

**THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST YEAR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY STUDENTS  
IN HIGHER EDUCATION**



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IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**by**

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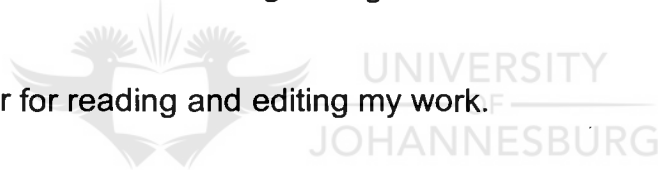
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## ABSTRACT

Despite the social and political changes that have taken place in South Africa, the majority of students in higher education still face disadvantages like poor socio-economic conditions, a legacy of inferior schooling and studying in a language other than their first language. Recent literature on the experiences of first year students in higher education, identifies a number of possible problems that impact negatively on students' performance. Examples of such problems include: not being prepared for learning demands at university and not knowing how to study. The high failure rate, especially amongst first year students, could be attributed to these problems.

This research explores the experiences of first year occupational therapy students in higher education in order to arrive at an informed understanding of such experiences. Awareness of students' experiences could enable educators to choose relevant course materials and select appropriate teaching methods as well as introduce measures to redress the impact of the legacy of inferior schooling in order to enhance learning.

The research strategy in this study is grounded within the interpretative paradigm as the aim is to understand how participants make sense of their realities, i.e. how students make sense of their experiences from their own perspectives. For the purposes of this study, a sample of Medunsa occupational therapy first year students who wrote their grade twelve examinations at the end of 1999 was interviewed. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who come from different provinces to serve as 'information rich cases'. Semi-structured interviews aimed at encouraging the respondent to engage in conversation intended to elicit respondents' construction were conducted. The data were analysed using the constant comparative method of data analysis.

The main finding of the research is that first year occupational therapy students experience problems related to adjustment in terms of the transition from high school to university which impact negatively on their academic performance. Examples

include: not seeing the relevance of subjects and managing heavy workloads; problems with adjustment to life at university; study and teaching methods which are unfamiliar, as well as being unable to pay required fees. Measures such as a continuous orientation programme which includes orientation to study and teaching methods as well as course content are recommended to address problems experienced by students.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>PAGE</b>
TITLE PAGE	
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
ABSTRACT	ii
LIST OF TABLES	vi
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. ORIENTATION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
3. AIM OF THE STUDY	3
4. ASSUMPTIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS	3
5. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
5.1 Introduction	4
5.2 The value of gaining an in-depth understanding of students' experiences	4
5.3 Students' approaches to learning	7
5.4 Transition from high school to university	9
5.4.1 Studies undertaken of students' experiences in higher education	9
5.4.2 Problems experienced by first year students in higher education	10
5.5 Possible measures which can be adopted to address problems experienced by students in higher education	13
5.6 Conclusion	17
6. RESEARCH ORIENTATION AND METHODS	19
6.1 Research orientation	19
6.2 Sampling	20

6.3	The context of the data collection	21
6.4	Data collection methods	21
6.5	Data analysis	25
6.6	Ethical considerations	25
6.7	Provisions for trustworthiness	26
7.	DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF DATA	28
8.	FINDINGS	33
8.1	Introduction	33
8.2	Discussion of findings	37
8.2.1	Subjects in first year	37
8.2.2	Teaching methods at university	39
8.2.3	Adjustment to life at university	42
8.2.4	Available facilities encourage learning	45
8.2.5	Study methods used to meet work demands	46
8.2.6	Uncertainty about financial position	47
8.3	Summary of the Findings	49
9.	RECOMMENDATIONS	49
10.	CONCLUSION	51
11.	REFERENCES	53
12.	APPENDICES	61
APPENDIX	A	61
APPENDIX	B	63
APPENDIX	C	65

## LIST OF TABLES

Page

<b>Table 7.1:</b>	Some Provisional Categories from the Interview with Edith	29
<b>Table 7.2:</b>	Excerpts from a provisional category (Studying many hours) with units of meaning, rule for inclusion and notes to assist in further exploration	31
<b>Table 8.1:</b>	Table of Categories and Sub-categories and the Outcome Statements as derived from the process of data analysis	34





## **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Those in positions of responsibility need to take measures to become aware of the attitudes, expectations and feelings of students if they are to be able to focus their energies on what matters to the students (Lewis, 1984:128).*

The above statement which emphasises the importance of educators' understanding and being aware of students' attitudes, expectations and feelings was expressed by Lewis in 1984. This is of importance even today because such knowledge will enable educators to create learning environments and plan learning tasks which encourage students to become actively involved in their learning. An understanding of students' experiences will enable educators to determine if the students are benefiting from all the learning opportunities made available. This information and knowledge could form the basis for changes which might enhance learning and also benefit future students. The research reported in this essay focussed on the experiences of first year students in higher education with the intention of arriving at an informed understanding of such experiences.

The first part of the essay presents an orientation to the problem being investigated, followed by the aim of the study. The second part presents the literature review which draws on literature in higher education with a specific focus on students' experiences in higher education. The third part describes the research strategy and methods employed in this study. This includes research orientation, sampling, data collection methods, data analysis, ethics as well as provision for trustworthiness. Thereafter the findings are presented and discussed, before concluding with a discussion on possible implications of this study for educators of students in higher education.

## **2. ORIENTATION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The Medical University of Southern Africa (Medunsa) was established in 1978 to train mainly black health professionals. For this reason, Medunsa is categorised as a historically black university. By admitting mainly black students, Medunsa has to face

the consequence of dealing with students who come from a poor educational background.

The fact that education for blacks in South Africa was of an inferior standard and quality in the previous dispensation is well documented in the literature (Naicker, 1996:3; Vice, 1991:6-7). Despite the social and political changes that have been taking place since April 1994, these students still face the disadvantages of a poor socio-economic and educational background as well as the legacy of inferior schooling (Wood, 1998:87). Universities that admit students from historically black schools are faced with the challenge of bridging the gap created by inferior education. One specific challenge that historically black universities face, is dealing with a high failure rate amongst first year students. Recent literature on the experiences of students in higher education identify a number of possible problems that impact negatively on students' performance. Examples of such problems include not being prepared for learning demands at university, and not knowing how to study (De Villiers, 1996:135; Wood, 1998:87; Olivier, 1986:93; Masondo, 1998:2; Molefe, 1991:2-3).

The Occupational Therapy (OT) department at Medunsa has been admitting thirty five-first year students per year for the past five years for a four-year bachelor's degree in Occupational Therapy (B. Occ. Ther.). The first year students' failure rate has been observed to be as high as 50% to 60% in the last five years. It is of major concern to the OT department as to what the possible reasons for such a high failure rate in first year could be. Concerns raised by the OT department regarding the high failure rate of first year students at Medunsa stimulated the idea of investigating the experiences of first year students in this department.

In view of the background sketched above, the need to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences of historically disadvantaged students in higher education, becomes very important as this may shed light on the problems which could lead to the high failure rate amongst first year students. This knowledge could be useful when deciding on measures to address those problems.

The main research question that guided this research can thus be stated as follows:

- What are the experiences of first year occupational therapy students in higher education at Medunsa?

### **3. AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of first year occupational therapy students in higher education in order to arrive at an informed understanding of such experiences.

### **4. ASSUMPTIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS**

As the co-ordinator of the first year OT programme at Medunsa, I am interested in gaining an informed understanding of the experiences that first year students encounter as they embark on higher education. The impression I have gained while co-ordinating this programme, is that most of the students have had negative experiences, which impact negatively on their academic performance. Some of my colleagues attribute the high failure rate mainly to students' lack of motivation to study. My assumption is that students from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds experience different problems even though they do share some common ones. Adjustment to the university environment, in my view, contributes greatly to the numerous problems faced by first year students. Therefore, understanding students' experiences will enable us as educators and administrators to create an environment in which students can empower themselves.

## **5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **5.1 Introduction**

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of first year occupational therapy students in higher education. This was done in order to arrive at an informed understanding of such experiences. The central argument of this literature review is that if educators have knowledge and information of how learners are experiencing their learning and their learning environment, they will be better equipped to create a learning environment that enhances learning. This will also enable educators to be aware of problems that could impact negatively on students' performance so that they can implement measures to address them. I shall therefore first explore the value of gaining an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and students' approaches to learning. This is followed by a review of students' experiences of transition from high school to university as reflected in the research literature. In turn, this will lead to a discussion on some possible measures which could be implemented to address some of the problems which students generally experience in higher education.

### **5.2 The value of gaining an in-depth understanding of students' experiences**

Literature on students' experiences in higher education outlines a number of reasons why understanding of students' experiences is of value to educators. This is particularly true for educators who are working with students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds as, according to De Villiers (1996:135), their schooling does not prepare them for university demands. Becker (in Lewis, 1984:6) emphasises that understanding students' experiences enables educators to appreciate and acknowledge the complexity of the demands students have to face in their environment in addition to the academic ones. The impact of gaining knowledge and information on students' experiences is highlighted by Behr (1987a:46) by stressing that the university environment "... both inside and outside the lecture room poses the students with diversity and complexity of challenges ...". An in-depth understanding will also indicate if the students are coping with these challenges or not. In light of this information, educators will be in a better

position to decide on the best support services needed as well as being able to plan and select teaching materials which will enhance learning.

The above supports the value of understanding how students are experiencing their learning environment as well as their learning. My main argument which is that educators will be in a better position to plan learning tasks, as well as create a learning environment that will enhance learning if they gain an in-depth understanding of how students are experiencing their learning, is supported by Lewis (1984: 128) as quoted in the introduction. I am of the opinion that this information and knowledge could also form the basis for changes which might enhance learning and also benefit future students. In addition educators will be more aware of how their decisions regarding course material and teaching aids are experienced by students. The draft white paper on higher education (1997:9) states one of the purposes of higher education as that of "... meeting the needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes". In order to meet the needs and aspirations of learners more efficiently on a continuous basis, educators need to monitor or confirm how students are experiencing the learning process and the learning environment. If students have negative experiences, they would not make the best use of their talents and the learning opportunities offered in higher education. Furthermore educators will also become aware of whether students are benefiting from all the learning opportunities made available to them. Kuh and Stage (1992:1028) are of the view that in-depth knowledge of students' experiences can also be used by educators when designing teaching strategies that promote students' learning and development.

On the question of learning environment, Entwistle (1992:1736) states that the learning context which the students experience influences their learning strategies. It is for this reason that it is of vital importance for educators to gain an in-depth knowledge of how students are experiencing their learning and learning environment as well as their perception of their courses. Furthermore, in-depth knowledge will enable educators to be more aware of the learning style pattern of students. This awareness of students' learning style pattern according to Goduka (1998: 38) includes whether students prefer to work in groups or individually; if they need structure and support; and if they prefer

oral or visual instructions. The necessity of understanding students' learning style is pointed out by Stage, Watson and Terrel (1999:46) when they claim that by understanding the learning styles of students, educators are able to "... connect with and motivate students to become involved and invested in their educational experiences". De Villiers (1996:136) stresses that it is important to explore students' experiences as students move from secondary education which is familiar to them, to tertiary education which is unfamiliar to them. The findings could help educators when mediating this process and when helping students to settle in. Educators will also be in a better position to determine if learners are experiencing problems in adjusting to the new learning environment and learning strategies. In this regard, Cassimjee and Brookes (1998: 95) warn educators that when dealing with students, " the pressures of the unknown are great and should not be underestimated". The pressure of the unknown in my view is increased when it comes to first year students who are faced with new and unfamiliar demands. Understanding of students' experiences will also enable educators to determine if students feel overwhelmed and intimidated as this will impact on their learning negatively (McInnis & Jamesare, 1996:1).

An understanding of how students experience the difference in learning at universities and at schools will help educators to confirm what Wood (1998:87) regards as a well-known problem of learning in school, "rote learning". This will enable educators to take measures to address this problem. Wood (1998:89) makes an observation that even though students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds "have very rich experiences in life, very little of this experience may be counted as valuable or academically relevant in a tertiary institution". If gaining an in-depth understanding of students' experiences confirms the above-mentioned observation as being the case with such students, then drastic steps need to be taken by educators to utilise students' life experiences in the learning process. Gravett (1997: 11) is of the view that the use of learners' experiences in learning is very significant, and she supports this view by stating that "... learning is approached from [a] constructivist perspective, as a process of interpreting and transforming one's experiential world". In addition, students make use of their 'existing knowledge' and experience when constructing new 'personal knowledge'. The use of experience in learning is very much in line with the principles

of adult education which encourages the use of students' experience in the process of learning.

### **5.3 Students' approaches to learning**

Obviously, when talking about students' experiences in higher education, learning should be at the centre of the discussion because the main task of students is to learn. It is for this reason that a review of literature on students' learning was carried out as part of this essay. The findings of this review as explained below highlight the importance of knowing how students experience the learning process, and the learning approach that they use. These findings support the main argument in this essay that knowledge and information of how students are experiencing their learning and learning environment, will enable educators to create learning environments that can enhance learning. The importance of this view is stressed by Brookfield (1990: 30) who states that, "in order to teach responsively, you need to examine how students experience their learning". In responsive teaching, teachers should adapt their teaching to suit students' needs. According to this line of thinking, educators should always seek "hard evidence" about how students perceive and respond to what is presented to them before changing methods of teaching and materials used (Brookfield, 1990:29). Ramsden (1992:3) supports the need and importance of studying students' learning by arguing that by doing this, educators could improve their teaching. Studying students' learning will enable educators to better define learning problems that exist. This will enable educators to introduce appropriate measures to address such problems. In addition to the importance of understanding students' learning, educators should also strive to understand what learning means to students. At times learning to students is only about how to please educators and score high marks. This view of learning could create a gap between what educators want from the students and what the students accomplish (Ramsden, 1992:6 ). Ramsden (1992:18) further argues that if educators aim at improving the quality of education by enhancing learning and ensuring meaningful learning, they should study its effects on students and look at the experience "through the eyes of students".

Another important issue related to students' learning is their approach to learning. Marton and Booth (1997:22) identify two types of approaches to learning as "deep" and "surface" approaches. It is important for educators to establish whether students are approaching learning tasks using "deep" or "surface" approaches to learning. According to Marton and Säljö (in Marton, 1979:7) deep approaches to learning lead to meaningful learning while surface approaches lead to mainly just accumulation of facts. The use of a deep approach to learning enables students to search for the meaning of what they are learning. Approaches to learning influence students' attitudes toward studying. A deep approach is associated with a "sense of involvement", "challenge and achievement" and a feeling of "personal fulfilment and pleasure". A surface approach leads to "procrastination and delay", and "less time in private study" which lead to failure (Ramsden, 1992:58-64). Students who use a deep approach feel more involved in their learning, more challenged, and they enjoy their learning. Surface learning on the other hand, in which no meaning is attached to what students are learning, leads to students being dissatisfied.

The approach to learning is not fixed and students tend to shift from one approach to the other in an attempt to adapt to the requirements educators seem to expect of them, particularly during assessments. If they perceive that deep approaches to learning are rewarded instead of surface approaches, they try to please their teachers by preferring them over surface approaches to learning. Ramsden (1992:58) warns that before educators draw conclusions and blame students for their negative attitude towards studying and poor performance, they should examine students' approaches to learning. This is important, because those students who use surface approaches lose interest and spend less time in private study, which leads to failure. In light of the abovementioned warning, I recommend that when dealing with students from historically disadvantaged educational backgrounds, educators should, as a priority, examine students' approaches to learning. I am convinced that if students are encouraged to use deep approaches to learning many of the problems which impact negatively on their performance would be addressed. Students will feel more involved in their learning, challenged, and they will enjoy their learning.



## **5.4 Transition from high school to university**

Under this section I shall first present findings of available studies undertaken on students' experiences in higher education. This will be followed by typical problems experienced by students in higher education. Lastly, I shall highlight the impact of these problems on students' performance.

### **5.4.1 Studies undertaken of students' experiences in higher education**

According to Kuh and Stage (1992:1719), higher education scholars have long been interested in "... the college students' experience". Research done on students' experiences was descriptive until the late 1960s. The main aim was to generate "profiles of students attending different types of institutions and measuring performance in different academic areas". In the 1970s and 1980s the focus was on growth and development of students. Lewis (1984: 2) referring to the work of Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) and Entwistle and Wilson (1977) reports that some of the studies done in Britain during this period, investigated the different approaches used by students when learning. The need to explore students' experiences in totality has been a concern to British researchers. In the United States of America (USA) researchers are reported to have been engaging in more comprehensive studies for a long time (Haselgrove, 1994:4). An example is the review on 'how college affects students' done by Pascarella and Terenzini as reported in Haselgrove (1994:4), which covers a variety of issues, including cognitive skills, psychosocial changes, moral development, career choices as well as attitudes and values. Some of the studies done focus on students' approaches to learning and how different approaches impact on students' performance (Marton & Säljö, 1997:39; Marton & Booth, 1997: 22). My general observation is that both British and American studies have concentrated on experiences of minority students, foreign students and first generation students.

In South Africa, higher education educators and academics at tertiary institutions have also been keen to engage in research on students' experiences in higher education. This is demonstrated by the number of studies done in this field and published articles on this topic. My observation is that these studies and published papers mainly focus

on students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds with specific emphasis on the problems they experience in learning (Behr, 1981; Fullard & Beerall, 1986; Olivier, 1986; Jiya, 1993; Molefe, 1991; Bubb, 1991; de Villiers, 1996; de Villiers & Rwigema, 1998; Wood, 1998; Goduka, 1998; Amos & Fisher, 1998). Students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds experience problems in learning because of reasons such as language, study methods and emotional problems. These problems seem to arise mainly from what Nyamapfene and Letseka (1995:159) summed up as “under-preparedness”. Other factors which contribute to their learning problems are wrong career choices, lack of self-assertiveness and not being prepared for the demands of higher education as a result of poor schooling. It is for this reason that a number of studies that have been done are specific to learning experiences, particularly those related to science subjects (Hare, 1991; Zietsman, 1997; Moetsana, 1993).

#### **5.4.2 Problems experienced by first year students in higher education**

My point of departure in this section is based on the argument presented by Mortimore (1992: 1014) that although schools and higher education are two successive phases of the education system, a number of differences exist between them. One of the differences is the different ages of the clientele. Age difference has a direct influence on the role students are prepared to play in the learning process. While schools tend to engage in a process of attempting to “... transmit knowledge, skills and culture to children and young people”, higher education prepares students for “roles” in government, the professions, business and industry (Mortimore, 1992: 1017). This serves as a motivating factor to students as they become aware that qualifications improve their ‘life chances’. These major differences of the two phases of the education system in my view, put very definite different demands on the students. In addition to preparing students to obtain qualifications for entry into higher education, schools should equip students to be able to benefit from advanced study. In this regard, however, the general perception by those who teach in higher education is that schools are not “... adequately preparing students for further study” (Mortimore, 1992: 1017). In South Africa this perception is justified particularly regarding historically black schools, as it was government policy to keep the education standard lower at such schools.

If students are not adequately prepared, transition from school to higher education cannot be easy. Entwistle (1992:1730) argues that it is commonly accepted that pupils entering higher education institutions are not well prepared for the different types of learning and studying required. This is as a result of teachers at schools taking a more active role in organising students' studies, whereas in higher education students plan their own work. Other contributing factors in South Africa which result in under-prepared students include a lack of facilities in schools, a lack of qualified teachers and low morale of teachers as well as a poor 'culture of learning' (De Villiers,1996:135). Therefore, students who are not exceptionally talented will most likely have negative experiences in their first year of higher education.

McInnis and Jasmesare (1996:1) claim that almost all first year students do experience some negative experiences. Some of the most common difficulties experienced by students in their first year are: transition from school to university, being in an unfamiliar situation, adapting to new teaching and study methods, adjustment to the demands of adult independence, coping with more work loads, adjustments to academic demands as well as lack of structure and social support (Pancer & Hunsberg, 2000: 2; Tao & Dong, 2000: 123 - 124; Ballantyne, 2000: 1; Walker, 1998:12 - 13; Banning in Upcraft, Gardner & Associates, 1990:53). Some students experience high level of stress due to an inability to cope with academic work which results in some of them developing health and emotional problems while others turn to drugs and alcohol in an attempt to cope with their problems (Pancer & Hunsberg, 2000: 39).

Coming to the South African context specifically, Behr (1982:12) is of the opinion that poor performance of students at universities can be attributed to the poor study habits which they acquire at school. Most of them acquire inappropriate study habits which in turn affect their performance negatively. Fullard and Beerlall (1986:69) cite reading and note taking techniques as amongst some of the most common problems experienced by first year students which impact negatively on their performance. This problem is also highlighted by Jiya (1993:80) who emphasises that language and reading difficulties experienced by students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds negatively influence their ability to learn.

A study by Kooy (in Behr, 1981:63) highlights problems such as an inability to programme study time effectively, to integrate information effectively, to deal with conflicting points of view, as well as an inability to express ideas clearly, all of which hinder students' performance. Added to the study method problems mentioned above, first year students may experience emotional problems such as high levels of anxiety which could also influence academic performance negatively. Emotional problems could be caused by the inability to adjust to living away from home, to the demands of social freedom and academic responsibility, as well as difficulties in coping with "political" and financial demands. Furthermore, most first year students are also unable to adjust to the new kind of teaching and learning in higher education (Behr & Lazarus, 1982:23). Other problems experienced by first year students which lead to poor performance are summarized by Behr (1981:62-63) as wrong career choice, lack of self-assertiveness, language difficulties which lead to poor communication, and an inability to cope with the new learning environment. In their study on 'managing students' learning environment', Bisschoff and Potts (1998:121) found that all students reported that there was a gap between what they experienced at school and what they were expected to cope with at universities. In this study, adapting to a new learning approach, particularly the shift from 'rote learning' to 'deep meaningful learning', was reported as one of the biggest challenges to students.

In light of the above information one could conclude that problems experienced by first year students in higher education are complex in nature. This conclusion is based on the fact that these problems range from those related to adjustment to the environment, to teaching methods, and to study methods as well as problems related to reading and communication skills. Also students could experience financial difficulties which though they are not directly related to their learning, nevertheless impact negatively on students' motivation to learn as well as their ability to concentrate. In my view one of the more subtle problems experienced by students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds is what Terenzini, Rendon, Miller, Upcraft, Gregg, Jalomo and Allison (1996 :57) term "invalidation". That is, not made to feel being part of the learning community, accepted, and capable of being successful as students. This is very much in line with prejudice that such students face in higher education. Invalidation by

educators and fellow students could impact negatively on students' performance. For this reason, even though most of the time educators tend to generalise learning difficulties experienced by students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, I am of the opinion that each student should be judged on merit. Educators should strike a balance between rational concerns and prejudices.

The literature indicates that the impact of experiences on students' performance differs from one student to another. Pancer and Hunsberger (2000:1) hold the view that the impact of university experiences is dependent on the students' expectations about universities. Those students with "... more complex expectations" tend to adjust better to stressful circumstances than those with "... simpler expectations". Kuh and Stage (1992:1725) are of the opinion that students who believe that they experience difficulty and perceive their academic programme to be too difficult, are less likely to get good grades. Therefore, how students perceive the process of learning as well as their learning environments, contribute to their performance as a whole. Negative experiences as well as failure to adapt to university life and demands felt by first year students lead to a high dropout rate as well as a high failure rate (Bubb, 1991:1). In light of the above, educators should take the necessary measures to minimise negative experiences and to address problems that lead to such experiences.

### **5.5 Possible measures which can be adopted to address problems experienced by students in higher education**

This section highlights some possible measures which could be implemented to address some of the problems experienced by students in higher education. I will first look at what the main focus should be when taking measures to address problems experienced by students. This will be followed by specific measures that could be taken. I will discuss how the handling of students by educators could impact on their ability to adjust and cope with the new environment and demands before I conclude with a discussion on who is responsible for implementation of these measures.

I support Ferreira's (1995:154) view that measures to address problems experienced

by students should mainly focus on helping students to adjust to university life. This should include adjustment to different methods of teaching as well as independent study methods. This view of mainly focussing on adjustment to university is also supported by Terenzini (1993:11), who acknowledges that one of the challenges that first year students in higher education face is transition from high school to university. Even though it is a complex process, educators and administrators could overcome problems related to this process by creating a more supportive atmosphere during the students' first year of study. One of the methods which could be used to ease the transition process as suggested by Walker (1998) is that of orienting students thoroughly. This suggestion is based on the positive reports given by students in his study. Students reported that orientation equips them with valuable information regarding universities, campus life, student services, as well as helping them to cope with personal and social transition to university life. This according to the report also makes them feel more welcomed. In my experience of working with first year students, orientation programmes that run over a long period of time seem to be more effective than one-off programmes.

Other recommended measures to address students' problems include the introduction of a bridging year, bridging courses and mediation given by educators and peer groups. These measures will also help students to overcome some adjustment problems (De Villiers & Rwigema, 1998:103; de Villiers, 1996:137; Naidoo, 1999:217; Behr, 1981 :63). Even though there seems to be general consensus regarding the need of academic support programmes to bridge the gap between inadequate schooling and higher education, according to Ferreira (1995:155) different South African universities have approached this in different ways. Some universities provide such programmes prior to registration in the form of an additional school year or a preparatory year at university. Other universities provide assistance to pre-graduate students or spread the curricula to enable the students to cope (Behr, 1987b:7).

Published articles and research reports on academic support and bridging course programmes seem to indicate that in South Africa, mainly historically white universities implement such programmes. One of the questions that needs to be answered regarding such programmes is, how successful are such academic support

programmes? Ferreira (1995:155) referring to the views of Van As (1995), Smit (1998) and Hofmeyer and Spencer (1985) acknowledges that the success of academic support programmes is questioned from time to time. Reasons for questioning such programmes range from lack of “clearly defined rationale”, “well formulated objectives” and “a logical structure” (Nolte, Heyns & Venter, 1997: 167). In order to overcome some of the shortcomings of such programmes, I am of the opinion that such programmes should be relevant to the specific needs of students, and their effectiveness should be evaluated on a regular basis. For this reason, I argue that such programmes should not be generalised and standardised, but should be developed for a specific group of students, within a specific educational context.

In addition to these bridging courses which help students to adjust to university life, Behr (1981:63) further recommends the use of enrichment programmes that help students, especially those from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, with language and communication. The importance of addressing the question of language problems is also emphasised by Jiya (1993:84), as most black students experience problems, particularly with English, which has a direct impact on their learning. Expressing a similar idea, Goduka (1998:34) is of the opinion that the implementation of a culturally inclusive education, accommodating students’ learning style as well as adjusting teaching styles by educators to suit the needs of students, will go a long way towards enhancing learning. This has implications for educators of first year students, in that their teaching skills should be geared towards enabling students to develop their full potential, irrespective of their background (Ferreira, 1995:155).

Awareness of approaches to learning used by students will enable educators to enhance learning, as they will become aware of the need to create an educational environment thereby giving the message that deep approaches to learning are awarded. This could be done by designing learning tasks that are of interest to students and which are related to students’ previous experiences. Ramsden (1997:200-201) contends that educators should be concerned with the way the students’ perceptions of assessment, teaching and courses may influence their attitude and approaches to studying. This is important because learning approaches depend on students’ interest in the task and

previous experiences of the students. The type of assessment methods used by educators should be perceived as encouraging understanding, and an indication of a personal commitment to what is being studied. That is, assessment methods that discourage rote learning should be used if deep approaches to learning are to be encouraged. Educators should design a curriculum that is not “over-loaded” for that would encourage students to use surface approaches to learning in an attempt to cope with the amount of work. When interacting with students, educators should communicate interest, enthusiasm and information as well as provide useful feedback on students’ work. Educators should strive to create a learning climate in which students do not feel anxious and threatened, as students who feel anxious and threatened tend to use a surface approach to learning rather than a deep approach to learning (Ramsden, 1992:64 & Ramsden, 1997: 214-215). Ramsden (1992: 86) equates the practice which encourages high quality student learning with good teaching practice.

The manner in which educators handle students influences their ability and willingness to adjust and cope with their new environment and demands. Terenzini, et al. (1996 :46 & 57) are of the view that “... students of all kinds yearned for acceptance and validation”. They define validation as “... engaging in those actions and outcomes that communicate to students they have the capacity and the competence to complete their college successfully”. Based on this view, I argue that educators of students who come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds should engage in validation and acceptance of students as this will make them feel part of the environment and motivated, as well as feel ready to play an active role in their learning. McInnis and Jamesare (1996:1) warn educators who are responsible for first year students that care must be taken to ensure that the level of challenge involved in adjusting to different teaching and learning styles as well as managing more work loads should not ‘overwhelm and alienate students’. Educators should also ensure that first year students are from the onset introduced to the ways in which they are expected to learn in a specific discipline. This could be done by introducing preparatory courses on study methods as well as how to use study materials. In my view this will facilitate transition. On the question of learning environment, Bisschoff and Potts (1998:117) suggest that



educators should strive to gain a "... deeper understanding of the students' learning environment as seen from the students' perspective". Based on this understanding, educators should strive to create a welcoming learning environment which will influence students' learning positively. One such measure that could be taken by educators is to involve students actively in their learning (Stage, et al. 1999:15).

For the abovementioned measures to be effective, educators should ensure that they address problems experienced by students both inside and outside the classroom, as these problems have a direct as well as an indirect impact on students' learning (Terenzini, et al. 1996:57). When measures are taken to address problems experienced by students, educators should always remember that activities outside the classroom influence activities inside the classroom, and vice versa (Terenzini, 1993:10). It is for this reason that Wood (1998:93) maintains that when measures are taken to improve the cognitive development of students, the whole institution should be involved, not only those who are responsible for student development. Amos and Fischer (1998:17) support this view in principle and suggest that academic development activities should be integrated into 'mainstream teaching and learning activities' and should not be addressed as separate activities. I support this view because as Behr (1987b:7) warns that by being in a support programme, students could misinterpret this as implying that they are second rate and not academically talented. This perception, if not handled carefully, could lead to a negative stigma which impacts negatively on their learning. For this reason, I argue that students should be consulted in and play a role in the planning and implementation of academic support programmes.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

In spite of a proliferation of studies on students' experiences in higher education, the need to find out how students are experiencing their learning and learning environment will always exist. The history of education in South Africa as highlighted above, makes this need even more serious because the negative impact of the previous educational system will take a long period of time to eradicate. As there are continuous changes being implemented in our current education system, comparative studies of experiences

of students from different educational backgrounds could provide a more comprehensive insight.

Engaging in studies on students' experiences enables educators to clearly define problems that could impact negatively on students' academic performance. In education, to clearly define the problem in itself is, according to Ramsden (1992:ix), more important than the provision of solutions, as this will enable educators to select relevant appropriate measures suitable for specific students and situations.

In this section, I have drawn on studies on students' experiences in higher education to support my main argument that if educators gain an in-depth knowledge of and information on students' experiences, they will be better equipped to plan and implement teaching strategies as well as to select learning materials that will enhance learning. The value of information on students' experiences, problems experienced by students, the impact of negative experiences, and possible solutions were examined. Even though emphasis is on the South African context, reference is made to studies done in Britain, Canada, Australia and the USA. The findings of these studies lead to the conclusion that students all over the world experience problems during transition from schools to universities. Educators are, however, warned not to generalize students' problems; instead they should investigate problems experienced in a particular situation for relevant and appropriate measures to be taken to address the problem. In my view, the two main measures that could be used to address most of the problems experienced by first year students are: aiding them during the transition period and ensuring that they use deep approaches to learning. In conclusion, I support Lewis's (1984:2) argument that, 'how students feel about being students, what is important to them and what affects their progress, are things that cannot be readily discovered'.

## 6. RESEARCH ORIENTATION AND METHODS

### 6.1 Research orientation

Like all research, this research was conducted within a particular paradigm. A paradigm is described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:4) as “a set of overarching and interconnected assumptions about the nature of reality”. Guba and Lincoln (1998:200) describe a paradigm as “a set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimates or first principles”. These beliefs are said to be basic because they cannot be proven but must be accepted simply on faith. Paradigms underpin the actions of the researcher and the methods used in the research project. In other words, conducting research within a particular paradigm provides the framework within which research takes place and also provides the basis on which verifiable knowledge can be built (Maykut & Morehouse,1994:4).

Merriam (1998:4) distinguishes three orientations to research (paradigms) as: positivist forms of research, interpretative research and critical research. Of the three orientations to research, my research paradigm can be described as interpretative as opposed to positivist and critical forms of research. The interpretative paradigm holds that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world. Therefore, there is not one single reality, but there are multiple socially constructed realities (Merriam,1998:6). Interpretative research aims at “understanding the meaning of the experience from the perspective of the participants” (Merriam,1998:4).

As the aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of first year OT students' experiences in higher education, I am interested in understanding the meaning of students' experiences from their own perspectives. The aim of the study and my research paradigm led to the use of qualitative research methods as the method of choice in this study. Maykut and Morehouse (1994:2) are of the view that this type of research method, generally examines “peoples' words and actions in a narrative or descriptive way more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants”. Qualitative research methods were used to explore experiences of first

year OT students in higher education. As highlighted by Merriam (1998: 7), in qualitative research methods the researcher is “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, and primarily employs an inductive research strategy”.

## **6.2. Sampling**

As this study was conducted by means of qualitative research methods, non-probability sampling was used to select participants. Merriam (1998: 61) is of the view that since generalisation is not the goal of qualitative research, non-probability sampling should be the method of choice for most qualitative research. The form of non-probability sampling that I used is called “purposeful” sampling. Of the different types of purposeful sampling identified by Goetz and Le Compte, Miles and Huberman, Patton (in Merriam,1998:62), I used “maximum variation purposeful sampling” to select information-rich participants. Maximum variation purposeful sampling is described by Lincoln and Guba, Patton, Taylor and Bogdan (in Maykut & Morehouse,1994:56) as a method through which the researcher “... attempts to understand some phenomenon by seeking out persons or settings that represent the greatest differences in that phenomenon”. Information rich cases are those cases from which the researcher can learn more about issues central to the purpose of the research (Patton,1990:169 -172). In order to do purposeful sampling, Merriam (1998:61) emphasises that it is important to determine the selection criteria based on the purpose of the study. The criteria that I used in this study are as follows:

- OT first year students who wrote grade twelve (12) at the end of 1999;
- students from former Department of Education and Training (DET) government schools; and
- students from different SA provinces

I first asked for permission from the head of the department of Occupational Therapy at Medunsa to conduct the study in the department using the facilities, equipment and the students’ files as well using first year students as participants. A copy of this letter was sent to the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Medunsa (See Appendix A, for a

copy of the letter). Once permission was granted, I read through first year students' files and compiled a list of those who met the selection criteria. I grouped those on the list according to the provinces they came from. From the list I chose participants from the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, North West and Northern Province who met the selection criteria.

On consideration of sample size, Lincoln and Guba in Merriam (1992: 64) state that it is difficult to decide beforehand on a sample size in qualitative research. It is recommended that the researcher should sample to the point of saturation. I initially planned to do twelve (12 ) interviews but ended up with 13 by which time the data were saturated and I ceased my interviewing.

### **6.3 The context of the data collection**

Medunsa is one of the three universities in Gauteng Province that offers a degree in Occupational Therapy. Historically, Medunsa was established in 1978 to train mainly black students at undergraduate level. The idea was to train black health professionals to render health services in the homelands. This has changed over the years, but black students remain in the majority, because in accordance with Medunsa's policy on selection, students selected each year should represent the demographics of the SA population. Medunsa admits about 700 first year students each year, of which approximately 35 register for Occupational Therapy. The Occupational Therapy department is one of the Allied Health Sciences departments that falls under the Faculty of Medicine. Due to the selection policy the majority of occupational therapy first year students come from former DET schools. This implies that most of them still face the legacy of inferior education. The proportion of males to female students differs from year to year, but the departments are encouraged to admit students who represent both sexes.

### **6.4 Data collection methods**

As the main aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of first year OT

students' experiences in higher education, the interview was my method of choice for collecting data, as I cannot observe experiences. Patton in Merriam (1998:72) is quoted as saying that an interview also allows us to "... enter into the other person's perspective". In the course of this study interviews enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of how OT students interpret the world around them. That is, students' experiences as well as their feelings about their experiences in higher education. My other reason for choosing interviews is motivated by the view of Bogdan and Taylor, and Kuh and Andreas (in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:80) that the interview has "the potential to illuminate salient features of culture and human experiences".

The main tool which I used to record the data during interviews was a tape recorder, which enabled me to preserve all the information given during the interviews for analysis. After each interview, I immediately wrote down my reflections on the interview, which contained insights that I gained as well as behaviours that I observed. I kept notes throughout the research project which contained my personal records of insights, beginning understandings, ideas, questions, concerns, problems experienced and decisions made during the research process. Glasser and Strauss, Lincoln and Guba, Taylor and Bogdan (in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:68) referred to this type of notes as "a diary", "a journal" or as "memos". The information from these notes were used throughout the research process especially when I analysed the data. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim before data were analysed.

The type of interview used in this study was "person-to-person" in-depth semi-structured interview. Maykut and Morehouse (1994:81) are of the opinion that in qualitative studies, open-ended questions which are designed to reveal what is important to understand about the phenomenon under investigation should be asked. They describe open-ended questions as questions that "invite" the interviewee to participate in a conversation. In this study, questions that reveal more about first year students' experiences in higher education were designed. These questions were supported by the use of probing questions which according to Patton (1990:324) help to clarify what the interviewee is talking about and also elaborate or give more information. Probing questions were also used when I wanted the interviewees to give specific examples of

what they were talking about, by encouraging interviewees to give more information about their feelings, reactions and anticipations.

The focus of the enquiry in this study is the experiences of first year occupational therapy students in higher education. For this reason, the following categories of inquiry were addressed during the interview:

- experience of being on the Medunsa campus,
- experience of being a first year occupational therapy student, and
- experience of lecturers and lectures.

These categories are based on ideas from literature regarding common possible problem areas experienced by first year students at universities as well as on the “question typology” as suggested by Patton (1990: 290 - 293).

### **Interview Schedule**

Based on the above categories the following open-ended questions were asked:

- Can you tell me about your experiences as a first year student on the Medunsa campus?
- How can you describe your experiences of participating in the first year B. Occ. Ther programme?
- Describe your positive experiences of lectures at Medunsa.  
Why would you regard such experiences as positive?
- Describe your negative experiences of lectures at Medunsa.  
Why would you regard such experiences as negative?
- Describe your positive experiences of practicals at Medunsa.  
Why would you regard such experiences as positive?
- Describe your negative experiences of practicals at Medunsa.  
Why would you regard such experiences as negative?
- Would you say that studying at university is different from studying at high school? Could you elaborate?
- Tell me about the financial support that you have towards your studies at Medunsa.

As suggested by Merriam (1998:82), for conducting an interview, I started by asking less sensitive questions and asked more sensitive questions only towards the end, such as those relating to financial support. By this stage, the interviewees were more relaxed and prepared to answer such questions. In order to obtain good quality information from interviews, I did what Patton (in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:98) suggest, namely establishing and maintaining a positive interview climate, and always being prepared and organised.

I conducted a “pilot interview” before doing the actual interviews. The pilot interview helped me to find out if questions which I planned to ask were understandable, unambiguous and whether they would enable me to get data relevant to the aim of my study. The pilot interview also gave me a clear indication of the time which I would need to conduct one interview, as well as the opportunity to practise conducting an interview (Merriam,1998:75). I also became aware that words like “programme” , “class” and “lectures” were used interchangeably, and for that reason I clarified the terms with the interviewee whenever necessary during interviews.

Before starting with the actual interview, I introduced myself (as the interviewer) in my capacity as a RAU student and explained why the interview was taking place. I explained the purpose of the study and the reason why the interviewee was selected. I asked to tape record the interview and to take notes during the interview and gave reasons for doing so. I reassured the interviewee of confidentiality and anonymity to enable him or her feel comfortable enough to participate. At the end of this explanation, I handed out a consent form (see Appendix B, for a copy of the consent form) to be signed by each participant. The actual interview started only after this procedure was completed. All interviews were conducted in English, but participants were encouraged to express themselves in their first languages when they found it difficult to do so in English.

All participants were eager to discuss their experiences openly even though three of them seemed very anxious at the beginning of the interviews. My general impression was that participants were reluctant to use their first languages with the exception of



three who responded to all questions in their first languages, Setswana, Northern Sotho and Luvenda. Although my first language is Luvenda, I can communicate well in Setswana and Northern Sotho, which made it easier to conduct the interviews and possible to ask probing questions. I planned to conduct my interviews devoting one hour to each participant, but because all participants including those who responded in their first languages were very brief in their response, the longest interview was only 30 minutes. I encouraged them, however to supply more detailed information, by asking them a number of probing questions.

## **6.5 Data analysis**

All interviews were recorded on audio-cassettes. Each interview was then transcribed verbatim in dialogue form. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym to protect his/her identity. These transcripts were analysed for recurring themes and patterns using the constant comparative method of analysis, as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 126 - 144). This process is discussed in detail in section 7.

## **6.6 Ethical considerations**

I was aware that some of the information regarding students' experiences could be very sensitive. What they said could result in negative consequences for them because of the nature of the questions I asked. Examples of such questions were those related to how students experience their lectures, lecturers and teaching methods used at Medunsa. This always holds a certain risk for participants, especially when negative experiences are expressed. Merriam (1998:132) suggests that the researcher should respect the privacy of the respondents and keep them as anonymous as possible. The respondents were also asked to give informed consent. The list of provisions for a personal code of ethics provided by Patton (1990:356) for use during the research process, include "informed consent, confidentiality, promises and reciprocity as well as risk assessment". I therefore took the following steps to ensure an ethical study:

- I requested that each participant sign an informed written consent form before conducting the interview. I explained to the participants the purpose of the study

as well as what the findings would be used for, before asking them to sign the consent form.

- I allocated pseudonyms to all participants to conceal their identity.
- I offered to inform participants of my findings if they were interested.
- I reassured all participants that whatever they said in the interviews, would be treated confidentially. I promised them that revealing information would be erased from the transcripts to ensure confidentiality.

## **6.7 Provisions for trustworthiness**

As ethical considerations have already been addressed above, this section addresses the issue of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is important to address because as Merriam (1998:198) contends, all research should be concerned with “producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner”. Lincoln and Guba (in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:64) describe trustworthiness as the term used to refer to “the believability of the researcher’s findings”, in other words, the extent to which others can have confidence in the findings of the study. This is particularly important in qualitative research because as Patton (1990) puts it, “the credibility of qualitative inquiry is especially dependent on the credibility of the researcher because the researcher is the instrument of data collection and the centre of the analytic process”. In an attempt to ensure validity and reliability I have already explained my perspective and experiences as well as the philosophical basis which underpins the study as suggested by Patton (1990:460). There are a number of steps that a researcher can take to increase trustworthiness of the research findings. In this study provisions for trustworthiness are mainly through an “audit trail”.

Coming to the question of internal validity, Merriam (1998:201) describes internal validity as concerned with “the question of how research findings match reality” and if the researchers observed what they think they are observing. In this study I aimed at ensuring internal validity by setting a clear audit trail. I gave clear details of the research methodology used, in such a way that the reader should be able to follow why and how each step was carried out. The original interview transcript was provided as an example

of an interview (Appendix C). Before writing up my findings I requested one of my colleagues to comment on the findings. Merriam (1998:204) refers to this as “peer examination”. I also took back my findings to the participants to do what Lincoln and Guba (in Maykut & Morehouse,1994:147) regard as “member checks”. Five participants were asked to say if their experiences were described accurately.

External validity, according to Guba and Lincoln (in Merriam,1998:207), is only possible if the study has internal validity and is concerned with “the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to another situation”. That is, how generalisable are the results. In qualitative research, external validity can be viewed in terms of the user of the study, in that the extent to which the findings apply to the user’s situation is up to the user to decide (Merriam, 1998:211). I have endeavoured to record clearly how this study was carried out, the context in which data were collected, how data were collected and analysed as well as the findings of this study in order to increase the external validity of the study.

On the question of reliability, the traditional definition of the term reliability, which refers to “the extent to which research findings can be replicated”, does not fit well in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998:205). Merriam (1998:206) indicates that in qualitative research the goal is not that outsiders should get the same results, rather to concur that the results make sense and they are consistent and dependable in relation to data collected. This is due to the fact that human experience is complex and the research is based on a human being as an instrument. To ensure that the results of this study are dependable, I gave a detailed description of how data were collected, how categories were derived and how decisions were made.

## 7. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

Data analysis is described by Merriam (1998:178) as “the process of making sense out of the data”. Making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said as well as what the researcher has seen and read. As I have already mentioned under section 6.5, the constant comparative method was used for data analysis. This method involves the construction of categories or themes and subcategories, derived from data which are continuously compared with one another. This method is characterised by a search for recurring patterns in the data (Merriam,1998:179). Merriam (1992:151) is of the view that in qualitative research, data collection and analysis should take place simultaneously. This view is supported by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:123) who say that data analysis should be conducted early and should take place as an ongoing research activity. The advantage of doing this was that I did not have to deal with large volumes of data to be analysed at the end of all the interviews. The findings highlighted the emerging insights, and problems which I needed to address before the next interview. For this reason, I analysed data from my first interview before conducting my second interview.

I used what Maykut and Morehouse (1994:148) describe as the “more hands-on approach” when analysing the data instead of computer programmes. After the first recorded interview with **Edith** was transcribed verbatim in a dialogue format, I coded the dialogue form indicating the name (pseudonym) of the participant and the page number of the transcript. For example, **T / E - 1** refers to a transcript (T) of the interview with Edith (E), page one (1). I started the process by reading through the transcript of my interview with Edith. As I read through for the third time, I began to “unitise data” by looking at “units of meaning”. I separated one unit of meaning from the next by drawing a line using a pencil, and writing a word or phrase carrying the essence of this unit of meaning in the margin. I also clearly marked the transcript and the page number which this unit of meaning comes from. Edith’s response to my question on her experiences as a first year student at Medunsa campus, “*OK, first I realised that I am not used to studying like many hours. That is what I have experienced. Like I used to stay up studying up to “bo” (about) ten, maybe eleven and I am not used to waking up earlier*”

*in the morning. Like I was used to only wake up at about six, but then only study in the afternoon, but now I have learned to like when I am free I have to study because, especially now that we are about to write exams”,* was extracted as a unit of meaning and the words “*studying / many hours*” were written in the margin. The code T / E - 1 was also written in the margin to mark that this unit of meaning is from a transcript of the interview with Edith on page one. Each unit of meaning was then cut out of the original transcript and pasted onto a card to facilitate further handling. These units of meaning were then transferred to the discovery sheet, where I began the process of linking the emerging words, concepts and ideas to find recurring themes, that could form the bases of the provisional categories.

From the interview with Edith about 15 provisional categories emerged. Some of these categories are listed in Table 7.1 below.

**Table 7. 1: Some Provisional Categories from the Interview with Edith**

. Studying many hours	. Life style is different
. Take own responsibility	. Uses different study methods
. Lacks confidence to consult lecturers	. Problems with terminology used
. Students assist each other	. Doing many subjects
. Different teaching methods	. Uncertain about financial position

Having prepared a list of provisional categories, I now placed each coded unit of meaning under the provisional categories, using the “look/feel - alike criteria”, described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:137). As I continually used the “look / feel - alike criteria” to compare the data cards with provisional categories, data that did not seem to fit into a particular category were placed elsewhere. Some of the data that did not fit into a particular category were tentatively named to represent a new provisional category.

When a provisional category contained approximately six to eight unitised data cards,

I was in a position to draw up a “rule of inclusion”. A rule of inclusion as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:139) should be written in the form of a propositional statement which conveys the meaning contained in the data cards collected under a category name. All the remaining data cards were then included on the basis of rules for inclusion. The rest of the interviews were all analysed by the same process of data analysis as described above. Analysis continued until there were no data left.

Table 7.2 below is an excerpt of a provisional category, and includes the rules of inclusion, the applicable units of meaning and notes to assist in further exploration.



**Table 7.2: Excerpts from a provisional category (Studying many hours) with units of meaning, rule for inclusion and notes to assist in further exploration.**

<p><b><u>Studying many hours</u></b></p>	<p><b>Rule for inclusion:</b> Students feel that in order to cope with their academic / work demands they have to study for many hours which do not give them enough time to rest and participate in social and recreational activities</p>
<p>Studying every day</p>	<p><b>T/A-1</b> I used to study when we were writing a test and work was easy. So here I study everyday whether I am writing a test or not.</p>
<p>Not used to studying many hours</p>	<p><b>T/E-1</b> Ok, first I realised that I am not used to studying like many hours.</p>
<p>Not having to do household activities like at home makes it possible to study for many hours</p>	<p><b>T/L-2</b> At home I did not have enough time for studying because I am a girl, I have plenty to do, the washing and clean the house. Here I have plenty of time to study. In my room when I wake up I study.</p>
<p>Studying every weekend</p>	<p><b>T/N-1</b> Well, I thought it would be easy like it is tough. Right now we have to write every Monday, it is like there are no weekends for us. You have to study every weekend and on Monday you are writing. I don't enjoy being a student, not as much as I thought I would.</p>
<p>Life is not balanced</p>	<p><b>T/P-5</b> Ish, I think at my age I think life must be in-between, life should be balanced.</p>
<p>Studying throughout the day</p>	<p><b>T/S-3</b> Here if you are in your room it is like you just feel that is very strange. If you are relaxing, you just relaxing, you just feel, you tell yourself that you are wasting time.</p>

By exploring, experimenting and constantly checking, I systematically gained a deeper understanding of the categories that were beginning to form. This enabled me to identify ambiguities and overlaps and in this regard the rules of inclusion were refined and adjusted where it was deemed necessary. The refined rules of inclusion for each of my categories were then compared to identify those that stood alone and those that had some connections with others. These were written up as “outcomes propositions” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:144) and formed the framework of the findings.

In line with Maykut and Morehouse’s (1994:157-158) suggestion, outcomes were prioritised according to the outcome propositions, importance in contributing to my focus of enquiry and their prominence in the data. Units of meaning or categories that were recurrent among all the participants were indicators of their importance. The findings are now discussed.





## 8. FINDINGS

### 8.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of occupational therapy first year students in higher education. The questions that I asked during the interviews enabled me as researcher to explore their experiences. Most participants felt that it was a privilege to be a university student and they were very proud of that. Participants also acknowledge that even though they do experience problems in their studies, there were ways in which such problems could be addressed. Most of the participants, with the exception of four, felt that most of their problems related to workload and writing tests every Monday. The participants felt that these problems could be easily addressed by the OT department, by streamlining and grouping departmental subjects together. Participants however expressed their eagerness to meet the challenges they were facing.

My general impression of the students I interviewed is that they did not seem to be reflecting much on what we were discussing. Their comments were very brief. Initially I thought this was as a result of language difficulties, but even those who responded in their first languages were also very brief. The nature of my relationship with the students (lecturer/student) could have had an influence on the manner in which they responded, irrespective of the reassurance that the information would be kept confidential and would not be used against them.

As already indicated under section 7, at the end of the data analysis process, the outcomes were prioritised according to my focus of inquiry and prominence in the data. These categories and sub-categories served as a basis for the findings of this research. They are listed in Table 8.1 below.

**Table 8.1: Table of Categories and Sub-categories and the Outcome Statements as derived from the process of data analysis.**

Categories and Sub-Categories	Outcome Statement
<p><b>1. Many subjects in first year</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Relevance of theoretical and practical subjects</li> <li>. Application of subjects to OT course not clear</li> <li>. Positive experiences of subjects passed</li> <li>. Not clear on how subjects are marked / how marks are allocated</li> <li>. Enjoy and learn more during practical classes more than theory classes</li> <li>. Experience activity classes like card-making negatively</li> <li>. High work loads</li> <li>. Doing more subjects than other first year students</li> <li>. Daily programme full</li> <li>. Studying many hours</li> <li>. No time for social life</li> <li>. Writing a test every Monday</li> </ul>	<p>Students feel that some subjects are not relevant to the OT course and the application of these subjects to OT is also not clear. Students express problems experienced in specific subjects and feel that subjects passed are well understood. Students are not sure how marks are allocated in some subjects. Students feel that they learn more and better during practical classes. Students feel that their work load is heavy because they are doing too many subjects.</p>

<p><b>2. Teaching methods used at universities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Only an outline and headings are presented</li> <li>. Application of information is included</li> <li>. Self study</li> <li>. No spoon feeding, information is made available to students</li> <li>. Different from what was anticipated</li> <li>. No homework and exercises</li> <li>. Language difficulties</li> <li>. Communication difficulties during group discussions</li> </ul>	<p>Students experience teaching methods used as different from those used at high school. Students feel that the methods used encourage them to do independent study and apply the knowledge. Students feel that it is difficult to adjust to the teaching methods used, to understand what lecturers are saying and find the terminology used daunting during the first few months.</p>
<p><b>3. Adjustment to life at university</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Feeling happy and proud at Medunsa</li> <li>. Isolated from social life</li> <li>. Feeling unsafe on the campus</li> <li>. Lifestyle is different</li> <li>. Came late for the official orientation programme</li> <li>. Feeling independent, responsible for oneself and own action and accept the consequences</li> <li>. Feel free to interact with other students</li> <li>. Students and staff are helpful</li> <li>. Lecturers are too lenient towards students</li> <li>. Some students scare others</li> </ul>	<p>Students value being admitted to Medunsa as an achievement in itself and feel happy to be at a university. Students recognize the challenges they have to meet as well as the responsibilities they have to take. To be able to solve own problems is experienced by students as one of the main demands of adjusting to university life. Students acknowledge that students and staff on the campus come from different cultural backgrounds and they have to accept and cooperate with them. Some students do not feel free to consult their lecturers and to talk in class initially. Those who missed the official orientation programme were orientated by colleagues and friends.</p>

<p><b>4. Available facilities encourage learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Basic facilities like a library, study halls and laboratories are available</li> <li>. Hostel rooms are used for studying</li> <li>. Electricity makes it possible to study longer</li> </ul>	<p>Students express positive feelings about facilities on the campus which they experience as encouraging learning more than social life.</p>
<p><b>5. Study methods used to meet work demands</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Students study in groups</li> <li>. Application of what is learned</li> <li>. Study long before tests or examinations</li> <li>. Study one subject at a time</li> </ul>	<p>Students feel the need to study in groups because in groups they support each other, advise each other and clarify information for each other.</p>
<p><b>6. Uncertain about financial position</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. No sponsorship</li> <li>. Parents unable to pay all fees</li> <li>. Application of the university financial policy on unpaid fees not consistent</li> </ul>	<p>Students recognise the need to pay all outstanding fees but are unsure as to whether they will get funds to do so before the end of the year. Students are not sure of the measures that may be taken against them if they fail to pay their outstanding fees. Feeling uncertain impacts negatively on students' studies because concentration on their studies becomes disturbed.</p>

Each Category and its subcategory is discussed in the next section in the order in which they appear in Table 8.1 above. Excerpts from interviews are used to illustrate the discussion. I then conclude with the summary of the findings.

## 8.2 Discussion of findings

### 8.2.1 Subjects in first year

The students who were interviewed feel that some of the subjects they are doing are not relevant to the occupational therapy course. Examples given by students of such courses are Biophysics and Sociology. Application of the two subjects mentioned above to occupational therapy is not clear to most students. These feelings and perceptions are expressed as follows by students, Selinah said, “... *Nna I don't see gore di re tswela mohola, like Biophysics, always they give examples of the nurses in the hospital. Every example ke manurse, ga ba ke bare O.T. Nna ke bona e le a lot of pressure to us go dira Biophysics le Sociology because ga di na mohola (I don't see their value to us, like Biophysics, always they give examples of the nurses in the hospital. Every example is nurses in a hospital. Every example is nurses, they never say OT, ... I see it as a lot of pressure to us to do Biophysics and Sociology because they are of no value)*”. Her feelings are echoed by Edith when she said that, “... *like in Biophysics, the application we did so far are not related to occupational therapy because all the application they say in nursing this and that, not in occupational therapy*”. Commenting about Sociology Margaret also expressed the same feeling when she said, “... *ja, Sociology is for nurses. Even when they are explaining in the book, they say skill nursing practice, they say nothing about OT*”. This perception influences students' motivation to study these particular subjects. Student also feel these subjects which they perceive as unnecessary add a lot of work for nothing. Entwistle (1992:1736) emphasises that it is important to explain the relevance of the subjects to the students because this has an influence on students' learning and studying. If the content of the subjects is perceived as relevant, students tend to use deep approaches to learning and are motivated to study.

Students express general problems which they experience in subjects like Therapeutic Media, Psychology and Anatomy which lead to poor performance in these subjects. Of particular concern to students is how marks are allocated in relation to what they are expected to know. Nancy became very emotional when talking about how some subjects are marked. She shared the following in this regard, “... *you don't even understand the*

marking. *Like the ways she marks, it is not the way one should be marked. It is bad*". She further expressed her feelings with specific reference to a particular lecturer as follows, *"... Like just think much, there is this one even if you work hard you get the same mark as the previous one ..."*. Kenneth feels that the question of marks allocation as is complex as he is not sure whether the problem lies with the lecturer or himself. He explains his feelings as follows, *"The lecturers (laughs) I don't have problems with them but sometimes this thing of mark allocation, ... maybe I didn't know what was expected from me"*. The students' concern about how marks are allocated in my view points to what Ramsden (1992:67) refers to as "the importance of assessment in students' learning". In Ramsden's (1992:67) words, the methods educators use "to assess students are one of the most critical of all influences on their learning". Students adapt to the requirements they perceive educators expect of them. Educators should therefore use assessment methods which give students the message that deep approaches to learning are rewarded.

Coming to theory and practical classes, students feel that they learn better and understand more during practical classes than theory classes. Alpheus feels that students *"learn easy"* during practicals, while Selinah feels that doing practicals enable students to *"have the light"* of what they will be doing in future as qualified therapists. To David practicals help when studying because in his words, *"Zwa practicals zwitou ri thusa ngauri hezwi ri tshi vhala zwa theory nga maanda ri a kona u vha ri tshi khou relator na zwine zwa khou itea kha practicals and then ra kona u pfesesa zwavhudi Zwino zwa theory habe ri vha ri tshi khou sokou tou khirema ri sa khou divha uri kha reality zwi vha zwi tshi khou tou itisa hani hezwi zwithu (practicals help a lot because when you read theory, you can relate it to practicals and then you can understand better. Theory we just memorize not knowing how these things happen in reality)"*. Most of the students interviewed have positive experiences of practical classes. Students feel that practical classes give them opportunities to actively participate in what they are learning. Participation provides students with active experience in class and they get the opportunity to reflect on what they are doing instead of just memorising (Shor, 1992:21). Students also feel being part of what they are learning and become motivated to learn. A number of students have negative experiences of some of the practical activities done like "card-making" as they did not see the relevance of such activities to the course.

When talking about the number of subjects that they are doing, students express the feeling that they are doing more subjects than at high school and other first year students at Medunsa. The students' perception, namely that of doing many subjects, is in line with what Pancer and Humsberger (2000:2) highlight as one of the realities that first year students face during transition. They contend that students face the challenge of the academic work which is experienced as more difficult and much more in volume than high school work. To Kenneth, the subjects are just too many. When expressing his feelings he said, *"Jaa, hey is another thing, they are too much. They are too much. They are too much, eh. Thus my problem. They are stressful because even at high school I was doing six subjects but now we are doing nine subjects and you have to put effort in all of them"*. Doing many subjects is perceived by students as having a greater work load irrespective of the content of each of those subjects. Many subjects result in students having to write a test every Monday which increases pressure on them as they have to study for many hours and have no time to rest or participate in social and recreational activities. Margaret feels that she is experiencing difficulties because of this reason, *"I am experiencing difficulties because in our course we are doing more subjects, so we are writing a test every Monday"*. Commenting on the daily programme Margaret further emphasises the problem of doing many subjects by saying, *"Oh, from quarter to eight until ten past four there is no break. On Wednesday we do not even have lunch"*. Students acknowledge that with time they got used to the number of subjects even though this did not solve their problem of studying for many hours per day in an attempt to cope with the work load. The impact of a heavy work load is that it is associated with students opting to use surface approaches to learning in an attempt to cope with their work (Entwistle, 1992:1736).

An interesting observation is that students feel positive about all subjects passed and they are convinced that all subjects passed are well understood.

### **8.2.2 Teaching methods at university**

When the students I interviewed were talking about their experiences of the teaching methods used at a university, it became clear that the methods come short of empowering the students. Even though some of the principles of "empowering education" as described

by Shor (1992:17) which include participation, problem posing, etc are applied, my overall impression based on the students' comments is that they are applied to a very limited extent. I hold the view that when dealing with students who come from disadvantaged educational and socio-economic backgrounds, educators should implement the principles of "empowering education" as described by Shor (1992:15-1999). These principles will enable educators to address the needs of such students. Amongst other things, these principles will enable students to "develop strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry and critical curiosity about society ..." instead of learning what is just presented to them as is (Shor,1992:15).

Students express the view that teaching methods used at a university are different from those used at high school. The main difference according to the students interviewed was that at high school teachers did most of the work for students while at a university students are expected to do most of the work themselves. This difference is explained by David when he said that, "*Zwi fhambana ngauri university zwinzhi zwinzhi a zwi sokou itiwa nga malecturer, ndiuri zwino tshikoloni habe vha do wana mudededzi u do ita zwothe. Arali ro nwala test kana tshinwe tshithu, ndiuri u do ita answer dzothe a ethe kha board, kana a sokou disa answer dzo ralo. Hu uri fhano ri fanela uri ri tou ya ri tshi tou dzi toda na manwe matshudeni so (It is different because here at university, lecturers do not do a lot of things while at school teachers do everything. If we have written a test or another thing, a teacher works out answers alone on the board or gives us model answers as they are, but here we are expected to look for answers with other students on our own)*". Students also express that at high school teachers gave them notes but here they are expected to write notes for themselves. While students feel that at school they were spoon fed, most of the students feel that there is no spoon feeding at a university. Frank summarises this by saying, "*... most of the work is based on yourself*". Another student, Alpheus, is very convinced that there is a difference in the methods of teaching. During the interview, Alpheus paused for short time when talking about the teaching methods, he seemed to be debating with himself during that time, and came up with what seems like a conclusion, "*Ja, there is no spoon feeding here*". Students such as Edith regard being given notes by teachers, extra classes for those who do not understand, teaching "*sentence by sentence moving from one chapter to another*" and being told what to do all the time as spoon



feeding. Margaret sees spoon feeding as related to language used when teaching, and said the following about the language which was used at high school, “... *they were spoon feeding us because they use to teach most things in our language*”.

Students expressed that lecturers just present headings and outlines during lectures, not detailed information. Selinah said, “*They don’t teach us the whole thing*”, while expressing her feeling on the question of content of lectures. On this issue Kenneth feels that, “... *here is like a lecturer is just summarising. It is a matter of just summarising, just giving you a guide how to read. ... they just give you an outline of how to read*”. Students experience lecturers as just doing “*a touch up*” with each student having to go and read the details.

According to the students interviewed for this study, the methods used at a university encourage them to do independent self study and apply their knowledge. However, some of the students experience problems in adjusting to these methods of teaching used at a university. Nancy feels that it would make a difference if teachers could start to use some of these methods of teaching in grade eleven to prepare students for tertiary education.

Coming to the question of language used during lectures and practicals, students experienced difficulties in understanding what the lecturers were saying and the terminology they were using for the first few months. In the words of Margaret “*at times it was difficult, those Whites sometimes I did not hear them. Some words were not well pronounced*”. On the same issue, Margaret further said, “*at high school they use to explain in our language if we do not understand. Here is only English*”. Terms used are also not always understood by students. Edith explains her experiences of language problems by saying, “... *like she (one of her lecturers) was using the other terms. Like I had to go back to my room and check the dictionary and look what this word mean*”.

Language difficulties experienced by students impact negatively on their studies especially, as Kenneth explains, “... *in courses like Psychology and Sociology where the English is very demanded ...*”. The educational background from which students come from seems to play a major role in the nature and extent of the language problem experienced by students. Alpheus’s explanation of his background illustrates the reality that some of the

students have experienced, when he said, “*They were using Shangaan even though they were teaching English, they were using Shangaan (laughing)*”. Language problems according to Kenneth go beyond formal classroom situations. During group discussions with other students, if other languages either than English or their own first language are used, some students feel left out if they do not understand and cannot speak nor understand the language used by other students.

Students expressed that in due course they felt they had a better understanding of what the lecturers were saying and the terminology they were using. Kenneth feels that he was assisted by the English department to cope with the language problems. He looked very proud and confident when he said, “*Jaa, English was quite difficult for me especially at the beginning of the year because I am from a township school, so it was very difficult. ..., but the English department helped me. I can hear now*”. To overcome language difficulties, in Jiya’s (1993: 83) view, if teaching English to students is chosen as an option, it must be taught “in the context of the particular discipline”.

### 8.2.3 Adjustment to life at university



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Life at university in this report refers to what Blocher (in Banning, 1990:56) describes as “the situation within the environment, support structures and reward structure”. That is, the opportunities, rewards and supports available for students on the campus. When talking about adjustment to life at university, students explain their feelings of being part of the Medunsa campus environment, their feelings of being independent, interaction with staff and fellow students, and orientation to the campus.

Students express the feeling of being proud and happy to be at a university. They feel it is a step in the right direction to improve the quality of their lives. This feeling is well described in Frank’s explanation, “*Well, eh, what I can say is, for me to be here is something that boost my ego. I mean I know where I am going, I am going to achieve. It is very unlike when you don’t even know where you are going and what you are going to do. You may apply and all that, but it does not guarantee that you will be doing what you have applied for. But for now I have a goal that I am looking for now. As I am studying*

*and that goal is clear because I have seen my goal. ... I have life through Medunsa ...* ". Irrespective of feeling isolated from a social life, students still feel it is the right thing to be at Medunsa because by *"being here, they are organising their future"*. According to Mortimore (1992:1017), the feelings that being at university improve students' life chances as they are working towards a qualification, motivate them to work harder. Initially, some students experience difficulties in adjusting to being away from home and parents, as well as adjusting to different life styles (particularly fashion clothing) on the campus. The campus environment was experienced as unsafe, especially at night, and as a result, students' mobility to and from the library and study halls are limited. The feelings of being unsafe on the campus have a negative influence on students' motivation to learn. This is highlighted by Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995:2) when they said that, "people who feel unsafe, ... are unlikely to be motivated to learn". The Medunsa campus environment is also experienced by most students that I interviewed as a place meant for working only, not for enjoying life.

Students feel independent and responsible for their own actions. Students express the view that they are aware that they have to face the consequences of their own decisions. Students express the view that they recognise the need to look after themselves and behave in a responsible manner. Some of them are experiencing taking responsibility at this particular level for the first time in their lives, because parents used to look after them at home. Described in the words of Margaret, the type of responsibility that students have to take on can be summarised as follows, *"Because here [there are] lots of things to enjoy, [it] is your choice, you can choose to put your books [away, if] there is a movie [or] there is a "bash" you go there, [there will be] nobody to tell you to do the right thing. Like at school we use to stay at home and your parents would ask, are you studying? Are you studying? Did you write your home work? But here nobody ask you if you have done your work, you have to do it for yourself"*. Those students who are goal-directed are aware that it is important to choose to study instead of entertainment as scoring low marks and failing are discouraging.

When interacting with fellow students and staff, the students I interviewed experience the majority of the students and staff as helpful and supportive towards their learning. Most

students however do not feel free to ask and answer questions in class, and lack confidence to approach their lecturers when experiencing problems. Coming to the handling of the classroom situation by lecturers, students feel that lecturers tend to be very lenient as they do not always call students to order when misbehaving. In addition, students feel that lecturers do not seem to care if students do not do their work. Frank, when referring to interaction with fellow students said, *“Ja, many of them they are supportive because when we came here many of them welcomed us. They showed us the place, tell us how we do some other things”*. When talking about interaction with lecturers Edith said, *“myself I don’t have that much confidence to go straight to the lecturer and ask”*. The implication of what Edith describes as lack of confidence to go straight to the lecturer and ask, is that it can be easily regarded by some lecturers as in line with the students’ cultural practices. Lecturers who lack knowledge on different cultural practices are likely to accept students who do not approach them at all, instead of assisting or supporting such students to become confident. Lack of confidence leads to students, not maximally utilising available learning opportunities. Added to this disadvantage, failure of students to approach lecturers and ask questions may confirm to lecturers “the presumption deficit in human beings who fail to conform to expectations” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995:6). Consequently the students may be perceived as having problems with learning or as unable to meet learning demands at a university.

The experiences and feelings that most of the students interviewed seemed reluctant to talk about relate to interaction with people (both staff and students) who come from different cultural backgrounds. Most of the students express the view that they do not have negative experiences even though they initially thought it would be difficult. To some of the students this exposure in itself forms part of their learning. All the students interviewed recognise that students and staff at Medunsa are from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. My understanding of students’ attitudes and views towards students and staff who come from different cultural backgrounds can be summarised in the words of Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995:8) who state that one “need[s] to respect similarities and differences among human beings and to go beyond sensitivity to active and effective responsiveness”.

To aid with adjustment during the transition period an orientation programme is organised for first year students for a week immediately after registration. The content of this programme includes orientation to the policies of the university, physical facilities, students' activities, and study methods. To a limited extent students are also orientated to the courses they are registered for. Because of some students registering late, they miss the opportunity to attend such a programme. Some of the students who miss the orientation programme are oriented informally by fellow students while others rely on the written programme to orient themselves. When answering a question on how she orientated herself to the facilities at Medunsa, Precious was very brief, "*Classmates*". Most of the students I interviewed failed to attend the orientation programme. Those who attended the programme felt that the programme was helpful even though it did not address their immediate needs like orientation to specific lecture halls. Students however feel that by attending this programme they felt more welcomed and free. In addition to these feelings, for Irene, this programme made her feel "*safe and secured*" because she knows what is happening on the Medunsa campus. Contrary to an observation which Lewis (1984:6) makes on acclimatising of students to a new environment that most students seem "confused [rather] than helped by university, departmental and student arrangements designed to be of assistance", the students who attended the orientation programme generally feel positive about the programme. They however pointed out what they feel could be improved.

#### **8.2.4 Available facilities encourage learning**

Students express positive feelings about facilities at Medunsa. Students experience facilities as mainly encouraging learning rather than social life. Nancy explains her feelings about the facilities as follows, "*Well, I will give it ten out of ten for learning. Like it is challenging, it improves your learning skills. ... As for the environment I don't feel that is full of life (laughing)*". Comparing facilities at his home and at Medunsa, Frank said, "*There is no electricity*" referring to his home, "*... but here you find time to use the whole night to study whereas compared to home you cannot study the whole night. There are many things that you can't find like here there is a library and study hall*". Students feel that the library and study halls are of value especially when they cannot study at the hostels

because of the noise. Some students feel that hostel rooms are not inviting but nevertheless feel that they encourage learning. Irene feels that everything regarding facilities at Medunsa is fine because *“there is everything, you can do practicals”* using available machines, equipment and laboratories which in her view are up to standard. Using facilities like the library and study halls is in Jane’s words *“motivating because you see people sitting there”*. This makes her feel challenged and motivated to study harder. In my view the positive feelings and perceptions of the facilities at Medunsa, may be influenced mainly by their experiences of inadequate facilities in the high schools from which they come. As a result of the previous South African government policies and poor funding of schools which were meant for black children, some such schools still lack basic facilities and resources for learning (Naicker, 1996:3 ;Vice,1991:6-7).

#### **8.2.5 Study methods used to meet work demands**

Students feel the need to study in groups because it offers an opportunity to support, advise and clarify information to one another. For this reason students engage in group discussions most of the time. Frank regards participation in study as a new experience to him. Study groups at Medunsa as experienced by David are different from those at high school in that as he explained it, *“... ndi uri u vhala ha hone arali ri tshi khou vhala fhethu huthihi munwe na munwe u khou vhala zwawe o dzula e ethe e thungo. Zwa fhanu zwi khwine ngauri ri vha ri tshi khou vhala ngaa group and ri tshi dovha ri tashi khou haseledza nga group (because even if we were studying at one place, each one of us was studying his or her own work separately. Here it is better because we study as a group and discuss whatever we are studying)”*. The students’ feelings and experiences on studying in groups is very much in line with what Nyamapfene and Letseka (1995:165) identify as advantages of group learning. They identify those advantages as being “fostering of joint effort, encouraging students to communicate with one another, co-operation and sharing of ideas”.

Students are aware that at university they are not simply expected to memorise the information but should be able to apply it. This is confirmed by Nancy when she said that she feels that *“the type of work, ... the nature of work, is not like at high school where you*

*just listen and know what is written in the book*". Ferreira (1995:154) is of the opinion that the different approaches used at schools and universities demand that at school students concentrate on the acquisition of knowledge, whereas at universities students are required to apply the knowledge they have acquired. Unlike in high school, where students tend to depend on their teachers to organise their studying for them, in higher education, students are more independent (Entwistle, 1992:1730). The approach used at universities also demands students to engage in independent study. Independent study is perceived by some students as very difficult to adjust to because they are ill-prepared to this approach to learning.

Students recognise the need to study long in advance before evaluations, and not a day or two before as the workload is heavy and the nature of work demands more than just memorisation. Studying long in advance is experienced by students like Kenneth as being difficult because of lack of planning. When explaining his problem he puts it as follows, *"I don't have a time table, I don't have time management. If I think of studying now, I study. I take a book and study. If I think of going out, I would go out now"*.

Students also express that they find it difficult to study more than one subject at a time. As they write a test every Monday, they tend to read only the subject they are writing a test on next. Fear of failing a test if they have not finished reading the scope encourages them to study in this pattern. For some students this is completely different from how they used to study at high school. The consequence, as explained by students, is that they do not always study all their subjects equally.

### **8.2.6 Uncertainty about financial position**

Pilkington (1994:55) makes an observation that "students' poverty is hidden from university authorities and often denied or underestimated by the students themselves. The disclosure of debts comes normally when a student has reached a personal crisis". If this observation can be generalised to apply to all university students, then all the students interviewed who do not have bursaries are going through personal crises. They were all very vociferous about their financial problems and uncertainties. They all came across as

being deeply affected and concerned about their financial situation.

Students express feelings of uncertainty regarding unpaid fees as most of them do not have sponsors. Some students have applied for bursaries but as Edith explains, *“I have applied for the bursaries, and no reply for now, maybe next year earlier or later this year”*. Students feel that the financial aid system at Medunsa is poor compared to other institutions. Parents of most of the students are responsible for paying fees. Students acknowledge that their parents are willing to pay all fees but are unable to do so because of other financial commitments. Jane on this issue said, *“I know they (her parents) want to give money”*. Another student, Edith, summarizes her situation as follows, *“So far I don’t have a bursary, my parents are paying for me, but so far I have paid only R3 000,00 because my father only send me R500,00 per month. That is what he can afford per month. But he is trying by all means, he will pay, he said so”*.

Students express feelings of being uncertain as to whether they will be allowed to write their examination and get their results at end of the year. The financial policy of Medunsa stipulates that students with outstanding fees are not allowed to write examinations. In practice over the years, all students including those with outstanding fees are nevertheless allowed to write their examinations. As Edith explains, students are never sure of the official position regarding the application of this particular policy. She explained it as follows, *“It is affecting my studies because sometimes I think, at first I thought I was not going to write exams. But I talked to my friends about that and they said that I don’t have to worry. I can write the exams, but the thing is, I won’t get the results”*. David, when talking about the same issue, explained that according to some senior students, only during examination time does the university become strict about students with outstanding fees. This hearsay seems to make students feel very anxious about their position and steps that may be taken against them.

Lack of money/ funds affects students’ attitudes towards studying in different ways. Jane feels pushed to study harder because as she explains, *“... I know if I fail or something my parents are “gona” pay more. It is actually pushing me, motivating me to perform”*. To Kenneth, lack of money / funds makes him feel demotivated to study. Explaining it in his



words he said, “... *you can't study if you are broke. Without money you always think, where am I going to get money*”.

To summarise, students feel uncertain about outcomes of bursary applications, measures that could be taken against them for failing to pay all the fees for the academic year, and whether their parents would be able to pay off the outstanding fees. All these concerns impact negatively on their studies because they disturb students' concentration and motivation to study.

### **8.3 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS**

The findings which emerged from the data analysis process were discussed in this section. The categories and subcategories that were discussed are as follows:

Subjects in first year, teaching methods used at university, adjustment to life at university, available facilities encourage learning, study methods used to meet work demands and uncertainty about financial position. In the discussion I used original student excerpts to allow the reader to experience the participants' views. Excerpts were also included to illustrate the emphasis of the discussion. In this section I also made reference to related literature in order to substantiate the findings and draw parallels between them.

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, I would like to recommend the following measures which could address some of the problems experienced by students:

- I believe that the students' concern about doing many subjects is exaggerated by the fact that they do not understand the relevance of these subjects. It is for this reason that I strongly recommend that the Occupational Therapy Department should clearly explain what occupational therapy is, the course curriculum and the relevance of each subject to the students during orientation. This is of utmost importance as most of the students register for occupational therapy without knowing what the course encompasses.

- Subject content should be reviewed in order to streamline the information and remove unnecessary information. Lecturers, particularly those teaching professional (Occupational Therapy) subjects should review the content of these subjects together and take necessary measures to address overlaps and duplications that may exist. This, hopefully could reduce the workloads that students have to cope with.
- The Occupational Therapy department should communicate with the departments teaching Biophysics, Sociology, Psychology and Anatomy to ensure that the content of these subjects is of relevance to the occupational therapy course. Lecturers who are teaching activities like 'card-making' and 'leather work' as part of Therapeutic Media should spend time explaining the purpose of activities in occupational therapy and clearly demonstrate how activities are used during patients' treatment.
- I recommend that the students' 'general' orientation programme which takes place immediately after registration for one week only, should be followed by a 'departmental' orientation programme. The departmental orientation programme should continue throughout the first semester. Spreading this programme over an extended period of time will give those students who register late an opportunity to attend. Such a programme should be planned in consultation with first year students. If it is done this way, educators will be in a better position to address specific needs of first year students. The content of the departmental orientation programme should include orientation to facilities for learning, life in general on the campus, as well as study and teaching methods. Time should be scheduled in the first year programme during the first semester to present the departmental orientation programme.
- The question of study methods should receive serious attention and be addressed on a continuous basis with the students. Subject co-ordinators should explain to students how each subject is evaluated. I recommend that educators should give tasks to students and use assessment methods that encourage 'meaningful' learning as opposed to 'rote' learning. To enable lecturers to be efficient in the use

of teaching and assessment methods which enhances learning, I strongly recommend that workshops on these topics be organised for staff.

- Students should be encouraged to continue with study groups because they get the opportunity to share information, reflect on what they are studying during discussions and encourage as well as assist each other. Studying in groups should also be encouraged during formal lectures by giving students learning tasks to be worked on in small groups in class (Vella, 1999:12). This will encourage students to be actively involved in what they are learning.
- I recommend that the principles of “empowering education” as described by Shor (1992) be implemented particularly when working with students from historically poor educational backgrounds. These principles include encouraging students to participate actively in class; to feel positive about what they are learning; use ‘problem-posing’ methods to encourage participation; relating what students are learning to their real life situations; and making use of what they bring along in their learning. Coupled with the use of dialogue, the use of these principles will go a long way towards addressing the needs of such students. In the process, students will be encouraged to express themselves which will hopefully improve their language abilities as well.
- Finally, I recommend that further studies should be done on all OT students to find out their experiences of the course as a whole. The knowledge gained could be used when decisions are made regarding course content, teaching methods and teaching materials.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

The focus of this essay has been on the experiences of a sample of first year occupational therapy students in higher education. The first part examined the main reason for this study, which is to gain an informed understanding of these experiences. Understanding

of students' experiences shed light on the problems experienced by first years which impact negatively on their academic performance.

The study has found that the experiences of first year occupational therapy students in higher education, are generally similar to that of other first year students nationally and internationally. These experiences include problems related to adjustment to transition from high school to university and those related to funding. Examples of these problems are problems in adjustment to the university environment, study methods, and teaching methods. Poor educational background seems to impact on the extent and the manifestation of problems rather than on the type of problems experienced.

Contrary to assumptions by some lecturers that occupational therapy students fail because they are not motivated to study, it seems from this study that they are in fact motivated. Therefore it may be concluded that they fail due to other reasons, rather than being poorly motivated to study.

What seems to matter most to the students interviewed in this study, is passing and failing tests and examinations, not learning itself. This may be due to the fact that the implications, particularly those of finance, could mean discontinuation of studies. This should be cause for concern to educators because the main reason for being at a university should be learning. It is however comforting to know that despite this attitude towards learning, students are concerned with the relevance of the subjects they are studying for the course.

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## 12. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### A COPY OF THE LETTER TO THE HEAD OF OT DEPARTMENT

P O Box 501

MEDUNSA

0204

1<sup>st</sup> June 2000

Prof E. Shipham

Head of Occupational Therapy Department

MEDUNSA,0204

Dear Prof E Shipham

#### RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY DEPARTMENT

As you already know, I am registered for my second year in M Phil Adult Education and Training for the year 2000 at Rand Afrikaans University (Student number: 9907617). One of the modules I am registered for is Research Methodology and the requirements thereof is to conduct a research project.

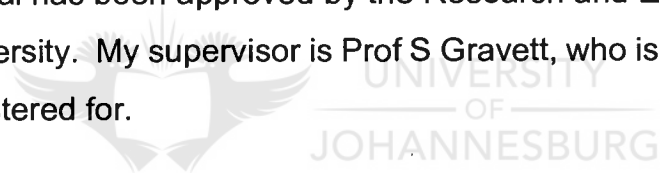
I therefore, request permission to conduct my research study in the department, making use of the facilities (seminar room) and first year students as participants in the study. I also request permission to read through the participants' personal files, so that I can group them according to provinces and the type of high schools they attended.

The title of the study is: *The experiences of first year Occupational Therapy (OT) students in Higher Education.*

The purpose of the study is *to gain an in-depth understanding of first year OT students' experiences in higher education. This understanding could be used as a basis for changes which might enhance learning. This study might shed light on the problems that are influencing students' performances negatively. Lecturers will also become more aware of how students are experiencing the course materials presented to them as well as the teaching methods they use.*

The method of data collection will be the interview. I will explain what the study is all about to the participants and ask them to sign consent form before participating (See attached, a copy of the consent form). I will also request one of my colleagues to verify my findings as soon as I start to analyse the data. I intend to share the findings with the department as well as with the students. I am convinced that this study will be of benefit to both the department and the students.

The research proposal has been approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of Rand Afrikaans University. My supervisor is Prof S Gravett, who is the co-ordinator of the course I am registered for.



Enclosed please find a copy of the research proposal.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours faithfully

.....

T A Ramukumba  
(M Phil Adult Education and Training Student - RAU).



Statement by the researcher:

I provided verbal information regarding this study

I agree to answer any future questions concerning the study as best as I can.

I will adhere to the approved protocol.

.....

Name of the researcher	Signature	Date	Place
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## APPENDIX C

### TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH EDITH

CODE: R - RESEARCHER

: P - PARTICIPANT

TVE- 1

R: First of all can you tell me about your experiences as a first year student at Medunsa Campus?

P: OK, First I realized that I am not used to studying like many hours that is what I have experienced like. I used to stay up studying up to be ten maybe eleven and I am not used to working up earlier in the mornings like I was used to only wake up at about 7 but then only study in the afternoon but now I have learned to like when I am free I have to study because especially now that we are about to write exams. I have to study. I have experienced that I have to be responsible for whatever I do and to be independent. Not to depend on somebody else. Like at home I used to depend on my parents like when something or say I am having a problem I use to go to them and explain. I have to try and sort out the problems that I have but so far I don't have any problems.

R: OK, Would you like to say more about being independent?

P: Yes, like responsible in locking my room, in washing my clothes, doing the laundry, like at home my mother used to do the laundry for us and if I see that I am running short of toiletry I have to go and buy them by myself.

R: OK, and your experiences in the campus in general?

P: In the campus. Hm.....?

R: I mean like being here in this environment at Medunsa.

P: Ja, I experience like when I was at home I was not used like going out at night but now I have to go to the library even if it is dark. I have to go, either I can't read in my room there is a noise in the corridor, I have to go to the library in the library is quite. In the campus like I have learned the style, the clothes they wear, like at home I use not to wearing things like mini skirts but here I can wear the skirt I can see others they are wearing the skirts, so I feel comfortable myself to wear a skirt.

R: OK, and then how do you experience other students and other people in the campus?

P: Like how do I see them?

R: Yes, how do you feel and how do you see them?



P: So far the people I meet around here are friendly. I can see that there is no harm around, like when you are walking around, you just greet them and pass them there is no like wanting to know where you are going what is your name. Like they treat you like you don't know them. Like they treat us equally or each other equally.

R: OK, when you say they treat us or each other equally, is the treatment by staff or by students similar.

P: No, it is not similar, we have to respect our lecturers, we don't talk like we are used to talking to our friends. What I have seen like in the campus it is easy to make friends rather than when you are at home because you are not used to that somebody. But here even if you are not used to that somebody you just start to talk like you ask are you doing Anatomy and I have a problem with this subject and then can you explain

more?

R: And how are your teachers, lecturers here at Medunsa different from your teachers at high school?

P: Like myself, aa, like when I am talking to my lecturers, I don't have that confidence like straight to say I have a problem with this and that but if a student at least knows this subject I have a confident of going to that person and talk to him or her about the problem but it is hard for me to go to the lecturers so that they can explain.

R: OK, are they, do you feel different when you look at them and look at your teachers at high school?

P: No, there is no difference.



R: How was your communication with your teachers at high school?

P: I think it is because right now I am a first year and at high school I have taken me five years. Like I was used to them, like when I have a problem with my studies and ask for like the study skills. Here I a not used to them that much.

R: OK, what is your comment about the way they support you towards your studying?

P: I think they support good because every time they say ask any question and if you have a problem you can come but is up to us whether we have that confidence or not. Myself I don't have that much confidence to go straight to the lecturer and ask.

R: OK, do you think that is affecting your learning?

P: I think so, because sometimes the student that I ask does not explain that much further in the way that I wanted him or her to explain. So I had to go to the lecturer or else consult another books for further information.

R: OK, and the how are your experiences so far the lectures?

P: You mean the subjects?

R: Yes the subjects.

P: So, far I am having a problem with Anatomy, last term I was also having a problem in Therapeutic Media. This time I have passed those tests and now I realize that I understand. At first I was not used to the terms and other, the ja the terms because we use to use the easy terms but now we are using the ones of the language and we are used to the 1st the second language. Now I am getting used to them.

R: OK, OK, so in the first semester you had some negative experiences but now it is becoming better.

P: And now it is becoming better.

R: Any positive experiences with your classes?

P: Positive?

R: Yes, the subjects.

P: Yes in Fundamentals, yes management, I learned that, the way Mrs Riana teaches us is easy for us to understand because most of us we passed the test like myself I got

84% in her first test and in the second test I got 90%. But in the other one, the philosophy, in Fundamentals, I think it was because it was my first time, like it was the first term and I was not used to it and sometimes I don't I was not understanding the way Miss Holly was talking like she was using the other terms. Like I had to go back to my room and check the dictionary and look what this word mean.

R: And then when you look at all the subjects that you are doing, how do you feel about the number of the subjects that you are doing, the type of subjects that you are doing? Let us look at the number first.

P: The number?

R: Yes.

P: At first I thought it was too much, but when I look I realized that it is not a matter of being too much it is a matter of whether you understand it. Is like you can have three courses but it might be divided into many sections and then it would be equal like I have compared with my room mate, she is doing MBCHB but if I see the way their work is divided, I think it is equal it is just that we have to study hard.

R: OK, and the type of subjects?

P: Ja, I think they are related to Occupational therapy because if you don't study Anatomy then you won't know which muscles are damaged and which muscles to be strengthened and how to if ever the patient cannot move the arm, you must know which nerve or muscle is damaged.

R: Do you think as you were talking that they are related to occupational therapy is it all the subjects that you feel are related to occupational therapy?

P: Not all of them, like in Biophysics the application we did so far are not related to occupational therapy because all the application they say in nursing this and that and that, but not in occupational therapy. But I think in the, when we were studying the chapter of gravity like right now, Mr Watson was explaining that the patient was having difficulties on moving the body side ways because of the change of the centre of gravity. If we were not doing Biophysics then we were not going to be able to understand what does he mean by the centre of gravity but now I think it is helping, Biophysics.

R: Any experiences in the practicals that you do?

P: In OCTA?

R: OCTA or psychology practicals or any other practicals that you do.

P: We have done practicals in Anatomy where we looked at the wet specimen. At first in OCTA, I did enjoy, like you told us what to do, we must interview and then do the activities with the client, so in that one I did not have any problems. But in Anatomy first I was not exposed to the "cadavas" so I was somehow scared. I was afraid to touch them like, how would they say like the people, the relatives of that person that is lying there if they can see how they are dissected how would they feel but now I am used to them. At first the smell I was not used to it. Sometimes it was making me dizzy.

R: OK, when you, what is your comment about learning during theoretical lectures and during practicals?

P: You mean whether is good or bad?

R: Ja.

P: I think is good because we are relating what we are learning in theory also applied. Like in Anatomy, it was not going to make sense if we were going to study about the lungs and how their veins and arteries if we did not see them or when you see them in the pictures, it was going to be difficult if we are treating patients like we would not know how the maybe for an examples running actively whether the blood circulation will be ok or not.

R: Now if you come to study methods, do you think are they different from high school methods?

P: Yes, they are different because in high school, I use to study four subjects per day. But here I only study one subject because if we I leave, like now we are going to write a test in Anatomy. It is hard for me to study another subject because I just think that I will be left behind in Anatomy if I concentrate in the other subjects. So I just study Anatomy until we write the test. Thereafter I change after writing the test.

R: So you study patterns differs.

P: Yes.

R: What about the teaching methods, do you think they are the same?

P: Not that much, they are not that much the same. It is the same because they explain, at first like the people were talking like in the university the lecturers were not going to give you notes and they were not going to explain to us. They were just going to say go and read page from page 1 to page 20 you are going to write a test. Thus when I was scared and now I realize that the lecturers are also explaining so that it can be easy for us when we are getting to the text book and read them, we relate what he or she said so it is not difficult but in high school we use to write notes. The use to

explain to us. The notes were not written by us we were coping them and study them and the text books we were using the exercises and the text books.

R: So you, for that reason you think they are different or they are the same?

P: They are the same but not that much.

R: There are areas that are different and areas that are the same. If you were to summarize your experiences since you have been here at Medunsa since the beginning of the year up to now, how would you put it?

P: Studying here at Medunsa?

R: Yes.

P: Like at first I was not used to it, like studying, in changing the classes, I was like at first I was wondering why but now I can see that we don't have to stay in one class because the departments are different. And now but I am used to it. Because are, we are, I have friends even now that I can go with. At first I didn't know even the departments I have to attend I used to carry my time table, at times I will get lost until the period is over.

R: Did you attend any orientation programme?

P: No, I came late.

R: Now do you have any, would you like to tell me about the financial support that you have for studying at Medunsa?



P: So far I don't have a bursary, my parents are paying for me but so far I have paid only R3 000,00 because my father only send me R500,00 per month. That is what he can afford per month but he is trying by all means that he will pay, he said so.

R: Do you think that is affecting your studying.

P: It is affecting my studies because sometimes I think, at first I thought I was not going to be able to write exams. But I talked to my friends about that and they said that I don't have to worry, I can write the exams, but the thing is I won't get the results. And so far I have applied for the bursaries, and no reply for now maybe next year, earlier later this year.

R: OK. Do you have anything additional that you would like to tell me concerning your experiences that I have not asked you?

P: No.

R: No. Thanks.

