor towards dropout at UNAM. Difficulties getting assistance from staff and the lack of communication as well as negative staff attitude towards students were mentioned by the two groups of students. Research supports that student engagement with staff members is related to student retention (Owolabi, 2018). Academic and social engagement, such as staff and peer interactions can improve a student's sense of belonging as well as retention and completion rates (Owolabi, 2018). A need therefore exists to prioritise student retention efforts (Yu, 2015 as cited in Spitzig, 2021). These findings support the importance of student engagement at universities.

Difficulties making the transition from high school to university and the orientation week were mentioned as contributing factors. Students who are freshly from high school and new to an institution can experience feelings of isolation on campus (Kodama, 2002). This experience can affect student retention rates. The more students feel marginalised, the more likely they are to leave an institution (Schlossberg, 1989). Extracurricular activities appear to be a somewhat important variable for many students when they consider their intentions to stay or drop out from an institution.

This was, however, not the case for the non-persisters and persisters in this study as they reported having little or no time to participate in extracurricular activities or decided to cancel it as a result of their heavy workload. The model developed by Tinto (1975) emphasised the balance between class performance and intellectual development with extracurricular activities. Tinto stated that students will be more likely to persist at university if they feel that they have had rewarding encounters with a university's social and academic systems. Zill, Nord and Loomis (1995) found that students who did not participate in extracurricular activities were more likely to drop out.

The quality of instruction, that is, lecturing, is a significant factor in a student's decision to discontinue their studies at an academic institution (e.g., Bryant, 2006), and thus delivering quality instruction is an important goal for higher education institutions. The results of this research reveal that students, especially the non-persisters, placed a high importance on lecturing. Research has explored how this factor is related to students' decision to drop out but the impact of lecturing on student retention at UNAM has received little attention.

Although only mentioned by one staff member, not having proper study skills required to complete their academic programme is a significant factor affecting student retention. Previous research has found that ineffective study skills can lead to learning difficulties (Henley & Furlong, 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). The findings of this research as mentioned by a staff member indicate that a lack of proper study skills may be a contributing factor towards dropping out for students. Students may need to take advantage of a range of study approaches available for them at

UNAM including study skills workshops, the Writing Centre and the library team as these services are crucial for retention.

In addition, the study found factors that are additional to those postulated in Tinto's theoretical model that might affect student retention at UNAM. These factors were the difficulties in selecting or transferring to the desired study major or programme and a lack of academic advice. Lack of academic advice and support has already been discussed above. According to the university regulations, students can transfer to another major or programme if it is part of the courses that can be selected for the particular qualification, or if there is a place available in the desired new major and whether that student qualifies. The UNAM admission criteria/requirements are then used to determine whether the student obtained the required symbol in a particular subject in Grade 12 to allow them to register for the new programme. It can therefore be assumed that the students are not informed enough about the regulations and do not understand transferring within a programme/qualification or to a completely different programme/qualification in another faculty.

Tinto's theory depicted four different constructs or variable sets, namely, background characteristics, initial goal and institutional commitments, academic and social integration and, later goal and institutional commitments. Thus, the discussions of the effects of these constructs on the student retention process will follow the same order.

### **5.2.1 Background characteristics**

This study did not focus on the family background by measuring the levels of students' parents' formal education; the individual attitude through students' general

reasoning test scores; and pre-university schooling by looking at the students' high school test scores. The study questionnaire, however, did not cater for these factors. From the UNAM statistics, it was however noticed that most of these students completed Grade 12 at Namibian schools as well other students originating from other SADC countries.

### **5.2.2 Initial goal and institutional commitment**

Students were asked about their main educational goal when they enrolled at the University of Namibia. The majority of non-persisters mentioned that their main goal was to obtain a qualification while the persisters mentioned that their main goal was to obtain a qualification and further their studies to a higher level or degree. Both groups of respondents perceived UNAM to be one of the best HEIs in Namibia as it was close to their homes and more convenient. UNAM offered their desired programme and course they initially set out to do. Thus, their initial goal was realised and this further suggests that as a result, the student participants had a high degree of institutional commitment as well. This indicated that students with high levels of initial commitment were more likely to have high levels of academic integration. These findings are also consistent with previous studies conducted by Pascarella et al. (1986), Aljohani (2016) and Chrysikos, Ahmed & Ward (2017). This is consistent with Tinto's theory and other studies conducted (Milem & Sullivan, 2000; Braxton et al., 2000).

### **5.2.3 Academic and social integration**

Academic integration is the action or process of integration within the academic community including, but not limited to, peer and staff interactions,

institutional culture elements, and programme structures (Scarpina, 2020). The interviews with students who persisted and who dropped out showed that neither group of students had positive experiences in the university. They experienced getting assistance from lecturers, faculty officers and other administrative staff. There was not much difference in how they perceived relationships with staff members.

A few students attended or were aware of the orientation week and none of them participated in any kind of social activities on campus. The student retention process is therefore possibly explained by the findings that low levels of academic and social integration exist in this university system. While such groups may form organically and informally, universities may also foster such opportunities for interaction and integration. As a result of culture shock and other barriers, students may find it hard to find accommodation and adjust culturally (Smith & Demjanenko, 2011), which means that the institution must help them along in order to ensure student retention.

#### **5.2.4 Students' later goal and institutional commitments**

Later goal and institutional commitment is said to be a predictor of student retention and those students who have high levels of later commitment were more likely to persist than those with low levels of commitment (Tinto, 1993). The initial negative experiences of the participants in this study appeared to have influenced mainly the non-persisters as they have dropped out and the persisters were still continuing with their studies. It was found that initial goal and institutional commitments had a stronger direct effect on student retention at UNAM than later goal and institutional commitments. This finding was therefore not consistent with previous studies which

indicated that the strongest predictor of student retention was later commitments (e.g., Braxton et al., 2000).

### **5.3 Findings from the quantitative and qualitative data**

The results from the quantitative and qualitative data provide further information about this issue. Students who persisted and those who dropped out, and staff members at the University of Namibia were asked to indicate the factors they perceived were influencing student retention at this university.

#### **5.3.1 Issues affecting student retention across all groups**

Thirteen factors or reasons were identified. These factors were classified into two groups: institutional factors and non-institutional factors. The participants cited seven institutional factors and six non-institutional factors as the main factors affecting student retention at the University of Namibia.

These factors are displayed in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1: Factors influencing student retention at the University of Namibia**

The following issues/factors gained agreement among participants in the study.

***Institutional Factors***

***Non-institutional Factors***

*Difficulties getting assistance from staff and lack of communication*

Getting admitted to another university or finding a job

*Difficulties in selecting the desired major or programme*

Difficulties finding a job after graduating and their majors having no career path

*Workload*

Getting a job or taking a gap year

*Lack of resources*

*Lecturing*

Un-preparedness for living away from home

*Lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the Orientation week*

Financial problems

*Lack of guidance and advice*

Family problems

### **5.3.1.1 Institutional factors**

Research indicates that the first year of university study is often a barrier to students and that the highest drop-out rate occurs at the transition from the first to the second year (Lau, 2003). As indicated in Table 5.1, within the institutional factors, *difficulty getting assistance from staff and lack of communication* was a factor that was mentioned. This factor was cited by 71% of the non-persisters and 80% of the persisters, and none of the staff members.

The lack of adequate academic assistance and lack of communication that are crucial in addressing the needs of students create an impression that the academic support at UNAM is poorly organised and even inefficient. Thus, students do not get the required encouragement and support from staff which are important techniques to employ in promoting retention. Research clearly suggests that there is a positive relationship between the utilisation of campus-support services and persistence to programme or degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Findings from a study by Swecker et al. (2013) suggest that for every meeting with an academic advisor, the odds that a student will be retained increase by 13%.

Students flourish in an atmosphere where they feel that they matter to staff. Most universities or higher education providers have student support centres. Services may include orientation activities, learning support, peer-mentoring, tutoring and cultural support. According to Shahbaz and Khan (2017), the problem of lack of communication can be blamed on factors such as unknown expectations, problems with comprehension, boring classroom lessons, personality differences, cultural

difference, negative attitude from both parties, peer pressure and the lack of effective training of lecturers.

Research indicates the importance of academic advice on student retention (Metzner, 1989; Seidman, 1991; Peterson et al., 2001). Braxton, Duster & Pascarella, (1988) examined the influence of academic advisory services within the Tinto model. They found that academic advice had a positive indirect effect on retention through academic integration and subsequent institutional commitment. Getting assistance and support from staff had a positive indirect effect on student retention through academic integration and institutional commitment. Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory posits that staff-student involvement is the most important category making the staff-student relationship the most important factor of student retention.

Secondly, students had difficulty in selecting *their desired major or programme*. This factor was cited by 29% of non-persisters, 17% of persisters, and 50% of staff members. Choosing a major is one of the most important decisions a student can make. A university major can open doors into the workforce and help pave the way to a high-paying job and fulfilling career. But as universities offer or introduce more courses and programmes the expansion of choices has left students feeling frustrated as they navigate an often confusing and overwhelming process of major selection. Many first-year students are not confident in their career path and nearly two-thirds of students say they feel overwhelmed by the process of selecting a major (Ascione, 2020). UNAM students cannot progress to the next year of study unless they pass the major. Selecting the wrong major or programme can be a costly mistake as students

ultimately drop out in the first year of study. Hammoudeh and Barrett (2002) argue that all potential students need to be given clear information about courses and course content before being admitted or offered a place on degree course.

Thirdly, student workload has been recognised as a major factor in the teaching and learning environment (Kyndt et al., 2014). *Workload* was also a major factor cited by the participants. This was cited by 71% of the non-persisters, 53% of the persisters and 20% of the staff members. Whitelock et al. (2015) argue that dropout can occur when students are unable to devote the necessary time to their course work. Workload, including time spent on the preparation of assignments, poses a problem to students at the University of Namibia.

Fourthly, *a lack of resources and poor student facilities* were mentioned as another factor affecting student retention. Fifty per cent of the non-persisters and 33% of the persisters cited this as a factor. None of the staff members cited this factor. Being able to use resources has been reported to correlate significantly with academic performance (Watson et al., 2004).

Another institutional factor cited was that students experienced problems with *lecturing* at UNAM and this was mentioned by 86% of the non-persisters, 20% of the persisters and surprisingly by 30% of the staff members. It can be argued that what goes on in the teaching and learning programme, that is the learning, teaching and assessment practices, plays an even more important role in the retention and success of students (Yorke, as cited in Ferrier & Heagney, 2008). The more involved staff members, who put effort not only into their methods of instruction through focus on

teaching clarity, but who also incorporates good lecturer practices such as a concern for active participation and positive atmosphere are related to student successes like higher GPA and persistence from the first into the second year (Lambert et al., 2012).

A difficulty for students *adjusting to the university climate and lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week* was another factor. This factor was cited by 50% of the non-persisters, 20% of the persisters, and 70% of the staff members. Diversity and climate is a major concern on university campuses (Hart, 2008). The university or campus climate is the interaction between people, processes, the institutional culture, and represents important aspects of an organisation including perceptions and expectations of the people in the academic community (Hart & Cress, 2008; Vaccaro, 2010). Adjustment to the university is shown to be moderately related to individual traits and social support. It is said to be multidimensional, predictive of university grades, and an unusually good predictor of retention (Credé & Niehorster, 2012).

The orientation week and programme provide an effective opportunity for new students to assimilate and make sense of the information provided, to socialise with the staff and existing students through a range of activities and to feel that they belong in the higher education community at their institution (Thomas et al., 2005b). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that students are informed about the orientation week in order for them to attend. More recently, there has been greater recognition of the need to admit and induct students into the higher education environment using more student-centred strategies to enable students to learn about and understand the expectations and culture of higher education (Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Crosling,

2003). Some institutions are now introducing 'longer and thinner' induction that starts earlier and lasts beyond a week (Thomas et al., 2002b).

Finally, *a lack of guidance and advice, getting assistance from staff and lack of communication* was only cited by 71% of the non-persisters and 80% of the persisters. Studies show that many students feel they are not getting the support they need, despite research showing that the relationships students have with their lecturers can have a big influence over retention rates. Lee Noel, a nationally recognized student-retention scholar and consultant, reported: "In our extensive work on campuses over the years, [we] have found that institutions where significant improvement in retention rates has been made, almost without exception, give extra attention to careful life planning and to academic advising" (Noel, 1985, p. 13).

Positive interactions can improve students' academic achievement, increase satisfaction with college, improve intellectual and personal development, increase motivation to learn, and also affect student persistence (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Jones, 2008; Lampion & Coll, 1993). Tinto (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) mentioned the importance of student-staff interaction on student retention. Non-persister and persister students only complained about the poor relationship with especially administrative staff at the University of Namibia. They mentioned the lack of advice from mainly the faculty officers. Academic advising has been referred to as the "cornerstone of student retention" (Crockett, 1978). Academic advising exerts a significant impact on student retention through its association with variables that are strongly correlated with student persistence (Cuseo, n.d.).

### 5.3.1.2 Non-institutional factors

The participants in this study also cited six non-institutional factors affecting student retention. The first factor was students getting *admitted to other universities or finding a job*. Students mentioned that once they got a job, they drop out from university. This factor was cited by 29% of the non-persisters and 13% of the persisters. Students often apply for university admission as well a job and once they get a job they drop out.

The second non-institutional factor was *difficulties finding a job after graduating and their majors have no career path*. This factor was cited by 14% of non-persisters and 13% of the persisters and none of the staff members. Unfortunately, university diplomas and degrees are not automatic tickets to getting a job as the job market is highly competitive. With so many students at university, the competition for jobs on graduation day is harder than ever. The job market, like in Namibia, is often flooded with already qualified job-seekers possessing higher qualifications and levels of experience than the recent graduates. Employers seek specific skills when advertising jobs. Gaining experience for graduates is also difficult in general and especially in the past few years as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy of Namibia. Many businesses closed down and workers were left unemployed and other workers were retrenched as a result of lockdowns announced and implemented by the government of the country which impacted business negatively. In addition to the difficulty experienced by students in getting a job, some students discovered upon graduation that their majors had no career path. They discovered a severe lack of job opportunities within their chosen field (Fizer, 2013).

The third non-institutional factor was *getting a job or taking a gap year*. This factor was cited by 29% of the non-persisters, 13% of the persisters and none of the staff members. The best case-scenario for taking a year-long break from your studies is returning to the university feeling refreshed and motivated. The worst-case scenario is that the student may lose academic momentum completely. On return, they may face difficulties in the transition back into their studies as it may be more difficult then. It also happens that students do not return to continue their studies after taking a gap year as they may have acquired employment in the meantime. Once they have started earning an income they delay returning to the university or never return (Higginbotham, 2020).

The fourth non-institutional factor cited was *unpreparedness of living away from home*. This factor was cited by 50% of the non-persister students and 37% of the persisters. A major factor that can affect the first-year students' adjustment is transition and this can include being in university for the first time and moving away from home. Additionally, transition can be considered the most important aspect of adjustment and smooth transition is tantamount to easier time adjusting (Farris, 2010 as cited in Nghiem et al., 2021). Generally speaking, the transition from high school to university is a stressful experience (Gan et al., 2010; Lubker & Etzel, 2007; Parker & Duffy, 2005).

The first-year students need to adjust to a lot of unfamiliar situations and experiences. This may include a different academic setting, pressures in relation to academics imposed by the institution, living arrangements, interests, and activities (Klingensmith, 2010). Another difficulty experienced by first-year students that is a

more personal aspect of transition, especially among those who opted to leave their homes and study elsewhere, is homesickness (Van Tilburg et al., 1996).

The fifth non-institutional factor that was mentioned was that students experienced *financial problems*. This factor was cited by 36% of the non-persisters, 30% of the persisters, and 64% of the staff members. Research shows that financial problems influence students' decision to drop out or not (Astin, 1975; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera *et al.*, 1990; Cabrera *et al.*, 1992). It is further argued by Bean and Metzner (1985) that finances impact student retention directly as well as indirectly through academic and psychological factors. Similarly, Cabrera *et al.* (1990) found that financial aid had a direct effect on student retention in a study conducted among a sample of students attending four-year institutions. The results from their study appear to suggest that financial aid is important not only because it equalises opportunities between affluent and low-income students, but also because it facilitates the integration of the student into the academic and social components of the institution. It further influences his or her commitment to stay in college. The government's NSFAP scheme to provide financial assistance to students in Namibia is also found to be inadequate to cover the expenses of students.

The final non-instructional factor was *family problems*. This factor was cited by a small number of non-persisters, persisters, and staff members. None of the non-persisters and persisters cited this factor. This factor was cited by 45% of staff members. Family pressures can cause problems, for example, unexpected pregnancy and having to care for a sick relative. The results of a study conducted by McCulloh (2016) on "Parent support and retention of rural first generation college students"

suggested that parental support shaped the students' decisions to remain enrolled. Previous research has shown that students with strong family support, especially from families where at least one parent has had college experience, tend to be more likely to persist toward degree attainment (Ishitani, 2006).

Previous research has also shown that students whose parents had university experience tended to have a stronger understanding of what the college experience would be like and what their role as a student would be (Pascarella et al., 2004). The results of a research study conducted by Wayt (2012) showed that students who had persisted through their first year of study and believed that they would persist towards degree attainment had a strong perception of family support. These students mentioned that their families asked about their university life, expected them to be successful, and were supportive in their academic endeavours. Reasons for dropout can include a combination of factors. For example, lack of commitment, lack of social integration, financial pressures, personal circumstances, lack of course match, poor preparation for university life (Jones, 2008).

#### **5.4 Findings of the themes**

The following section summarises the findings of each theme. The two common themes shared by all three groups were poor institutional experience and student characteristics.

##### **5.4.1 Poor institutional experience**

Under the first theme, institutional experience, both the non-persisters and persisters expressed dissatisfaction with the system. They raised issues like the non-academic

environment, the administrative system that needed reform, lecturing, poor student facilities and a lack of communication with administration. Staff attitude was described as negative as staff did not care about students, students were disrespected, students felt intimidated by staff when they complained, there was a lack of communication, and the difficulties students experienced getting assistance from staff. All three groups, that is, non-persisters, persisters and staff members mentioned that timetabling was a problem and that the workload was just too heavy. The non-persisters and staff members stated that students were not happy with the way lectures were conducted and the way students were taught in some programmes.

#### **5.4.2 Student characteristics**

Under the second theme, student characteristics, focussing on student goals, it became evident that the university was for many not their first choice and that they experienced difficulties making the transition between high school and the university. It was worsened by the fact that they had further difficulties choosing the desired major or programme and would not hesitate to leave UNAM for another study opportunity at another institution should they get a job. This was supported by all three groups.

The non-persisters and persisters mentioned that external influences like family and friends had influenced their decision to drop out. Staff felt that family and friends support played a vital role in students' decision to drop out and that financial problems were another contributing factor. All the above factors were perceived by respondents to negatively affect their experiences at UNAM which ultimately might lead to their decision to drop out.

Using Tinto's (1975) theory to compare the students' levels of goal commitment and institutional commitment, it was found that the persister students appeared to be more motivated and they portrayed a higher level of goal commitment than the non-persister students. The persisters also appeared to have a higher level of institutional commitment than the non-persisters. This can be attributed to the finding that more non-persisters (29%) had difficulties selecting their desired major or programme than the persisters (17%).

In addition, the lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week had influenced the non-persisters' levels of academic integration. This was evidenced by the responses of the non-persisters (50%) and the persisters (20%). It however, appears that both groups had some difficulties in terms of social integration because of a lack of knowledge of the university system. They lacked knowledge about the orientation week, and they did not take part in any extra-curricular or social activities on campus.

Both groups did not have a positive experience at the university as they had problems with mainly academic staff members especially in relation to relationship issues and getting assistance from staff. Students complained by citing how staff treated them with disrespect and that they were not very helpful towards students and that there was a major lack of communication and a general negative attitude. Spady's Theory on Student Departure linked the process of student departure to the concept of social integration. Thus, students who had difficulties integrating into the university system were more likely to drop out from the university.

### **5.5 Similarities in factors**

The analysis of the data identified a number of similarities in the factors mentioned by the participants in the three groups. The main topics that were identified focussed firstly on the students' institutional experience like the non-academic environment, the administrative system that needed reform, lecturing, poor student facilities and a lack of communication with administration, staff attitude, lack of communication and the difficulties that students experienced getting assistance from staff. There were also concerns about timetabling and the workload.

Secondly, the student characteristics showed that UNAM was for many not their first choice. They had trouble making the transition between high school and the university and they had difficulties choosing the desired major or programme and as such, they would leave the university for another study opportunity should they get a job. External influences like family and friends played a vital role in students' decision to drop out as well as problems with finances.

Table 5.2 presents a list of the factors on which there were agreements showing the groups that considered a particular issue to be important in affecting student retention at UNAM. This section merges all the major findings affecting student retention as perceived by the non-persisters, persisters and staff at the University of Namibia. An effort was made to identify similar factors mentioned by the participants in the three groups which might affect student retention.

**Table 5.2: Factors influencing student retention as perceived by non-persister students, persister students and staff members**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Non-persister</b>	<b>Persister</b>	<b>Staff members</b>
Lack of resources	x	x	x
Financial problems	x	x	x
Lecturing	x	x	x
Negative staff attitude	x	x	
Disrespecting students	x	x	
Lack of communication, guidance/advice	x	x	x
Difficulty getting assistance from staff	x	x	
Difficulty making the transition from high school	x	x	
Difficulty in choosing the desired Major or programme	x	x	x
Lack of knowledge of the university system	x	x	x
Another study opportunity	x		
Getting a job	x	x	
Workload/Too many classes	x	x	x
Not attending orientation week	x	x	x
External influences	x	x	x

The factors in Table 5.2 are an indication of what students and staff perceive to influence student retention at UNAM. Issues like lack of resources, financial problems, lecturing, lack of communication/guidance/advice, difficulties in choosing the desired major or programme, lack of knowledge of the university system, workload or too many classes, not attending the orientation week and other external influences were reported by all participants to influence the decision of students to drop out from university. The interventions that can be put in place are discussed in Chapter Six under the recommendations section.

Issues categorised under the theme of the students' poor institutional experience were identified from the data of all three of the participant groups. This theme comprised of issues such as students' dissatisfaction with the university's administrative system, rules, policies, restrictions, services, facilities, and the practices of the administrative staff. In their discussions of the issues under this theme, participants from all groups talked about how these issues affected students' experiences and how this resulted in their withdrawal or transfer to other institutions. The data showed that, because of their poor experiences, the students at the University of Namibia, especially the non-persisters, had a low level of integration into the university environment, a low sense of belonging to the university system and a low level of satisfaction. These factors were reported to make the decision to leave UNAM easier, especially in cases in which the student had an alternative opportunity of study or getting a job.

Participants of all three groups also discussed issues related to the students' characteristics, such as their educational and job goals, the level of educational commitments, external commitments and the influence of the family and friends on

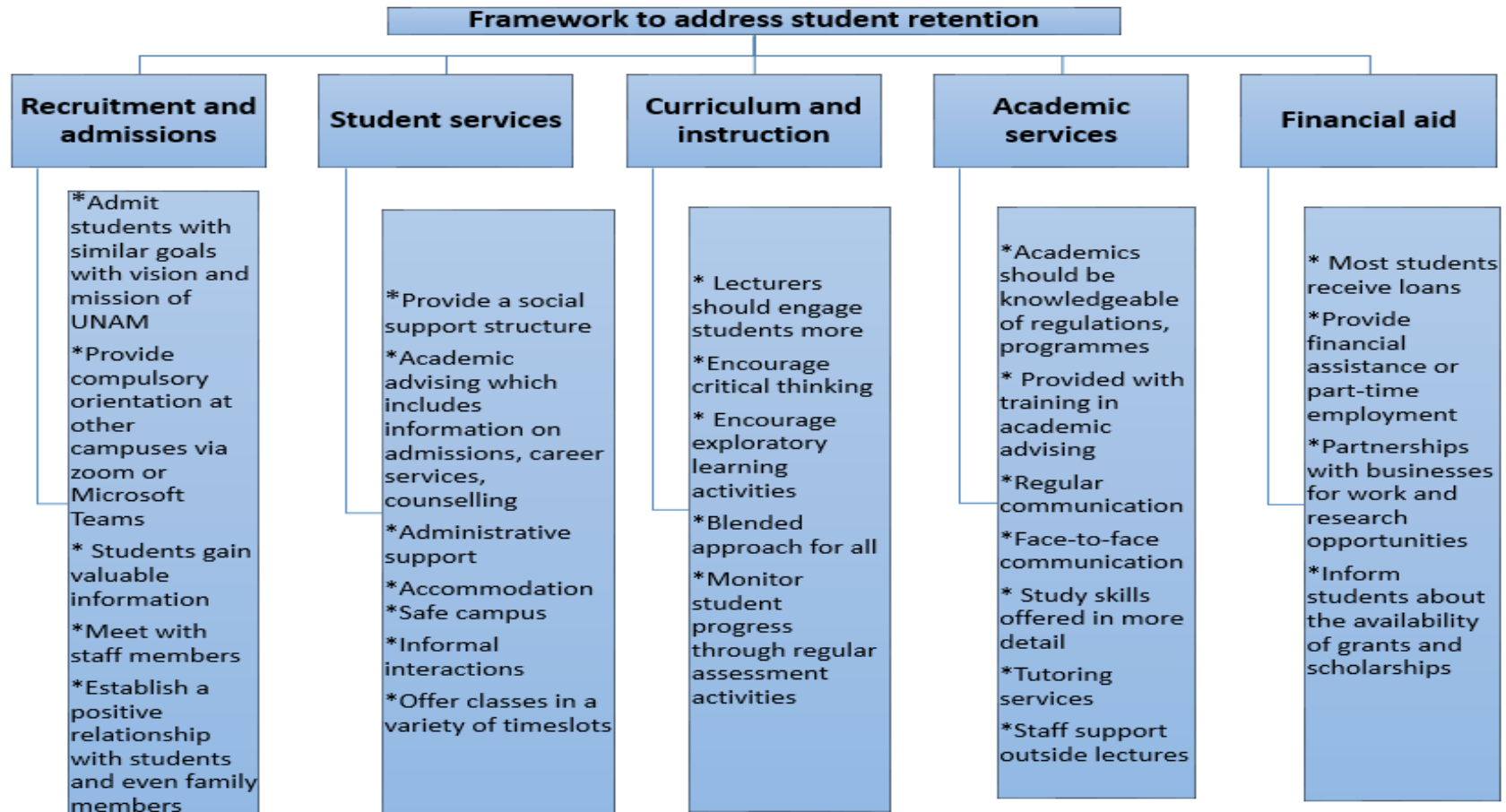
their decisions to stay in or to leave the university. These issues were classified in each of the three groups under the student characteristics theme. The data showed that some of the non-persisters had educational goals that were not offered by UNAM. The university was not their first choice of study. Thus, when they were admitted to an institution that offered a higher qualification, they left the university. The non-persister respondents had a low level of educational commitment, thereby leading them to withdraw from UNAM upon finding a suitable job. Non-persisters also reported having received support from family members and friends to proceed with their decision to drop out.

#### **5.6. Framework to address student retention**

As UNAM aims to commit itself to student success, it must show commitment towards student retention. Literature suggests a few institutional support factors or components that could be included in a model on student retention. These components include recruitment and admission, student services, academic services, curriculum instruction and financial aid. This proposed framework, when reviewed by a task force constituted by UNAM, could then construct, or develop a retention plan and may even identify and include other components not addressed in this study's proposed framework.

It should be noted that the components have to be done in combination with a comprehensive monitoring system which will be important to monitor student development during university years and in the development, implementation, and assessment of intervention programmes, and services in an effort to improve student retention.

**Figure 5.1: Framework to address student retention**



### **5.6.1 Recruitment and admissions**

UNAM should aim to admit students whose academic goals are similar or correspond with the mission and vision of the institution. The institution should attempt to match the students' academic and career goals with the institutional mission by providing early orientation to prospective students. Research suggests that the relationship or connection between student goal and those of an institution are important factors related to the persistence of students during their time of study (Kinsey, 2021, as cited in Ericksen, 2022). Prospective students can be invited to attend orientation at other campuses or via zoom or Microsoft Teams meetings where students are based in remote areas or based in other countries (Edwards, 2021). Students can thus gain access to important information and they can already meet with some staff members. All campus departments should be involved in the orientation or outreach programmes as personal contact with students and sometimes even with the family members can help to establish a positive relationship between the university and students.

### **5.6.2 Student services**

Student services provide the social support structure which aims to encourage a positive campus climate that promotes learning and excellence (Smith et al., 2014). These may include academic advising, admissions, alcohol and drug education programmes, career services, community service and service learning, counselling, food services, health centres, and accommodation.

UNAM should provide a safe campus environment for all staff, students and visitors. Findings from a study conducted by Ekpoh et al. (2011) showed that inadequate security personnel, insufficient patrol vehicles, poor lighting on campus, non-availability or use of modern security facilities, poor funding of security departments, lack of security-awareness education, non-availability of electronic gadgets among others were the factors hindering the effective security operations at universities. One of the recommendations made was that the security unit or company should be well funded and/or equipped with modern technology by the university management for a better security on campus and the performance of duties.

Furthermore, opportunities for informal interactions between staff and students should be provided through entertainment, sports, extracurricular activities, and academic-related social events as well as through student clubs and associations.

As part of the services offered, UNAM could offer classes in a variety of timeslots to enable students to allow more flexible attendance or scheduling by students. This may help to overcome the problem of timetabling experienced by students (MirHassani & Habibi, 2013). Classes can also be offered in combinations on weekends to support students who cannot always attend the weekly classes due to work or personal commitments of students.

UNAM should also provide career counselling to ensure that students reach their goal. Karp (2013) suggests that career counselling should drive an integrated approach to advising, and universities should provide services to students based on their level of

need and they should strategically deploy resources to allow for developmental advising. An effort should also be made to provide psychological support to students to deal with the stress and pressing workload experienced by many students especially in their first year of study. These services must be advertised and announced to students, emphasising the importance of support to students. Although not mentioned in the study by participants, UNAM should identify cultural and racial issues and provide support and assistance in dealing with such issues. Staff should be encouraged to provide more administrative support which was mentioned by participants as being a major difficulty experienced at UNAM.

### **5.6.3 Curriculum and instruction**

UNAM should and are busy with an ongoing review of curricula so as to remain relevant and to provide students with the necessary instruction that will support them in their studies and progress. Emphasis should be on real-world application of theory and its relevance in the job market. The current tradition of lectures as a method of instruction should incorporate more innovative strategies that engage students more and encourage critical thinking and exploratory learning activities.

Instruction can be further enhanced through computer instruction and technologies as is already practised to some extent at UNAM through MOODLE, and lecturers should receive training so as to incorporate new teaching strategies into their courses and teaching. A blended approach, that is, face-to-face and online instruction for all courses could be considered as a way to complement instruction at UNAM. Blended learning is also used to describe other blends, such as combining different

instructional methods, pedagogical approaches and technologies, although these blends are not aligned with influential blended learning definitions (Hrastinski, (2019). In order to monitor student progress and instructional effectiveness, courses should include more regular assessment activities so that students are required to illustrate that they can apply information in real-life situations and rather than only utilising rote learning.

#### **5.6.4 Academic services**

Academic staff are generally well-informed or versed in their subject areas but they should equally be knowledgeable of UNAM regulations, programmes and career opportunities and they should perhaps be provided with training in academic advising in order for them to be able to provide advice when possible. Regular communication with students will provide students with assurance that their academic needs are being considered and met. Robinson and Stubberud (2012), in a study titled “Communication preferences among university students” examined the preferred communication methods for work/school and the social purposes of university students in the United States and Norway. The results show that these students expressed a preference for face-to-face communication over all other methods for both work/school and social communication.

A variety of instructional methods and academic support skills, for example, study skills, should be offered in more detail by the department of Language Development for students to develop these skills better. Tutoring can also help to overcome barriers to student progress. Senior students or students who have completed the same courses

can be “employed” or tasked to provide tutoring as a support network to first-year students within a programme or course at UNAM. In addition, staff support and involvement outside of lectures will contribute to positive academic and social growth and development of students.

### **5.6.5 Financial aid**

Students in higher education in many developed and less developed countries receive financial aid in the form of loans, which must be repaid after the students graduate or complete their education (Woodhall, 1987). Many students in Namibia are uninformed about the availability of grants and scholarships compared to student loans. They mainly apply for a loan at NSFAP and they should be informed about the availability of grants and scholarships if available and the steps involved to apply for funding. Grants have been found to be positively related to student persistence while loans may have a negative effect on persistence. One way of preparing parents and students for funding opportunities is to advise them before the student finishes school (Grade 12) about the options that are available and related to acquiring university finance for their studies. UNAM should also try to encourage and develop partnerships with Namibian businesses for work and research opportunities for students.

### **5.7 Chapter summary**

This chapter discussed and integrated the findings obtained from the quantitative data and qualitative data to identify factors influencing first-year students at the University of Namibia using Tinto’s theory. The findings from the data indicated that Tinto’s

student integration theory is useful in analysing student retention, but that Tinto's theory was not very useful in explaining the retention process of UNAM because the major constructs in this theory such as academic and social integration, failed to show major differences between students who persisted and those who dropped out. The findings, however, further helped to explain why first-year students at the University of Namibia leave the university before completing their studies. The most important institutional factors were difficulty in getting assistance from staff and a lack of communication, difficulty in selecting the desired major or programme, workload, lack of resources, lecturing strategies, lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the orientation week, and a lack of guidance and advice.

The factors that might affect student retention at the University of Namibia are university related and student-related. Most of the factors reported that may have an influence on student drop-out are institutional-related and these play a major role in their decision to leave the university. The main non-institutional factors were difficulty in finding a job and their majors having no career path, getting a job or taking a gap year, un-preparedness for living away from home, financial problems, family problems, and getting admitted to another university or finding a job.

The final chapter of this study presents a summary of the major findings, recommendations for practice and future research, and some limitations.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

#### 6.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this study presents a summary of the major findings, recommendations for practice and future research, and some limitations.

#### 6.2 Overview of the study

The study employed a mixed methods convergent parallel design and the pragmatist paradigm was found to be the most suitable for this study. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors influencing student retention at the University of Namibia. This study was guided by Tinto's (1975) student integration theory which views students' decision to drop out as the results of interactions between the student and the academic and social systems of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

The participants of the study were fourteen (14) non-persister students who were interviewed over the telephone, thirty (30) persister students using focus group interviews, and twenty (20) academic and administrative staff members using staff questionnaires. The data were collected during the 2018 – 2020 academic years.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed that the main reasons for students to drop out were their poor institutional experience with the difficulty experienced in getting assistance from administrative staff and a lack of communication, difficulty in selecting the desired major or programme, workload, lack of resources, lecturing strategies, lack of knowledge of the university system and not attending the

orientation week, and a lack of guidance and advice. Major student retention models (Castaneda et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993) reported that the quality of the student's institutional experience and the level of a student's integration into the academic and social system of an academic institution were the most influential variables. The factors that might affect student retention at the University of Namibia are university-related and student-related. Most of the factors reported to may have an influence on student drop-out are institutional-related and they play a major role in their decision to leave the university.

The main non-institutional factors were difficulty in finding a job and their majors having no career path, getting a job or taking a gap year, un-preparedness for living away from home, financial problems, family problems, and getting admitted to another university or finding a job. It can be concluded from the study findings that the biggest factors influencing students' decision to drop out were institutional-related or university-related factors. The main factors for non-persisters, however, were a poor system, that is, lecturing, lack of resources, the administrative system that needs reform, difficulty getting assistance from staff and lack of communication, timetabling and the family and friends support withdrawal system. Getting admitted to another institution and getting a job or taking a gap year were also other contributing factors.

### **6.3 Strengths of the study and contribution to new knowledge**

This study contributes to information on student retention at the University of Namibia and in the Namibian Higher Education context. It provides a better understanding on the topic of student retention which affects Higher Education

Institutions, the future workforce and the economy of Namibia. It further provides the university with recommendations based on findings from the current study to improve student retention. This study which was conducted on student retention in the country in the Higher Education field may provide a better understanding on this problem as it collected data from non-persister students, persister students and staff members in order to obtain their views, perspectives and actual experiences and information to enable the researcher to present credible findings. The findings, recommendations and conclusions can assist the management, academic and administrative staff to design strategies to address the issues that affect student retention, more particularly, the institutional experience of non-persisters and persisters at UNAM.

#### **6.4 Limitations of the study**

This section addresses the limitations of this study. This study was undertaken at one university in Namibia. The single institutional setting of the study limits the generalisability of findings to other institutions. In addition, the nature of first-year student characteristics of this study may not be representative of those students at other institutions (Stewart et al., 2015). Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory aims to explain the student retention process within a given university like in the case with this study, which was conducted at the University of Namibia, and as such, it should not be seen as a systems model of departure. Studies undertaken elsewhere may lead to different findings. Furthermore, if this study was carried out at another time the sample size and responses may be different. There are no expectations of generalisation of the findings. The findings from this study could be expanded so as to apply to a larger sample and it is acknowledged that applying the findings and recommendations to other institutions may be possible but this needs further

investigation and testing. This could then help to add to existing academic literature and to contribute to future research and theory (Bassey, 1999; 2001).

The study focussed on student retention during the first year of study and retention at the University of Namibia only and the second year or following years were not researched or investigated. A larger population of non-persisters from other campuses of the University of Namibia could have been included in the study but a lack of time as well as contacting the non-persister students proved extremely problematic and challenging especially since they had left the university and many of them had changed their cellular phone numbers as well as their email addresses after leaving the university. A few non-persisters also indicated that they did not have time to participate in the study.

### **6.5 Implications for policy and practice**

Universities have the duty to the society to make post-secondary education a successful experience for students to be able to do well in school, to graduate, and to become what they want to become in life (Caruth, 2018). This study's implications for future research include the need to replicate this study at other UNAM campuses or at similar higher education institutions in Namibia. This study provides a framework for institutions that are trying to utilise and incorporate qualitative data to solve or improve retention problems at their institution. The results of this research can help university administrators to consider new programmes related to retention. The university could then develop courses to ensure that students have the necessary study skills in order to be successful in their studies.

The study findings have the potential to assist the University in setting student goals and decision-making to improve and strengthen programmes which address student needs. In addition, it may be used as a guide by the institutions to help the currently enrolled students to identify activities and services that are available on the University of Namibia's campuses which can ease the transition process from high school into higher education. It may also help them to deal and overcome some of the difficulties experienced during their registration process.

The study further has the potential to inform future research in the fields of retention and persistence by highlighting areas in need of further examination. The study findings can be used as a basis for quantitative research or enquiry into student retention which might be generalised to a large population of universities and students. The findings of this study have clear implications for the University of Namibia in that they shed light on the factors affecting student retention and possible areas in need of improvement. UNAM needs to provide students with information and clear lines of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures (Berger, 2001).

#### **6.5.1 Admission rules and policies of UNAM**

The University of Namibia could review its admission rules and policies to attract students who meet the requirements such as students with high school grades. It was reported by some non-persisters that they enrolled at UNAM only because they did not get admission to other institutions and because they were not admitted elsewhere for their first choice or programme of study. Students mentioned that they could not progress to the next semester or year as there were too many pre-requisites hindering

their academic progress or advancement. They sometimes failed only one module which was a pre-requisite for advancing to the next level and thus had to repeat the semester or year only to try and successfully complete the module that they failed. Aljohani (2014) recommends that the admission procedure at all government higher education institutions “are done in coordination to ensure that students, where possible, are admitted in the institution of their first preference and minimise the risk of student attrition” (p. 320).

### **6.5.2 Implement data collection tools or prevention tools for the early identification of at-risk students at UNAM**

To address low student retention rates, universities must gather data on programme effectiveness, student achievement, and resource allocation. Once this data has been collected, it can enhance student retention efforts intelligently year after year. Few institutions have a full-time coordinator for retention programmes, which are often carried out in many departments and units across the institution. The University of Namibia could appoint a staff researcher or make use of a staff researcher whose main responsibility would be to engage in ongoing action research. The main focus would be on continuous improvement of the institution’s retention of students. Data on student retention must be collected regularly and retention efforts must be viewed as dynamic and able to change in order to best meet the needs of a particular institution (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Instead of conducting a study on several campuses, researchers could examine these variables on a qualitative level using only one of UNAM’s campuses like the current study.

By using an interview data collection technique or a survey questionnaire and visiting faculties and classes, researchers could determine the reasons why students return for their second year of study in a particular programme. This would be feasible and practicable at smaller campuses like UNAM's other campuses in the country. Researchers could obtain information and some basic data of the first-year students from the Student Records Department. Then in the following year, student records would indicate which students returned to the UNAM and which students did not. Questionnaires for each group could be administered and the data could be examined for patterns and themes among the persisters and the non-persisters. These research tools and data would be helpful to UNAM to gain better knowledge and understanding of the factors in the form of difficulties and obstacles that confront first-year students that may contribute to the decision for them to drop out. Ultimately, data analytics can help to boost student retention at any institution (Chooi, 2019).

### **6.5.3 Establish student consultation and support programmes at UNAM**

The findings of the current study indicate that students experience difficulties with communication with staff, lack of assistance from staff, lecturing, consultation and negative staff attitude. It is widely accepted that student-staff interactions generally have a positive influence on the cognitive growth and development of college students (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student support services can help to ensure that students succeed in their studies at UNAM. Studies by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest that academic resources such as these produced statistically significant positive impacts on student persistence. It is important for institutions of higher learning to implement and maintain various academic resources that promote student success and increase student persistence because these resources are needed

by a significant number of students who are not adequately prepared for the academic challenges they will face at the university.

The University of Namibia or its campuses or centres could implement regular study sessions and tutoring to its first-year students. These study sessions and tutoring could offer students an opportunity or mechanism to keep the grades in their subjects at an acceptable level as extended hours or weekend library hours offer students an opportunity and a quiet place to study. Library staff can offer research instruction as well as a place for study skills workshops. Learning commons are replacing traditional library spaces, and one goal of the learning commons is collaborative workspaces (Mueller, 2015). A “Learning Commons” is an allocated practice or learning hub at libraries to encourage collaborative learning. These types of workspaces have been found to benefit students both academically and socially. All students and in particular the non-persistent students could benefit from such services which in the end might influence them to persist.

#### **6.5.4 Improve the social and academic environments of UNAM**

The students’ poor institutional experience at the University of Namibia was cited as another major factor that contributed to low institutional commitment and integration resulting in their decision to drop out or enrol at another institution. Tinto has argued that social integration and commitment to the institution are major considerations for student persistence. Several studies have found that students are more reluctant to leave an institution after joining a campus organisation. It is important that students have a variety of opportunities to engage with peers through campus activities and organisations (Hanover Research, 2014). Students who engage with staff at the

university are more likely to persist to graduation as well (Roberts & Styron, 2010). Staff approachability through providing adequate contact information, office hours, and other opportunities for interaction, have been found to significantly impact whether a student feels comfortable contacting a professor or advisor at an institution.

The goal of providing quality education should be prevalent and exist at every higher learning institution. All staff and students should therefore share a common purpose. Institutions may also identify students and academic staff leaders to assist first-year students with academic and social integration. Campuses may consider scheduling student events at a time that is more compatible with students' class schedules. These student events can encourage students to engage more in social interactions.

#### **6.5.5 Design and implement student retention plans at UNAM**

Student engagement has been identified as a key factor in student persistence and success, with a student's sense of belonging to their academic community being an important element (e.g., Kuh 2008; Tinto 2017). As a priority, institutions should ensure that students who have the capacity to succeed in higher education are given the best chance to complete their studies through the appropriate provision of academic and other support services as required of them. No evidence could be found of a Student Retention Plan at the University of Namibia.

One of the most efficient ways to improve student retention is to reach at-risk students before they leave the university. The University of Namibia can do this by implementing an early alert student referral programme. Cases of students experiencing academic, personal, financial, or social problems should be brought to

the attention of the University by staff. These students should then be contacted through the contact details provided at registration and they should then be informed about the university's resources and available interventions that can help them to address the difficult experienced. Interventions can include guidance and counselling, mid-year student assessments or motivational programmes in addition to constant and consistent tracking of student performance (Hanover Research, 2014).

This study found that one of the main factors that causes drop-out is finances, that is, the lack of money and attending university and getting an education are by no means cheap. In addition to scholarships, many universities or faculties within some universities offer emergency financial assistance in the form of grants that do not require the recipient to repay the grant. Programmes providing financial aid can assist students facing debt issues at university. The University of Namibia could include or introduce a new financial aid model through which it can increase the share of students with financial needs receiving assistance from the University. Hanover Research (2014) suggests that financial aid programmes can be lifesavers for students facing debt issues at university.

#### **6.5.6 Review and reform the timetabling system at UNAM**

Both non-persisters and persisters complained that they basically had no time for any other activities due to the timetable and workload. Students defined their workload as the number of hours or the amount of effort required for studying, or for achieving their goals. The results of this study show that 'having time' is a precondition for experiencing a manageable workload. When this precondition is fulfilled, the interest

of a student and the ability to plan and set priorities play an important role in the perception of workload.

As a broad initiative to redesign courses across the curriculum, blended learning classrooms can help instructors to reduce in-class time by as much as one-half and use class time more efficiently (Marcum et al., 2014). Not only do many students prefer blended learning environments over face-to-face and online options, but studies by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation show that high-quality hybrid courses help at-risk students to master content twice as fast as they would with lectures, and their pass rates increase by one-third.

UNAM can assist students to cope with the timetable and workload by designing more student-friendly class schedules. They might design schedules in morning or afternoon blocks - for instance, from 9H00 to 12H00 or 14H00 to 17H00. For part-time students with obligations off-campus, these blocks can be easier to manage. Schedule blocks also help students from learning communities and working groups, offering vital student-to-student support and a strong sense of connectedness to the staff and institutions.

### **6.5.7 Student orientation at UNAM**

The focus of orientation activities is mainly for first-year students to socialise with the staff and existing students through a range of activities and to feel that they belong in the higher education community at their institution (Thomas et al., 2005b, as cited in Thomas, 2009). The goals of the orientation programmes are to create students' familiarity with the institution's regulations and academic standards,

acquaint the students with their classmates and to learn about the other institutional members that will help students to succeed. It also aims to acquaint students with the academic and institutional rules, regulations and activities in general and with the faculty-specific aspects. A structured orientation model can aid the students, staff members, administration, parents and current students. Orientation marks a successful beginning of a university year as the programme tries to assure the new students that they have made a good decision in their choice of institution as well as the study programme.

The orientation programme and activities at the University of Namibia are conducted after the students have registered in some cases, even when classes have already commenced. The orientation activities and sessions should aim to inform the first-year students about the university system as both non-persisters and persisters mentioned the poor system as a problem being experienced at UNAM. It should inform students about qualification levels and the type of the expected jobs offered to future graduates (Aljohani, 2014). It should also provide adequate information about academic majors and programmes as during high school there appears to be a lack of information and academic advice that is needed for students to make informed decisions regarding the choice of study programme and institutions.

#### **6.5.8 Introduce training programmes for staff of the registration and student services departments at UNAM**

According to the findings of this study, the negative attitude of staff towards students might affect their decision to drop out as the relationship was reported to be poor. UNAM staff involved with student services and registration officials do not receive

formal training for the duties they perform at registration. Meetings are conducted where duties and responsibilities are outlined. Wyckoff (1999) notes that, “To establish a high degree of commitment to the academic advising process, university and college administrators must become cognizant not only of the educational value of advising but of the role advising plays in the retention of students” (p. 3).

Universities need to listen to all their students, take their concerns seriously and try to be sensitive to how perceptions of their experiences vary among students of different races, income levels and cultural backgrounds. Only then can the university improve persistence and completion while addressing the continuing inequality in student outcomes that threaten the very fabric of our society (Tinto, 2016).

Swail (1995, as cited in Moodley & Singh, 2015) states that the “focus of academic services in terms of student retention should be based on providing supplementary support to student, in addition to class contact,” (p. 98). This entails providing academic advising, supplementary instruction, tutoring and mentoring, research opportunities, pre-university programming and bridging programmes. Swail states that the university should provide proper guidance that addresses the needs of the students. Another factor that is addressed by Tinto’s model places emphasis on student integration and student services should incorporate this as the atmosphere and climate of an institution which is reflected by how an institution treats and provides support to its students.

It is recommended that UNAM offers training to academic and administrative staff members who deal directly with students who register and further provide staff with some information pertaining to student drop-out as well as background and an overview of factors affecting student retention in order to try and prevent such incidences from occurring. Students who feel connected to an institution, feel cared about, understand their purpose, and have clear academic and career goals and are more apt to persist in their academic endeavours (Ohrablo, 2017).

## **6.6 Recommendations for theory and future research**

It is important to know if students are graduating from university. Determining whether universities are meeting the learning needs is critical for higher education institutions. Formalising attention to retention would convey to the university community that retention is a critical component for the stability and health of the institution (McPherson, 2016). It would demonstrate that the university leadership is taking a proactive approach in addressing the problem of student departure.

There are several recommendations that have the potential to influence student retention at the University of Namibia. These recommendations are discussed below.

### **6.6.1 Conduct more exploratory studies**

Student retention is a topic or phenomenon that has not been well-researched in Namibia despite this topic being well-researched at institutions around the world. It is recommended that UNAM can conduct on-going research related to retention and analyse data prior to students graduating. Retention numbers and rates are the measure that is used most often for assessing university success. More exploratory techniques

can be utilised to gain a better understanding of the problem of student retention (Aljohani, 2014). This study adopted constructs and research questions from popular theoretical models on student retention which could have limited the findings and conclusions. So, the findings and conclusions of this current study can now serve or act as a starting point for further exploratory studies to be conducted on student retention at higher institutions in Namibia.

### **6.6.2 Conduct more qualitative studies**

Literature shows (Al-Dossery, 2008; McPherson, 2016; Kelly, 1980) that most of the studies conducted on student retention lacked qualitative investigations. Many studies on student retention make use of “statistical quantitative techniques which provide insufficient detail to understand the quality of students’ experiences” (Aljohani, 2014, p. 329). Thus, using a mixed methodology, that is, the quantitative followed by qualitative can include a two-phase study where quantitative research is undertaken first, followed by qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 1995, 1999, 2013) to get a better understanding and view of retention issues at institutions as was done in this study.

### **6.6.3 Conduct further studies on the most frequent student retention factors**

It is recommended that further investigations into the most frequent factors that cause students to drop out of the University of Namibia. The study could be replicated with other samples at UNAM or one or two of its other campuses to confirm the findings of the current study related to the difficulties experienced as well as factors that might influence their decision to drop out. Further studies on student retention at UNAM

might add to the findings of this study or refute or approve what had been reported by the respondents.

#### **6.6.4 Some additional recommendations and strategies on student retention and practical steps to improve student retention and success at UNAM**

The University of Adelaide in Australia's first integrated Student Retention and Success Plan 2019-2021 for student retention and success, highlights four key recommendations for retention and success strategies at institutional level. It states firstly, that there should be early engagement with the student. Since the participants in this current study at UNAM complained about poor communication, lack of communication and assistance, and lack of social interaction with staff, UNAM could strive to engage first-year students to promote belonging and this must continue until the students reach their final year of study and graduate.

Secondly, there should be engagement and belonging in the areas of academic, social and professional services. Attention to these services should be of great importance to ensure that all students benefit. Thirdly, the institution should develop the capacity for students to engage and the staff to offer an engaging experience where everyone is responsible for improving student belonging, retention, and success. Finally, at the management level, "the institution must take responsibility for nurturing a culture of belonging and creating the necessary infrastructure" (Thomas, 2013, p. 5). This includes the use of data to monitor and support student retention and success. All the above are recommendations that could be implemented at the University of Namibia in order to improve student retention.

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette, United States of America, is home to over 18 000 students, more than 100 programmes and its Retention Plan of 2013-2015 recommends the following strategies to improve student retention. This could indeed benefit UNAM when formulating strategies to improve student retention at its campuses:

There is a need to strengthen the role of staff in student retention. This can be achieved by improving parent, student and staff access to key programme information about UNAM's curricula, courses and degree and policy information. UNAM can furthermore enhance communication with students and staff using electronic tools to improve the amount and quality of information shared via the UNAM website. Critical course review points for all academic degree programmes can be implemented to ensure continued progress in majors which could lead to timely graduation of students at its campuses. There is a need to ensure continuing student success in attaining their degree. This will require staff to identify bottleneck courses and address these problems so that they do not impact students' graduation negatively.

UNAM should implement a degree audit for undergraduate students. The institution should strive to provide students and advisors with a progress report which gives students a clear picture of their progress and requirements for graduation. The summer school sessions could be expanded to facilitate students' academic progress and success by increasing the number of staff to participate and teach summer school courses. Closer attention should be given to the role of online learning in student progress and success towards graduation by developing an orientation programme for students enrolled in online courses and programmes. Since social interaction is a key

factor in student retention, the university could make an effort to introduce more activities where first-year students can socialise with staff. Finally, UNAM could strengthen strategic university interaction with students by empowering staff to engage in student retention through access to and use of learning analytics packages which will predict and alert staff and advisors about the retention engagement and success of their current students (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Retention Plan, 2013-2015).

### **6.6.5 Recommendations from participants in the current study**

#### **6.6.5.1 The non-persister students**

The non-persisters mentioned that getting financial assistance from UNAM and accommodation in the university hostel would help them to complete their studies. Students need to be informed about the availability of guidance and counselling services in case they experience depression, emotional exhaustion and depression. They suggested that UNAM staff should engage more with students and that they can make more time available to listen to students and provide advice. Staff should aim to inform them more about the latest developments and expectations in their programmes so that they do not feel left-out. Lecturers should reduce the time for providing feedback on tests and assignments. The non-persisters also recommended that the registration process be made easier and less cumbersome. In addition, they recommended that UNAM could reduce the fees for international students, especially the registration fees payable at the beginning of the academic year.

### **6.6.5.2 The persister students**

The persisters, just like the non-persisters, suggested that UNAM provide financial assistance to help pay for their tuition. UNAM should not prevent students from continuing with their studies as a result of outstanding payments or debts. They further recommended that UNAM reviews and revises its timetabling system to make it easier for them to cope with the lectures and the resulting workload. The persisters also recommended that UNAM reduces the registration fees payable at the beginning of the academic year and find a way to assist students with the financing of their studies. They recommended that UNAM provides “employment” to students who have difficulties in paying for their studies. The persister students suggested that UNAM staff should provide more information to students about the difficulty level of the courses they are registered for and inform students about the completion rate of students from previous academic years in order to get them an idea as to what to expect. Lastly, they requested for more engagement and motivation from lecturers as well as properly trained lecturers in the way they teach in order to improve lecturing methods and enhance students’ understanding of the course content.

### **6.6.5.3 The staff members**

Staff members who completed the questionnaire recommended that UNAM should generate and make more funds available to the very needy students because many students drop out due to financial constraints. It was mentioned that UNAM is aware of such student cases but the institution simply does not provide help. UNAM’s student intervention programmes, if they are in existence, should organise regular intervention workshops for students who are experiencing academic, personal, financial, and social problems.

There should be active action from the side of the institution to create affordable hostel accommodation where students will be safe and conditions conducive to learning. This can be achieved through public/private partnerships.

The Finance Department should keep proper payment records of students as sometimes a student's studies and progress are delayed because the system cannot confirm whether the student has made a payment. Students are asked to produce proof of payment, sometimes as far back as three to four years, and yet the proof is not traceable on the side of the finance department or on the student portal. While searching for proof of payment, the student should be allowed to register and continue with classes and not to miss out on lessons, or even failing to register within the time frame provided for a particular course. These issues are also reasons for students giving up and cancelling studies. The researcher personally experienced UNAM's poor record keeping as he is studying on Staff Development/Staff Rebate and was handed over to a debt collector for outstanding study fees for the current study.

UNAM should consider introducing an incomplete grade. This will allow students who struggle throughout their programme to work on assignments even after the course examination is done in order to get a better continuous assessment mark and then continue to write the consecutive examination. The incomplete grades need to be limited to a specific number per registered year.

UNAM should have regular learning and time management counselling sessions with students to identify problems and find ways to address them. The Dean of Students should encourage students to visit counsellors on campus in order to work out

personal problems so that it does not affect their studies negatively. More attention should be paid to students' problems and concerns and the institution should find ways of engaging parents and sharing with them strategies on how to provide support to their young student-adults.

UNAM should find revenue streams to employ students as teaching assistants/aids in the various programmes on offer. Students could receive rebates on their studies in return for their work within the various faculties. Another recommendation is that UNAM should create a job placement centre at each campus that can provide short-term or irregular income opportunities to students. Jobs such as stock-taking or inventory counting at big retail stores or companies, making photocopies, doing filing for a company or cutting vegetables for a restaurant chef who needs a hand for a few hours can be negotiated to assist students. UNAM should also increase facilities for more affordable accommodation on its campuses.

In the Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) programme, for example, the curriculum itself is too overloaded to provide for quality education. Too much repetition is found across too many subjects. This situation can provide students with a feeling of being continuously overwhelmed and they cannot focus on an exercise of deepening skills, understanding and knowledge.

UNAM should improve academic support to students on how to write academic assignments and how to prepare for examinations. Students should be provided with writing support sessions at no cost and this should be done by the availability of a writing support centre. This centre should be run by English majors and graduate

students. The students' language needs should be identified during these sessions and remedial English support should then be provided. The Department of Language Development (DLD), formerly known as the Language Centre at UNAM, has a Writing Excellence Unit which is run by staff and students to provide assistance to students. The UNAM Library should ensure that the library database on previous examination papers is kept up to date. It is especially helpful to first-year students in acquainting themselves with the format of examinations in different programmes. The library textbook selection should be comprehensive in all titles and enough copies or e-book versions should be available in relation to student numbers. This will ensure fundamental learning and academic performance conditions for students where resources are available in order to promote conditions for successful study.

The faculty officers at UNAM campuses currently try to provide a clear roadmap for students but they are overwhelmed by too much work during certain periods of the year. UNAM could introduce a similar service but as an online service where the faculty officer can address and provide answers to the questions from students and try and lessen the faculty officer's workload. This could also be introduced as a Frequently Asked Questions webpage or Query Page and this might prove to be helpful.

A student-evaluation form similar to the student-lecturer evaluation form should be created where students can assess and reflect on their own studies/experiences/insights. This instrument should be administered at the end of each semester (perhaps in year 1 and year 2) of their studies and this should include guiding questions to help students to reflect on their chosen field of study, its

relevance to their interest, future career goals, and to what extent it meets or does not meet their expectations. This could be the responsibility of a staff researcher which UNAM can employ as mentioned earlier in this chapter. As was recommended earlier in this chapter, the responses from the staff questionnaire expressed the same idea that UNAM develops and introduces a Student Retention Plan/Policy to identify the factors, for example, institutional factors, student factors, and external factors that affect student retention.

Social workers should be employed by UNAM and they should be responsive to the needs of students as many students need counselling but they struggle to find the right people to talk to especially in their first year of study. They could feel challenged by the transition from high school to university and often become depressed. The Office of the Dean of Students (ODS) can also assist in providing students with counselling services as students may experience psychological or emotional problems which could lead to them dropping out of their study programme. There should be proactive face-to-face options for struggling students through the Office of the Dean of Students.

UNAM should integrate information literacy instruction into the curriculum as a compulsory subject for all first-year students to ensure real learning outcomes that will provide the competencies for functioning in an academic environment like information searching and evaluation, the ethical use of sources, and use of e-sources. The UNAM library has already developed content for one semester and this could further be developed into an online course with assessment. The institution should also improve its internet access to students on campus and improve its teaching

facilities by installing projectors and up-to-date functional laboratories for practical work.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

Student retention remains an important topic for university management, academic staff, administrators, and students. Despite numerous studies conducted on student retention, no institution has discovered or implemented a solution to solve all retention problems (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). This study identified the factors which influence student retention and also illustrated several reasons why students drop out from UNAM. The findings of this study add to research already conducted on student retention in higher education institutions, particularly in Namibia. It provides a framework to researchers and academic institutions to design and conduct research that help to identify factors that affect student retention so as to develop a student retention plan in order to assist students to persist and hopefully graduate. Institutional stakeholders may be better able to keep students enrolled in higher education institutions until graduation (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). This could greatly benefit both students and their respective institutions over the course of time.

It can be concluded that the study identified the most frequent factors influencing student retention at the University of Namibia, thus the objective of the study was achieved.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Certificate



#### ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

Ethical Clearance Reference Number: FOE /440/2018

Date: 28 November, 2018

This Ethical Clearance Certificate is issued by the University of Namibia Research Ethics Committee (UREC) in accordance with the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Policy and Guidelines. Ethical approval is given in respect of undertakings contained in the Research Project outlined below. This Certificate is issued on the recommendations of the ethical evaluation done by the Faculty/Centre/Campus Research & Publications Committee sitting with the Postgraduate Studies Committee.

**Title of Project:** Factors Contributing to Student Retention at the University of Namibia

**Researcher:** BASIL ALBERT RICKERTS

**Student Number:** 8400210

**Supervisor(s):** Dr. K. Shalyefu

**Faculty:** Faculty of Education

Take note of the following:

- (a) Any significant changes in the conditions or undertakings outlined in the approved Proposal must be communicated to the UREC. An application to make amendments may be necessary.
- (b) Any breaches of ethical undertakings or practices that have an impact on ethical conduct of the research must be reported to the UREC.
- (c) The Principal Researcher must report issues of ethical compliance to the UREC (through the Chairperson of the Faculty/Centre/Campus Research & Publications Committee) at the end of the Project or as may be requested by UREC.
- (d) The UREC retains the right to:
  - (i) Withdraw or amend this Ethical Clearance if any unethical practices (as outlined in the Research Ethics Policy) have been detected or suspected,
  - (ii) Request for an ethical compliance report at any point during the course of the research.

UREC wishes you the best in your research.

Dr. J.E. de Villiers: UREC Chairperson

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J.E. de Villiers", is written over a horizontal line.

Ms. P. Claassen: UREC Secretary

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paula Claassen", is written over a horizontal line.

## Appendix B: University Research Permission Letter

### CENTRE FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

University of Namibia, Private Bag 13301, Windhoek, Namibia  
340 Mandume Ndemufayo Avenue, Pioneers Park  
☎ +264 61 206 3275/4662; Fax +264 61 206 3290; URL: <http://www.unam.edu.na>



### RESEARCH PERMISSION LETTER

**Student Name:** Mr. Basil Albert Rickerts

**Student number:** 8400210

**Programme:** DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION (Curriculum, Instructional & Assessment)

**Approved research title:** FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT RETENTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA.

#### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I hereby confirm that the above mentioned student is registered at the University of Namibia for the programme indicated. The proposed study met all the requirements as stipulated in the University guidelines and has been approved by the relevant committees.

The proposal adheres to ethical principles as per attached Ethical Clearance Certificate. Permission is hereby granted to carry out the research as described in the approved proposal.

Best Regards

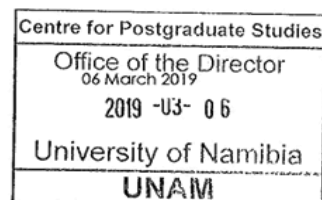
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marius Hedimbi', is written over a horizontal dashed line.

Prof. Marius Hedimbi

Director: Centre for Postgraduate Studies

Tel: +264 61 2063275

E-mail: [directorpgs@unam.na](mailto:directorpgs@unam.na)



## **Appendix C: Participants' Invitation Information and Consent Form**

### **INVITATION, INFORMATION AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

**Project Title: Factors influencing student retention at the University of Namibia**

**Main Campus**

**Investigator:**

B. A. Rickerts: HEd.; MEd.; MA.; PhD Candidate Email: [brickerts@unam.na](mailto:brickerts@unam.na)

**Supervisors:**

Prof R. K. Shalyefu: PhD

Email: [rkshalyefu@unam.na](mailto:rkshalyefu@unam.na)

Dr N. Kadhila: PhD

Email: [nkadhila@unam.na](mailto:nkadhila@unam.na)

It would really be appreciated if you could participate in this study conducted on Student Retention at the University of Namibia Main Campus. This research study has been approved by the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Policy and Guidelines, Certificate FOE/440/2018.

You have been invited to participate in this study as the investigation includes all first- and second-year students from all Faculties of the University of Namibia Main Campus enrolled in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years and those who dropped out in the preceding year. This will include both persister students and non-persister students who voluntarily withdrew from their study programmes during the years of the data collection. The study aims to collect data by interviewing students and staff through telephone interviews, focus groups and staff survey questionnaires.

**Consent:**

I agree to participate and be interviewed, and that my voice will be audio recorded. No names will be used. All information shared in this study will only be used for academic purposes, and I will in no way be prejudiced or negatively affected should I decide to participate/not participate in this study. The data collected will be protected during and after completion of the study. The results may be published and a report of the research outcomes will be provided to the University of Namibia.

**Please sign below as an indication that you are willingly participating and are in no way coerced into participation. Please assist in submitting a truthful reflection of your thoughts, experiences and feelings.**

Thank you for your participation. If you have any further questions or queries feel free to contact me at [brickerts@unam.na](mailto:brickerts@unam.na) or my supervisor, Prof R Shalyefu or Dr N Kadhila through the email addresses provided.

Participant's consent:      Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Non-Persister Students' Interview Questions

Adapted from a study by Saheed Abdullah Al-Dossary, (2008)

Course: .....Year of Study: .....

1. What influenced you to study at UNAM Main Campus?
2. What was your main goal when you decided to enrol at UNAM?
3. Why have you decided **not to** complete your studies at UNAM? Please try to elaborate.
4. Before you decided to withdraw, did you discuss your decision with anybody?
5. While studying at UNAM did you seek assistance from lecturers, faculty officers, student counsellors, other administrative staff?
6. Have you experienced difficulties getting assistance from the lecturers, faculty officers, student councillors, other administrative staff?
7. Did you interact with staff members outside lectures while attending UNAM?
8. If so, briefly describe your experiences.
9. Do you think the lecturers and administrative staff at UNAM care about your education?
10. What type of social interaction (**Social interaction** can be between groups of two, or larger **social** groups) did you have while attending UNAM, and with whom?
11. Do you think UNAM has a student-friendly environment? (An **environment** is broadly characterized by its facilities, classrooms, health supports, and disciplinary policies and practices).
12. Did you attend orientation in your first year and how did the orientation week help you to settle in?
13. Is there anything missing in the orientation week?
14. Does UNAM offer enough **extracurricular activities** (include arts, athletics, clubs, employment, personal commitments, and other pursuits) for students, in your view?
15. How can UNAM improve student retention/ help students to persist and complete their studies?
16. What are you doing now?

17. Do you have a desire to return to UNAM sometime in the future?
18. Is there anything UNAM could have done to help you complete your study?  
Please elaborate.
19. In your Faculty or Programme what do you think were the biggest challenges/difficulties you and other students faced?
20. Is there anything we should have mentioned but did not?

**Thank you for your time. Much appreciated.**

Mr Basil Rickerts

## Appendix E: Persister Students' Focus Groups Interview Questions

Adapted from a study by Saheed Abdullah Al-Dossary, (2008)

Course: .....Year of Study: .....

1. What influenced you to study at UNAM Main Campus?
2. What influenced you to study this course?
3. What was your main goal when you decided to enrol at UNAM?
4. Now that you have been at UNAM for more than a year, why have you decided to complete your studies at UNAM?
5. Do you seek or have you sought assistance from lecturers, faculty officers, student counsellors?
6. Have you experienced difficulties getting assistance from the lecturers, faculty officers, student councillors?
7. If so, describe your experiences with the lecturers, faculty officers, student councillors.
8. Have you interacted with staff members outside lectures while attending UNAM?
9. How would you describe your interaction with staff members?
10. Do you think the lecturers at UNAM care about your education?
11. Do you think the administration staff care about your education?
12. What type of social interaction (**Social interaction** can be between groups of two, or larger **social** groups) do you have while attending UNAM, and with whom?
13. Do you think UNAM has a student-friendly environment? (An **environment** is broadly characterized by its facilities, classrooms, health supports, and disciplinary policies and practices).
14. How did the orientation week help you to settle in?
15. Is there anything missing in the orientation week?
16. How could the orientation week at UNAM be improved?
17. Does UNAM offer enough extracurricular activities (include arts, athletics, clubs, employment, personal commitments, and other pursuits) for students, in your view?

18. Why you think some students left UNAM during their first year or did not return for the second year of study?
19. How can UNAM improve student retention/ help students to persist in their studies?
20. In your Faculty/Programme what do you think are the biggest challenges/difficulties students face?
21. What are the challenges you personally face in your Faculty/Programme?
22. Is there anything we should have talked about but did not?
23. Is there anything else you would like to say?

**Appendix F: Academic and Administrative Staff Survey**

**(Adapted from Othman Ahmad Aljohani, June 2014)**

**Name:** .....

**Faculty/Department:** .....

Dear Staff Member

Please take some time to complete this questionnaire. The purpose of this Questionnaire is to **identify the factors influencing students' retention at UNAM main campus**. Your responses will provide important information that will help your university in planning better ways to support academic retention and success of the students. The aim of this Survey is to determine your views on causes of student drop-out at UNAM.

**PLEASE TYPE YOUR RESPONSES AFTER EACH QUESTION. IF YOU WISH TO WRITE OUT YOUR RESPONSES PLEASE DO SO ON A SEPARATE PAGE(S).**

1. What do you perceive as the primary reasons for drop-out among UNAM first-year students?
2. What techniques/methods/approaches do you employ as a lecturer/registrar/faculty officer/student counsellor to encourage students to persist in completion of their studies?
3. What actions do you think UNAM should take to increase student retention?

**Thank you for your participation.**