ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

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Declaration of proof-reader Mr Louis Montcrieff Nel: PTC (Graaff-Reinet TC), DE (Paarl TC), BA Ed (UPE/NMMU), English Higher and Afrikaans Higher (DOE)

I declare that I, Louis Montcrieff Nel, have proofread the dissertation entitled: Adjustment experiences and coping strategies of first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus) written by Reyagalaletsa Felicity Tom ███████████████████ It was a general proof-read that included presentation, consistent referencing style and any major grammatical errors.

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3.5.2015

Declaration

I declare that **ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references and that this work has not been submitted before for any other degree at any other institution.

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Full names   Date

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Student number

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Abstract

First year at university is challenging. For most students adjustment to social and academic life entails a degree of stress and emotional difficulties. These difficulties can result in a greater risk of first year attrition. The study sought to understand and describe the adjustment experiences of a sample of first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus). Qualitative research was conducted to establish the lived experiences of the participants. Four focus groups were conducted, in all there were eighteen first year participants from different departments. Data were gathered by use of semi-structured interviews which allowed probing. Thematic Content Analysis was employed to glean themes from the data. The study concluded that some of the first year participants struggled to adjust to social and academic life at the institution. This was exacerbated by the presence of insufficient support from university personnel, financial problems, unmanageable workloads, and unfamiliar method of instruction. These participants tended to use negative coping mechanism such as ignoring problems, smoking marijuana and propositioning the opposite sex (males). However, some of the participants had positive adjustment experiences and used positive coping mechanisms such as working hard, interacting with lecturing staff, listening to music, interacting with peers and attending religious events. The study recommended that orientation for first year students should incorporate a programme that helped first year students understand the challenges they are likely to face.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

According to Ayele (2011), adjustment involves the ability to select appropriate and effective measures to meet the demands of the environment while maintaining a healthy attitude towards that environment. This does not only rely on academic ability, but also on the ability of a student to make a quick adjustment to an environment that requires greater autonomy, and individual responsibility, than was previously expected in a school setting (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordstrom, 2008). This can be achieved through internalising the character, culture, and behavioural norms of the institution the student is enrolled at. Essentially, the students' ability to set goals and achieve a balance between academic and social activities plays a critical role in their success during the first year, and eventually towards their chances of graduating from the university (Secuban, 2012).

1.2 Background to the study

Each year students who have matriculated enrol at higher learning institutions to further their studies. Some students adjust relatively well to this new environment. For others, this transition entails a great degree of personal stress and emotional maladjustment (Beyers, & Goossens, 2003). According to Somer and Dumont (2011), the high dropout and low graduation rates of disadvantaged students are among the many problems associated with poor adjustment to university life in South Africa. It is reported that 50% of students enrolled at higher learning institutions in the country drop out in their first three years, with about 30% dropping out in their first year.

Many studies have been conducted on the adjustment experiences and coping strategies of students attending tertiary institutions (Thurber & Walton, 2012; Somer & Dumont, 2011; Schultz, 2008). These studies are all quantitative and do not address the in-depth experiences of students. One phenomenological study in Zimbabwe, using a semi-structured interview guide with seven participants, made some attempt to fill that gap (Mudhovozi, 2012). This study illustrated a gap in the literature and motivated the present study which will use a qualitative approach and gather data using focus groups. The research was undertaken in South Africa, at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus), which is designated as a previously disadvantaged or emerging university.

1.3 Research problem

First year at university can be a very stressful period of social and academic change (Ayele, 2011). It is a time when students experience social challenges such as moving away from home, making new friends and being introduced to a new in environment. These, together, with academic challenges, which include demanding coursework and a heavy academic work load, can be stressful (Bojuwoye, 2002). Other challenges include homesickness (Thurber & Walton, 2012), problematic relationships with roommates and significant others (Secuban, 2012) plus poor student-lecturer relationships (Ayele, 2011). An orientation week survey conducted by Bojuwoye (2002) found that students knew that university was going to be different from high school but they did not expect such a big difference. Not all students become stressed and many experience different aspects of university life in a positive manner.

1.4 Study Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate the social and academic adjustment experiences and coping strategies of first year students' at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus).

1.5 Study objectives

- To determine the self-reported social adjustment experiences of first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus).
- To determine the self-reported academic adjustment experiences of first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus).
- To investigate the coping mechanisms used by first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) to cope with social and academic adjustment experiences.

1.6 Significance of the study

The study is important because it will increase the body of knowledge, specifically in-depth qualitative insights, pertaining to the adjustment experiences of first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus). The results of the study will assist relevant bodies at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) in designing appropriate orientation programmes and peer mentoring programmes. Students, through participating in the study will benefit in terms of understanding their academic and social adjustment experiences. This

insight, it is hoped, will be fed back to their peers and friends. Results from the study will also be disseminated to relevant bodies at University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus) for instance, student counselling and the Student Representative Council (SRC) so that they may use the information in planning interventions during orientation week.

1.7 Summary

This chapter served as an introduction to the study. The background to the study, research problem, study aims and objectives and significance of the study formed the focus of the chapter. The following chapter presents an overview of literature relevant to the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The present study focuses on the social and academic adjustment experiences of first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) and the coping mechanisms they use to adjust to the environment. According to Goleman (1998), successful adjustment to the institutional setting not only depends on academic factors but also on non-academic ones. Non-academic factors include the resilience of the individual, which is often based on their quota of Emotional Intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence can be defined as: (1) the ability to perceive, appraise and express emotion accurately; (2) the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought, the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and (3) the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Salami, 2011). Emotional Intelligence (EI) involves the ability to use feelings to generate self-motivation plus the ability to empathise with others in order to build good relationships. It also involves an individual's ability to have insight into his or her own behaviour(s) and motivations.

2.2 Adjustment challenges

Secuban (2012) posits that enrolling at a tertiary institution can be seen as a very positive event, with great opportunities for the academic and social development of an individual. However, as with other major life events, it is also accompanied by multiple and significant life challenges. Students who leave their homes to study at university experience the challenges of facing a new environment, and the stressors associated with being separated from familiar features of their previous environment, in different ways. These challenges may contribute towards psychological and physical ill-health, thus a connection to family is essential during this period. The ability to set goals and achieve a balance between academic and social activities is an important factor in enabling students to adjust well to the demands of university life. The author concludes that challenges encountered by first year students include the following include homesickness, financial worries, different teaching styles used by lecturing staff, large amount of work and fitting into the new environment.

2.2.1 Homesickness

Homesickness is the distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home. Its cognitive trademark is preoccupation with thoughts about home and attachment objects (Thurber, 1999). Some students experience a mild form of homesickness and are able to develop coping skills which involve for instance, keeping in constant contact with family members and friends. Other students however, experience intense homesickness which can be painful and emotionally debilitating (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

Homesickness can often cause a delay in the adjustment process of students because their main focus is missing home. Students who are homesick lose focus of their main priorities which should be making new friends and beginning their academic career. When their main focus is on missing home, they spend their days thinking about being at home and being with friends and family, rather than on the reality of their life at university. This focus can also lead to the isolation of the student, as their peers become frustrated with them and do not understand their homesickness. Students who isolate themselves spend the majority of their time in their rooms alone. They may go to classes and do homework but they do not put in the effort to make friends or get involved in sport or other student activities (Farris, 2010). As the newness of the university atmosphere begins to wear off, first-year students begin to deal with the reality of the many adjustments they are experiencing. As noted some students deal with homesickness by maintaining strong ties with their home community. These students often go home at weekends (if the distance is not too great). This however, can make the sense of loss of family more intense, depending on the resilience of the individual (Zeller & Mosier, 1993). Resilience, according to Braverman (2001), refers to competence and successful adaptation, after exposure to significant stressors or risk. A qualitative study conducted by Khademi and Aghdam (2012), established that there is an inverse relationship between resilience and homesickness. This means that the higher the resilience of a first year student, the less homesick he or she will be.

2.2.2 Financial problems

Financial difficulties remain a constant problem for many first-entering university students. According to Bojuwoye (2002), some students may be able to face the challenges of being selected for admission, only to be faced with the prospect of being turned away at the registration desk because of financial inadequacy. According to Lemmens (2010), using

Tinto's (1993) theory, there is a direct link between a student's ability to pay for studies and retention. A student might make a decision not to study if he or she is faced by a lack of financial support, or enrol, only to withdraw later. This means that financial support positively influences first year students' retention at university. Sledge (2012), further adds that an essential aspect of the decision to go to a higher education institution is whether a student is able to afford it or not. After high school students generally have either never held a job or worked part-time, which means they have to depend on their parents, guardians or loans to attend a tertiary institution. As university becomes a reality, students often find the cost higher than they thought, and realise they cannot afford it. Some may get assistance in the form of bursaries or student loans, which are usually not enough to cover tuition, books, accommodation and living expenses (Sledge, 2012). This is particularly the case in African institutions where students come from rural backgrounds and have little or no access to any funding (Bojuwoye, 2002).

In America Sledge (2012) reports that for many students transitioning into financial independence can be an overwhelming experience. Challenges like these lower the prospective student's self-esteem, completely destroying his or her self-confidence. Financial insecurity may have direct impact on a first-year's ability to concentrate in lectures. Due to financial difficulties many students are forced to register late, thus setting them back and making it difficult for them to catch up academically. They may also have difficulty purchasing basic necessities such as food (Bujowuye, 2002). A study by Letseka, Cosser, Breier and Visser (2010), revealed that the most common reason for dropping out of university by Black African students is financial problems.

Families, who offer financial support, play a vital role in making tuition affordable for students. However, for many African families tertiary education fees are a burden. International students find themselves having to supplement student loans or bursaries by finding part-time employment. This places additional pressure on the students. It must be noted that sometimes students have to work, while studying, as they need to financially assist their families (Bartoli, Kennedy & Tedam, 2008).

2.2.3 Teaching styles

According to Ayele (2011) instructional and learning methods are markedly different at university from those in high school. The teaching styles of different lecturers at university

often make it difficult for the students to grasp the subject matter taught in class. In addition, students also report that unlike high school, the lecturer plays only a facilitating role in introducing them to academic activities, thus students are expected to be more independent and self-reliant. At university students exert initiative in planning and conducting their own learning experiences which does not happen at high school. Wehlage, Newman, and Secada (1996), described this as an authentic achievement. A student is no longer just a passive recipient of the knowledge given by the teacher. She or he has to become an active participant in constructing knowledge. For example, the responsibility to schedule appointments for consultations with professors and lecturers at the university rests upon the student. This is different at high school, as the learners are called in by teachers and are not really active participants in constructing knowledge. They are usually told what to do, how to do it, and where to go. At university, only a few directives are given and from there students are expected to assume responsibility for making decisions and are given the freedom to do so (Molapisi, 2009). At high school, there are frequent checks on whether the assigned task has been prepared. Assignments are usually short and students are frequently assessed on daily or weekly work as opposed to semester or term performance. At university level, there are few checks and students must handwork in on the date given by the lecturer (Molapisi, 2009). Furthermore, one of the participants in a study by Kidwell (2005) indicated that he did not know the extent of his knowledge at university as opposed to high school. He reported that at high school teachers checked every day whereas at university lecturers do not check so he did not know if understood work properly much of the time. Furthermore, he noted that universities do not do not care about students as people. This type of experience might give students the perception that tertiary institution lecturers are less friendly and less sensitive to their problems than high school teachers.

2.2.4 Workload

Somer and Dumont (2011), found that many students experienced anxiety in relation to the academic demands of their institutions. The difficulties they encountered arose from the heavy workload that each course expects of them. Students often find that learning packages and teaching methodologies are different from those at secondary school level. Generally, university lectures are more difficult than high school classes. More reading assignments and examinations and tests usually cover a greater amount of materials (Salami, 2011). When students are in high school, family members are more likely to be able to help them with homework. However, even if family is within reach students find that university material is

often beyond the grasp of parents, family or friends who have no tertiary background. The family, therefore, has less direct control over the student's academic success (Sledge, 2012).

The students may not realise from the onset that the workload is considerable because they attend classes less frequently and assignments are given in less exacting terms (Molapisi, 2009). In a study by Ayele (2011), students revealed that they are supposed to master the minimum requirements of different course work on group and individual projects as well as preparing for tests, which they find very difficult. A student is expected to accomplish a minimum of twice the amount of work given in high school in about the same amount of time (Somer & Dumont, 2011). According to Salami (2011), lecturers expect students to do more work outside the lecture hall. In order for students to survive they must take responsibility for their actions. They are expected to be mature in their actions and behave in a responsible manner in order to meet high academic standards, and yet may still be struggling with the problems of adolescence (Molapisi, 2009). Those that are overwhelmed by their academic workload and requirements are likely to receive lower academic marks at the end of an academic year than their more resilient peers (Somer & Dumont, 2011).

2.2.5 Fitting in

Before attending university, students spent much time with the same group of friends and peers at secondary school. There they developed strong support groups and friendship structures. They were also well known to their teachers, in the new environment all this has gone (Muldoon & MacDonald, 2010). According to Salami (2011), the new environment in which the students find themselves with new processes, procedures and people can create emotional problems. Students may feel overwhelmed and intimidated, become unsure and inhibited, thereby reducing positive learning and social experiences.

One of most significant aspects of the adjustment process is getting involved in different social or sporting activities and making friends. They are the most important determinants of a successful transition into college (Salami, 2011). According to Farris (2010), a student who finds himself or herself isolated during their first year at university face a difficult adjustment process. Without adequate support students are unable to share new experiences and many students become withdrawn. Muldoon and MacDonald (2010), suggest that lack of social integration into the university environment is one of the key causes of attrition (that is, student drop-out). A great deal of time is needed to develop intimacy which students often

find they do not have, particularly in their first year of their studies at tertiary institutions. Living with roommates in hostels can present problems. For example, negotiating respect of personal property, personal space, sleeping and relaxation needs can be a complicated task. The intricacy increases when roommates are of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds with different values. Students' inability to cope with this type of challenge is likely to result in depression and confusion (Salami, 2011).

The social connections and friendships that a student makes at university may have a positive influence but they can also have a negative influence. The supervision that students are under during their time at university is much more limited than during their time at home which makes them more vulnerable to peer pressure (Fromme, Kruse & Corbin, 2008). Findings in a study by Molapisi (2009), revealed that first year students experienced the effect of making new friends as personally validating.

2.3 Coping with challenges

Psychological stress indicates that there is an unfavourable person-environment fit. Individuals alter their circumstances, or how they are interpreted, to make them appear more favourable, which in psychological terms is defined as coping or using a coping mechanism. Traditional approaches to coping emphasise individual traits or styles, that is, stable properties of personality. They emphasise coping as a process in which an individual employs on-going efforts to manage specific demands appraised as difficult or overwhelming. Although stable coping styles do exist, and are important, coping is highly contextual and for it to be effective it must change over time and contexts (Eisenbarth, 2012; Folkman, 2008; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Coping affects subsequent stress reactions in two critical ways: firstly, if an individual's relationship with the environment is changed by coping actions, the conditions of psychological stress may also be changed for the better. This is known as problem-focused coping. In emotion-focused coping, people change only the way they attend to, or interpret what is happening. Thinking about the threat is avoided. Likewise, reappraisal of a threat is thought of in a way that is non-threatening and removes the cognitive basis of the stress reaction (Eisenbarth, 2012). Furthermore, Schwarzer (2000) discusses two types of coping. These are proactive coping and preventive coping. Proactive coping is described as goal management, while preventive coping is described as risk management. Pro-active coping

and preventive coping have important implications for new students who are adjusting to university life. First year students who possess the potential for proactive coping may see opportunities and enhance their own capacities. Conversely, those with preventive coping skills may be able to recognise potential stressors, thereby eliminating problems at an earlier stage and experiencing fewer frustrations, such as failure in exams, financial strain, or interpersonal problems (Schwarzer, 2000).

2.3.1 Preventive coping

Preventive coping is undertaken when an individual is likely to experience threatening events that may occur in the future. People accumulate resources and take general precautions in order to be protected against a variety of these events. It involves an effort to prepare for uncertain events in the future. The goal is to build up general resistance resources that result in less stress in the near (and sometimes distant) future by reducing the severity of the impact. In this way, the individual experiences the consequences of stressful events as less severe. Examples of such events are job loss, forced retirement, crime, illness, physical impairment, disaster and/or poverty (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007).

2.3.2 Proactive coping

Proactive coping is aimed at uncertain challenges or goals. Individual's accumulate resources and develop skills and strategies in their pursuit of these goals or in overcoming specific challenges. An example of positive coping is proactive coping because it does not require any negative judgments, such as harm, loss, or threat. Proactive coping reflects efforts to build up general resources that enable promotion towards personal growth. In proactive coping individuals see risks, demands and opportunities in the future, but they do not assess them as possible threats. Instead, they recognise demanding situations as personal challenges. Coping becomes goal management instead of risk management. Individuals are not reactive, but proactive in that they initiate positive coping which creates opportunities for personal growth. Stress is interpreted as good stress (eustress) which is productive and ensures that the individual is dynamically motivated to cope with challenges as they arise as opposed to bad stress or distress (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007).

2.4 Coping strategies

Transition to university life requires that students learn to cope with new work and a different interpersonal environment which imposes many intellectual, social and instrumental demands

(Wintre et al., 2011). Individuals use different types of coping strategies so that the selected strategies coincide with the situational context (Doumit, 2012). According to Aldridge and Roesch (2008), the daily stress and coping processes in multi-ethnic adolescents are varied and many. Findings revealed that adolescents use their full range of coping strategies rather than relying on one or two strategies. It was also reported that adolescents regularly employ flexible coping mechanisms which is linked to better adjustment in adolescents.

The styles of coping elicited by stressful events are important and closely related to positive or successful adjustment to a new environment (Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger & Pratt, 2000). Students may devise their own coping strategies, which can be functional or dysfunctional, when faced with stressful situations (Ayele, 2011). Proactive coping and preventive coping have a positive impact on individual adjustment to university life (Schwarzer, 2000), meaning they can be described as functional ways of coping.

Dysfunctional coping strategies are negative coping mechanisms which are destructive to psychological well-being and are associated with a low or poor academic performance. Due to an inherent desire to belong and to feel socially accepted, students find themselves using maladaptive coping mechanisms such as illegal drug use, alcohol abuse and promiscuous sexual behaviours (Thurber & Walton, 2012; Fischer, 2009). These types of avoidant coping methods are dysfunctional and can lead to withdrawal, negative attitudes, and avoidance of problems (Fischer, 2009; Leong, Bonz & Zachar, 1997). According to Tuna (2003), another way of coping for students includes behavioural disengagement, such us reducing efforts to deal with a stressor and/or self-distraction. This involves doing things to distract from the stressor and include day dreaming, escape through sleep and in the worst case scenario committing suicide. According to Sledge (2012), the greater the family participation in the individual's entry into university life, the better the individual is prepared to cope with the challenges ahead. He suggested that the emergence of negative emotions is likely to appear as students deal with differences in values and morals that they are exposed to in higher education environments. This causes them to question their own, and their family and community values.

According to Mudhovozi (2012), positive coping, characterised by an approach-oriented style and problem-focused effort, is related to fewer emotional and behavioural disorders. It also predicts positive academic, personal and emotional adjustment in an individual's first year of

tertiary education. The author conducted a study which revealed social networks and effective (and realistic) beliefs amongst positive coping strategies. Peer support networks and friends are also noted as important for students, as they are able to share their burdens and have positive socialisation experiences.

Abdullah, Elias, Uli and Mahyuddin (2010), state that students are likely to use both problem-focused and emotion-focused forms of coping in stressful encounters. For example, a student may rely more on problem-focused coping in situations in which there is a possible change in the outcomes (for instance, coping with the stress felt because of an up-coming examination), but in situations in which little can be done to change the outcomes, such as coping with stress while waiting for the results of an examination, they may rely more on emotion-focused coping. This is a negative way of coping, but it may be the only realistic option when the source of stress is outside their control (McLeod, 2009).

Molapsi (2009) reports that other students use positive methods of coping to deal with academic stress for instance, they break down modules into sections, form study groups and try to avoid time-wasting activities. The author also reports that some students state that consulting lecturers and studying hard helped them to cope with the challenge of facing different instructional methods and increased work load in a tertiary environment. Use of active and internal coping strategies such as direct problem-solving, positive thinking and leisure activities is related to positive well-being. On the other hand, the use of avoidant coping strategies such as withdrawal and avoidance is positively related to a decreased emotional and psychological well-being and depression.

2.5 Psychological problems when coping with a tertiary environment

First year students may have difficulty adapting to university life and handling their new found freedom with minimal adult supervision. They may experience anxiety when they leave behind the social support of family, friends, and familiar surroundings. This may place them at risk for academic, personal, and social difficulties (Hernandes, 2006). For example, Hernandes (2006) suggests that adolescent drinking and suicidal ideation are associated with stress experienced by students during their first year at university. Change in relationships that is associated with leaving home is linked to mood and substance disorders (Overbeek, Vollebergh, Engels & Meeuws, 2003). In addition to depression and anxiety students may be diagnosed with more serious psychological disorders which impacts on their overall ability to

function (Hernandez, 2006). According to Blake (2006), psychological adjustment, which includes loneliness, depression, isolation, and loss of status and identity are amongst the many challenges faced by students, particularly first years. Adjustment difficulties may also arise from the differences between the expectations of the students and realities of life in a higher education environment. Students whose expectations were negative before they entered tertiary education reported more stress, depression, and poorer university adjustment than students with positive expectations (Sharma, 2012).

A study by Bouteyre, Maure and Bernaud (2007) to determine: (1) the rate of depressive symptoms, (2) if daily challenges encountered during first-year of college study were related to student depressive symptoms and (3) the relationship between coping and symptoms amongst French first-year psychology students revealed that not all coping strategies work equally well. The research revealed that problem-solving coping methods reduced depression in the sample. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, was revealed to be a significant predictor of depression. In conclusion it was noted that challenges encountered during the first year of university life can be a considerable risk factor for depression.

2.6 Overview of international research relating to academic and social adjustment of students

According to Jemal (2012), attrition rates amongst first year university students are higher as compared to their senior counterparts. This is also supported by Le Roux and Brier (2012) who add that it is commonly known that the highest rate of dropout occurs in the first year of study at a higher education institution. Jemal (2012) conducted a study, using a sample of 204 first year students, at the University of Jimma in Ethiopia. The study aimed to identify factors related to adjustment problems. Fifty percent (50%) of the study participants experienced at least one form of adjustment problem. They reported more problems with social adjustment as compared to academic and psychological adjustment. It was concluded that interacting socially as well as establishing meaningful, quality relationships was very difficult for first years in the study sample.

Salami (2011), reports that due to the newness of the environment, first year students may experience feelings of isolation and a subsequent decline in self-esteem. For those whose parental support is minimal or lacking, adjustment to university becomes even more challenging. The author also noted that when students are given enough social support from

family and friends they are able to handle adjustment challenges more competently. A reasonable explanation for this is that students receive guidance, intimacy, positive social interactions and tangible assistance for things such as money. This assists the students in effectively handling any academic, social and/or personal-emotional problems arising in their new environment. Their adjustment process, therefore, is experienced without many problems and consequently less depression and anxiety and more overall psychological and physical well-being.

Secuban (2012), in the United States of America (USA), conducted a study aimed at developing an understanding of undergraduate college students' social readiness for the tertiary education experience. It was revealed that having a connection to family and friends was important in assisting the students to adjust. Students maintained contact with family through web-based video, text messaging and telephone calls. First-year students found connections with university faculty and staff through first-year intervention programmes and frequently relied on these relationships (with staff) to get them through difficult times in their first semester. It was concluded that without the support of family, friends, faculty and staff, the social transition for first year students would have been much more difficult. The students also reported that having the support of parents and university administrators was important to their adjustment.

In a study by Secuban (2012), first-year students found that interpersonal relationships were difficult to form during their first semester at a tertiary institution. However, they also reported that once they became involved in-campus activities their network of friends broadened. They also reported to developing core friendships by the end of their first six months in the new environment. Internal and external influences shaped the students' adjustment to their environment in a number of ways. Internal motivation, such as having a natural love of learning, to learning self-discipline, were identified as important internal factors that enabled the students to adjust. External factors such as experiencing campus culture, strong religious practices, resolving roommate issues and parental influence were other key factors that determined their success in their first year undergraduate studies.

A study conducted at a Canadian university by Wintre and Yaffe (2000), aimed at investigating factors that contribute to first-year students' adjustment by looking at their overall adaptation to a tertiary environment. It measured factors such as parenting styles,

current relationships with parents, psychological well-being and adjustment variables. The results revealed that the role of parents provided a significant contribution to the individual's adjustment to university. Mutual exchange was the parental relationship variable that was found to be the most significant contributor to male adaptation to an academic environment. However, for females, the significant parenting variable was discussion with parents about attending university in terms of what they might expect and what their parents might provide. In terms of psychological well-being variables, both depressive and perceived stress in the new environment, were found to be related to lack of parental dependability.

A study conducted by Abdulla, Elias, Uli, and Mahyudin (2010), in Malaysia revealed that there was a significant and positive relationship between students' coping mechanisms and their overall university adjustment, academic adjustment, social adjustment, emotional adjustment and their attachment to the university and academic achievement. The research concluded that it is important to help students, especially first year undergraduates, to identify coping strategies which will help them overcome stressful encounters during the transition to higher education institutions. Results also indicated that throughout a period of one semester, students' overall adjustment and academic achievement was found to be significantly associated with how well they coped or did not cope with the higher education environment. The significant and positive relationships found between students' overall adjustment and academic achievement and problem-focused and emotional-focused coping implied that these were the two main coping categories which helped them manage the environmental demands.

Sicat (2011), analysed the cultural adjustment and coping strategies of Timorese, Nepalese, Indians and Korean students enrolled at Tarlac State University (TSU) in the Philippines during 2007 - 2009. The study used a qualitative research design. The study discovered cultural adjustment problems. The cultural adjustments that were found most difficult by the students from East Timor, Nepal and Korea were eating habits and hygiene practices. In their academic environment these students, and other international students, found the most difficult challenge was their inability to understand the lessons in a language foreign to them, or in accent different from theirs. Another challenge faced by international students was the difference in religions and religious practices. Homesickness was also found to be a factor in international student dropout rates.

Al-Khatib, Awamleh and Samawi (2012), investigated the degree of students' adjustment to university life at Albalqa Applied Technical University in Jordan (United Arab Emirates). The authors used a quantitative approach, utilising a cross-sectional survey design. A random sample of 334 students participated in the investigation. The study revealed that the degree of students' adjustment to university life was moderate and that there was no statistically significant difference in results on the scale of adjustment to tertiary education between males, females and year level.

2.7 Overview of South African research relating to the academic and social adjustment of students

According to Letseka (2007), one of the challenges faced by first year students is lack of preparedness of learners as they exit school level. According to the findings of the study, 80% of students surveyed indicated that they were failing all, or some of their courses in a tertiary environment, and realised that they were unlikely to pass at the end of the year. There was significant evidence that there is a mismatch between individual's choice of career and their ability to do well in their chosen field. This evidence was also attributed to poor career guidance or lack of it. Steenkamp, Baard and Frick (2009), also wrote that lack of adequate preparation at school level, of the type of material taught at university, was of concern. An earlier study by Stephen, Welman and Jordaan (2004), indicated that English, as a language of instruction, impacts negatively on black African students' success rates. This was influenced by the fact that most black students (from rural backgrounds) take English as a second language in high school. The authors believed that socio-economic challenges among black African students further exacerbate this problem. Additional challenges that were found to face first year students in South Africa were those related to accommodation on campus. According to Tinto (1993), students who reside off-campus are disadvantaged, when compared to their on-campus counterparts, because they spend less time on campus creating relationships with other students and staff and clearly had fewer opportunities to engage in quality interactions. Because of this these students are less likely to make a strong commitment to their studies. Mbara and Celliers (2013), reported that traffic congestion, long waiting times for public transport, harassment from taxi drivers and assaults are problems that frequently affect first year students residing off campus. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011), report that difficulties in academic adjustment to university and failure can be, in part, be due to boring presentations by lecturers, non-attendance of lecturers, perceived lack of relevance of module content and difficult lecturers.

According to le Roux and Breier (2012), there is no benchmarking of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations in South Africa, therefore, first-year students have difficulty in adapting to a university environment. They have a poor educational background in terms of what is needed at tertiary level due to the inherent weaknesses in the school system in the country. According to Dennis and Murray (2012), of the students who wrote the NSC mathematics, 6% achieved the proficient level (62%-100%), 73% achieved an intermediate level (49%-61%) and 21% achieved the basic level 0%-33%). Dennis and Murray (2010), further reported that the 2010 report indicated that 8% of the participants achieved only a 21% proficiency in the upper intermediate level of mathematics, 36% the lower intermediate level and 35% the basic level, meaning that, according to the authors, 92% of the students who applied for entry into universities in 2010 would need some form of mathematics support.

Le Roux and Brier (2009), also report that prior to the release of the matric results into the public domain, there is a process of standardisation that takes place. This process entails adjusting the Grade 12 results for various reasons, which range from quality of examination papers to politically motivated influences. Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013). report that the main aim of standardisation is to correct fluctuations in performance that are the result of factors within the examination processes, rather than those factors which reflect the knowledge and abilities of candidates. This has an impact on the perceived abilities of the candidates which tends to portray their abilities as more positive than they actually are (Le Roux & Brier, 2012).

In a quantitative study conducted by Hassim, Strydom and Strydom (2013), first year students reported difficulty adapting to their new environment. Nevertheless, the experience was also viewed by the students as an opportunity for growth. The challenges that the students faced ranged from challenges related to both academic and social adaption. Peer pressure, academic performance, identity confusion, drugs and alcohol played a part in stressors which added to these challenges. The authors suggest that individual coping strategies are different but the major factor in predicting positive social and academic adaptation is resilience. The study also noted that when students enter university with high expectations that are not met they feel frustrated and helpless which, in turn, results in a lack of self-confidence and higher attrition rates.

According to Pillay and Ngcobo (2010), academic work and the fear of failure are the biggest stressors for first-year students. First time entering students are faced with a curriculum which is more demanding and challenging than anything they have seen before. This is supported by Hassim, Strydom and Strydom (2013), who report that in addition, first year students need to learn to cope with examination anxiety, financial difficulties, personal relationships and social problems. Without resilience students find it difficult cope and many do not complete their intended degree. Molapisi (2009), investigated the challenges and coping mechanisms associated with the transition from high school to university. Students reported a wide variety of challenges. Some reported that the registration period was a frustrating, complicated and draining period for them. Other first years reported challenges related to the different method of instruction. They found it challenging to move from the environment of teaching to the one of lecturing. They reported that lecturers seemed inhuman, as they were more interested in covering the work than in the students' well-being. It remained the student's responsibility to contact the lecturers to arrange consultation time if they needed help. In large classes the lecturer often stated that he or she would not see individual students and the student must report problems to the class representative so that the work could be repeated. However, work was rarely repeated. Students also experienced crowded lecture halls and poor air-conditioning in summer which they also found draining. With regard to coping mechanisms the commonest reported was peer support, as well as consulting with lectures and studying hard. In a quantitative study by Katina (2011), aimed at investigating the effectiveness of the support programmes offered to students at Walter Sisal University in South Africa, participants attributed adjustment success to intervention programmes offered at the campus. They reported that these interventions assisted in their social, emotional and academic development. They further reported that the interventions assisted in the development of their communication skills.

Given the challenges discussed in the literature review which are mostly attributed to external factors, students also experience difficulty in adjustment due to factors that are purely intrinsic. Some of these factors, as indicated by Steenkamp, Baard and Frick (2009), are laziness and inability to manage time successfully, as well lack of an appropriate initiation (orientation) programmes. Other factors include a lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, poor ability to concentrate on multiple tasks and lack of interest in the subjects they are enrolled to study, lack of help-seeking behaviours and negative attitudes to tertiary education

generally (possibly because they did not get into the course they wanted to study or are at university because of peer and parental pressure). Furthermore, poor class attendance was also seen as a major obstacle to success during first year at university.

2.8 Summary

The literature review of this study focused on various issues pertaining to the adjustment of first year students in a tertiary environment. These factors include homesickness, financial problems, different methods of instructions, increased workload, difficulty fitting in with the other students and the new social environment. Furthermore, different coping mechanisms commonly employed by the students were noted. The following chapter provides the theoretical framework for the study.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

3.1 Introduction

In the following chapter a definition of key terms is provided. This is followed by an overview of the theoretical perspective guiding the study. The study utilizes Tinto's (1993), Theory of Adjustment and Astin's (1975), Theory of Involvement as a framework for the research. These theories help elaborate the processes that first-year students undergo when they are adjusting to a tertiary environment for the first time.

3.2 Operational definitions

For the purpose of this study the following definitions will be used.

3.2.1 Adjustment

Adjustment is a behavioural process by which humans maintain equilibrium among their various needs or between their needs and the obstacles of their environments. A sequence of adjustment begins when a need is felt and ends when it is satisfied. It includes a process of altering one's behaviour to reach a harmonious relationship with the environment (Sarson & Sarson, 2002).

3.2.2 Social adjustment

This form of adjustment relates to a student's success in handling the various interpersonal relationships and social situations found at a university campus (Schultz, 2008). This process includes several components: making friends, inclusion in campus life and social networking. It includes those experiences that help to connect students to the tertiary environment 3and aid in their psychosocial development and that contribute to their overall satisfaction in their new environment. All of these components are very demanding and require the investment of time and energy for first year students (Almog, 2011).

3.2.3 Academic adjustment

Academic adjustment relates to experiencing the various educational demands characteristic of going to university (Schultz, 2008). Students achieve academic adjustment through reaching a state of satisfaction with their performance and friendships with peers, lecturers and the environment as a whole. It involves those experiences that students have on a campus

that supports academic development, encourages cognitive development, and enhances their academic motivation to pursue academic tasks in a meaningful way (Al-khatib et al., 2012).

3.2.4 Coping

Coping is defined as the cognitive and behavioural efforts which are needed to manage particular external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, Schwarzer (2000), differentiates between two types of coping: proactive coping is defined as efforts to strive actively to seek new challenges, create new opportunities, and facilitate promotion towards challenging goals so that they will be less negative. Preventive coping refers to the process by which a person builds up resources and resistance just in case possible stressors occur. For the purpose of this study, the definition by Schwarzer (2000) will be used.

3.3 Tinto's (1993) Theory of Adjustment for new students

Tinto's (1993) model of academic and social integration has provided a framework for researchers studying student success and persistence at higher learning institutions over decades (Strahn -Koller, 2012). Criticism of Tinto's (1975) theory, led him to further develop his theory (Kwai, 2009). He accentuated the applicability of the model by including stages of separation, transition, and incorporation, and added that these factors were integral in understanding why students leave college institutions of higher learning (Kwai, 2009). Tinto (1993) further revised his 1975 model by positing five major theoretical bases for developing and understanding the evolving nature of student adjustment. These included psychological, societal, economic, organisational, and interaction factors.

This model is both interactional and longitudinal in nature as it theorises how interactions over time, within an institution, can affect departure behaviour or adjustment. Tinto (1993), believed that people come to higher education with many diverse characteristics, such as family background, socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, along with their own personal abilities and personality. He posited that these factors affect the level of commitment students have towards their educational goals as well as their commitment to the institution. Tinto (1993), further stated that increased integration, both academically and socially, of the student would serve the purpose of increasing commitment to learning thereby reducing the dropout rate. According to Strahn-Koller (2012), student affairs professionals help students by monitoring their academic performance and making referrals to counsellors, academic

advisors, and tutors. Furthermore, they help create supportive social and educational environments in which students are valued and full members of their academic communities (Long, 2012). The frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty staff, especially outside the classroom, is one of the predictors of voluntary departure (that is, poor interactions leads to more voluntary departures). This means that students are most likely to stay in the institutions that involve them as valued members of the tertiary environment community (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993), proposed three stages that students move through from school to a tertiary environment namely separation, transition and incorporation or adjustment. Sharma (2012), reports that Tinto's (1993), work is informed by social anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's study of rites of passage. It notes that as an individual moves from one stage to another, certain rites of passage occur which are marked with socially significant events. These events provide perceptible evidence of an individual's assimilation into a social setting. He describes stages of separation, transition, and incorporation through which individuals pass in order to establish membership in traditional societies. Students need to first separate or disassociate themselves with their past lives and then transition to a tertiary setting becoming familiar with its norms and patterns. Finally, they adopt the institutions environment as their own and adopt its customs and ritual (Longwell-Grice & Longwell Grice, 2008).

Tinto (1993), claimed that higher education students who failed to integrate into the social and academic system of an institution would likely leave the institution. According to Kwai (2009), this may be due to lack of social support and an inability to form connections with their peers. In addition, interacting with faculty members in and outside of the lecture hall (in office hours, before and after class) is considered a key component of students' social integration because lecturers are socialising agents who convey institutional norms and values to students.

According to Tinto (1993), students undergo a series of stages during their first year at a university (or other institutions of higher learning). Three stages of adjustment have been identified: separation, transition and adjustment (which he first called incorporation). The stages of adjustment for new students are as follows, adapted from Tinto (1993).

- *Separation -* the Separation stage is characterised by a decline in interactions with past associates and a change in behaviour. First-year students distance themselves from membership in past communities, homes, schools and work places. They are required to make mental and physical breaks from the previous communities. Tinto (1993), suggested that students who do not disassociate from their own cultures do not benefit from the full rewards of membership in the college community and are at risk of departure. New students may go through a process of questioning the values of previous communities in order to adopt values perceived as appropriate to the university environment. Because many tertiary students attend school away from home, healthy adjustment to separation is essential for maximising the educational and social benefits of the experience (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Although this can be quite traumatic for students, most are eventually able to move to the second stage, that of transition.

- *Transition -* in the Transition stage, students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to interact with members of a new group. This stage is a bridge between the old and the new. New students may not yet be fully integrated into their new university environment. They may be searching for a connection with their new and old settings (norms, values, relationships). Students are torn between their old environment and the new one, they may feel they no longer belong in their old environments but have yet to find their place in the new one. When the differences between the old and new are extreme, adjustment is more difficult. Student affairs at universities should help students make the academic and social transitions through early contact with students and community building within the institution. If student is to progress through the stages, there needs to be separation from the previous environment (Long, 2012).

- A*djustmen*t - the final stage entails students' adjustment and involvement in the social and academic communities and activities of the institution. New interaction patterns are established with other students and lecturing and administrative staff, thereby avoiding the risk of dropping out. Ultimately students enjoy success with the new situations they encounter. Tinto (1993), further indicated that financial concerns are important as they are one of the few characteristics that have a long-term indirect effect on the individual student's decision to dropout.

The ability to successfully move through these phases may be dependent on the differences between a student's past norms and behaviour patterns and those that are accepted in the new environment. Students from families, communities and schools with very different norms and behaviours from those in the tertiary environment may have difficulty adjusting to the new environment. To be accepted some students may reject culturally-unique aspects of their past lives in order to continue in their new environment (Kwai, 2009). According to Schultz (2008), students who become successfully connected with their social and academic environment, while staying committed to their educational goals, are more likely to adjust well at an institution and complete their tertiary education. Tinto (1993), suggests that the way in which first year students cope with the challenges encountered at the university may contribute towards adjusting to university. As stressors increase their ability to cope can be challenged, a process that is implicated in the probability of first year students leaving university (Maroney, 2010). Students who adopt denial or disengagement as measures of coping with the challenges experienced are at risk of dropping out, whereas those who employ active coping strategies have a lower risk of dropout (Longwell-Grice & Longwell Grice, 2008; Ray, Braxton & Sullivan, 1999).

3.4 Astin's (1999) Theory of Student Involvement

Another conceptual framework for understanding retention is Astin's (1975; 1999) Theory of Student Involvement. Astin's (1975), fundamental contention is that the more involved students are in the academic and social life of an institution, the more likely they are to learn and persist. Astin (1999), examined entering students' personal background data, their experiences while enrolled, as well as the degree of fit between student and the tertiary institution. He also developed the construct of student involvement or student engagement to describe to the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the social and academic parts of higher education environment experience. If students invest significant amounts of time and approach to academic work and campus life, their overall learning will increase because they are emotionally and physically invested in the outcomes (Long, 2012). Astin (1999), believed that students are more likely to be involved if they have access to high-quality programmes and services that stimulate and challenge their learning abilities. He further proposed that high marks point to academic involvement as there is a strong correlation between grades and persistence (retention or the student's ability to persevere). The author also found evidence that extra-curricular activities and on-campus employment

were positively correlated with persistence, forming the basis for his construct of social involvement which he considered as important as academic involvement.

Astin's (1999), model of involvement resembles Tinto's (1993), model of integration as they both have an academic and a social component. It is therefore necessary to differentiate academic and social involvement from academic and social integration. The former are indicators of physical and psychological energy devoted to the tertiary experience while the latter describes the extent of membership in the university or other higher education environment community. Therefore, involvement can be considered to come before adjustment (Astin, 1999). For instance, students who devote a great deal of energy to academic scholarship by tutoring their peers (a form of academic involvement) would likely feel that they are members of their tertiary institution's academic community and be confident in their academic abilities, which implies academic adjustment (Artze-Vega, 2012)

3.5 Summary

The chapter presented the framework for the studies which are Tinto's (1993), Theory of Student Adjustment and Astin's (1999), Theory of Student Involvement. The next chapter outlines the research methodology used by the researcher to complete the study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research methodology used in the investigation. It focuses on the research design, sampling, data collection and analysis, the study research questions, reliability, validity and bias and finally, the ethical implications which underpinned the study.

4.2 Research design

The research approach that was chosen for the study was qualitative. In qualitative research the researcher is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of the individual(s) involved. Qualitative methods can be used to gain new perspectives pertaining to things about much which is already known, or to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively. The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate the meaning students attribute to their own experiences relating to their academic and social adjustment of first year life at a tertiary institution.

4.3 Sampling

4.3.1 Population and sample

The sample was drawn from the population of undergraduate first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus) because many of them were away from home for the first time thus had to adjust to the new environment. For the majority, it was also the first time they had registered at an institution of higher learning thus their adjustment experiences were pertinent to the study topic.

4.3.2 Area of the study

The area this study was conducted in was the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus), situated at Turfloop, Sovenga in Polokwane, Capricorn area, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

4.3.3 Sampling method

The study used a non-probability sampling method. The sampling method chosen for this study was purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, the sampling units are selected subjectively by the researcher, who attempts to obtain a sample that appears to be representative of the population (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981). Holloway (1997), further

adds that the researcher chooses a group or number of individuals in whom he or she has an interest. The participants had an experience of the event or condition under investigation and were informed about the research that took place. In purposive sampling, generalisability is less important than the collection of rich data and an ability to interpret and understand the ideas of the people chosen for the sample (Holloway, 1997). In the present study four focus groups comprising of between four and ten participants each were used. The participants were recruited by putting up a notice outside the psychology building asking interested first years to contact the researcher. The participants were first years registered for Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Science and Law (LLB) degrees.

4.4 Data collection

The study made use of focus groups as a method of data collection. Focus groups are formally organised, structured groups of individuals brought together to discuss a topic during a specific period of time. They allow interaction between the researcher and the participants and among the participants themselves. The participants in focus groups are usually people who share particular characteristics, demographics or an interest that is relevant to the topic under discussion. A total of four focus groups were conducted in the study.

According to Marczyk, DeMateeo and Festinger (2005), a typical focus group is composed of 6-10 participants. Fewer than 6 members may restrict the diversity of the opinions that are offered and more than 10 may make it difficult for everyone to express their opinions comprehensively. Ritchie and Lewis (2003), add that a focus group may consist of four to ten members brought together to discuss a research topic. They add that if proper rapport is built and enough time is given to each participant all should be able to give their opinions. If more than one focus group is conducted then diversity of opinion is ensured. In the present study, each focus group comprised of between four and six participants, half males and half females. This was carried out to ensure equal gender representation. The focus group discussions were conducted in a comfortable, non-threatening setting that was convenient to the participants. The length of each group discussion was between one and two hours.

Marczyk et al. (2005), state that the use of focus groups is chosen for research because they provide an open, fairly unrestricted forum for individuals to discuss ideas and to clarify each

other's impression and opinions. In addition, they can become a forum for change both during the focus group meeting itself and afterwards. Focus groups provide insights into how people think and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. Group interaction and non-verbal communication are primary benefits of focus groups.

Group interaction between members of the target population during focus group discussions encourages participants to make connections to various concepts through the discussions that may not occur during individual interviews. It is also useful in exploring and examining what people think, how they think, and why they think the way they do about the issues of under investigation without pressuring them into making decisions or reaching a consensus (Bhana, 2009). According to Bhana (2009), the focus group is the best approach for examining the stories, experiences, points of view, beliefs, needs and concerns of individuals. It allows the researcher(s) to access different communication forms which people use in their day-to-day interaction, such as joking, arguing, teasing and recapturing past events. As such, focus groups permit researchers to enter the world of the participants which other research methods may not be able to do.

An individual may be reluctant to discuss any contradictions during an in-depth interview where the main dynamic occurs primarily between researcher and the participant. But in focus group settings, where the interactions occur between the participants themselves rather than with the researcher, the participants are more likely to be open about any differences in opinion. The focus group setting also provides the researcher with opportunities to follow up the comments and to cross-check with participants in a more interactive manner than a questionnaire or individual interview can offer (Bhana, 2009).

Focus groups, however, have a disadvantage because of the relatively small sample size results cannot be generalised. People in a focus group are speaking in a specific context, within a specific culture, and so sometimes it may be difficult for the researcher to clearly identify an individual message. This too is a potential limitation of focus groups (Gibbs, 1997). Gibbs continues to advise that it should not be assumed that the individuals in a focus group are expressing their own definitive individual views.

Ethical issues that are applicable in other methods of research are also applicable when conducting focus groups for example, when selecting and involving participants, researchers

must ensure that full information about the purpose and uses of participants' contributions is given. In addition, being honest and keeping participants informed about the expectations of the group and topic, and not pressurising participants to speak is good practice. A particular ethical issue to consider in the case of focus groups is the handling of sensitive material and confidentiality given that there will always be more than one participant in the group. Participants need to be encouraged to keep confidential what they hear during the meeting and researchers have the responsibility to make data collected from the group anonymous (Gibbs, 1997).

With the permission of the participants, an audio recorder was utilised to record the focus group sessions. Field notes were also taken during the interview and they were later used during analysis by comparing them with the recorded data. This form of data triangulation enhanced the reliability of the research. At the end of each focus group discussion, the researcher made field notes in order to record non-verbal behaviours (Patton, 2002).

Appointments were set telephonically with each participant who agreed to participate in the study, and time and venue for the focus group were explained. Rapport between the interviewer and participants was established at the start of each focus group. Rapport is described by Shenton (2004) as a state of mutual trust and responsiveness between individuals or groups of people. Participants were de-briefed immediately after each interview. Debriefing is an opportunity to share in depth recent experiences with someone who is willing to listen and care, without judgment or criticism (Maree, 2010). An appointment was made after the focus group discussion to give feedback to the participants so that they could validate the data transcripts. If participants were upset or felt uncomfortable in anyway after the focus group sessions, de-briefing or the feedback session the researcher discussed the matter with them (individually) and, if necessary, they were informed they could be referred to an appropriate professional. A few participants requested referral but most did not.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the focus group discussion (see Appendix 1). Patton (2002), defines an interview guide as a series of broad questions where the researcher is free to explore and probe areas of interest with interviewees. Interview guides are organised around areas of particular interest, while still allowing a considerable flexibility to the researcher (Bloemberg & Volpe, 2008). In this study, the researcher was

guided by a list of open-ended questions but had to probe some of the participants' answers, so that a more in-depth understanding and elaboration of points of interest could be achieved. The questions in the interview guide were developed by using the theoretical perspectives of the study as a guide namely, Tinto's (1993), Theory of Student Adjustment for new students and Astin's (1999), Theory of Student Involvement.

4.5 Data analysis

The method of qualitative data analysis chosen for this study was Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). TCA entails identification, analysis, and reporting of themes within data. TCA is used to elaborate on themes gleaned through interpreting the in-depth experience of participants. The method was also chosen for its flexibility (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The following steps adapted from Braun and Clark (2006), were followed when using TCA:

4.5.1 Familiarising yourself with the data

It was imperative that the researcher immerse him or herself in the data to the extent that she was familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Immersion usually involves reading and re-reading the data in an active way, searching for meanings and patterns. The researcher read through the entire data set at least once before coding is begun, as ideas and identification of possible patterns are shaped with further reading through. The data was then transcribed into written form. According to Braun and Clark (2006), the most important part about transcription is that the information needed is retained, from the verbal account, and in a way which is true to the original meaning. Aspects such as punctuation are added so as to maintain the original meaning of data.

4.5.2 Generating initial codes

This phase began when the researcher has familiarised herself with the data and has generated an initial list of ideas about potential themes. The next step then, was the production of initial codes from the data. The codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst, and refers to the most basic elements of the raw data. However, coded data differs from the units of analysis (themes) which are (frequently) broader. The researcher worked systematically through the entire data set, giving equal attention to each data item, and identifying aspects in the data items that formed the basis of repeated patterns (themes) across the entire data set. All actual data extracts were coded, and then collated together within each

code. Braun and Clark (2006), advise that the researcher code for as many potential themes or patterns as possible in order to ensure that all items of interest are captured. All extracts of data were coded inclusively according to their relevance.

4.5.3 Searching for themes

A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. There is no specific answer to the question of what proportion of the data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme. The researcher used her judgement to determine which data to include as themes. Braun and Clark (2006), also add that it is important for the researcher to retain some flexibility, as rigid rules do not work. When all data were initially coded and collated, the analyst sorted through the different codes and identified them into potential themes, collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. The researcher analysed the codes and considered how different codes could be combined to form an all-embracing theme. The themes were then arranged into themes and sub-themes.

4.5.4 Reviewing themes

When a set of themes has been devised, the reviewing and refinement of themes emerging from the data began. This phase involved two levels of reviewing and refining themes. Level one involved reviewing at the level of the coded data extracts. The researcher read all collated extracts for each theme, and assessed whether they appeared to form a coherent pattern. For those that did not form a coherent pattern, the researcher re-worked the themes to either find a place for the new theme or create a new theme. The first level of review entailed reading the entire data set for two purposes. The first was, to ascertain whether the themes worked in relation to the data set. The second was to code any additional data within themes that has been missed in earlier coding stages. The need for re-coding from the data set is to be expected as coding is an on-going process (Braun & Clark, 2006).

4.5.5 Defining, refining and naming themes

This stage entailed definition and further refinement of the themes that were presented for analysis. The researcher identified the essence of what each theme and overall themes were about and determined what aspect of the data each theme captured. It was important that the researcher went back to collated data extracts for each theme, and organised them into a coherent and internally consistent account, with accompanying narrative. Equally vital is that

the researcher did not just paraphrase the content of the data extracts presented, but identified what is interesting about them and why. As well as identifying the story that each theme told, it was important to consider how it was situated in the broader overall pattern that gave a picture of the entire data pattern or narrative. The refinement process entailed identifying whether or not a theme contained any sub-themes (themes-within-a-themes). These can be useful for giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme, and also for demonstrating the hierarchy of meaning within the data set. It was important that by the end of this phase the researcher clearly defined the themes. The names of each theme are then decided upon. It was important that they were concise and immediately gave the reader a sense of what the theme is about (Braun & Clark, 2006).

4.5.6 Reflection

At this point the researcher engaged in reflection, which entailed thinking about what she had done thus far. She reflected on the process to ensure that the research has been carried out in a proper and ethical manner. Reflection also enabled the researcher to think about her own part in the process so that she could be more objective in reporting the results (Braun & Clark, 2006).

4.5.7 Producing the report

This stage involved the final analysis and writing of the analysis and dissertation. The analyst provided a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data told, within and across the themes. The emphasis is to tell what is usually a complicated story gleaned from data in a way that is clear, concise and coherent to a reader and which will convince them of the merit and validity of the analysis. The researcher chose extracts from the data that captured the essence of the theme that was presented. The extracts were embedded within an analytic narrative that illustrated the story being told about the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

4.6 Research questions

The study had the following research questions.

1. What social adjustment challenges do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) have?
2. What academic adjustment challenges do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) have?

3. How do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) experience and cope with the social and academic adjustment challenges they face?

4.7 Reliability and validity

To assist with reliability in this qualitative study the following measures were taken.

- The research design and its implementation were properly described, that is the planning in the research proposal was precise (Shenton, 2000).
- A detailed description of how the data were collected was given (Joppe, 2000).

According to Shenton (2004), internal validity is difficult to ensure in qualitative studies, he advises the following steps to increase it.

- *Debriefing sessions* – Frequent sessions took place between the researcher and her supervisor. Fundamentally, these sessions required the researcher to think outside the box and to consider all ideas she had. This assisted the researcher in identifying her biases and subjective judgements.

- *The University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) relevant committees' scrutiny of the proposed research* - The researcher used the feedback from the various committees at the institution. This enabled the researcher to refine her methods, develop the research design and strengthen her arguments.

- *Participants' validation* - The participants in the study were asked to validate data by reading the transcripts of the data prepared by the researcher. This helped in verifying that the experiences expressed by participants were the same as those formed during data collection.

- *Examination of previous research findings* -The researcher scrutinised findings of any previous quantitative and qualitative studies of the same phenomenon.

To ensure external validity of the study, information about the following was given in the research proposal before the research began (adapted from Shenton, 2004).

- How field data was collected and the methods used were addressed. In this study, with permission from participants, an audio recorder was used and field notes were taken.

- The sample size was given, that is the number of participants who took part in the study.

- The number of researchers who conducted the research was noted. In this case it was one person who conducted the research and a supervisor who supervised all aspects of the investigation.

- The number and length of the focus group sessions were also clearly noted.

4.8 Bias

To minimise bias in the current study, the following were carried out by the researcher.

- Being careful when interpreting and analysing the data and making explanations based on those interpretations.

- Allowing participants to validate the transcripts.

- Attending to the ethical practices and implications of conducting the research.

- Constant confronting of her own opinions and prejudices inherent to the data under analysis.

- Recording of detailed field notes which included reflection on her subjectivity and any bias or judgements made.

- Using the services of the supervisor as a sounding board, particularly when reading and re-reading the transcripts (Shenton, 2004).

4.9 Ethical considerations

The researcher in this study applied for ethical clearance to complete the research through the various committees at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus).

4.9.1 Informed consent

Informed consent indicates that research participants have the right to be informed about the nature of the research and the right to withdraw at any time (Silverman, 2006). Participants in this study were informed about the significance and relevance of the study. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that they understood the nature and aim of the research study. The research participants were informed, as required by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (Psychology Board), of their right to abstain from participating in the study, or to withdraw from participating in the study (by revoking their consent) at any time, without suffering prejudice or reprisal.

4.9.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

A participant's right to both privacy and confidentiality must be protected. The researcher must ensure that where personal information about research participants or a community is collected, stored, used or destroyed, this is done in ways that respect the privacy or confidentiality of participants or the community and any agreements made with the participants or the community (HPCSA, 2008). To ensure that both confidentiality and anonymity were not compromised, no personal details of the participants were collected. The researcher recorded and stored data using pseudonyms and not participants' actual names. Also, during time of publication, the anonymity of individual participants will be preserved. The researcher ensured that information from the study was not shared with family, or outsiders (Wiles, Crow, Heath & Charles, 2008).

4.10 Summary

The chapter described the research approach chosen for the study and gave an in-depth account of how the research was undertaken and the ethical procedures which underpinned it. The following chapter presents the study results and analysis.

CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the presentation of results, analysis of the data and a discussion of the results. The themes are broken down under Tinto's (1993), major stages of adjustment namely: separation, transition plus adjustment and coping. Some themes appear similar however; it was decided to keep them under the aforementioned stages for conceptual clarity. The stages are thus broken down into the following subthemes; the stage of separation is broken down into the subthemes disintegration and independence. The transition stage is broken down into the subtheme of change. The theme of adjustment is divided into the subthemes of positive and negative adjustment experiences, which are further broken down into academic and social adjustment experiences. Coping is divided into negative coping mechanisms and positive coping mechanisms.

5.2 Presentation of research findings

The research is presented in the following order first a description of the demographic information of participants followed by a tabular presentation of the same. This is followed by a presentation of themes arising from the data, then a tabular summary of themes. The focus groups were conducted in English as it is the medium of instruction at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus). This was discussed with the participants at the beginning of each focus group discussion and they were all comfortable in discussing issues in that medium.

5.2.1 Demographic information

A total of four focus groups were conducted with first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus). All students in the sample were first entering students and had not registered for tertiary education before this. The participants in the study gave their own subjective experiences of their first year at the university. The focus groups comprised of males and females, from departments at the university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. The majority of the students who participated in the study were campus residents, with the exception of one student who resided outside the campus. The demographic information is presented in a tabular format.

Initially, a minimum of 6 participants in each group were recruited to take part in the study. Without any explanation, some members did not arrive for the focus group discussions. The researcher however, chose to continue with the participants that presented themselves for the discussion due to the following reasons: (i) it was difficult to obtain participants who were willing to participate in the study: (ii) each focus group was arranged for a different day and therefore it was not possible to combine the members to compose larger groups and (iii) participants that made themselves available for the focus group discussions were eager to have their say and therefore contributed divergent opinions and spoke freely. Three of the focus groups comprised of 4 participants and one comprised of six participants. In all 18 first year students participated in the research.

Table 1: <u>Focus group 1 demographic information</u>

	Participant 1	**Participant 2**	**Participant3**	**Participant 4**
Age	18 years	22 years	19 years	20 years
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male
ethnicity	Xitsonga	Nigerian	Xitsonga	Sesotho
Degree registered for	BA	BEd	BA	BA

The participants in focus group 1 were two females and two males aged between 18 and 22 years. Three of the participants were South Africans (two Xitsonga speaking and one Sesotho speaking) and one was a Nigerian national. Three of the students were registered for Bachelor of Arts and one for Bachelor of Education

Table 2: <u>Focus group 2 demographic information</u>

	Participant 1	**Participant 2**	**Participant 3**	**Participant 4**	**Participant 5**	**Participant 6**
Age	20 years	19 years	21 years	22 years	20 years	19 years
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female
ethnicity	Xitsonga	Sesotho	Sesotho	Tshivenda	IsiZulu	Sesotho
Degree of study	BSW	LLB	LLB	BComm	LLB	LLB

The participants in focus group 2 were three females and three males aged between 19 and 22. They were all South Africans. Three of them were of Sesotho origin, one Xitsonga, one Tshivenda, and the other IsiZulu. Four participants were registered for a Bachelor of Law degree (LLB), one for Bachelor of Commerce (B Comm), and one for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW).

Table 3: <u>Focus group 3 demographic information</u>

	Participant 1	**participant 2**	**Participant 3**	**Participant 4**
Age	19 years	21 years	19 years	20 years
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female
Ethnicity	Sesotho	Sesotho	Sesotho	Sesotho
Degree of study	LLB	LLB	BSW	BSW

Focus group 3 comprised of two females and two males whose ages ranged between 19 and 21 years. They were all of Sesotho origin. Two of them were registered for a Bachelor of Law degree (LLB) and the other two for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW).

Table 4: <u>Focus group 4 demographic information</u>

	Participant 1	**Participant 2**	**Participant 3**	**Participant 4**
Age	19 years	19 years	21 years	22 years
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Male
Ethnicity	SiSwati	Sesotho	Sesotho	Xitsonga
Degree of study	BSc	BA	BA	BSc

Participants in focus group 4 were two females and two males. Their ages ranged between 19 and 22 years. Two of them were of Sesotho ethnicity; one was of SiSwati ethnicity and the last one was of Xitsonga ethnicity.

5.2.2 Presentation of themes arising out of the data

The analysis of data arising out of the focus groups is presented in themes which arose out of the data using the process of Thematic Content Analysis. The themes arising out of this scrutiny are discussed in terms of the theoretical framework underpinning the study which broadly deals with separation, transition, adjustment and coping strategies of students. All the participants responses were presented verbatim, no modification with regard to grammatical errors was made.

5.2.2.1 Separation

The themes that are sub-headed under separation are disintegration and independence.

5.2.2.1.1 Theme 1: Disintegration

This stage is characterised by a decline in interactions with past associates and a change in behaviour. First-year students distance themselves from previous friendships and communities (Tinto, 1993). New students may go through a process of questioning the values of previous communities in order to adopt values perceived as appropriate to the university environment. Because many tertiary students attend school away from home, healthy adjustment to separation is essential for making the most of the educational and social benefits of the experience (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Some first year students in this study reported feelings of *drifting apart* from their friends back at home, due to the time they spent at university and the different values and ideas they were absorbing in the new setting. This represents a disintegration of former friendships. For others it served the purpose of being able to remove themselves from what can be termed bullies. As indicated by Tinto(1993), students not only have to make a physical break from their previous communities, but also a mental break in order to fully realise the benefits of the new environment. These feelings are essential for maximising the educational and social benefits of the tertiary setting. The following statements made by participants underpin this analysis.

> Participant 4 Group3: *"I don't do things I used to do before, such as going to visit friends when I'm at home because I spend most of the time here. I used to spend much*

times with my friends, but when I go home now I just spend time at home watching TV. I don't know what happened, maybe it's because I spend a short period of my village."

Participant 2 Group1:*"ehhh…actually, I don't have close friends. Most of the people I used to call my friends were only classmates. Most of them are around the campus, and we are no longer that close. I don't have any problem about the issue of friends."*

Participant 1 Group 3:*"I think I have lost touch. Back at home i was in touch with nature and when I got back home now, I feel like it's not my thing anymore. I become confused at times."*

Participant 4 Group2: *Being away from my friends is a blessing. I have been with friends who did not have dreams. Their dream each and every day was about how to get the next drink."*

Participant 4 Group 4:*"When I go home now to visit my home, I feel that my friends back at home are slow. I feel as though we don't clique any longer."*

Participant 1 Group 3:*"For me it's good because my friends back at home don't like education. Here I'm meeting people that like education like me."*

Participant 3 Group 1: *"Here on campus you get to meet sociable people who have dreams, academics, lots and lots of people. But then at home you get to meet lots of different people. Some do not have dreams. When they feel like drinking they drink. There is nothing which pushes them to follow their dreams. Here its people with same mentality (similar dreams), that is to pursue our studies."*

Participant 4 Group 1: *"I consider it a good thing. I used to have friends that were not good for me or for my standards. They made fun of me [bullies] they would make sure that each and every day they look down on me, make statements that would degrade your confidence."*

5.2.2.1.2 Theme 2: Independence

Some students could not wait to go to university as they felt they would be independent, meet new friends and gain new knowledge. Tinto (1993), emphasizes that it is during this stage that first-year students distance themselves from memberships in their old communities that is, their homes, old schools and mentally prepare themselves for university experience. It is a period where some students reach a breakthrough in their development and consequently the values and the culture of the university is exciting. According to Astin (1999), students work hard during this stage and dedicate energy into the activities on the campus. This maximises their educational and social benefits and prepares them for the succeeding stages of the adjustment process.

Participant 4 Group 4: *"I couldn't wait to come to university. My parents are overly strict and as a result, we used to fight a lot because I'm someone who likes to party. At the university, I do not have curfews, I do as I wish, no one tells when to come back home, or when I should do my laundry."*

Participant 5 Group 2: *"For me being away from home is good. We are able to socialise. It's a good feeling each and every day."*

Participant 2 Group 3: *"I think being away from home is exciting. You get to meet new friends, who are at your level of intellect and education."*

Participant 1 group 1:*"Being away from family is such a relief. The culture I come from, when you're a man or a boy, when you get to a particular age, you have to leave the house. Even if you're not working, you have to find a place to stay; they expect you to be working. For me, being away from home is like a dream come true."*

Participant 3 Group 2:*"I am enjoying being away from family and experiencing a new life."*

Participant 4 Group 3:*"For me it's good because you get to meet new people and learn new languages."*

5.2.2.2 Transition

The theme that is sub-headed under transition is change.

5.2.2.2.1 Theme 3: Change

According to Tinto (1993), this stage serves as a bridge between the old and the new. Students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to interact with members of a new group. They may not yet be fully integrated into their new university environment may still be searching for a connection with their new and old environment with regard to norms, values, morals and relationships. Students find it hard to choose between their old environment and the new one, they may know that they do not belong in their old environments but have not yet to found their place in the new one. When the differences between the old and new are complete opposites the student finds it more difficult to adjust.

Participant 6 Group 2:*"It's nice especially the excitement of getting to meet new people. But then the idea of having to start new relationships, having to analyse your partner, whether or not to do this and that how will they react…it's a bit challenging. But for me it is the challenge that is exciting."*

Participant 2 Group 2:*"For me it's fun, it's like a bitter-sweet situation. The freedom of having to answer to no one is nice. But then there are days when things don't go well and you miss your parents, your siblings and family."*

Participant 1 Group 4: *"At first I was confused, I didn't know if I was happy or sad, because to some extent, I enjoyed the freedom. I could stay awake watching TV for as long as I wanted, I could go out anytime I wanted or do anything I liked. On the other hand, I really missed my family. Especially when faced with challenges, I missed my mother and sibling as I knew they would have been able to help me."*

Participant 4 Group 1: *"The other thing, you tend to focus more on the future when you are here. You begin to behave in a certain manner in order to prepare yourself for the future, whereby you are going to be independent."*

Participant 4 Group 2: *"We have particular group of people that are too noisy. But I'm used to them now. I came to realise that these people are happy, why can't I be like them and enjoy life? Eventually I learnt not to take life too seriously, and now I'm happy and their noise doesn't bother me anymore."*

5.2.2.3 Adjustment

According to Tinto (1993), the final stage of students' entry into a new environment entails students' adjustment and involvement in the social and academic communities of the institution. New interaction patterns are established with other students and lecturing and administrative staff, thereby avoiding the risk of dropping out. Ultimately students enjoy success with the new conditions they encounter. Adjustment of first year students in this study is divided into positive and negative adjustment experiences as follows. Some participants had positive academic adjustment experiences (about 50 % of the positive responses were received from participants from the Law).Positive experiences pertaining to financial support were received from two Law students and one participant from registered in the Faculty of Science. Furthermore, 50 % of the participants who reported social and emotional support were from Law and the other 50 % were from participating students from other faculties who contributed to the focus groups. Of those who reported negative adjustment experiences, 60 % of the participants who commented about unsupportive lecturers and department wherefrom departments situated within the Faculty of the Humanities. The other 40% were spread equally amongst participants from departments in other faculties.

5.2.2.3.1 Positive adjustment experiences

Some of the participants indicated that the support they received from their lecturers and their department contributed positively towards their adjustment to university. The kinds of support received ranges from provision of scopes before the tests or examinations, reassessment opportunity in the case of failure, availability of lecturers for clarification of material, appropriate dissemination of information, financial support from the departments, and social support from departments and lecturing staff. The themes that emerged from positive adjustment experience are support from lecturers and departments. Furthermore, the subthemes derived from this theme are academic support; financial support; and social and emotional support.

5.2.2.3.1.1 Support from lecturers and departments

Tinto (1999), highlighted that interacting with faculty members in and outside of the lecture hall is considered is an important component of students' social adjustment because lecturers are socialising agents who convey institutional norms and values to students. This theme was divided into three subthemes of academic support, financial support, social and emotional support as follows:

5.2.2.3.1.2 Theme 4: Academic support

Tinto (1993), posits that student affairs at universities must create an environment that is conducive for learning and one in which students feel they are valued and full members of their academic communities. Students commended their departments and lecturers for their academic support in the form of dissemination of information, patience of lecturers, as well as scheduling of appointment time, amongst others things. This was not experienced by all the participants as is noted under theme 7.

> Participant 4 Group 3: *"The department is supportive in a sense that there is information available on where to go when one needs help. When I came to the university at the beginning of the year, I didn't know where to go or what modules to register but the secretary at the department made an appointment for me to talk to one of the lecturers and that was very helpful."*

> Participant 4 Group1:*"Some lecturers they can bear with you, of whatever situation you are facing, if you don't understand. They can help you up until you understand. I have noticed that some lecturers do focus on the students and not on finishing the material that they need to finish."*

> Participant 2 Group 1: *"There are some lecturers who are supportive and they try to go an extra mile. Instead of lecturing, they teach in such a way that we improve our learning."*

Participant 2 Group 1comment 2: *"Those that are supportive teach us to a point where we understand what they are trying to teach. They also assess/test our knowledge that we acquired. And then after that, they try to improve their teaching strategies so that they can accommodate everyone."*

Participant 1 Group 2: *"For me my lecturers are very supportive, so much. Every time when we have a test, they give us scope. They teach, they don't give us lectures. I love them too much."*

Participant 4 Group 2: *"They are supportive, they give us scope. Sometimes when we fail, they give us re-tests."*

Participant 3 Group 3: *"I'm not sure, but I think they are supportive. Like there is this lecturer whose module we failed a lot. She consulted with other lecturers in the department on what to do and they suggested that she gave us another test."*

Participant 2 Group 2: *"My accounting lecturer is very supportive, more like our teacher in high school. He schedules time for appointments so that we can see him in the office."*

Participant 1 Group 4: *"Some lecturers are supportive, some are not. When you approach them for help, they are more than willing to assist."*

Participant 6 Group 2: *"It's like being responsible for your own learning. You have to go and consult. They are always there for you if you go and ask for help."*

Participant 2 Group 4: *"The lecturers are very supportive; you just have to approach them for help. We are many in class so it's each student's responsibility to approach a lecturer for help. They even go an extra mile to help when you approach because now they can know where you are struggling."*

5.2.2.3.1.3 Theme 5: Financial support

With regard to financial support, the students highlighted the bursaries they receive from their departments. According to Lemmens (2010), on reference Tinto (1993)'s theory, there is a direct link between a student's ability to pay for studies and his or her retention (ability to

stay at an institution). If students find that they do not have financial support then they may have to leave the university. This means that financial support is critical to student retention at a tertiary institution.

> Participant 1 Group 4: *"I am a bursary holder, so most of my needs are paid for by my bursary. For the rest of the things, I get the money from my parents. So I can say yes, the money that I get is enough."*

> Participant 2 Group 2: *"My department of accounting is supportive. They arrange bursaries for students who perform well, and then they take time to give us workshops on accounting and how to fight to get employment after completion."*

> Participant 1 Group 4 comment 2: *"There are bursaries available at the department. Those who perform well are given bursaries. I believe this encourages others to also perform."*

5.2.2.3.1.4 Theme 6: Social and emotional support

Tinto (1999), maintains that when the university's efforts to serve the students extend beyond students affairs, success at university can be maintained. The frequency and perceived worth of interaction with staff in and out of the lecture hall is one of the predictors of students leaving. Students' who have positive interactions with staff are more likely to stay and feel that they *belong* than those who do not. Some of the students in the present study enjoyed social and emotional support from their lecturers, peers and departments in the form of peer support groups, mentorship programmes, awards ceremonies and workshops arranged by their department.

> Participant 4 Group 4: *"Yes I believe my department has been supportive. There is peer group support available in the department for those who are struggling to cope both socially and academically."*

> Participant 2 Group 3: *"The school of Law has started a mentorship programme. I even want to become a mentor myself because I found it to be very helpful. They revive that passion of wanting to study Law more and more."*

Participant 4 Group 2: *they motivate us, they advise us about life."*

Participant 3 Group 3: *"I think they are supportive, yesterday there were these awards. I find the awards to be helpful because they motivate other students to work hard so that one day it would be them receiving them."*

Participant 4 Group 2: *"They make us realise that certain things that we were not aware of. They tell us how to react when there is a strike and how to resolve certain conflicts."*

Participant 2 Group 3*: "Definitely, it depends on the relationship you have with your lecturers. I find the most of the lecturers to be supportive, more especially the ones during first semester. I used to go and consult and I still maintain the relationship. Even yesterday I visited one of the lecturers. We had a long talk. You know, she is more of a parent than a lecturer, she motivates me."*

Participant 2 Group 2: *"...then they take time to give us workshops on accounting and how to fight to get employment after completion*."

5.2.2.3.2 Negative academic adjustment experiences

As indicated by Secuban (2012), enrolling at a university can be viewed as a very positive event, with great opportunities for the academic and social development of an individual. It can however, as with other major life events, be accompanied by challenges of different forms and magnitude for instance, emotional and social adjustment. Academic challenges experienced by the students in this study ranged from problems related to the staff at the university, teaching methods, workload, finances, and accommodation. According to Tinto (1993), for the students to finally adjust to the new environment, they undergo a transitional phase whereby new interactional patterns are established with the other students and staff members. Failure to establish these meaningful relationships thus put students at risk of dropping out of university during their first year.

5.2.2.3.2.1 Theme 7: Unsupportive lecturers and departments

Conversely, some challenges experienced by the students in the study are attributed to lecturers, who, according to the students, make things difficult for them. This includes experiencing hostility from staff members, including administrative staff. Some lecturers are also reported not to attend classes or have consultations, leaving students confused. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011), reported that students attributed difficulty in adjustment at university to, amongst other things, difficult lecturers, which according to Tinto's (1993) theory, makes it difficult for them to become incorporated or adjust to the new environment.

Participant 5 Group 2: *"There's this thing about lecturers, I don't know if it's part of their profession. They have this strictness. It's like they don't care how we perform, or what we do. We'd write a test from a chapter 1-18, which it's probably 18 chapters."*

Participant 3 Group 2: *"I feel that some lecturers had a difficult time during their studies at university and it seems as if they have this mentality of making us work hard for everything. Nowadays, things are much easier but they twist them and make them hard for us."*

Participant 6 Group 2:*"I think there is a structure at my school. The HOD sometimes has meetings with us to find out what our complaints are and what he can do. But then the staff, especially the secretary, when you go there to seek help, they treat you as if you have done something wrong."*

Participant 4 Group 1: *"You find that you are failing the course because of a lecturer that is not here. He/she is nowhere to be found. Other courses in our department offered by part-time lecturers, there are no permanent lecturers. If the dept. was supportive, they would have done follow-ups, but they don't do it."*

Participant 2 Group 1: *"So far I can say that I have found that there are those lecturers that are supportive and those that are not. Ehhh...those that are not supportive are those who are doing many modules. There are others who have not come to class even today. Sometimes I ask myself what we are going to write in the exam. There are others [lecturers] who have not come to class even today. Sometimes I ask myself what we are going to write in the exam."*

Participant 4 Group 4: *"The lecturers are not supportive. More especially male ones, they help only girls, maybe it's their way of charming them. It's unfair because we pay the same amount of money for tuition."*

Participant 2 Group 4: *"From my course it varies from one module to the other. Some of them are supportive, others just dump work on you, and you have to go and figure it yourself. It's up to you to approach them. If you don't approach them, they also don't approach you."*

Participant 4 Group 2: *"From me I don't think the department is supportive. People there when you go to them to seek help, they always brag, treat you as if they don't want to help you."*

Participant 1 Group 3: *"They are not supportive at all, it's like they try and make you feel like you are nothing. The lecturers are not supportive at all. Sometimes when you go and ask for assistance, they tell you that you must make an appointment and when you do make an appointment, the time you go, they are not there. I sometimes feel lost, not knowing what to do."*

5.2.2.3.2.2 Theme 8: Workload

Students indicated that the workload as compared to high school is very high. With the responsibility of making sure that they study lying solely on their shoulders, as opposed to at high school where they had assistance from their parents, peers, siblings or caregivers, the work is seen as hard to manage. Students have to take responsibility for their own learning. Other students complained of too many assignments that sometimes need to be submitted on the same date as well as tests that have to be written on the same day. Students also found it difficult to type all their assignments at university as opposed to high school where they were

able to submit handwritten ones. A study by Molapisi (2009), supports these statements. Students in Molapisi's (2009), research reported that they found it challenging to move from the environment of teaching (at school) to one of lecturing (at university). They further indicated that the increased academic workload at university was demanding and emotionally challenging. As indicated by Astin (1999), for students' to adjust to their new environment, and thus have a good chance of finishing their studies, they ought to be involved in the social and sporting activities of an institution. Difficulty in managing the workload may be seen as an impediment to this and a risk factor for academic failure, as students may lack the time to participate in activities not associated with academic learning.

Participant 2 Group 4: *"When I came to the university, I understood what it means to pursue a degree. Now you actually have to work, and go beyond what the teachers used to give you. The workload is high. Remember at high school we were supported by our parents. We managed to put some liabilities on our parents. Now we are at university, we are kind of independent, we are on our own.*

Participant 3 Group 1: *"During my school time, I used to be just a secretary and copy the notes and then here at the university we don't have to cram the work; we have to know the work thoroughly. And then a lecture does not give out notes, you have to research find the whole information; write it in such a way that you'll be able to understand."*

Participant 5 Group 2 *"I'm doing law, which is something different from what I did in high school. It is different and interesting in a sense that in law you have to get the constitution and the act in your head. You have to write these long essays and apply more than 20 cases, which is very interesting and challenging. Law is not a child's play."*

Participant 3 Group 3: *"It's different; here you do too much work. You find that you are writing two tests in a week and you also have assignments. At high school, it was possible to postpone a test or assignment due date if the dates are too close. Here when the date is set is set al.so at high school we did not have presentations."*

Participant 2 Group 1: *"You find that you have to submit 3-4 assignments on the same day. And that for me very difficult during the first semester whereby u find that you have to submit an assignment and later in the evening write a test. It is hard I feel sad."*

Participant 2 Group 4: *"It's like at high school we were doing introduction to things we are doing here university. Now we go to details, to an extent that I sometimes feel that I have never done the subject in my life"*

Participant 2 Group 3: *"I think the workload is too much but if students learn to manage their time properly they should be able to cope. If you keep on postponing things you are going to fall back and if you do things on time you are going to cope."*

Participant 4 Group 1: *"Workload for myself, I find it a bit more. They give you a lot of assignments. Like one lecture can give you an assignment and the home-test, saying that they want it after maybe two days. The other one can give another assignment and say that they want it the next day, and the other one can keep you in class for the whole day, you attend a lesson until in the evening. And tomorrow they want their assignment. This will put a lot of pressure on you because you have to eat to have the energy to do the assignment, but you have to start by cooking because you left no one at the room that can cook for you. The work becomes overload and that brings a lot of stress."*

Participant 1 Group 3: *"The workload is different. For instance at high school we were not typing and here we have to type assignments and that can be too much work."*

5.2.2.3.2.3 Theme 9: Different teaching methods

According to Ayele (2011), the teaching styles at university often make it difficult for the students to understand the subject matter. Unlike high school, the lecturer plays only a facilitating role in introducing them to academic activities, thus students are expected to be more independent and self-reliant. They are expected to exert initiative in planning and conducting their own learning experiences which did not happen at high school. They have the responsibility to schedule appointments for consultations with professors and lecturers at the university. These experiences may give students the perception that tertiary institution

lecturers as less friendly and less sensitive to their problems than high school teachers (Kidwell, 2005). According to Kidwell (2005), the experience of some students at tertiary institutions is that lecturing staff do not put in the time to help them. As indicated by Tinto (1993), students should be able to adapt to and adopt new norms and behaviours of the university, which may be different from those of high school. The following statements made by students in this study, which are related to different teaching methods used at university underpin this analysis. Students complain that as opposed to high school, where they were guided every step of the way; they find this to not be a case at university, which made an adjustment process difficult for them.

Participant 2 Group 1: *"With me I see there is a lot of difference. At high school we used to go to the class, wait for the teacher to come and give you the notes. You just copy the notes and go back home, and memorize for the test. Here the lecturer just gives you a topic, and you just go and research about the topic given. More work is focused on research."*

Participant 3 Group 4: *"The work is very different in that at high school, we were guided every step of the way. Here, it's like we are independent, we have to have discipline when it comes to when you do your assignment, when to study for the test, when to consult, it's all on our shoulders. There is no mother or father who will push you to do your work."*

Participant 4 Group 1: *"The difference that I see is the way we work, at high school, you find that the teacher comes to class and you attend only few hours. Here you attend more hours. The kind of work that they are giving is kind of too much as compared to the work we had in high school."*

Participant 1 Group 2: *"It is different because yes at high school we used to do assignments and stuff, but we were expected to type so that your work is neat."*

Participant 5 Group 2:"*I'm doing law, which is something different from what I did in high school. It is different and interesting in a sense that in law you have to get the constitution and the act in your head. You have to write these long essays and apply more than 20 cases, which is very interesting and challenging.*"

5.2.2.3.1.4 Theme 10: Financial difficulties

First year at university can be quite challenging financially. During registration some students already realise they do not have enough money for registration and accommodation. The participants also struggled with money for buying books, making copies of learning materials and meals. For those who did not have bursaries, having money for rent was a challenge, especially if their parents were unemployed. Additionally, students struggled with money for clothes, ability to afford pay-as-you-go units for cell-phones which allow them access to social networks. Bojuwoye (2002), indicated that financial difficulties remain a constant problem for many first-entering university students. Some students may be able to face the challenges of being selected for admission, only to be turned away at the registration desk because of lack of money. These financial difficulties may force students to register late which makes it difficult for them (Bujowuye, 2002). Although some of the students in the present study complained of these financial difficulties others indicated that they receive assistance in the form of bursaries and were able to afford other necessities with the help of their parents. According to Tinto (1993), financial concerns are important as they form part of the characteristics that might have long-term indirect effect on the students' decision to dropout.

Participant 3 Group 4: "*During registration I didn't have enough money to register. When I called my uncle to assist, it was as if I was committing a crime. As a result, I felt like going back home.*"

Participant 3 Group 3: "*The money is not enough for me. There are times when you have to make copies because you don't have the textbook, you might find out that the only way to have the information is to make copies because it costs less. You find that you don't have money to call home so that they send you money; you have to wait for the following week when your parents have money.*"

Participant 4 Group 3: *"Sometimes I find that I have to buy a textbook but i don't have the money to buy it. When I call home, they tell me that they don't money even for making copies. Most of the time I understand because they pay for a lot of things such as rent, food, transport, since I don't have a bursary and they don't have that kind of money lying around."*

Participant 4 Group 3 comment 2: *"My parents could not have money for me to pay for rent, so that was a bit challenging for me. I didn't know where to go or what to do. And then my friend that I came here with told me that I can stay with her."*

Participant 2 Group 3: *"I definitely did not have enough money. We used to have group discussions and I needed a phone that will enable me have social networks so that I can communicate with other group members. For instance when we have to meet at a certain time at the library, I would not receive the communication because my phone does not have WhatsApp."*

Participant 3 group 2: *"My budget is fine. I am a bursary holder. Financially, I can say I'm fine. Because we are facing scarcity of resources and the demand is so high, I always try to manipulate my money and follow a budget."*

5.2.2.3.1.5 Theme 11: Lack of accommodation

Accommodation can also be an issue during first year. Not getting a placement at a residence and inability to afford it, can be devastating as it means that students have to worry about their safety when they have late afternoon classes. According to the National Planning Commission (2011), enrolments have almost doubled in the last decade but building of residences at tertiary institutions has been slow resulting in inadequate student accommodation. This means that the students have to find alternative accommodation off campus, which poses challenges such as waiting times for public transport and possible assault if leaving campus at night (Mbara & Celliers, 2013). Students in the present study found themselves struggling to get accommodation on campus and resorting to getting cheap accommodation off campus. These students do not reap the full benefits of social interaction with their peer group and often have to leave early because of transport issues thus missing meetings with lecturing staff and social events. According to Tinto (1993), lack of this type

of interaction, which forms a key component of students' social integration, may result in a difficult adjustment process and increased chances for students of dropping out of university.

> Participant 2 Group 4: *"I didn't get a place at the residence immediately when I got to the university. I had to stay off-camp for about three weeks. Life was just too difficult for me because I am not used to struggling. I had to walk a long distance to get to the campus. When you have a late afternoon class, you can't concentrate in class because you are thinking of the tsotsi's that you might come across when you go to your room. So I used to think that maybe I should go back home and maybe I will apply next to another university that has enough residences."*

> Participant 4 Group 3: *"I did not apply for accommodation on time, so it was very difficult. Then I decided to go and stay off-campus."*

> Participant 3 Group 3:*"It was difficult for me especially because I did not have any relatives around here. There were times when I did not know where to go, who to ask, for things like accommodation. I didn't know where to go or who to cry to."*

5.2.2.3.3 Negative social adjustment experiences
The theme identified under negative social adjustment is homesickness and social isolation as discussed below.

5.2.2.3.3.1 Theme 12: Homesickness and social isolation
According to Hernandes (2006), first year students experience anxiety when they leave behind the social support of family, friends, and familiar surroundings. However, having a connection to family and friends is important in assisting the students to adjust. They are able to handle adjustment challenges more efficiently if they receive guidance, intimacy, positive social interactions and tangible assistance from caregivers (Salami, 2011). According to Tinto (1999), students who are unable to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with staff are likely to experience social isolation. Farris (2010), posits that students who are socially anxious and have difficulty making friends are at risk of developing extreme homesickness. Furthermore, some students may not fully dissociate from their own community culture and may not benefit from the full rewards of membership of a university community. The

following statements were made by the first year students, who experienced homesickness and social isolation.

Participant 1 group 1:*"For me being away from home is weird and boring because I am used to enjoying with my family and friends and coming and having to make new friends is kind of boring, I hate it*."

Participant 3 group 4: *"This year has been very difficult for me personally. My mother has a chronic illness and therefore I cannot be away from her for a long time. Last year it was better because I knew I would see her every evening when I come back from school."*

Participant 3 group 2:*"For me it feels good you get to know different people, more especially people I don't know their background, I don't know what they think of me, although sometimes it might be difficult to associate with those people."*

Participant 1 group 2: *"I had difficulties to socialise with other tribes because of the different languages. But now I'm fine because I'm learning their languages."*

Participant 3 Group 3:*"It's hard because you have to adapt to new behaviours, meet new people. It's not simple to understand people that you just met."*

"Participant 4 group 1:"It's a bit hard for me because I'm used to being with my family and sharing everything with them. Since I came here, I never go a day without calling them to let them know how everything is going. So I found being here a bit difficult."*

5.2.2.4 Coping
The subthemes discussed under coping are positive as well as negative coping mechanisms as follows.

5.2.2.4.1 Positive coping mechanisms
According to Tinto (1993), the use of active coping strategies by first year students at university might lower their chances of leaving. Molapsi (2009), further adds that some

students use positive methods of coping to deal with academic stress for instance, study groups and summarising modules and peer study groups. The author also reports consulting with staff and working hard are positive coping mechanisms as well as attending support programmes (Nkatana, 2011). In the present study, students reported use of various coping methods such as learning to manage their time properly, use of support groups and keeping in touch with family members. Students also engaged in leisure activities such as listening to music, reading other materials besides academic books, and exercising. Other ways of coping used by the students are their religious beliefs which include reading the bible and praying. The commonest coping mechanism reported by the participants was communicating and mixing with their peers as well as consulting with staff and studying hard.

Participant 2 Group 1: *"Eh….according to me my workload this time, I have the tips and techniques to control it unlike during the first semester I had no idea on how to do assignments. The work was just overwhelming I had no idea of how to control it. So this time at least I know how to manage it. My time management skills have improved."*

Participant 2 group 3: *"I found the mentorship programme to be very helpful they advise on how to tackle particular issues."*

Participant 6 Group 2: *"I coped with the situation due to the help that I got from the structures on campus that we engage ourselves with. One of those structures is "let's talk". The people that I've met there have played a major role in me being able to sit down on my desk and telling myself that I'm going to do this until I'm good at it. They basically motivated me and made me realise that I should be thankful that I'm alive and start to appreciate life more."*

Participant 3 group 2: *"I consult my mentors most of the time when I'm struggling."*

Participant 1 group 2: *"In my class we have many study groups. So when I'm stressed, I visit one of my classmates to ask for help."*

Participant 2 group 1: *"I tried by all means to form group discussion; I organized people to help me. My group was very helpful."*

Participant 1 group 3:*"When I got here the pressure was so high. I wrote tests and I failed. I wanted to quit. I even went to the school of law to deregister. They didn't want me to deregister. I met people who came through for me. People who share the same situation as me supported me."*

Participant 2 group 3:*"I have made a couple of friends, but I still prefer to keep in touch with my family, they help me to keep sane."*

Participant 4 group 1:*"The first thing that I think of is family. You find that eh, I am coming from a big background, a big family. Thinking about them will actually encourage me to actually pursue whatever it is that I am struggling with. Then the stress will reduce bit by bit."*

Participant 2 group 1:*"I just listen to the music. I listen to jazz music. It calms me down. I just do this for maybe 30 minutes or so and when I am relaxing, I think of what I can do to find a solution."*

Participant 6 group 2:*"If I'm still stressed, I listen to music and sleep it off at night and feel better in the morning."*

Participant 6 group 2:*"I start by getting a book collection and reading them. Or it depends on what interests me at that point. If it's not a book, I would do a puzzle, if the puzzle is finished then my problem is finished."*

Participant 1 group 1:*"I also use prayer as a way of coping with the pressures that comes with my studies."*

Participant 4 group 1:*"I also consider the word from the bible."*

Participant 2 group 4:*"My mother has taught me to pray when I have a problem. I practice the same thing here at the university, when I am stressed, I just pray to God to fight the battles for me, and He has never disappointed me."*

Participant 4 group 1 comment 2: *"The first thing that I do is consider sleep, but then before I sleep, I consider music which is associated with soothing the heart and the mind."*

Participant 3 group 4:*"I am also a very religious person. I believe in prayer at all time."*

Participant 1 group 4:*"Most of the time I exercise when I feel really stressed. I invite my friends for a game of basketball and when I get to my room in the evening I pray."*

5.2.2.4.2 Negative Coping mechanisms

According to Thurber and Walton (2012), and Salami (2011), students may find themselves using maladaptive coping mechanisms such as illegal drug use, smoking, alcohol abuse, and promiscuous sexual behaviours due to an inborn desire to belong and be accepted. These results are supported by the following comments from first years who reported use of substances and propositioning girls in order to cope with stressful situations at university. Other students indicated that they did not do anything about the situation but cry and isolate themselves. These are avoidant coping strategies and they can lead to decreased psychological well-being and depression. Being in-denial or avoiding dealing with the problems directly put students at a great risk of attrition (Ray, Braxton & Sullivan, 2009).

Participant 4 group 4:*"When I'm really stressed, I have friends that can hook me up with dope [marijuana]. That relaxes me a lot. Sometimes I just 'drink' my problems away, and when I wake up I can plan afresh."*

Participant 3 group 2:*"Sometimes I just go around campus, talk to anyone, proposing to any girl that I come across, just to let go of the stress."*

Participant 1 group 3:*"When I am stressed, I go around proposing other girls. I make them feel good. If I make them feel good about themselves, for example, if I tell a girl that "you are beautiful" and they feel good, I also feel good and my stress level goes down."*

Participant 1 group 2:*"I just cry, and call my dad and see what he can do about the situation."*

Participant 2 group 4:*"If its people who are stressing me, I usually just stay in my room and avoid them until I feel better."*

5.2.2.5 Tabular summary of main themes

The following is a table that summarises the major themes that emerged from the participants' responses.

Table 5: Tabular summary of main themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Separation: this theme is derived from the students' responses with regard to the feelings of disintegration they felt during the first year in a quest to adopt the values of the new environment. It also entailed excitement that came with the thought of being in the new environment.	**1.1 Disintegration: st**udents during this stage not only have to make physical break from their previous societies, but also mental break in order to fully reap the benefits of the new environment. To maximize the educational and social benefits of the new environment. Students mentioned that they find themselves drifting apart from their friends and family back at home. Others find it as a relief to finally leave their friends, more especially those that they did not share similar interests with friends from home. **1.2 Independence:** this subtheme highlighted that some students were looking forward to going to university as this served as an opportunity for them to be independent, meet new friends, as well as gaining new knowledge.

2. Transition: participants noted confusion that accompanied bridge or change between the new environment and the old	**2.1 Change:** during this stage the first years are torn between the old and the new environment and they may feel that they no longer belong to the old environment while still finding their feet in the new one. If the difference the two is enormous, students may have increased adjustment difficulties.
3. Adjustment: this theme emanated from the responses given by students of positive and negative adjustment experiences in their journey to become integrated in the new environment.	**3.1 Academic support:** students mentioned the support they received from their lecturers and departments such as dissemination of information, patience with students, and scheduling of appointment time.
	3.2 Financial support: this subtheme highlights the support the students received in a form of bursaries.
	3.3 Social and emotional support: students indicated that they received support from their lecturers and departments in a form of peer support group and peer mentoring programs, awards ceremonies, and departmental workshops.
	3.4 Unsupportive lecturers and departments: first years complained of challenges such as hostility of lecturers and other staff members, non-attendance of classes by lecturers, and unavailability of lecturers for consultations.
	3.5 Workload: this subtheme emanates from the students' comments about increased workload they encountered at

	university.
	3.6 Different teaching methods: under this subtheme, the students mentioned that they found it difficult to adjust to the method of instruction used at university which they say is difficult relative to the one used in high school.
	3.7 Financial difficulties: some students in the study complained about not being able to afford certain necessities.
	3.8 Lack of accommodation: this subtheme was derived from the students' comments about not being able to find accommodation at the university campus.
	3.9 Homesickness and social isolation: this sub-theme is underpinned by the students' comments related to missing friends and family back home
4. Coping: coping strategies employed by the students to cope with negative adjustment experiences. They employed positive and negative coping strategies.	**4.1 Positive coping mechanisms:** this subtheme notes the responses given by the students on coping mechanism used by the students when facing adjustment challenges. They include leisure activities such as sleeping, listening to music and/or exercise; and religious practices. **4.2 Negative coping mechanisms:** this subtheme arose from the participants' responses that include use of substance, proposing girls on campus, crying, and social isolation.

5.3 Summary

The focus of this chapter was on the analysis, presentation and discussion of the research findings. Discussed under the chapter were demographic details of the participants and then major themes were elicited from the data. The chapter ended with a table which summarised the main themes gleaned from a thorough analysis of the data. The following chapter presents the research conclusions.

CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Introduction

The study sought to explore the social and academic adjustment experiences and coping strategies of first year students. It was guided by Tinto's (1993), Theory of Adjustment of first year students which states that students undergo three stages during their first year at university. These are separation, transition and adjustment. Another theory that guided the current study is Astin's 1999 theory of Student Involvement, which suggests that for students to persist at university they need to be involved, not only in the academic but also the social activities of the campus. A perusal of the study transcripts revealed that both male and female participants had the same problems and iterated similar points of concern. They faced the same challenges thus it was not considered appropriate to breakdown male and participant responses as no essential differences were noted in the content. This chapter serves to discuss a summary of the key findings of the study in terms of the study research questions as noted below.

1. What social adjustment challenges do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) have?
2. What academic adjustment challenges do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) have?
3. How do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) experience and cope with the social and academic adjustment challenges they face?

6.2 Summary of key findings in terms of the research questions

The research findings are now discussed in terms of the research questions presented in the research method chapter (see 4.8).

6.2.1 Research question 1: What social adjustment challenges do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) have?

Some students in this study experienced homesickness and some social isolation due to various factors. For instance, some found it difficult to establish friendships due to the newness of the environment. Others missed their family members with whom they were very close. According to Tinto (1993), this is a common experience amongst first year students as

they undergo, what he termed, separation issues. However, according to Thurber and Walton (2012), if these feeling are intense and chronic, they may interfere with the adjustment process (academic and social) during the students first year.

Lack of accommodation was seen as a challenge to some of the participants. As not enough accommodation is available on campus even first years have to stay off campus, which is not ideal. This puts them at risk if they have to work late at night and leave when it is dark. The campus is situated near a tavern and much of the area does not have street lights thus female students, in particular, are at risk. The problem of lack of accommodation not only exposes the students to social ills, but as indicated by Tinto (1993), and Astin (1999), as depriving the students of time to be actively involved in campus social activities.

6.2.2 Research question 2: What academic adjustment challenges do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) have?

Some of the participants in this research complained about the support they received from their lecturers and their departments. It is possible that some of the complaints could be associated with personality clashes between staff and participants however; this was not investigated in this research. Students are less likely to perceive university as satisfying and congenial, if they view their lecturers as unsupportive. According to Tinto (1993), lecturers and university staff play a critical role in communicating the norms and values of the university and helping with the academic adjustment challenges of first year students. Some participants in the study also expressed their concerns about the very high workload. This problem is very likely exacerbated by the fact that they have to write many tests and submit numerous assignments. This can be challenging as students might find it difficult to have time to become involved in campus activities and therefore struggle to adjust to life at the university (Astin, 1999).

The difference in the teaching methods used at high schools to ones used at university were amongst the factors attributed to academic difficulties experienced by first year students. Ayele (2011) suggests that the different methods of instruction used by different lecturers at university may worsen academic adjustment which according to Tinto (1993), contributes to overall attrition rates of first year students.

Financial difficulties also added to academic adjustment as buying books and photocopying is expensive and some participants found it difficult to afford all the learning material they needed. As indicated by Tinto in Lemmens (2010), financial difficulties are likely to negatively influence a first year students' decision to continue further with his or her studies. Eventually this impacts negatively on throughput rates (the student may have to withdraw from the university because of financial problems).

6.2.3 Research question 3: How do first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) experience and cope with the social and academic adjustment challenges they face?

Tinto (1993), indicated that the use of active coping mechanisms, instead of avoidance may enhance the chances of a student graduating. In the current study, the coping mechanisms highlighted by the first year students include time management, consulting with mentors and fellow students to seek help, contacting family members. Other positive coping mechanisms include, listening to music, and religious practices. The use of these coping strategies helped first years face the challenges they experienced. This type of coping can be considered proactive as, according to Schwarzer (2000), it does not require any negative judgments, such as harm, loss, or threat. Proactive coping helps individual's efforts to build up general resources that enable promotion towards personal growth. Another functional way of coping as described by (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007), is preventive coping, in which people accumulate resources, such as using mentorship programmes and confiding in peers which can be seen as general precautions which protect individuals against experiencing a variety of threats for instance, bullying which was not an issue amongst participants in this research.

These are dysfunctional coping strategies which are destructive and which may lead to psychological harm and are associated with a low or poor academic performance. Examples of these are use of illegal drug, alcohol abuse, and promiscuous sexual behaviours (Thurber & Walton, 2012; Fischer, 2009). They can be regarded as avoidant coping methods as instead of devising means of dealing with the problem, students disengages and distances themselves from the problem. First year students in this study mentioned the use of dagga, propositioning of girls (by males), leaving the problem to the others to solve, or isolating (and thus ignoring the threat) themselves. As indicated by Tinto (1993), these methods decrease the chances of retention and thus eventual throughput amongst the first year students.

6.3 Conclusion

Participants experienced both positive and negative adjustment. They reported positive as well as negative adjustment experiences and use of adaptive as well as maladaptive coping mechanisms. In summary, first year at university is not without challenges. This can become more challenging if students are faced with problems beyond their control such as financial difficulties, lack of accommodation, social isolation, increased workload, and lack of support from their lectures and departments. As enrolments increase, a tertiary institution has to keep up with the task of providing accommodation for students. If this is not the case some students find themselves having to look for places to live off campus, which is problematic in terms of attending evening social functions and can be dangerous.

The findings of the current study reveal that first year students experienced financial difficulties. Not having enough money for books, meals and other necessities can be stressful to these students as they may be preoccupied with thoughts of how to get money, which negatively impacts on academic progress. Academic challenges include the transition from High school to university. In addition to dealing with homesickness students have to adapt to increased and hard-to manage workloads. Participants also struggled with methods of instruction at university and felt they were not given enough guidance in their modules.

CHAPTER 7: RESEARCH STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the strengths of the current study as well its limitations and recommendations of the study.

7.2 Research strengths

7.2.1 The study made use of focus groups as a method for data collection and therefore, the researcher was able to obtain rich data from the participants at the same time.

7.2.2 The research is underpinned by a framework relevant to the topic.

7.3 Research limitations

7.3.1 Due to the nature of this study, the findings are not generalisable to a larger population.

7.3.2. The timing of data collection was before the first years could write examinations hence decreased turn-out of participants.

7.4 Recommendations

Based on the responses given by the participants in this study regarding their adjustment experiences, the following are recommendations are made

- Broader research study using a quantitative cross sectional survey design.
- Broader research, as above, using a random sample.
- The study is made available to appropriate structures at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus).

7.5 Summary

The chapter gave research strengths, limitations and recommendations arising out of the current study.

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Appendix A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The researcher will introduce herself and group members. She will then ask each participant to introduce themselves by stating their name and something about themselves. This will be used to build rapport. The researcher will then introduce the topic and tell the students what the research is about.

The interview schedule is a guide and probing will take place based on answers to the questions. The reason for the schedule is to provide focus as an unstructured focus group session could lead to too much information that was not focused and would be difficult to analyse. The questions were constructed using Tinto's (1993) theory of adjustment for new students as a guide.

Separation

1. How do you find being away from your family?

2. How do you find being away from your friends?

3. What have you found to be different regarding the values of the university community as compared to the home community values?

4. Have you found the work you are expected to do very different from High School?

Transition

1. Tell me about some of the situations when you felt that you were not coping

2. How did you come out of those situations?

3. Have you ever felt like you are at the wrong place and maybe you should go back home?

4. Have you ever felt like you are losing touch with your previous life prior coming to university?

Adjustment

1. How have you found the workload?

2. Have you found your lecturers supportive?

3. Have you found your department supportive?

4. What do you do if you feel stressed about work (it can be a test or assignment)?

5. Have you all made new friends during the time you have been here?

6. What do you do if you feel stressed about your social life on campus?

7. Have you had enough money to be able to buy things you need?

8. At what stage can you say you felt like you have settled in with regard to life at the university?

9. Would anyone like to add anything further (about the topic we have been discussing)?

Appendix B: Cover letter

UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

Faculty of Humanities

School of Social Sciences

Department of Psychology

Private Bag X1106

Sovenga

0727

Tel: +27 15 268 3505

Fax:+27 15 268 2866

_____

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Invitation to participate in research titled: ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tom R.F. (Clinical Masters student – mini-dissertation) supervised by Prof K A Nel (Department of Psychology at the University of Limpopo, Turfloop Campus).

Purpose of the research: The purpose of the study is to explore the social and academic adjustment experiences of first year students at the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus).

Research procedure: If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be required to answer questions asked by the researcher during focus group discussions and de-briefing session(s).

Costs: There are no financial costs directly associated with participation in this project.

Compensation: You will not receive any monetary or other compensation for participating in this study.

Participation: Participation in this research investigation is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to participate.

Confidentiality: The researcher will endeavour to keep the information collected for this study strictly confidential. If any publication results from this research, you will not be identified by name.

Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to refuse to participation. You are allowed to withdraw from the project at any time without giving reason(s).

Additional information: If you discontinue participation in this project, you may request that we do not use the information already given to us. You are encouraged to ask questions concerning the study at any time as they occur to you during or after the interview(s). Any significant new findings developed during the course of the study that may relate to your willingness to continue participation will be provided to you.

Participants rights: If you have any questions pertaining to your participation in this research study, you may contact the researcher (Tom R.F.), by telephoning her on: 0716043101 or by e-mailing Prof K A Nel: knel@ul.ac.za or phoning: (015) 2682944.

Researcher: Supervisor:

Appendix C: APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE (TREC FORMS)

FORM B – PART I

PROJECT TITLE: ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

PROJECT LEADER: Ms Reyagalaletsa Felicity Tom

DECLARATION

I, the signatory, hereby apply for approval to conduct research described in the attached research proposal and declare that:

1. I am fully aware of the guidelines and regulations for ethical research and that I will abide by these guidelines and regulations as set out in documents (available from the Secretary of the Ethics Committee); and

2. I undertake to provide every person who participates in this research project with the relevant information in Part III. Every participant will be requested to sign Part IV.

Name of Researcher: Ms R.F. Tom

Signature:…………………………………

Date:…………………………………………

For Official use by the Ethics Committee:

Approved/Not approved

Remarks:………………………………………………………………………………………...

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Signature of Chairperson:………………………………………..

Date:………………………

PART II

PROJECT TITLE: ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

PROJECT LEADER:Ms R.F. Tom

Protocol for conducting research using human participants

1. Department: Psychology

2. Title of project: ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

3. Full name, surname and qualifications of project leader: Prof Kathryn Anne Nel Counselling Psychologist PhD

4. List the name(s) of all persons (Researchers and Technical Staff) involved with the project and identify their role(s) in the conduct of the experiment:

Name: Qualifications: Responsible for conducting research:

R.F. Tom   M1 (Clinical Psychology)

5. Name and address of principal researcher: Private Bag X 122 Mmabatho. 2735

6. Procedures to be followed: Conducting focus group sessions among first year students.

7. Nature of discomfort: Presence of other participants in the group may inhibit honest responses from some participants. Some participants may feel uncomfortable after revealing their thoughts and feelings and may want to see an appropriate person to discuss these feelings.

8. Participants will gain more knowledge and insight into their adjustment experiences and coping strategies in a university environment. The study will elicit data on negative as well as positive adjustment experiences of students which will assist the University of Limpopo (Turfloop campus) in terms of student orientation and on-going peer mentoring and intervention programmes.

Signature of Project Leader:……………………………………………………………………

Date:……………………

PART III - INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

PROJECT TITLE: ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

PROJECT LEADER: Ms R.F. Tom

1. You are invited to participate in the following research project: Social and academic adjustment experiences of first year students at the University of Limpopo

2. Participation in the project is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project (without providing any reasons) at any time.

3. It is possible that you might not personally experience any advantages during the project, although the knowledge that may be accumulated through the project might prove advantageous to others.

4. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you might have in connection with this project at any stage. The project leader and her/his staff will gladly answer your question. They will also discuss the project in detail with you.

5. Presence of other participants in the group may inhibit honest responses from some participants. Some participants may feel uncomfortable after revealing their thoughts and feelings and may want to see an appropriate person to discuss these feelings.

6. Should you at any stage feel unhappy, uncomfortable or is concerned about the research, please contact Ms Noko Shai-Ragoboya at the University of Limpopo, Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, tel: 015 268 2401.

PART IV

CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE: ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

PROJECT LEADER: Ms R. F. Tom

I, hereby voluntarily consent to participate in the following project:

ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP CAMPUS)

I realise that:

1.	The study deals with the experiences and coping strategies of first year students.

2.	The procedure or treatment envisaged may hold some risk for me that cannot be foreseen at this stage.

3.	The Ethics Committee has approved that individuals may be approached to participate in the study.

4.	The research project, ie. the extent, aims and methods of the research, has been explained to me.

5.	The project sets out the risks that can be reasonably expected as well as possible discomfort for persons participating in the research, an explanation of the anticipated advantages for myself or others that are reasonably expected from the research and alternative procedures that may be to my advantage.

6.	I will be informed of any new information that may become available during the research that may influence my willingness to continue my participation.

7.	Access to the records that pertain to my participation in the study will be restricted to persons directly involved in the research.

8.	Any questions that I may have regarding the research, or related matters, will be

answered by the researcher/s.

9.	If I have any questions about, or problems regarding the study, or experience any undesirable effects, I may contact a member of the research team or Ms Noko Shai-Ragoboya.

10.	Participation in this research is voluntary and I can withdraw my participation at any stage.

11.	If any medical problem is identified at any stage during the research, or when I am vetted for participation, such condition will be discussed with me in confidence by a qualified person and/or I will be referred to my doctor.

12.	I indemnify the University of Limpopo and all persons involved with the above project from any liability that may arise from my participation in the above project or that may be related to it, for whatever reasons, including negligence on the part of the mentioned persons.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHED PERSON	SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

SIGNATURE OF PERSON THAT INFORMED	SIGNATURE	OF
PARENT/GUARDIAN	THE RESEARCHED PERSON

Signed at_____ this _____ day of _____2013