

**WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**



**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND GENDER DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

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**STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION: THE CASE OF WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**

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**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND  
GENDER DEVELOPMENT STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTER OF SCIENCE DEGREE IN DEVELOPMENT  
STUDIES**

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**3<sup>RD</sup> JUNE 2016**

**WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**



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**APPROVAL FORM**

The undersigned certify that they have read and recommended to the Women's University in Africa for acceptance of the **DISSERTATION** entitled, **STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**, submitted by **RAYMOND ERICK ZVAVANYANGE** in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the **MASTER OF SCIENCE (M.Sc.) DEGREE IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**.

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**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND GENDER DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

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FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF  
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## **DEDICATION**

To Erick Zvavamwe and Raina Teresa Mutsvengure

An academic gift from your grandson

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study epitomises a creative endeavor with inspiration derived from diverse places.

I would like to acknowledge the ‘mind’ of The Intelligent Designer. To God be the Glory.

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study sought to explore students' perceptions of the first-year experience in higher education with a special focus on Women's University in Africa (WUA). The study was centered on three (3) objectives which were to: explore the barriers that students encounter in their first year at WUA; investigate the efficacy of support services meant to facilitate the transition from high school to university for first-year students at WUA; and explore the coping mechanisms used by students during their first-year experience at WUA. The study was located within the qualitative research paradigm and a case study research design was used to delve into the first-year experience within its context using a variety of data sources. The qualitative research paradigm was chosen as it allowed for the capture and broadening of understanding in a holistic way, the dynamic social interactions and experiences of first-year students and the members of the university. The study population comprised two groups viz. three categories of students (first, second, and third years) and the staff members of the university who work closely with students. Non-probability sampling was used to purposively sample ten (10) students from the three categories and two (2) key informants, representing the university. Two semi-structured interview schedules were used as the primary research instruments in this study. Data were collected using in-depth interviews with students and key informants respectively. The interviews audio-tapped while hand-written notes were used in the case where consent for audio-tapping was denied by a participant. Data gathered from the study was analysed in three phases: orientation to the data, working the data, and final composition of analysed data and drawing of conclusions. To explore the barriers that students encounter in their first year at WUA, the study found among other things, that some participants failed to attend the First-Year Orientation Programme because of work and other commitments, had challenges to manage study and other competing demands, expressed their dissatisfaction at the unreliable internet service at WUA, and indicated that they struggled to raise the full fees as required by the University. In terms of the efficacy of support services meant to facilitate the transition from high school to university for first-year students, the study established that there was a need to sensitise the new students to the pivotal role of the Office of Student Affairs and that attendance and participation in the First-Year Orientation Programme had many benefits to new students. Concerning the coping mechanisms used by students during their first-year experience at WUA, participants indicated the coping mechanisms as: the use of on-campus peer support among new students; making the best out of what comes one's way; prioritisation, determination, and first things first; and holding the peace and helplessness. The main limitation of the study is the lack of generalisation of findings given the small sample size which was not representative. It is clear from the study that the first-year experience has many dimensions which the new student has to bravely address during the transition from high school to university education. This study revealed that some new students were aware of the new demands on them in the pursuit of a university education while others simply had to adapt quickly to the new learning environment. The study recommended among other things, for robust follow-up programmes after the usual First-Year Orientation Programme at the University.*

## **KEYWORDS:**

Barriers, Coping Mechanisms, First-Year Experience, Higher Education, Student, Support Services

## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<b>FYE</b>	First-Year Experience
<b>SRC</b>	Student Representative Council
<b>MOOC</b>	Massive Open Online Course
<b>WUA</b>	Women's University in Africa

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **1.0.THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING**

#### **1.1.Introduction**

The acquisition of knowledge and skills beginning at kindergarten all the way to higher education is riddled with transitions which if left unmanaged can adversely influence the academic and non-academic performance of the new student. Transitions are especially a challenge to students completing high school and entering university education. The purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions of the first-year experience in higher education with special focus on the Women's University in Africa (WUA).

#### **1.2.Background of the Study**

Students' perceptions in higher education can be the source of improvements in the types of programmes targeted at new students in transition. Previous studies suggests that in many countries, and across many disciplines, there are a number of constraints that students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, face in university education (Ali, Tariq, & Topping, 2009; Cunningham, 2013; Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kizito, Munyakazi, & Basuayi, 2016; Sutherland, 2003). If these constraints are left unaddressed, and in particular for first-year students, they can impact on the academic motivation and achievement (Kern, Fagley, & Miller, 1998); self-perception of ability or performance (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006); personality traits (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006); learning styles (Kidwell, 2005); and student success (Cunningham, 2013). Kidwell (2005) observed that the processes within the transition many of which are transformational have sometimes been referred to as "purgatorial." Freshmen begin to

develop thinking skills as well as begin to acclimatise with the new environment in ways different to what they did in high school. They literally sieve out “the best of each worlds” in order to maximise on their first-year experience (Kidwell, 2005).

In a study of first-year students’ perceptions of their levels of capability across several domains of generic skills and attributes, Lizzio and Wilson (2004) found that first-year students categorized skills in ways that can be meaningfully related to job performance. The researchers established that students, particularly at times of transition in and out of university education, hold quite complex self-descriptions of their past, present and possible future roles and identities (namely, who they consider they were, who they feel they are now and who they anticipate becoming). Lizzio and Wilson (2004) argues that students experiment with ‘possible selves’ as they attempt to construct a personal and professional future identity that is both personally satisfying and sustainable in their anticipated environment. Thus, addressing the fears and meeting the needs of new students should be a priority to educators, teachers, and university administrators.

The first-year in university education is an intense learning period such that as Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis (2005) contend, students may experience an ‘early reality shock. This reaction is often attributed to the first-year students’ ill-preparedness for higher education having been used to the learning styles in high school. Smith and Wertlieb (2005) observed that first-year college students are constrained in many ways as their expectations of “what college is like” do not always align with their actual experiences. In this regard, there is a huge gap between the students’ idealized college and the reality at the college. The view stressed by Krause et al. (2005) is echoed by Smith and Wertlieb (2005) who notes that some of the first-year students are overwhelmed by the intense academic training and social demands of higher education.

### **1.3.Statement of the Problem**

The transition from high school to university education should seriously be addressed by college administrators and teachers as it impacts on attrition, sources of university funding, and the number of enrolled students (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2008). Brinkworth et al. (2008) adds that several strategies have been presented to make this transition easier for freshmen. There is a dearth of literature on the first-year experience of students in the Zimbabwean context. This study explores students' perceptions of the first-year experience at the Women's University in Africa. The University is private, owned and co-founded by two exceptional Zimbabwean women, Professor Hope Cynthia Sadza and Dr. Fay Chung in 2002. This pioneer University was created with the mandate of educating mature women who had been sidelined from tertiary education by social and cultural constraints (Women's University in Africa, 2015). WUA has a diverse student population of both males and females, with females constituting the majority. In particular, the first-year students are a mix of both young students in their late teens as well as mature students, some with many years of professional work experience. It is plausible that such a learning context is rich in insights and this provides the basis for the current exploration. Such insights can facilitate the design of new institutional strategies to help the transition process of high school students to university education.

### **1.4.Significance of the Study**

This study aims to make a substantial and original contribution to knowledge in a number of ways. Theoretically, it seeks to increase our understanding of the students' perceptions of the first-year experience at WUA. In many ways, this would facilitate student learning and may contribute to an improvement in support services to new students who transition from high

school to university education regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. From a theoretical perspective, this study contribute to the research knowledge on higher education experience in Zimbabwe vis-à-vis the first - year experience of new students as there is a lack of in depth research on this area within the Zimbabwean context. This study may also assist in informing researchers and administrators on the processes involved in student transitions at different educational levels. It seeks to increase sensitivity to students' perception of their first-year experience because it is from such perspectives that student-student and student-university relations are improved, as well as shaping the kinds of motivation and academic and non-academic performance of students in university education. The study contributes to the development of policies which ease the first-year experience of students by university policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and other interested parties. These policies could, for instance, lead to a review of the scope and extent of reach of student support services provided by WUA.

### **1.5.Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study was to explore students' perceptions of the first-year experience in higher education.

### **1.6.Objectives**

Objectives of this study were to:

1. Explore the barriers that students encounter in their first year at WUA
2. Investigate the efficacy of support services meant to facilitate the transition from high school to university for first-year students at WUA

3. Explore the coping mechanisms used by students during their first-year experience at WUA.

### **1.7. Research Question**

How do students perceive the first-year experience in higher education?

### **1.8. Theoretical Framework**

The study's theoretical framework is based on Interpretivism, Constructivism, and The Symbolic Interaction Theory. The Theories' focus is two-pronged: focus on the student and the higher education (social) world in which the student exists and subsequently creates perceptions. The core idea in Interpretivism is that human beings work with subjective meanings in the social world with a view to acknowledge their existence, to reconstruct them, to understand them, to avoid distorting them, to use them as building blocks in theorizing (Goldkuhl, 2012). Flick (2004) states that Constructivism is concerned with how knowledge arises, what concept of knowledge is appropriate, and what criteria can be involved in the evaluation of knowledge. The Symbolic Interaction Theory is traced to the works of William James (1842 – 1910), John Dewey (1859 – 1952), Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914), and George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931). According to Denzin (2004), symbolic interactionism is a sociological and social psychological perspective. The term symbolic in the phrase symbolic interaction refers to the underlying linguistic foundations of human group life, and the word interaction refers to the fact that people do not act toward one another, but interact with each other. Singelmann (1972) established that the point of departure for Symbolic Interaction Theory is the dialectic interdependence between the human organism and his natural and social environments. While the environment has its own reality vis-à-vis the individual, it is selectively perceived and

reacted to by organism. Human action is thus at the same time a creative response to a subjectively meaningful environment as it is constrained by the objective nature of natural and social phenomena (Singelmann, 1972). In the view of Denzin (2004), the theory is concerned with the study and analysis of the developmental course of action that occurs when two or more persons (or agents) with agency (reflexivity) join their individual lines of action together into joint action.

### **1.9. Assumptions of the Study**

This study was based on the following assumptions common to basic research.

- Data gathered accurately represented the problem under study.
- Participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis.
- Participants understood the questions asked on the instruments.
- Participants truthfully answered questions on the instruments.
- Participants were representative of the student population at WUA.

### **1.10. Definition of Terms**

In the context of this study, terms will be defined to have the following meanings.

*First-Year.* This refers to the first-year of study of an undergraduate or post-graduate student in a higher education institution (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006).

*First-Year Experience.* The entire period experienced by students during their first year at University. Two complete semesters constitute an academic year.

*Freshman.* A student, who is first-time and studying at college or university. The term “new student” and “freshmen” refer to one and the same person either male or female.

*Higher Education.* The on-going education processes post-secondary school and high school in a University, Training and/or Vocational College. The terms “higher education” and “university education” are used interchangeably in this study.

*Instructor.* This means a teacher or educator, one who takes students through a structured way of learning and understanding.

*Perception.* This means understanding or judgment.

*Student Attrition.* This refers to departure from all forms of higher education prior to completion of a degree or other credential (Johnson, 2012).

*Transition.* This refers to a period of change from one stage or form to another form or stage.

### **1.11. Delimitations**

As with any research project, there are delimitations to this study. The first delimitation relates to the study’s confinement to students registered at WUA during the March – June 2016 semester. The second delimitation is that participation in the study was voluntary and there were no financial rewards to participants. This restricted the study to participants who were keen to share some of their experiences to make the study worthwhile. Despite these delimitations this study is worthwhile. There is a dearth of knowledge on the transition processes in Zimbabwe from the perspectives of students as well as how new students navigate this terrain. The study explores these issues and other related matters with the objective to contribute to research and knowledge on university education in Zimbabwe and the rest of the world.

### **1.12. Limitations**

Several limitations exist in the present study. First, the study may contain methodological flaws which make it impossible to unearth the real issues concerning student perceptions of the first year experience at WUA. This short-coming could impact on the trustworthiness, dependability, and credibility of the present study. Second, the study will was conducted at WUA. This sole focus on WUA excluded potential insights from other local institutions.

### **1.13. Organisation of the Study**

This study is organised into five chapters as follows:

Chapter One: The Problem and its Setting.

Chapter Two: Literature Review.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology.

Chapter Four: Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Chapter Five: Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations.

### **1.14. Summary**

This chapter provided an introduction to the study, the problem, research question and other related issues. Change from high school to university education is particularly challenging for students regardless of how well-prepared they may be. It can also be an exciting opportunity for new insights in higher education as this study will explore taking from the students' perception of the first-year experience at WUA. The chapter also noted that first year students face a

number of constraints which can impact on their academic achievement and motivation, participation in university life, and other social impacts at individual level.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to review the related literature on students' perceptions of the first-year experience in higher education. The chapter begins by defining the first-year experience, and proceeds to various dimensions of the first-year experience, before concluding with a summary of the main issues noted.

#### **2.2. Defining the First-Year Experience**

For purposes of this study, the term “first-year experience” (FYE) refers simply to the complete period experienced by students in their first year at College or University. Two completed semesters constitute an academic year at university, and forms the foundation for First-Year Experience Programs. According to Barefoot, Fidler, Gardner, Moore, and Roberts (1999), a First-Year Experience Program is “intentional and comprehensive, and consists of different components working together to increase academic performance, provide a cohesive learning experience, increase student persistence, assist in the transition to college, facilitate a sense of commitment and community to the university, and increase personal development” (p. 5). Higgins (2010) defines the first year programs as “an all-encompassing term used to speak about all of the programs for first year students at a single institution” (p. 2). The FYE has also been considered across many disciplines including psychology, sociology, and education.

Researchers have explored the FYE of international students in foreign universities in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012), whereas others focused on the FYE of students in general taking into cognizance the diversity of the student population (Longden, 2006). There is evidence to suggest that all the three research approaches, viz. qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research are commonly used by researchers to explore the FYE (Arnold, 2013; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Neir & Zayer, 2015; Mulder, Pearce, & Baik, 2014; Wilson, Laybourn, Dearne, & Tait, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

### **2.3. Major Schools of Theory Associated With the First-Year Experience**

Theories related to the first-year experience suggest that the first-year candidates merit special attention (Bauman, 2010; Higgins, 2010; Sanford, 1966). Categories of these theories are: student development theories and student persistence theories, all which relate to how the freshman enters college, grows within the college, and ultimately completes their studies.

#### **2.3.1. Student Development Theories**

Student development is critical to the student experience in higher education. Past studies have defined student development as the direction in which a student grows, advances, or increases his or her development capabilities as a result of enrolment in an institution of higher learning. According to Bauman (2010), theorists view student development as follows:

- Psychosocial: how individuals relate to themselves and others.
- Cognitive-Structural: how individuals view the world or make sense of their experiences.
- Typological: examine individual differences in how people view and relate to the world.

- Person-Environment: how the environment influences behavior.

Nevitt Sanford's (1966) Psychosocial Development Model is regarded as a basic and foundation for all freshmen programs (Higgins, 2010). The Theory states that students grow and develop when they reach a state of optimal dissonance, meaning they experience discomfort but also have full support to work through and grow from the initial discomfort (Higgins, 2010; Sanford, 1966). Sanford (1966) argued that once students understood their own identity and had encountered a healthy level of challenge and support, they would succeed. As freshmen, students are on their own for the very first time in learning new things, meeting new peers, and learning to be self-sufficient. As Higgins (2010) notes, discomforts occur naturally during the first year, and the task of any institution of higher learning is to provide the support so that students cope and grow.

### **2.3.2. The Student Integration Model, Tinto (1975)**

Tinto (1975) developed one of the first models for studying student attrition and persistence in higher education. Students who are both academically and socially invested in their institution perform better and are more likely to persist through graduation. According to Tinto (1975), student attrition is "a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems...continually modify his goals and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout" (p. 94). It is quite difficult to ascertain the levels of student attrition and persistence in many institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe as the socio-economic and political challenges permeates virtually every aspect of the intellectual community with cases of massive brain drain and high rates of student drop-outs. Even the

circumstances surrounding this disappointing scenario and ways to change the situation are little understood.

## **2.4. The impact of changes in higher education on the first-year experience**

### **2.4.1. Global realities in higher education**

Institutions of higher learning around the world are confronted with momentous social, economic, and technological changes that will substantially change the FYE of students (Committee for Economic Development, 2005; Neier & Zayer, 2015). According to the Committee for Economic Development (2005), the future economic growth and individual opportunity for US citizens will rest, in part, on the educational opportunities access to their current generation of young people. These emergent changes require that universities respond holistically and creatively so as to meet students' needs. Upon enrolment at college or university, the freshman is immersed in a process of learning until his or her completion time. Any delays in completion of studies whilst inevitable in some cases are almost non-permissible. Deary, Watson, and Hogston (2003) observe that in the UK, higher education institutions are required to maintain attrition below 13% and may face penalties for failing to achieve this. Attrition rates to some extent depend on the type of degree programmes offered, learning styles, and other related factors found in higher education. The Committee for Economic Development (2005) reports that there is a need for change all along the educational continuum to prepare future students academically, socially, and financially to cut on the lost opportunities whenever one student drops out of school.

#### **2.4.2. The social and economic purposes of higher education in society**

Higher education plays an important role in a knowledge society through, *inter alia*, the training of future leaders, transforming minds, development of professional competencies for the workplace, elimination of inequalities, economic development, and contributing to collective goals and a common vision (Committee for Economic Development, 2005; Maasen, 2003; Materu, 2007; McArthur, 2011; UNDP, 2015; Padgett, 2011). Deary, Watson & Hogston (2003) argue that the young people should be attracted to university degree and professional programmes so as to create the necessary synergy in workplaces which in many cases are replete with an ageing generation. Young people while full of energy and enthusiasm about their contributions to the progress in the society cannot escape the acquisition of knowledge and skills as provided via higher education. Maasen (2003) observe that the knowledge and skills required by the marketplace and research teams is constantly changing and so should be the quality and relevance of university education in the Southern Africa. According to Padgett (2011), higher education serves and benefits both the individual and society, and as such college graduates are expected to develop outcomes that generate both private or internal benefits such as high-paying jobs and public or external benefits, such as students' engagement in volunteerism, participation in civic, community and public affairs, and charitable contributions. These outcomes suggest that university education in many ways serves the society.

Materu (2007) opines that higher education is important in the competitiveness and economic development of Africa. Maasen (2003) asserts that the emergent changes brought about by the overall transition to a knowledge economy have created a demand for quality and higher skill levels in many occupations. Materu (2007) argues that these changes require new competencies

such as adaptability, team work, communication skills and the motivation for continual learning. Many of these attributes are related to the pedagogy, content, and student experience at University prior to graduation. The challenges that higher education faces in Zimbabwe (Garwe & Maganga, 2015; Majoni, 2014) and the gradual decline in a once highly-rated education system in Africa is a cause of concern to educators and policy makers. Garwe and Maganga (2015) highlight the high drop-out and non-completion rates among students in Zimbabwe. Generally, when faced with insurmountable challenges to do with enrollment, completion and delivery of efficient and effective education services, it appears too much a burden to be concerned with minute details such as the first-year experience. Thus, higher education's task is not only to ensure the increase in numbers of students transformed into honorable citizens (Padgett, 2011) through graduation but equally making the first-year experience enriching for students yet to complete their studies. Therefore, as this study argues, it is critical to fully explore the students' perceptions of the first-year experience in higher education.

#### **2.4.3. The challenges faced by students in pursuit of higher education**

Alder (2016) and Mudhovozi (2012) assert that students handle transitions at university differently. According to Mudhovozi (2012), high school graduation is insufficient to prepare students for academic and social independence at university. In a phenomenological study of seven purposefully sampled first-year students to investigate the social and academic experiences of students at a university in Zimbabwe (Mudhovozi, 2012), the first year students experienced varied social and academic adjustment problems. The first-year students over-relied on social networks and efficacious beliefs to cope with the challenges at university. The study suggested the need for students need to be exposed to various coping resources to enable them to quickly and smoothly adjust into the new life at university (Mudhovozi, 2012).

Fleming and Grace (2015) describe pioneering initiatives in Australia aimed at eliminating inequalities in education access between the ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ Australians. The aim of the ACT University Experience Camp is to assist students to make the actual transition to higher education. The initiative was in part due to the recognition of low participation rates in higher education among three groups namely: people living in rural and remote areas, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and indigenous students. The ACT University Experience Camp operates in joint partnership with the Country Education Foundation (CEF) Australia, an independent not-for-profit organization supporting and overseeing local educational foundations across Australia. Each year, up to 50 students from Years 9, 10 and 11 at CEF-affiliated schools in New South Wales travel from their local communities to Canberra to experience, first-hand University and city life. Students in the Camp are take through the rigors of the University application process, lectures and workshops (day and evenings), and participation in a number of social events (Fleming & Grace, 2015). The ACT University Experience Camp is investing in the future education of students from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds as many of these proceed to pursue higher education.

## **2.5. The importance of student engagement during the first-year experience**

### **2.5.1. Active social and academic engagement in and out of the classroom**

Student engagement is critical in college although studies do not always agree on where emphasis should be placed the most: social versus academic or both (Committee for Economic Development, 2005; Tinto, 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). According to Tinto (1997), if academic and social integration is to occur among students, it must occur in the classroom. Senge (2000) opines that the school is a “learning organization’ one in which students, administrators, and teachers learn from each other. Knowledge and perspectives of the learning community are

critical to a learning organization (Senge, 2000; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Zhao and Kuh (2004) suggest that most learning communities incorporate active and collaborative learning activities in contemporary academic and social activities that extend beyond the classroom. The active and collaborative learning encourages deeper, relevant and personal learning, which constitutes who the student is and not necessarily what the student has (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The collaborative emphasis is evident in both social and academic engagements (Tinto, 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Most universities engage students socially and academically principally through the orientation programmes and the student representative councils (SRCs). These methods of engagement appear to influence students' perceptions of the first-year experience (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Larmar & Ingamells, 2010; Tinto, 1998).

### **2.5.2. The use of orientation programmes for new students**

Larmar and Ingamells (2010) observe that the university orientation appears to be effective as a school-based strategy with the potential to improve the first-year experience of students. Well-organized orientation program truly assist in the integration process into school and university culture (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010). Orientation activities help students to connect with key staff within the school, identify specific supportive infrastructure at both school and institutional level, and make constructive connections (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010). Tinto (1998) opines that students are more likely to participate in academic life when steps are taken by university staff to actively engage them. The more students participate in social and academic activities at universities, the more likely they are to persist with their degree programme (Tinto, 1998). The SRC when functional serves as the official interface between the administration and the rest of the student body. SRCs sometimes coordinate student-run, student-initiated community, and service projects. The application procedures and election processes for the SRCs are usually

done in each academic year. In the view of Tinto (1998), social and academic engagement empowers students, nurture socialization, and guards against feelings of confusion and failure that leads to disengagement and possible drop-outs.

### **2.5.3. Student engagement as critical feedback to instructors and administrators**

A number of empirical analyses show that when intentionally sought, student engagement is a source of insights needed to build the requisite knowledge and skills as well as competencies in graduates of the higher education system (Mulder, Pearce, & Baik, 2014; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Mulder et al. (2014) examined the student perceptions before and after experiencing student peer review in four university subjects differing in discipline, year level and class size. The peer review process is associated with publication, an important metric in assessing the quality of research work by academics. In the peer review process, academic peers critically judge manuscripts and provide timely feedback which may then be used to improve the work. Mulder et al. (2014) found that students reported high satisfaction levels with the peer review process and its positive impact on their learning, and particularly showed an enhanced appreciation of the influence of review writing on their learning. Therefore, to be inclusive in higher education serves to accommodate the diverse student body and foster engaged students. This is particularly useful for the first-year experience at WUA.

### **2.5.4. The linkages between technology and education**

The experiences of the learner in the classroom have changed significantly over the last 30 years. Greater attention has also been placed on the dynamics in multicultural settings and inclusive classrooms/learning opportunities for students with learning disabilities (Busch, Pederson, Espin, & Weissenburger, 2001; Hendrickson, Therrien, Weeden, Pascarella, & Hosp, 2015; Tapasak &

Walther –Thomas, 1999). Maguire, Evans, and Dyas (2001) argue that learners need to be understood during the learning process. A holistic student development philosophy is considered essential to student success (Hendrickson, Therrien, Weeden, Pascarella, & Hosp, 2015; Tapasak & Walther – Thomas, 1999). Other scholars such as O’Boyle (2009) argue that research on pedagogical practices enabled by constructivism elaborate on the varied curricula approaches experimented with such as subject-centered, problem-centered, and more recently, student-centered. Constructivism avers that there is no objective truth to be discovered but that meaning of various phenomena we are engaged in through experiences and situations is socially constructed.

There is a great deal of excitement on the education and technology opportunities that now exist for students and educators in recent years. Students’ expectations and the ability to learn and master new academic content have also been altered through computers and software. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are an education revolution (Greene, Oswald, & Pomerantz, 2015) and represent a new kind of a learning community (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). MOOCs typically involve structured and sequenced teacher-led activities (e.g., lecture videos, readings, and problem-sets) coupled with online assessments and student interaction platforms (e.g., discussion forums) (Greene, Oswald, & Pomerantz, 2015). Some MOOCs have fixed beginning and ending dates while others are more flexible resources that can be accessed dynamically. The students who complete all the activities and reach some predetermined criterion for the assessments, often 70% or more receive a certificate or endorsement of completion of studies. The most popular of the MOOCs are edX ([www.edx.org](http://www.edx.org)) and Coursera ([www.coursera.org](http://www.coursera.org)). Most MOOCs provide this course-like experience online for those who choose to enroll, often at

no cost and requiring at a minimum an Internet connection (Greene, Oswald, & Pomerantz, 2015).

Research by Neier and Zayer (2015) to examine students' perception on the usefulness of Web 2.0 and social media in enhancing their educational experience, established that social media is a future learning tool. However, students were cautious as to which tools hold the most potential and for what purpose the tool could be used for (Neier & Zayer, 2015). This mixed-methods study (Neier & Zayer, 2015) also found the need by students for interaction during learning as well as being sensitive to students' needs by teachers and universities who used social media in the classroom. Thus, social media had positive outcomes in the classroom and in the learning processes of students, which ultimately, impacts on their persistence and success in their degree programmes. Students report a sense of empowerment through the use of digital and online technologies with far-reaching implications for the higher education experiences for students.

#### **2.5.5. The changes in approaches to student learning**

Continuous improvement and innovation in the theories and approaches have altered the way knowledge is constructed and how student learning is approached and actually proceeds (Maguire, Evans, & Dyas, 2001). Nationally-designed surveys and research instruments have been used worldwide to uncover certain concepts in practices and outcomes in education. For example, the Questionnaire instrument used widely to investigate approaches to learning in the UK is the 'Approaches to Studying Inventory' devised by Entwistle and Ramsden in 1983. The instrument has evolved over the years to be called 'Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students' (ASSIST) (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Entwistle, Tait, & McCune, 1999; Maguire, Evans, & Dyas, 2001). Blooms' Taxonomy of Learning is another popular theory with

ramifications in how instructors should relate to the way in which their students assimilate new materials (Bloom, Mesia, & Krathwohl, 1964).

## **2.6. The benefits of support services during the first-year experience**

### **2.6.1. Quality of the first-year experience**

Earlier studies indicate that there are many variables that institutions put in place to increase student persistence, retention, and academic success (CrissmanIshler & Upcraft, 2004; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Waters, 2003). Institutional motivation, commitment, and support can determine the quality of the student experience during the first year prior to and after they are on-course (Tinto, 1998; Waters, 2003). According to Waters (2003), institutional support for both the students and academic staff can ensure that first-year students transit to become independent and autonomous learners. Waters (2003) argue that the attitude of teachers and institutional support for teaching is a huge critical factor, among the many variables, in determining the quality of the first-year student experience and the ability of new students to adapt to the teaching and learning styles. Waters (2003) posits that the academic staff should assume this important responsibility so that the student learns well. This recognition will ensure that students are active learners and reduce the chances of having student drop-out of university.

### **2.6.2. Fostering student persistence**

There is evidence to suggest that students who receive institutional support during their transition and adjustment process persist in college and are likely to complete their studies (CrissmanIshler & Upcraft, 2004; Longden, 2006). CrissmanIshler and Upcraft (2004) explore American experiences with the first-year students, and argue that institutions cannot afford to admit students and hope that they sink or swim on their own. There are serious obligations on both

sides. Many institutions have come to understand the need to both challenge and support the students they admit and make a commitment to help them succeed (CrissmanIshler & Upcraft, 2004). Therefore, institutional support tends to foster student persistence.

### **2.6.3. Dealing with stress among first-year students**

Traditional and non-traditional student support services take a number of approaches in order to serve its diverse student population based on specific needs and ease the adjustment to university (LaPadula, 2003; Weiss & Repetto, 1997). Stress is reported as a notable factor in the life of students in many disciplines (Deary, Watson, & Hogston, 2003; Milem & Berger, 1997). Deary et al. (2003) investigated the attrition of students from nursing programmes in Scotland. The researchers confirmed in their longitudinal cohort study of burnout and attrition in nursing students that students experienced varying levels of stress, which as research evidence indicates, is linked to attrition in degree programmes. The study offered explanations for the observations about stress and coping in individuals. Deary et al. (2003) uniquely highlighted the positive aspects of personality, burnout, coping and attrition to a measure of stress in nursing students. As their work established the relationship between personality, stress, coping and burnout, considered with that between personality and attrition, led to the conclusion that there is probably not a direct relationship between stress, burnout and attrition. The students less likely to experience greater degrees of stress and aspects of burnout are more likely to proceed to registration (Deary, Watson, & Hogston, 2003).

### **2.6.4. Identifying student needs**

According to LaPadula (2003), student support services can enhance enrollment, decrease attrition, and provide for a balanced program to students. They are readily available on campus

for the traditional student (LaPadula, 2003). LaPadula (2003) observes that more attention is increasingly being given to the needs of the distance education student. The transition from high school to university can be quite challenging to disabled students if there are no student support services provided by the institutions of higher learning. There are a growing number of disabled students attending postsecondary educational institutions (Weiss & Repetto, 1997). A report by Weiss and Repetto (1997) on a survey of services and support provided to students with disabilities at 28 community colleges and 39 vocational technical centers in Florida, United States, showed that disabled students are equally concerned with access and success in postsecondary education and training. It is cogent to argue that student support services play a critical role in the educational process of on-campus students, disabled students, and distance learners, and most likely to contribute to academic success.

## **2.7. The need for institutional resources for minority students during the first-year experience**

### **2.7.1. The disparities in minority communities**

Colleges and universities are tasked with the responsibility of providing institutional resources to all categories of the student population. However, as Arnold (2013) contends, not all students equally benefit from such institutional scarce resources as witnessed among the minority groups. Arnold (2013) opines further that minorities issues are increasingly being prioritized by policymakers in higher education. Abraham, Lujan, Lopez, and Walker (2002) and Musoba, Collazo, and Placide (2013) suggest that institutional resources might not be adequately addressing the needs of the Hispanic students in the US. The researchers observe that Hispanics constitute the largest of the minority group and that minority students account for one fourth of all college and university students. Almost all minority students in the US are of Hispanic origin

with the rest split among Blacks, or African – American, Asian, and Native American (Abraham, Lujan, Lopez, & Walker, 2002; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013).

A study by Nora and Cabrera (1996) in which they examined minority and nonminority freshman adjustment to college showed evidence that minorities on the average, enter college with significantly lower academic readiness, and consequently, are found among those students who tend to drop out because of ill preparedness. Zulu (2008) report of a study at a historically black university campus in South Africa on student and lecturer experiences, academic success, and academic failure. The study cautions that students enter university with different levels of academic preparation because of differing schooling, social and economic backgrounds, and when they start university study; other factors begin to impact and influence their academic performance. Zulu (2008) advises that it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that the first-year student is exposed to as many positive academic experiences as possible. In a more or less similar study, Arnold (2013) sought to understand the differences in the first-year study success between minority and majority students in the bachelor program in economics at Erasmus School of Economics, which is part of Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. The study used a quantitative approach on a dataset of 944 students. Among the results, the study established that minority students gained less credits in their academic work and had a higher dropout rate. The study also found that preparatory education was a highly significant determinant of first-year study success, of which minority students were unlikely to have been exposed to (Arnold, 2013). These three related studies (Arnold, 2013; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Zulu, 2008) stress the need for concerted institutional support to the first-year minority students during their studies in college.

### **2.7.2. Provision of institutional resources and policies to support students**

In other works, researchers agree that the provision of institutional resources to first-year students is pivotal to student success and retention, and that this should more than often be reflected in university policies (Longden, 2006; Williamson, Laybourn, Deane, & Tait, 2011). Williamson et al. (2011) conducted an internal qualitative study to examine the development of expectations, learning experiences and study attitudes of new psychology students at Edinburgh Napier University, UK, over their first semester. The purpose of their study was to inform the design of an intervention to support the undergraduate transitional process. Even though institutional support already existed, the researchers wanted to establish a more targeted approach across programmes. They used an action research approach to collect data from two cohorts of first-year participants at the start of both first and second semesters, with one cohort fully meeting the objectives of the research. The Semester 1 data showed realistic expectations but lacked in-depth reflection while the Semester 2 responses on ‘experiences’ of first semester showed a predominant concern with time- and self- management. The researchers noted for the need to first-year intervention and the development of appropriate student psychological contracts. The study by Williamson et al. (2011) stress the importance of a clear policy by institutions which lay out the kinds of student support and their importance in desired outcomes in students’ experiences.

### **2.8. Best practices and strategies to improve the first-year experience**

The first year at college has many dimensions including intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural, all of which needs to be addressed in order to ease student transition and improve the

first-year experience. Researchers argue that the first-year experience determine student's acclimation to a university setting, subsequent academic cultures, identity, and success (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Kidwell, 2005; Longden, 2006). Other researchers such as Milem and Berger (1997) stress that for students in particular, the period of transition to university represents a separation from the patterns and norms associated with previous experiences, wherein behavioral patterns of the university have not been established fully. Work by Kidwell (2005) shows that the new college life is uncharted territory in the eyes of eager and well-prepared students. This uncharted territory can be an opportunity to shape destinies (Kidwell, 2005).

### **2.8.1. Improving the diversity experiences of students**

According to Eberly Teaching Center for Excellence (2002), new undergraduate students bring with them to college a whole set of assumptions and strategies about life and learning based on their prior experience. There is evidence to suggest that students handle transitions differently and sometimes, transition is daunting especially for international students. An Australian study by Birks, Chapman, Ralph, McPherson, Eliot, and Coyle (2013) that sought to identify the experiences of beginning nursing students and develops strategies to reduce attrition and promote success in their undergraduate studies, established among other findings, that communication with approachable academics was critical in the learning journey of the students. Some participants in the study spoke highly of the social support they received from family and friends and others in their social networks when it came to difficulties in their quest for success.

### **2.8.2. Ease of the transition process**

Alder (2016)'s study explored the transition to university as experienced by first-year students of English Literature in the UK. The motivation to conduct the study by the researcher was the observed deficiencies in the research on the first year as focusing mostly on persistence and success. Alder (2016) uniquely sought to explore the within subject discipline differences among first-year students. A phenomenographic approach suited to suggesting interpretative narrative of the experiences of small groups of participants was used (Alder, 2016). A series of interviews were conducted with eight first-year students and four second-year students. According to Alder (2016), all the participants had continued successfully with their programmes at the time of the study. Results indicated that, while describing anxieties and concerns about adjusting to the new practices and discourses of English literature at university level, students' identification with their chosen subject appeared closely implicated in their engagement with university study and their academic identity formation. The study's findings suggests that even within the most academically engaged of students and with the promptings of a discipline such as English Literature which welcomes debates and contradictions, there were still challenges in academic identity among such engaged first-year students (Alder, 2016). There are no two first-year experiences which are the same and each cohort of students requires different strategies to ease the process of transition to higher education.

## **2.9. The first-year experience contextualized in Zimbabwe**

### **2.9.1. The developments in higher education in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe is a signatory to the *Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training*, in which the importance of quality education and training to

undergraduates is duly credited. The Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) reports on its website ([www.zimche.co.zw](http://www.zimche.co.zw)) that there are about sixteen (16) universities in the country. A large majority of these Universities are owned by the state while the others are private-owned and (or) run by the church. WUA, the focus of this study, is private-owned, and was co-founded by Professor Hope Cynthia Sadza and Dr. Fay Chung in the year 2002. All universities in the country grant degrees and diplomas upon successful completion of studies. The student population at these Universities is from the country's towns, provinces, rural areas, and international borders, which makes an interesting case for the first-year experience as both the rural and urban young people meet for the first time at university.

### **2.9.2. Challenges faced by Universities in Zimbabwe**

Many universities in Zimbabwe are struggling to effectively deliver on their mandate owing to the harsh socio-economic and political environment which has persisted for decades (Garwe & Maganga, 2015; Majoni, 2014). Consequently, the first-year experience is affected the most as new students struggle to complete their degree programmes. Garwe and Maganga (2015) contend that there are various reasons that lead to non-completion of degree programmes and the downside impacts on student persistence in college. Many of these reasons are understudied and represent potential learning experience for the country's university instructors and administrators. This contrasts other Western countries such as the US and Europe where significant attention and resources are devoted solely to the understanding of the FYE.

### **2.9.3. The constitutional provisions to higher education in Zimbabwe**

According to the Government of Zimbabwe (2006), the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) is authorised the Act of Parliament [*CHAPTER 25:27*] with objects and powers "to

promote and co-ordinate education provided by institutions of higher education and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research in institutions of higher education” (p. 4). Of the stated Functions of the Council in the Act, 6 (d) and 6 (g), are closely related to the first-year experience of students, and is as follows:

- 6 (d) states that the Council is “to design and recommend an institutional quality assurance system for higher education, that is a system whereby the courses, programmes and degrees offered by institutions are evaluated on a regular and objective basis, ...” (p. 5);
- 6 (9) states that the Council is “to assist institutions of higher education in the training of high calibre staff.” (p. 4)

Despite the remarkable Functions of the Council, the entity is not directly involved in the day-to-day affairs of Universities in Zimbabwe. This is a special task carried out by the Senate, the highest decision-making organ in most Universities, and executed through administrative and teaching units of the Universities.

## **2.10. Summary**

This chapter has explored the conceptual areas on students’ perception of the first-year experience in higher education as studied in the international literature. A large majority of the research on the first-year experience has been conducted in Australia, UK, and the US with a dearth of research focusing on the African continent. This gap in research is an opportunity for

pioneering work within the context of Zimbabwe given the increase in number of institutions of higher learning in the country. The complex issues that impact on student life in higher education can be addressed by targeted support and interventions which would ultimately lead to desired outcomes to students, administrators, and teachers. This chapter has also shown the importance of individual and group focus when addressing the challenges found in the first-year experience among new students.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **3.0.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1.Introduction**

Researchers come from different traditions and employ different methodologies in the social sciences. According to Hall and Howard (2008), a methodology is the research design framework: the particular way of thinking about the research that determines which methods will be used and how they will be used. Methods are the tools researchers use, the procedures they undertake, basically the “what we do” in order that the research question can be answered in synchronicity with the methodological, theoretical, and epistemological framing of the study (Hall & Howard, 2008). Analogically, a methodology is a domain or a map, while a method refers to a set of steps to travel between two places on the map (Jonker & Pennink, 2010). The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research methodology that was adopted in this study in order to address the research question and its three objectives.

#### **3.2.Research Approach**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach because this allowed for the capture and broadening of our understanding in a holistic way, the dynamic social interactions and experiences of students and the university staff with regard to the first-year experience in higher education. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problem. Berg (2001) defines qualitative research as the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics,

metaphors, symbols, and description of things. Essentially, qualitative research helps a researcher to understand and develop explanations of social phenomena and why things are the way they are (Hancock, Ockleford, & Winridge, 2009). Qualitative research is exploratory and is useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine (Creswell, 2009). Morse (1991) adds that this type of research approach may be needed because the topic is novel, the topic has never been addressed with a certain sample or group of people, and existing theories do not apply with the particular sample or group under investigation. This study sought to gain a broad understanding of the students' perception of the first-year experience at Women's University in Africa (WUA). To this end, the qualitative research approach was the most suitable approach that allowed the researcher to capture the social aspects of the students' first-year experience.

### **3.3. Research Design**

According to Creswell (2009), a research design is a plan and the procedure for research that span the decision from broad assumptions to the detailed methods of data collection and analysis. Yin (1984) elaborates on the research design as the logic that links the data to be collected (and the conclusions) to be drawn to the initial questions of a study. Every empirical study has an implicit, if not explicit, research design. The main purpose of the research design is to help avoid the situation in which the evidence does not address the initial research questions (Yin, 1984).

#### **3.3.1. Case study**

This study adopted a case study research design. Merriam (1998) define a case study as being “an examination of a specific phenomenon” (p. 9). Such a phenomenon may be an individual, a

group, a program or an event, into which the researcher is interested in gaining insight through interpretation of the case being studied. Creswell (2009) observe that a case study is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that a qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This approach has the advantage of ensuring that the issue and/or the real-life and contemporary phenomenon is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lens which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 1984; Zainal, 2007). Stake (1995) opines that cases are bounded by time and activity, and the researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time. Zainal (2007) assert that in most cases, the case study method selects small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of the study.

Yin (1984) describes three categories of case study designs: the exploratory, the descriptive, and the explanatory. Exploratory case studies set to explore any phenomenon in the data which serves as a point of interest to the researcher while descriptive case studies set to describe the natural phenomena which occur within the data in question. Explanatory case studies examine the data closely both at a surface and deep level in order to explain the phenomena in the data (Yin, 1984). According to Yin (1994), there can be single and multiple case designs. Zucker (2009) observe that one rationale for these designs is to identify an extreme or unique case. The single case may focus on a single unit of analysis or multiple units of analysis. On the other hand, the multiple (comparative) case studies are analogous to multiple experiments (Yin, 1994). The single case study research design was discovered to be the appropriate method for this study

because it allowed the researcher to closely explore as well as investigate the real lives of students at WUA.

### **3.3.2. Advantages of case studies**

According to Yin (1984), the examination of data is most often conducted within the context of its use, that is, within the situation in which the activity takes place. This study explored students' perception of the first-year experience at WUA. Participants were not isolated from their context, that is, the university. This contrasts with other research strategies where it may be necessary to isolate the phenomenon from its context in order to investigate a limited number of variables. Zainal (2007) observe that variations in terms of intrinsic, instrumental and collective approaches to case studies allow for both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. The detailed qualitative accounts often produced in case studies not only help to explore or describe the data in real-life environment, but also help to explain the complexities of real life situations which may not be captured through experimental or survey research (Zainal, 2007). Moriarty (2011) argue that this attention to detail makes case studies accessible to many readers owing to their richness in the 'real experiences' that make up other people's lives and the variety in how the research report would be written up.

### **3.3.3. Disadvantages of case studies**

The most common criticism of the case study is the assertion that it is impossible to generalize from a single case and that there is a tendency for verification, that is, for researchers to use data to confirm their preconceived notions (Moriarty, 2011; Simons, 1996). Other criticisms note that the case study is labour intensive as a research strategy (Schell, 1992). Schell (1992) argues that more energy is required at each stage of the research process within a case study in order to make

the data collected systematically comparable with data collected using other strategies. Yin (1984) reports comprehensively on the three types of arguments against case study research namely: the accusation that case studies lack rigor; case studies provide very little basis for scientific generalization since they use a small number of subjects, some conducted with only one subject, and that case studies as take too long to complete. Yin (1984) reports that case studies are said to be difficult and produces a massive amount of documentation. According to Yin (2009), the standards in the conduct of case study research are variable, particularly in the development of case study protocols or plans of analysis.

### **3.4.Population**

Two groups of participants comprised the population of this study *viz.* three categories of students at different study level (i.e., first, second, and third years), and staff members of the University who work closely with first-year students.

### **3.5.Sampling**

The study adopted non-probability sampling to purposively sample ten (10) enrolled students at different levels (see Appendix F) as well as two (2) key informants representing members of the University staff. The study did not attempt to sample all the students enrolled at WUA because of the non-feasibility of this approach, limited time and financial constraints, and other related factors. However, the researcher assumed that the sample chosen was representative enough of the research problem under investigation.

According to Berg (2001), in non-probability sampling, the investigator does not base his or her sample selection on probability theory. Rather, efforts are undertaken to: create a kind of quasi-

random sample; and/or have a clear idea about what larger group or groups the sample may reflect. Non-probability samples offer the benefits of not requiring a list of all possible elements in a full population, and the ability to access otherwise highly sensitive or difficult research study populations (Berg, 2001). In purposive sampling the researcher uses special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population and whose opinion will be important to the research, because of what the researcher already knows about them (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2009; Harrell & Bradley, 2009). This study used non-probability sampling and purposive sampling as this allowed the researcher to explore the perspectives of the students studying at the University.

### **3.6. Research Instrument**

Annum (2006) defines a research instrument as a “tool which the researcher uses to gather data” (p. 1). The interview was the primary research instrument in this study, taking the form of semi-structured and in-depth for students and key informants, respectively. According to Harrell & Bradley (2009), interviews can be used as a primary data gathering method to collect information from individuals about their own practices, beliefs, or opinions. They can be used to gather information on past or present behavior or experiences (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Hancock, Ockleford, and Winridge (2009) observe that a semi-structured interview is a free-flowing conversation and involves a number of open ended questions based on the topic areas that the researcher wants to cover. The open ended nature of the questions posed in a semi-structured interview defines the topic under investigation but provides opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail (Hancock, Ockleford, & Winridge, 2009). Should the interviewee have difficulty in answering a particular question or provides on a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the

question further. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer directs the interview more closely (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003) and also has the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on an original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee. According to Gray (2004), probing is a way for the interview to explore new paths which were not initially considered. The conversation might thus take an unanticipated direction which can provide an opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) argue that there is less flexibility with the semi-structured interview. The in-depth interview will be used to tap into the expert knowledge of key informants and will be based on a schedule or guide with a set of prepared questions and topics that must be covered by the researcher (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The semi-structured interview schedules for students would be centered on questions that generate responses relevant to the objectives of the study.

### **3.7.Pre-testing**

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) argue that no research instrument is perfect and hence the need for ‘piloting’ or pre-testing the questions with a small number of participants in order to establish clarity in the instrument. According to Yin (2011), pre-testing helps to test one or more aspects of a final study – for example, its design, fieldwork procedures, data collection instruments, or analysis plans. It is an opportunity to “practice” (Yin, 2011: 37) and assists in eliminating ambiguous questions as well as in generating useful feedback on the structure and flow of the planned semi-structured interview. During pre-testing, the interview questions should be easy to understand when actually presented to the targeted participants (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Pre-testing also helps to reveal unanticipated problems with question wording, how long it takes to complete the interview, and try to identify and eliminate items that

will not generate usable data (Phellas, Bloch, & Seale, 2011). The researcher pre-tested the interview schedule with one student, who was later excluded from the final sample of research participants. Phellas, Bloch, and Seale (2011) observe that the people used during the pilot study should be excluded from your final sample as their experience of seeing the earlier interview schedule may make them answer the real thing differently. The study then proceeded to the main phase after pre-testing.

### **3.8.Data Collection / Gathering**

According to Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit (2004), data collection is a process whereby researchers gather “raw empirical information of a phenomenon” (p. 6) to find answers to their research questions through speaking to research participants. This process is critical in research as it helps the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the research participants. This study conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews to gather data from the participants. Each interview lasted about an hour depending on the flow of the conversation. The researcher (with the permission of participants) used audio-tapping to capture data which was later transcribed and analysed. Hand-written notes were used for some participants who declined to have their interviews audio-tapped. Silverman (2001) observe that the use of a recorder assists in avoiding the loss of data through the researcher’s memory lapse over time as it allows for transcribing which presents detailed and clear acknowledgements of participants’ experiences.

### **3.9.Data Analysis**

Data obtained in this study was analysed using the interpretative approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and specifically through thematic content analysis (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Creswell (2009) opines that data analysis “involves making sense out of text and image data” (p. 183). Creswell (2009) adds that data analysis involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analysis, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the interpretative approach allows researchers to treat social action and human activity as text. In short, human action can be seen as a collection of symbols expressing layers of meaning. Interviews can be transcribed into written text for analysis, and how one interprets such a text depends in part on the theoretical orientation taken by the researcher (Berg, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Berg (2001) and Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) observe that researchers conduct content analysis on written documents or transcriptions of recorded interviews to explore the coverage of particular themes. Wilkinson & Birmingham (2003) opine that is specifically the themes or issues in the text that are analysed by the researcher. The following steps adopted from Chibonore (2015) were used during the process of data analysis:

#### *Phase 1: Orientation to the data*

This phase involves transcribing the interview, authentication of collected data through checking, confirming and testing the accurate nature of data provided by the research participants. According to Chibonore (2015), orientation to the data is done to verify the true nature of data

that has been gathered. The stage proceeds by an analysis of the raw data collected to identify any errors and omissions and to amend them as much as is possible. By so doing, the researcher was able to gain an overview of the research material.

### *Phase 2: Working the data*

This phase involves familiarization, ordering, and summarizing the data into emerging categories on the basis of identified themes in the study (Chibonore, 2015). This phase makes use of the objectives of the research when establishing the different categories for each group of similar themes. The researcher in this study had to revisit each theme to ensure that the category established was the most suitable as per the verbatim.

### *Phase 3: Final composition of analysed data and drawing of conclusions*

This phase involves a final write up of the themes of the qualitative data whilst establishing the pattern which has emerged (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004). The researcher conducted a final evaluation of the research findings to ensure that they were addressing the study objectives with a view to provide valid conclusions. Gathered data was presented as narrative passages that also incorporated a detailed discussion of the themes, perceptions of the research participants, quotations, and a general discussion of the themes.

### **3.10. Methodological Limitations**

#### **3.10.1. Researcher bias**

Qualitative research is subjective. It is possible that there was a researcher bias at each stage of data collection and data analysis process. The researcher overcame this methodological limitation by constant checking and verification of the data gathered against each participant as well as allocating as much time as was needed to the process of data analysis. The other source of researcher bias in this study was that WUA is the home institution of the researcher and this certainly played a role in the selection of participants.

#### **3.10.2. Additional research to test the findings**

The lack of extra time, financial constraints, and other related factors did not permit the researcher to conduct additional research to test the research findings.

### **3.11. Ethical Considerations**

#### **3.11.1. Informed and Voluntary Consent**

According to Halai (2006), researchers are expected to obtain informed consent from all those who are directly involved in research or in the vicinity of research. This principle adheres to a larger issue of respect to the participants so that they are not coerced into participation and have access to relevant information prior to the consent. Halai (2006) states that consent is usually obtained through written consent forms, and necessary elements of consent are identified by the review committees. They usually include prior information on key elements of research purpose, procedures, time period, risks, benefits, and a clause stipulating that participation is voluntary and that the participants have the right to withdraw from the study. Participants in this study

were made aware of the informed and voluntary consent and what it meant as far as their responses were concerned. The participants were also informed that this study did not have any financial rewards to it and nevertheless, agreed to take part.

### **3.11.2. Privacy and Anonymity**

This principle is concerned with offering respect and protection to research participants through assurance of confidentiality of information shared and anonymity by not revealing the identity of the individuals and institutions involved (Halai, 2006). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the research participants. They were informed of their anonymity in the data compilation and report writing of the study. However, the participants' identities were not anonymous to the researcher and his main supervisor. The participants were informed of this fact prior to conducting the interviews. The recordings of the interviews (those to which the participants consented) were locked away in a safe. The period of time on which they will be discarded is after six years provided that no research publications emanate from this study. The participants were made aware of this provision.

### **3.11.3. Confidentiality**

The researcher treated all the information availed to him in a confidential manner and did not avail it to anyone else.

### **3.11.4. No Harm to Participants, Beneficence and Reciprocity**

This principle expects researchers to provide participants with an outline of the risks and benefits involved to the participants in the study (Halai, 2006). The principle adds that there should be a reasonable expectation by research participants that they will not be involved in any situation in

which they might be harmed. The principle of reciprocity requires that the researchers consider actively ways through which participants could be compensated for their time and effort. The researcher in this study provided all the information about risks and benefits of the study in summary in the Consent Forms(Appendix B and Appendix C) and Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A).

#### **3.11.5. Voluntary Participation and the Right to Withdraw from the Study at Any Time**

Voluntary participation means that participants should take part in the study willingly and should also be free to withdraw from the study as and when they wish to at any time. Chibonore (2015) opines that the research participants should be informed of the option to withdraw from the research at any time if they so wish and that they can do so without giving any justification to the researcher. This study did not coerce participants; instead it encouraged willing participants to freely engage on agreeable terms with the researcher. Banister (2007) observes that in the era of digital technologies, besides withdrawing from the study while it is being conducted, participants need to know that they can choose to withdraw once data collection is finished. Participants need to be able to withdraw after reviewing recordings or edited versions of the data. They need to be able to withdraw (or have the data withdrawn) from websites or other distribution media if they feel threatened or exploited (Banister, 2007).

#### **3.11.6. Publication of findings and feedback to research participants**

According to Babbie and Mouton (2004), the final research report should be made available to the research participants if and when they so request it. The researcher made it clear to participants that the final electronic copy of the research report with the findings of the study will be availed to them should they choose to have it as soon as it is complete. The findings of this

research shall be published in the form of an academic journal with full anonymity of the participants as indicated earlier, in future.

### **3.11.7. Clearance from the Institutional Ethics Committee**

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Standard Letter given to graduate students to proceed to work on their Dissertations as part of the academic requirements of the Master of Science degree in Development Studies. This Standard Letter was used as the basis to conduct this non-medical study involving human participants.

## **3.12. Research Quality**

### **3.12.1. Reliability and Validity: Trustworthiness**

This study adopted the principles established in Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (2009), that trustworthiness in a qualitative study is ensured through member checks, or arranging for those who provided the data to evaluate the conclusions. The researcher consulted with experts in higher education on the research findings. The researcher also ensured trustworthiness by providing thick description, or rich detail of the context of the study (Merriam, 2009).

### **3.12.2. Researcher subjectivity and reflexivity**

The researcher was drawn to this study because of this interest in quality education at all levels in the development of responsible citizens. The potential of this study to inform the programmes targeted at first-year students captivated the researcher. As such, the researcher viewed this study as one step, among many that WUA can do to facilitate the transition of high school students to university education.

### **3.13. Summary**

This chapter discussed the research methodology used to address the research question and analyse the findings. The study adopted a qualitative research approach which allowed the researcher to capture the students' lived experiences during their first year at WUA. The study used a case study research design as well as non-probability sampling to select participants. It was also established from this chapter that as in every research, there were methodological limitations which the researcher promptly addressed through a number of strategies.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **4.0. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the data gathered, analyzes, and discusses the findings of the study. The main themes that emerged from the data analysis processes are discussed. The discussion is guided by the research question posed in the study which is in tandem with the research objectives. Thus, the discussion is based on the three objectives of the study, restated below, which were to:

- Explore the barriers that students encounter in their first year at Women's University in Africa (WUA).
- Investigate the efficacy of support services meant to facilitate the transition from high school to university for first-year students at WUA.
- Explore the coping mechanisms used by students during their first year experience at WUA.

#### **4.2. FIRST OBJECTIVE: EXPLORE THE BARRIERS THAT STUDENTS ENCOUNTER IN THEIR FIRST YEAR AT WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**

Research has shown that the first-year experience is the bedrock of students' perception and that any unaddressed barriers may alter student experiences. This study focused on the first-year

experience at WUA. The first objective of this study explored the barriers that students encounter in their first-year at WUA. The themes which emerged are discussed below:

#### **4.2.1. Failure to attend the First-Year Orientation Programme**

One of the issues raised by participants as a barrier they encountered during their first-year experience was a failure to attend the First-Year Orientation Programme because of work and other commitments. Failure to attend the event means that the new students were not physically on campus at the time of the Programme. New students who fail to participate in the Orientation Programme miss many important things, some of which would affect how they will perceive the first-year experience. The First-Year Orientation Programme is designed to be attended by new and returning students as well as members of staff at WUA. During the Orientation Programme first-year students listen through oral and sometimes interactive presentations on the university delivered by selected speakers. This is sometimes meant to inspire new students to excel in their studies and to foster a sense of belonging within the community of students.

One participant said:

*“I failed to attend the Orientation Programme because I was at work. I was working and at the same time going to school. It was really difficult.”*

Another participant said:

*“I did not attend the Orientation Programme because I was at home. I asked other students who had attended the Programme. The only thing which is useful to me is that they told me was that if you have not fully paid up the fees you will not be able to write the exams and you will not get to see your results... The other thing the students told me was that suppose you fall sick and you*

*have an assignment you have not done. You are supposed to come with proof that you have gone to see the doctor. It should really show that you were really sick. I heard that the University will accept this proof.”*

The quotations show that because the participants failed to be physically present at the First-Year Orientation Programme there are many potentially beneficial things that they could have taken home by mere attendance at the event. One of these things could have been tips on how to navigate the transition period from high school to university. This is typically information that is sometimes creatively shared through testimonials by selected returning students. The speakers who speak at the Orientation Programme are sometimes chosen for their specific experience with the cohorts and as such, the new students would stand to gain much from attending the event. The other thing they could potentially gain from such a programme would be the chance to meet and make new friends as many of the students would be new to the university. The First-Year Orientation Programme is a platform where new students get first-hand general information about their new study place and the requirements in order to succeed in their chosen programme of study. When new students fail to be physically present at the event this means that they would need to seek information from those students who attended the event, members of staff, and other sources. Some of the information passed on to these students might be inaccurate, biased, and perhaps opinionated such as to impress in the new students' minds a different picture of their university. From the above findings, it is clear that the failure by some participants to attend the First-Year Orientation Programme suggest the need of having a follow-up programme during the semester to update and possibly cement of some of the issues shared during the first-meeting with new students. One can see also that the event is critical to the first-year experience as it is a

convergence of much of the best resources of the university towards a welcome of the first-year students.

#### **4.2.2. The challenge to manage study and other commitments**

Participants in the study also raised the issue of the challenge to manage study and other commitments. This is when the students would have to allow time for non-study activities which in many cases would coincide with the study time. The students would have to make difficult decisions as to which of the activity to choose which would make the best use of their time as well as resources. The participants indicated that such kinds of situations were hard for them and none of the activities were to be neglected. This study explored how the participants fared in terms of managing study and other commitments during their first-year at WUA. First-year students would struggle managing their study and other commitments because of the time clashes. In the worst case scenario, participants would choose the option that best served their interest at that time and it turned out that this was not necessarily school work. Some of the participants indicated that family time was equally important.

One participant said:

*“...I commute to University and keeping to time was not so easy as well. Some of these barriers [challenges they encounter at WUA] would demand that I forfeit some of the important commitments in my life such as family and work-related commitments. This was very difficult. For example, for my family they need my attention and so during the weekdays it was not easy to do the studying.”*

Another participant said:

*“It was really difficult [managing the demands on the student’s time]. Also, I had to adjust to doing the school assignments as well as my work assignments. I could not balance the time that I had. I also had lots of field trips some of them lasting up to a week in [deletion, names of places in Zimbabwe]. I had a laptop to use though there wasn’t that much Internet. Juggling all these things was hard for me.”*

From the above quotations, we observe that the challenge to manage study and other commitments was a key issue among participants. Students who fail to allocate adequate time to study and other commitments may actually fail to achieve any goal at all. This is because of insufficient time to ensure that each activity would receive sufficient attention and detail as to warrant its successful completion. The other possible outcome is that by struggling to manage the different commitments they expend their time, resources, and effort which in the prevailing socio-economic context of Zimbabwe are limited. The quotations suggest that the demands on the study and other commitments were not synergistic meaning that each came with its own set of requirements and deadlines. Committing time to a single commitment did not entail working on the other.

It is clear from the quotations that this suggests for a need to establish boundaries within the study itself as well as from the other commitments. This is confirmed in a study by Van Den Hurk (2006) where the study found among other things, that students who are better time planners and who have better self-monitoring skills were more efficient in allocating their individual study time (spent less time on individual study), prepared more appropriately for the tutorial group meeting and achieved higher scores on cognitive tests. This means that

participants would have to devise creative ways of managing their study time as well as paying more attention to group meetings (scheduled and non-scheduled) in order to keep abreast with their learning tasks and activities. This finding points towards the importance of devising mechanisms that help students to be able to manage the delicate balance between study and other competing demands.

#### **4.2.3. Prolonged lecture hours and periods**

The issue of prolonged lecture hours and periods was raised by participants in the study as critical during their first-year experience at WUA. Most lectures are conducted for periods lasting up to three hours with mandatory short-breaks of about fifteen (15) minutes at the end of each hour. The health break is allowed so that students can refresh as well as conduct body exercises. The lecture is also the principal mode of teaching at the university and is a medium through which students engage with the instructor and the learning materials. Lecture hours add up to the course credits and therefore, is an academic requirement according to the standards set by WUA. Participants highlighted that they sometimes had sessions lasting up to three (3) hours with less than three (3) breaks. This was also compounded by the fact that sometimes the materials taught in each session might have required more time to permit to comprehension.

One participant related:

*“The lecture hours were too much! I still remember coming out of some of our lectures around 7:30 pm. I think people must have concluded that we were super intelligent students whereas we would come of those lectures blank! We would not even have understood a single thing from our class. The breaks were there but only for a very short period.”*

Another participant said:

*“.... We spend the whole day sitting with short breaks that are meaningless [of no effect]. Sitting is not good. We just come to WUA Auditorium at the Educational Services Center and that is the only place we know for our degree programme.”*

Another participant said:

*“For students like me who are coming direct from high school, we are not used to study for 5 hours. Some lectures have very short breaks, maybe, five (5) minutes. They are just too short.”*

We can see from the quotations above that some participants felt that the lecture hours and periods were a huge challenge to them. Considering that students who recently completed from high school are used to learning which lasts for an hour or less, the new experience where lectures seemed to last for eternity was unbearable to some participants. Prolonged lecture periods and hours tend to lead to disinterestedness in mastering the materials taught by instructors. It might also lead to a loss in concentration and ultimately, a hate for higher education. This can potentially discourage prospective students from seeking for a study place at WUA. The quotations from the participants hint to the possibility that students failed to get adequate time to revisit the materials studied in a day considering the fact that some lectures ended late in evening. This would also make it impossible to recover from the day's activities as well as plan how the next day would proceed in their student diaries. This failure to revise materials learned in a day contradicts the research on effective university teaching, a scholarly activity that is oriented to and focused on the students (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010).

#### 4.2.4. The gulf between high school and university education

The issue of the gulf between high school and university education was raised by participants as crucial to their first-year experience at WUA. The aims of education are distinct at each level in the life of the student, meaning that, each level lays down its requirements and demands on the students. Theoretically, the lower levels of education such as high school are supposed to supply unhindered the pool of new students who constitute the student body at university level. However, the content of the subject matter at high school and the breadth and depth to which that material is covered as taught by educators is different from what new students are exposed to when they enter university education. Participants in this study highlighted that this difference, meaning gap, between high school and university education was so huge that it impacted on their academic performance and adjustment to university education. The two education systems appeared as parallel worlds.

One participant said:

*“After I had failed Psychology in my 1:1 [First Year, First Semester], my father came in to help me in my studies. He would explain a lot of things to me. He said that in university it is different from high school. In University you have to put many practical examples in your assignments. You have to explain and analyse. You cannot simply generalize. When I was in 1:1 I did not know that I was supposed to read a lot of books. You must read a lot of books. I didn’t read a lot of books then. I discovered that in college you need to make use of the Internet. I would just read as any other person would do. Not so much. I would copy and paste.”*

Another participant said:

*“For me, doing many subjects all at once was a big challenge. It took some time to begin to understand the amount of work that was needed in each of them. You know, the change from three (3) subjects at Advanced Level in High School to six (6) modules at university was difficult.”*

Another participant articulated:

*“The university studying environment was totally different from high school. I was coming straight from high school. In high school, for example, in the history subject, when one is talking about Napoleon Bonaparte you were not required to write so much about him. You were just supposed to state how many battles he fought. But in my first-year at WUA, we had to write so much about him. I struggled a lot.”*

It is lucid from the above quotations that there is a gulf between high school and university education. The two education systems and their levels are clearly distinct. Participants felt that this gulf presented its own demands many of which were difficult to meet. The findings from this study suggests that high school students were inadequately prepared to succeed during their first-year in university education because of the likelihood of failing in some university courses. A new student had many things to consider as they made the transition from high school to university all which improved their chances of succeeding in studies. Failure to succeed in studies would lead to student drop puts, resentment of higher education, and overall, negative perception of their first-year experience at WUA. It is also clear from the findings of the study that new students were required to demonstrate their understanding of the new concepts they were learning. There are many ways in which new students can adjust to this new educational

environment such as the use of the library to read and research, use of study tutorials, consultation with other students, and the use of their student support networks. The study also suggests that new students should have clear goals when they begin university education.

Some participants undermined the issue of “copy-and-paste”, categorized in university regulations under plagiarism and academic misconduct. It is plausible that with the numerous demands on students and their inability to cope with the workload, some students opted to plagiarise. It is known that academic plagiarism is a breach of university protocol (Carroll, 2002; Perry, 2010) and the highest among undergraduates (Perry, 2010). This act of plagiarism suggests two scenarios from the perspective of the students: that WUA has lax rules on the quality of student work turned in for marking by instructors. The other scenario is that the university instructors are not seriously assessing the work as submitted by students. This means that the university would need to consider ways to promote good academic practices in the quality of students’ work so that students’ would be compelled to promptly adjust to university education. These ways could include: promoting good academic practices among first-year students, showcasing the best student essays for each academic semester and year which would serve as the minimum standards expected of new students at the university. Perry (2010) states deterrence measures on plagiarism could include suspension from studies until the student can prove that they are able to engage in scholarly writing.

#### **4.2.5. Unreliable internet services at WUA**

Participants raised the issue of unreliable internet services as one of the barriers they encountered at the university. A reliable internet service allows students to access the World Wide Web for information concerning their studies and for further research. The university has an Internet

Service Provider who provides internet services which is subsequently, accessed at different points on campus. While it is permissible that the internet service may be interrupted due to power cuts and other reasons, persistent interruptions render the internet service unpredictable and at the very worst, unreliable. This was the case as raised by participants in the study. They would come to university campus in order that they could do their assignments and update their work. However, when students failed to access the internet services when they were at campus this tended to disrupt the flow of their work and possibly, frustrate their study efforts.

One participant said:

*“...they were some technicalities concerning access to the Internet when I was at the university. If you were outside the library and in other places, you could not pick the Wireless Network, and also in places such as the Stonebridge. ... When I was in other places I could not access the network. It was easy because during the Orientation Programme the library people told us about how to use the Internet at the University. The internet connection was ok in the library...it was bad in other places.”*

Another participant noted:

*“The Internet at the university is really bad. Worse still, the IT [Information and Technology] people at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor at the Educational Services Center are not helpful at all. They are not friendly. The headquarters is a little better as the Internet connection is better.”*

Another participant said:

*“The issue of Internet settings should be fixed. We are sick and tired of going up and down in search of a place with good Internet connection. I can’t write my assignments because of the Internet problem. As per their word during the Orientation Programme they should just make sure that students have the Internet services. They should fulfill their word.”*

Responding to some of the issues raised by the study’s participants, one key informant said:

*“I can think of three things concerning the reliability of Internet services at the university. First, it’s the issue of congestion of Internet. The second is the students themselves. Sometimes students change the computer internet settings we give them and so fail to access the Internet because of such actions. We are also trying to get new equipment for the University (e.g., servers, computers, projectors, etc). As a way to address the reliability of Internet, we are working on the access points in two ways: (1) Increase the access points, and (2) buy more access points, have more powerful computers and improve the wireless network. You find that there are issues with access plain texts websites and streaming on-line. This can determine how much of bandwidth is used by users online (students and others). When huge bandwidths are used as in the case in watching movies online others will not be able to access websites and the Internet. The other effect of such is that it takes time for a page to load. Students always have new ways to by-pass the blocking systems that we would have put in place in the network.”*

From what was highlighted by the participants, there is an unreliable internet service at the university. An unreliable internet services would compel students to search for other places outside of the university with better internet services around the Mount Pleasant Area such as SAFAIDS and the University of Zimbabwe. This act of searching for another study place

defeats the purpose of WUA as an educational institution as it is evidently struggling to provide reliable internet services to its student population. This sets a bad trend in the country's educational institutional contrary to the evidence from the World Bank which points to the ubiquitous digital technologies in educational settings (World Bank, 2016). From a student perspective, students would bear transport costs to and from their homes to come to do research using the internet only to find that there were no internet services on the day. This means students might be discouraged to be at the University for Self-study and research. It is clear from the quotations that there were fewer internet access points at the university. Fewer access points mean that the actual access points would be full of students scrambling to use the internet. Those particular places would not be conducive to serious study and research by students who required quiet time and places.

#### **4.2.6. The struggle to raise the full fees by new students**

The issue of struggling to raise the full fees was raised by the participants as critical to the success of their study experience at WUA. Participants were unable due to both internal and external reasons to raise the full fees before the start of the semester as required by the university. Students raise the fees through different means some of which include: income derived from work, sponsorship, and self-generated funds. Raising fees through any one of these means is also happening within the broader socio-economic and political context of Zimbabwe, which at the very least is unstable. The students who failed to raise the required amounts to register as well as pay the full fees remained unregistered according to the university. Consequently, they were not allowed to access any of the services provided by the university especially the library services and the use of the internet.

One participant said:

*“In my case, the first-year experience is very hard...I have not fully paid my fees. This failure to pay my full fees means that I can't get all the information that I want to use in my studies. This is really difficult for me.”*

Another participant related:

*“The biggest challenge during my first-year experience was the failure to raise the full fees. I could not pay my fees in full. As a result, I was very much unsure whether I should continue with my degree programme or not, especially whether I should attend lessons or not. I also missed the first few weeks' lectures in the semester... The university staff [read Accounts Office] was very strict. It was quite hard for me. I also sold my laptop so that I could pay my fees.”*

One more participant said:

*“... I didn't pay the full fees and so we are not allowed to use the library as students.”*

The above quotations reveal that the participants really struggled to raise the full fees required by WUA. First-year students who struggled to pay the full fees who study on the periphery of the actual student experience as planned by the university. Perhaps, they would feel rejected, unwelcome and consequently, lose the sense of belonging to WUA. This is clearly not in the interest of the university and the new students. Because they cannot access any of the critical services provided at the university this barring might lead to delays in completion of their study programmes. It is clear from the participants' view that students' who struggled to raise the full fees were keen for the university staff as represented by the Accounts Office to be sympathetic and alert them to the fees payment options that were available. This is because the Accounts

Office personnel sometimes interrupt lectures to send away unregistered and unpaid students. This usually happens at the very beginning of the semester and towards the final examinations. Students who would be chased away from classes feel ashamed and helpless as they are multiple reasons as to why one would fail to raise the full fees. They are also likely to perform poorly in their studies because of the constant interruptions in their study programme.

#### **4.2.7. Single-teaching methods and styles**

The issue of single-teaching methods and styles was raised by participants as prominent in their meetings with instructors. Single-teaching methods and styles are repetitive methods with little or no engagement of the learner with the instructor. These repetitive methods come in various shades. Some participants indicated that the lecturers would stand in front of them and speak for the entire duration of the lecture. Others highlighted that the lecturers would dictate the learning material to them and students were supposed to write as the instructor went along. The participants stressed that single-teaching methods and styles did not captivate their attention to learn of the materials during their studies. They were simply not engaged in the learning processes.

One participant said:

*“You know a course like Accounts which I failed needs a lecturer who is active not somebody who would come to class to read some big books on Accounts. You could not understand where the course was coming from and going to. The guy was not active. The instructor came to class and started reading from a book on Accounts. He was not teaching at all. He was simply reading the book to us and not teaching! Now again, we have an old man taking us in one of the courses. He is too lazy to write and show some workings on the board. He asks to read various*

*sections of some big book about the course. That is all we do. That is how we are studying that course!”*

Another participant said:

*“Some lecturers need to change the way they conduct their lectures. They did not engage the students and it was boring in some of the classes. The lecturers were very selective. If you participated in class you would get high marks and if you didn’t you would get lower marks. They did not use any interactive methods such as Microsoft PowerPoint.”*

It is clear from the above quotations that participants are more than often dissatisfied with the single-teaching method and styles used by their instructors in class. The American theoretical physicist Richard Feynman (1918 – 1988) known for his work in the path integral formulation of quantum mechanics was an innovative teacher used “active learning” to excite his students. Active learning means involving students in doing things and reflecting about what they are doing, which includes activities such as reading, writing, discussing, and problem solving (Mills, 2012). Research suggests that instructors who employ active learning may improve the employability of their students because of the knowledge and skills imparted to the students in the myriad of ways (e.g. videos, lectures, readings, and tailored problem-sets, more commonly known as MOOCs) they would be engaged during the learning processes (Maguire, Evans, & Dyas, 2001; Greene, Oswald, & Pomerantz, 2015). The participants fully agreed that there was a need for a variation of the teaching methods and styles especially in their lectures. It is clear from the participants’ views that they yearned for their active engagement in the lectures. This is because perhaps each student would feel that they were not making the best use of their time class and in general at WUA. Consequently, some students would perhaps fall asleep in class,

leave before due time, disrupt the class, shift attention to their smart phones, all to avoid boredom because of lack of student engagement. The participants also showed that they were not keen to adapt to be taken through reading sessions during class periods. This way of engaging students was seriously not “teaching”.

#### **4.2.8. The existence of difficult social relationships among students**

The issue of difficult social relationships among students was raised by some participants in the study. New social relationships are constructed among the freshmen during their first-year experience. The social relationships flourish or flounder depending on commitment and attention devoted to them. Inadequate attention and commitment means that social relations cease to be of benefit to parties concerned. The relationship would fail as a consequence. In some instances, social relations would be there but would be of a complex nature. There would be many factors acting directly and indirectly on the relationship which would make it non-beneficial to its parties. The participants indicated that social relationships also evolve depending on how the students relate with each other with the passage of time.

One participant said:

*“We tend to establish social classes among ourselves as new students. We have wrong impressions of each other the first time we meet at university. If you decide to have fights with anyone those fights might last as long as your time at WUA. Doing so is not a good way to spend your time at University. I did not have any problem at all.”*

Another participant said:

*“Do you know what happens concerning how we see each other as new students? It happens naturally. You fall into your own social group naturally. It’s a social thing. You just see by yourself that I fit into this social group. Those who are perceived as the lower social class are those who are the brightest in school work. The upper social class would go to those students whom they had designated as of a lower social class to seek for help with assignments. It is about social classes. It happens naturally by itself.”*

Another participant said:

*“You know as students we discriminate against each other depending our social standing and material possessions you have. We discriminate against each other and sometimes you end up in a social group with people who do not know what they are doing and why they are at WUA.”*

One more participant disclosed:

*“Oh, another thing was that my Class Representative and I were not good friends at all. She didn’t understand many things about me. I had responsibilities at home, my sister and my parents whom I was supporting with my income from work. She spoke ill of me to lecturers and I had lots of difficulties in our classes. As time moved and with closer scrutiny, some of my lecturers saw the correct version of truth in what was spoken of me and that I didn’t have any problem at all. They were some issues between the two of us. I was simply trying to manage my own life which had its own dynamics. I learnt that there are different social characters in class. Some people bring you closer under the guise that they want to be your friends. And, when you do that you will be shocked to see that they are nothing but a monster. The Class Representative was doing things out of line and wanted to show off.”*

The quotations proffer the fact that social classes existed among the participants as they undertook their studies at WUA. It is the social classes which determined many things that the first-year student would be exposed to during the course of their studies. The social class is a sort of grouping as it makes each member access the benefits within that group. This does not always correspond with intelligence. The findings of this study suggest that even among new students distraction because of materials possessions and social standing is a thorny feature to be encountered in university education. It also points to the different socio-economic backgrounds of students as some students because of their backgrounds possess more material goods such as motor vehicles, technological gadgets, and designer clothes than others. We can observe from the quotations that social classes may possibly influence the formation of academic and tutorial groups at WUA. This implies that the whole study process would be driven by social classes and not by the desire to learn new things and experience a world of inquiry as learners. One can then argue that the participants should be taught social skills and be reminded of the mission of the university, which is to provide higher education to the men and women in Zimbabwe. One of the social skills that students could be taught has to do with emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).

#### **4.2.9. Failure to access the library services by unregistered students**

The issue of access to the library services was raised by the participants in the study at WUA. Unregistered students are not allowed to access any of the services provided by the university. Participants highlighted the fact because they were denied access to the library services they could not complete their university assignments as well as address the set questions exhaustively. This is because the library services provide a quiet environment where students can come in and

do their study undisturbed. The students could also read the books stored in the library and this would improve their knowledge and skills on certain subjects for which they would be examined.

One participant said:

*“The University should make it easy for students who have not fully paid their fees. If they make it tight, there is no way the students will pass since they cannot use the library. I feel like they are not sympathetic.”*

Another participant said:

*“...I didn't pay the full fees and so we are not allowed to use the library as students.”*

It is pellucid from the above quotes that some participants had access to the library whilst others did not have access to it. The University did not waiver from its position that those who had not paid full fees could not access their services. This shows that the favorable reviews made to the library were by those participants who were able to access the service. Those who were denied access had negative reviews of the library and sometimes felt that they were abandoned by the university. There is a definite need for the University to consider its reviewing this policy. If students are denied access to the library, how are they going to access books, computers and other materials that are critical for their own learning? Consequently, such experiences affect how students experience and perceive their first year of study at WUA. Such experience may lead to bad publicity for the University and may also lead to many students dropping out. From a social justice perspective, this is regrettable.

#### **4.2.10. Lack of preparedness for academic rigors by new students**

The issue of lack of preparedness for academic rigors was raised by participants indicating that the first-year experience is an uphill task. University education requires among other things, that students be fully engaged in the study process through a variety of ways such as committing time to extra study and reflection on their study programme, engaging in academic tutorials and group discussions, seeking clarification on unclear concepts from their instructors whenever there is a need, and colleagues on difficult assignments, and that students provide feedback on their learning processes. All these demands befitting a portfolio can prove to be cumbersome for new students. Atop these demands is the necessity to undergo serious training in critical thinking and analytical skills by the first-year students. Many new students would be unprepared to tackle these kinds of academic rigors. Some of the issues which were highlighted by participants are detailed below:

One participant said:

*“...there were courses such as Accounts. The level at which we were doing accounting as a class had a flawed assumption that we had all done Accounts before we came to WUA. I had not done any of that stuff. It was a challenge to me. I failed the Accounts course. I have carry-forward in Accounts. It is not a big challenge as of now because I now understand the basics. I was totally blank at the time we studied the course. The pace that they were moving at was too much.”*

Another participant said:

*“My academic failure bit so hard on my self-esteem. I thought that this was not good for me. I thought that this was not for me and that I was not really intelligent. I was devastated. I would go straight home after my lectures because I didn’t have anyone to talk with. I could not stay together with my other friends. Each time I would walk at University, I felt like people were talking about me. I hated my first-year. The lecturers did not use all the class time and would end the classes earlier than the schedules said. I would simply go home after the classes. I would go home after classes. The people I used to play with we could not chat. Our time tables clashed. I did not have any friends then because our timetables clashed. I hated my first-year.”*

It is reasonable from the above quotations that the first-year experience for some students can be referred to as an ‘a roller-coaster ride’. This is because the experience has good and bad moments all of which the students must embrace. Students who require more time to adapt to the new situations might actually struggle with their courses. The failure to achieve passes in some courses was undesirable and students would sometimes encounter stress when this happened. It is possible that the instructors do not gauge the level of knowledge and skills possessed by the new students. Gauging as well as assessing the knowledge means that instructors can tailor the learning to the needs of the students as proposed in Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning (Bloom, Mesia, & Krathwohl, 1964). Bloom et al. (1964) defined the levels of educational activity, from simple (like memorizing facts) to the more complex (such as analysing or evaluating information). They described three types or domains of knowledge as cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitudes), and psychomotor (physical skills) (Bloom, Mesia, & Krathwohl, 1964). An appreciation of this Taxonomy of Learning greatly prepares the new students to the rigors of university education which among other things, consists of serious

academic writing, delivering academic talks, scholarly argumentation, and critical thinking. It can be argued that one can see that the lack of preparedness for academic rigors should not be placed squarely on the shoulders of the new students. The material that is taught to first-year students is new to them regardless of the ways in which it is presented. The findings of this study suggest that a lack of preparedness among new students at WUA may impact on their self-belief and their perceived chances of joining the academic community. It is therefore important that teaching of university students particularly in their first year should be aimed at building their thinking and writing skills before they are asked to engage in rigorous academic tasks. This allows them to be better prepared and may contribute towards a positive first-year experience.

#### **4.3. SECOND OBJECTIVE: INVESTIGATE THE EFFICACY OF SUPPORT SERVICES MEANT TO FACILITATE THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**

Carefully designed student support services facilitate the transition from high school to higher education for first-year students. Participants had varying levels of the student support services available at the University depending on how they got began their University experience. The second objective of this study investigated the efficacy of support services meant to facilitate the transition from high school to University for first-year students at WUA. The themes which emerged under this objective shall be discussed in the next lines:

#### 4.3.1. The Office of Student Affairs

Participants in the study also raised the issue of the lack of awareness of vital role of the Office of Student Affairs. The Office of Student Affairs is a unit of WUA which is responsible for the well-being of all students enrolled at the university, and that role includes welcoming the new students and together with faculty staff, introduces them to university education. Presently, this Office is managed by a single person. This set-up for a vital office may present challenges as the member of the university can sometimes become overwhelmed with the duties and responsibilities assigned by the institution at the same providing guidance and counseling to ease the transition from high school to higher education among first-year students. Some of the issues noted by the participant are detailed below:

One participant said:

*“...Students Affairs said something during the Orientation Programme through one speaker from the Students Representative Council (SRC). The support services available at the university are the Library and Computer Services Department...the SRC talked about the sports and the churches and interdenominational faith movements available on campus. I am part of the leadership of the [deletion, name of religious group] on campus.”*

Another participant said:

*“... I don't think I have used any of the Student Affairs services nor even visit the offices. I don't know about this service.”*

Another participant articulated:

*“I don’t know about the Office of Student Affairs. I am not on campus most of the time so I am unaware of the Office of Student Affairs.”*

From the verbatim, many participants revealed that they were unaware of the Office of Student Affairs. A lack of awareness also means that the vital role that the Office plays remains inconspicuous when in fact it is bigger than it is perceived to be. This is because the Office of Student Affairs has several functions such as coordinating sports, guiding and counseling of students, promoting harmony among the student body, and handling student grievances including issues of sexual harassment and sexual assaults. There are new students who might have special needs and issues which if left unaddressed might force them to drop out of their studies. Having a single person to manage this important Office is unrealistic and the university might consider easing the services offered by its important office. It is clear from the participants’ views that there would have been more aspects about the university they would know if they were aware of the Student Representative Council (SRC). One of the functions of the SRC is to alert new students to the services provided by the university. It also plays a liaison role with the all graduates of the university. The findings of this study suggest that the SRC should consider a central role in the campus activities so that new students would be more aware of the Office of Student Affairs. This would mean that incoming students would be aware of the many other support services and how they can fully benefit from them during their study programmes. Awareness of the Office of Student Affairs also means that new students can visit the Office as well as set appointment times with the member of staff responsible for the office. This would encourage students to share some of the challenges that they face in their studies as well as seek help on matters that they are unsure of such as how to dealing with dating issues and how

students can stay safe at all times when at the university. These are some of the vital roles that the Office of Student Affairs should be foremost addressing within the student population and especially for the new cohorts.

#### **4.3.2. Participation and Attendance in the First-Year Orientation Programme**

The issue of participation and attendance in the First-Year Orientation Programme was raised by participants as critical to their first-year experience at WUA. Participation means that the new students were actively involved during the full proceedings of the day which include reacting to the presentations shared, participating in discussions as the audience, and following through the day's planned activities. Attendance means that the new students were able to physically be at WUA on the day of the Orientation Programme. The participants highlighted that the event was beneficial to them as they got the opportunity to learn as much about the university from the events that were prepared for them. They also got the chance to meet some of the instructors as well as senior members of the university including members of the Executive Council, the highest governing body of WUA.

One participant said:

*“I attended the Orientation Programme. I got a lot of information from it. As matter of fact, after the Orientation I was very motivated to do my studies.”*

Another participant said:

*“I managed to attend the Orientation Programme in my first year at WUA. We got CD’s [Compact Disk] which we could refer to whenever we wanted. We were also told about the University. The CD’s are very comprehensive. I learnt about the other units of the University through the CDs (e.g., the Campus in Marondera and the Global Head Office). The CD’s were given when students registered and also during the Orientation Programme. I like the fact that you can go back and use the CD if you want to do so.”*

It is plain from the verbatim that the students who attended and participated in the First-Year Orientation Programme perceived the event as informative. They received resources in the form of the Compact Disk which contains general information about the university and all its services. It is plausible to suggest that WUA publicized the First-Year Orientation Programme which could have been done during the registration process as new students got the student identification numbers as well as were told of when the First-Year Orientation Programme would take place and the venue. Students who attend the First-Year Orientation Programme get the chance to bond among themselves as the new members of the university community. Friendships and partnerships are made, some of which might come in handy during their study experience. The findings of this study on the potential of the university orientation as a strategy to improve the first-year experience of students are in agreement with the observations of Larmar and Ingamells (2010). The First-Year Orientation Programme is a school-based strategy which can easily facilitate the new study life of the students. The findings also point to the fact that participation and attendance in the First-Year Orientation Programme was a commitment which was required on the part of new students. They had to commit to the new information that was presented to them and that they would follow up on it for the entire duration of their studies. The

new students are also informed of the different ways they can handle the process of transition from high school to university education from the diverse set of presenters. Each presenter would give a unique perspective of the different parts that constitute the student's study life such as academic, social, financial, and spiritual.

#### **4.4. THIRD OBJECTIVE: EXPLORE THE COPING MECHANISMS USED BY STUDENTS DURING THEIR FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE AT WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**

Coping mechanisms place students in vantage positions to address some of the challenges they face during their first-year in university. An analogy to this is to say that 'students cannot change the direction of the higher education winds but they can adjust their sails (coping with the situation) so that they reach their desired goals'. Each day of the first-year in university has its own challenges. Many of the coping mechanisms used by students are at the level of the individual as they were all distinct among the participants. This study explored the coping mechanisms used by students during their first-year experience at WUA. The themes that emerged under this objective are elaborated below:

##### **4.4.1. The use of on-campus peer support among new students**

The issue of on-campus peer support among new students was raised by participants as critical during the first-year experience at WUA. On-campus peer support refers to the assistance students give to each other in times of need during the course of their studies. The assistance can take many forms ranging from social, financial, and academic assistance during the course of their studies. The times of need varies as well and could be when students are faced with

problems that are beyond their resilient capacity. On-campus peer support is sometimes out of goodwill of the other students but can also be given on a payment basis depending on the arrangement between the student in-need and the giver of the support. The participants in this study noted that at one time or another they had received some kind of on-campus peer support and that this was one of their coping mechanisms in response to the challenges they encountered at WUA during their first-year. Some of the issues noted by participants are described below:

One participant said:

*“I consulted with other seniors in my degree programme and here at the University. I was also introduced to the world of “copy-and-paste”. This was a life saver to me especially in my assignments.”*

Another participant disclosed:

*“We study with both mature and young people same as my age. We are just a happy group. Some students have motor vehicles. They sometimes help me with transport to and from our class venues. Sometimes, they assist me with food and lunch in between our classes. The difference is that those class mates of whom we are almost of the same age are mainly interested in show off and like. They think they are better than other students. This is not good. I usually interact with the older and mature students. They do not discriminate against us.”*

One more participant said:

*“I usually ask others who have enough resources so that they can help me in my research. I do not ask them to do the actual work for me but that they just help me with the Internet.”*

The quotations clearly show that participants had strong feelings about on-campus peer support as a coping mechanism to the challenges they encountered at WUA. This is because on-campus peers offered counsel and sometimes assistance in-kind whenever the need arose and so helped participants to remain focused on their studies. This agrees with the observation by de Vos (2004) that well being and communal living are related. It was seen from the study that peers of a mature age were more inclined to assist their colleagues despite the obvious age difference between them and fresh-from high school members of the class. They were not preoccupied with status competition but rather reciprocity as human beings (de Vos, 2004). When there was no status competition which takes the form of show-off as related by participants, students could establish some forms of on-campus peer support. Anderson, Bugavey, Gaetz, Guglielmina, and Kirkgaard (2009) established that college time is a unique time for the young adults because they are not only surrounded by people of their own age but also because the time spent in college represents a shift away from the family and toward developing alternate strong social networks and means of social support. This means that through robust peer support less fortunate students are able to persist in their studies. The study findings clearly show that new students relied on some kind of on-campus peer support throughout their first-year experience though it was unclear to whom and by whom support would be given as other factors came into play in such situations. The findings also show that on-campus peer support tended to be stronger between young and mature students taking the same study programme. We can conclude that on-campus peer support enabled the new students to remain committed to their studies whenever challenges came in their way as they could consult with their mature colleagues.

#### **4.4.2. Prioritisation, determination and first things first**

One of the things raised by participants as crucial to their first-year experience was the issue of prioritization and first things first. Prioritization means that participants would cognitively designate the many different tasks within their studies in order of their importance. Determination means that participants would refuse to let anything stop them from doing what they would have decided to do in their study programme. First things first means that participants would address the important tasks first before other things could be addressed. These mental processes are closely related in that some of the tasks that needed attention could be designated as important and one of the priorities but that did not entail that the participant would be determined to deal with that tasks first. The concerns raised by the participants are detailed below:

One participant said:

*“I asked for advance at work so that I could pay my fees. I also did not have transport money. I missed a lot of lectures. The challenges that I faced during my first-year at university motivated me to search for Meetings and Conferences that are fully funded so that I could raise some money for my studies and home needs. I see that International Conferences outside of Africa are more rewarding financially than the Conferences within Africa. After these types of Conferences, I would return with enough money to clear off my debt in fees at university and use the remainder of the money to support my family at home.”*

The same participant continued:

*“I have no Saturdays and Sundays in my study life. I have no fun life. You know, at one time some of my friends some of whom are married planned a trip to [deletion, name of district in Zimbabwe]. They asked me to be a part of the trip about 2 days before and they said I had to contribute United States Dollar 100.00. They simply just assumed that since I am a single [deletion, gender of participant] I had such moneys. They think money is all around me. I told them that I couldn't go on the trip. As a result such friendships simply fell off. My friendships deteriorated. I lost many friends because I could not accept some petty things to get in the way of my studies.”*

Another participant said:

*“There were many hard times during my first year at WUA. One time, I walked from the Mount Pleasant Educational Services Center to Belvedere Teachers Technical College where we I was going to write a final examinations paper. The reason I had to walk was because I did not have any money at all. It took me about two hours to reach the exams venue. Most of the times I did not have any money at all as my relative with whom I stayed with deliberately took all the money my father sent me for upkeep in my studies. I think she was on a mission to see me fail in my studies. On that day, I used the main roads and followed them till I reached Belvedere. I have always told myself that I will reach my goals no matter what. I just told myself to keep going and not be distracted.”*

It is evident from the above quotations that participants made tough choices concerning prioritization and determination. They had to be scrupulous in addressing the tasks in their study programme. There was no room for error when either prioritizing or considering first things

first. It is plausible to say that when participants failed to align their choices and decisions with what they wanted to achieve they could begin to entertain issues that were misaligned with their educational objectives. It is common among first-year students to spend a considerable amount of time in spaces such as clubs, music and entertainment spots, and fun centers at the expense of study time. Many of these adventures bring some form of social status and self-belief to those who would be vigorously searching for them. Some first-year students would actually spend all the money meant for their school fees by telling lies to their parents or guardians. The findings of this study reveal that the participants who placed their choices and decisions on where they were supposed to be were creative in their imaginations. They had chosen to address the issue of their university education and not to put it into disrepute. One can see that by focusing on first things first participants forced through their way through to reach their objectives. It can be argued that some of the coping mechanisms used by students were actually of a wide scope extending beyond the WUA experiences. They were coping with the challenges that came with being an individual in a hostile environment. The above quotations therefore reveal that new students had to address the tasks they valued and which made sure that their educational objectives were at the center.

#### **4.4.3. Making the most out of what comes one's way**

One of the issues raised by participants as critical during their first-year experience was making the most out of what came one's way. This means that participants had to use to the fullest potential all the opportunities, events, activities, and social relations that crossed their paths. Many of the experiences that new students encounter at university require that the student critically analyse the situation and make the appropriate decision and corresponding action. The

participants who came to study at WUA indicated that they needed a positive mental attitude so that they could make the best of their university days. Making the most out of what came one's way meant that they were assured of a rich in positive experiences and thoroughly enjoyable university education.

One participant said:

*“...WUA is the best place I can ever be at. I have met good people here. The lecturers are like our mothers and fathers. They sometimes give us advice and counsel which can help you in your non-academic areas. It is not just educational roles that the lecturers assume but equally advisory roles. I have learnt to be better organized and be focused on what I want to achieve in my life. I am not supposed to be distracted by some things which happen from time to time. I now value my time because as you might know those people who are successful managed to use their time wisely. It is not because of some special talents that they had. It's just that they managed their time wisely. We must implement the things we plan so that we can get the results we want. We should implement things at the right time and at the right place. Your socio-economic background forces you to be organized as a first-year student. I also keep in mind three important questions: Why am I here? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? It keeps me focused on my studies. You have to aim higher because there is always some place you can go and reach.”*

Another participant said:

*“My first-year experience was exciting because I was accepted by WUA to study the degree programme that I loved...”*

Another participant said:

*“I really liked the fact the issue of addressing gender issues by the University and that WUA is devoted to the study of issues affecting women and girls. The courses that were on offer excited me as well. All the courses that we did in 1:1 even till now have a gender aspect in them, for example, courses such as Sociology, Gender, Civil and Society. There is something to emancipate women in all that they are doing. I particularly liked also that many of the staff members are women. As women, we have to improve our status in the society. I am from [deletion, name of district in Zimbabwe] and so to see women driving big cars and doing great things was an inspiration in my first-year. I usually have conversations with my brother who is studying at [deletion, name of another local university] 2:1[Second Year, First Semester] and he tells me that it’s a male dominated environment at his University. At WUA, I like that you can study even while you are pregnant as a female student. They give you the privilege as long as you are still fit. From what my brother told me, at his University you can only be at University up until about five (5) months and you will not be allowed to attend classes as a female student while at WUA, you can come to University as long as you can. This motivated me to come to this University.”*

It is pellucid from the above quotations that participants made use of the opportunities that came their way during their first-year experience at WUA. The university was a study place of their choice. The participants would be more than willing to be engaged in their studies. They would be more likely to actively participate in class and do their assignments. It is plausible to say that students who are fully engaged in the activities of their university may sometimes initiate new endeavors such as community projects and campaigns which can bring good publicity to the university. This means that the students would have assumed the role of student ambassadors.

This might also create an impetus to the recruitment of a high caliber of new students for undergraduate studies at the university (Rhodes, Sherwin, & Smith, 2005). Such students are motivated and can work independently or with a team of excellent individuals to achieve what the students would have planned to do. The above quotations also note that participants were satisfied with some of the services they received at the university when compared to other local universities. This implies that participants were cognizant that they were both good and bad aspects that one could find at the university. However, they consciously chose the former over the latter, which made a difference in how they made use of the study experience at WUA. The students who hold positive mental images about their place of study can be recruited to work closely with the Office of Student Affairs because of their potential ability to seek solutions to defined problems. This might hint to the possibility of student assistants under the Office of Student Affairs at WUA. The findings from the quotations above proffer the fact that WUA had a solid reputation as being the pioneer university in the country to focus on “mainstreaming gender equality in higher education.” This simple idea encouraged some participants to desire to study at the institution. These students embrace the challenges that came their way while studying at the institution. One can see that such students can create a good reputation of the university.

#### **4.4.4. Holding the peace and helplessness**

One of the issues highlighted by participants as a coping mechanism to the challenges they encountered at WUA was holding the peace and helplessness. Holding the peace means that the participants would choose to remain calm and avoid confrontation by any means necessary. They would decide to keep cordial relations with the warring party and ease the difficult

moments whenever they would arise. Helplessness means that the participants run out of options on the best way to solve the problems they would be confronted with. Participants who are helpless would cease to test out ideas and explore options that could potentially provide a solution to the problem at hand. The concerns which were highlighted by the participants are detailed below:

One participant said:

*“We have wrong impressions of each other as new students the first time we meet. If you decide to have fights [confrontations] with anyone those fights might last as long as your time at WUA. Doing so is not a good way to spend your time at WUA.”*

Another participant revealed:

*“I simply brushed the challenges in my first year aside. I don’t mind. I was afraid to fail my courses if I said something. I could not afford to make such complaints.”*

Another participant said:

*“For me, some of the things I did together with other students were to talk to the lecturers individually as well as a group of students in one class/course. We lodged our complaints with the lecturer and we believe that the lecturer would in turn pass them on to the WUA. However, as some of us were sent away by the Accounts people because of non-payment of fees, the lecturers would refuse to teach a class with very few students. We could not do anything about it. If I were one of the students chased away, I think it would be a hopeless situation as the Accounts people are not sympathetic.”*

The quotations show that participants adopted a number of coping strategies which helped them to address the challenges they faced at university. Coping strategies adopted in response to student–student challenges meant that the participants could focus on their studies and avoid distractions from their educational goal. There are many outcomes which can arise as a result of the confrontations between students one of them being that both students can be suspended from university. Confrontations act in opposition to the spirit of co-operation expected of new students beginning their higher education. The findings of the study show that cordial relations through holding the peace were effective in maintaining harmony among the students and their instructors.

We can see from the verbatim that those participants who indicated the state of helplessness felt that they could not influence the outcome of the undesirable situation. This contrasts the findings of Westheimer and Kahne (2004) who argued that “developing students’ capacities and commitments for effective and democratic citizenship is important” (p. 1). This implies that university education should not only be academic but extend to other issues which needs resolving, many of which the students confront when they complete their studies. Education should teach students to dislike the status-quo in particular when it fails to address the basics. One can see that students who choose to maintain the status-quo may miss on critical skills needed in the broader society. One such skill is “citizenship”. Good students, same as good citizens, are actively involved in resolving the problems within their community. It can be argued that one of the primary missions of the university is to develop responsible citizens who are unafraid to address the tough problems they encounter in the society.

#### **4.5. Summary**

The chapter presented the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews, analysis, and interpretation of the findings of the study. The discussion was guided by the three objectives of the study. The findings of the study the first-year experience is critical to students in higher education. Concerning the barriers that students encountered during their first-year experience, the study established that there was a gulf between high school and university education. Each educational system has its own demands. New students had to master the taught materials delivered by instructors as well as get along with fellow students. In terms of the efficacy of student support services in facilitating the transition from high school to higher education it was found that there was a lack of awareness of the vital role of the Office of Student Affairs and the visibility of the Student Representative Council. Lastly, to explore the coping mechanisms used by students during their first year experience it was established that first-year students had impressions about each other which posed potential problems if they were negative. Some participants felt that they had more to gain from being at University than spent time getting muddled in risky issues, *inter alia*, getting into fights, lodging complaints; and challenging authority at the University.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **5.0. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations emanating from the study. The three objectives which guided the study were to: explore the barriers that students encounter in their first year at Women's University in Africa (WUA), investigate the efficacy of support services meant to facilitate the transition from high school to university for first-year students at WUA, and explore the coping mechanisms used by students during their first-year experience at WUA. The chapter also presents areas of future research.

#### **5.2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

##### **FIRST OBJECTIVE: EXPLORE THE BARRIERS THAT STUDENTS ENCOUNTER IN THEIR FIRST YEAR AT WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**

By engaging in this study, the researcher sought to discover students' perceptions of the first-year experience in higher education. The researcher made use of participants at Women's University in Africa. The several themes which emerged from the first objective are summarised briefly below:

##### **Failure to attend the First-Year Orientation Programme**

It was established in this study that some participants failed to attend the First-Year Orientation Programme because of work and other commitments. By failing to attend the programme, first-

year students would miss important presentations and information meant to ease their transition into university education. The study revealed that the First-Year Orientation Programme is an exciting platform for interaction between the university members and the new students.

### **The challenge to manage study and other commitments**

Research findings revealed that participants had challenges with managing their study and other competing demands. Many of the participants indicated that they were either heads of their families or that they had important responsibilities as members of the family. It is clear from the research that the different competing demands on the university study time may potentially impact on their academic performance.

### **Prolonged lecture hours and periods**

It was established in this study that there were prolonged lecture hours and periods with limited or fewer health breaks at the university. The participants indicated that these prolonged lecture hours and periods were difficult to adapt and that this might potentially impact on the amount of materials retained in memory by them from each learning session.

### **The gulf between high school and university education**

It emerged from the study that participants felt that there was a gulf between high school and university education. The two education systems appeared as parallel words yet had specific demands which differed in depth and breadth. The participants indicated that the gulf was a huge challenge which required tailored interventions so that they could adjust to the new situation.

### **Unreliable internet services at WUA**

Research findings show that there is an unreliable internet service at the University. Participants highlighted the fact that many of their school work and assignments depended on the use of the World Wide Web to search for information and conduct further research. The unreliable internet service frustrated some participants. It was also shown in this study that the university was exploring options to resolve the problems associated with the internet services with a view to provide a more conducive learning environment.

### **The struggle to raise the full fees by new students**

It is clear from the study that first-year students struggled to raise the full fees as required by WUA. There were many reasons which accounted for this scenario one of them being the harsh socio-economic and political context in Zimbabwe. The participants who could not pay the full fees remained unregistered and so could not access any of the services (e.g. the library and the internet) provided by the University. The study established that students who struggled to raise the full fees were keen for the University staff as represented by the Accounts Office to be sympathetic and alert them to the fees payment options that they could pursue.

### **Single-teaching methods and styles**

Research findings revealed that instructors at the University used single-teaching methods and styles which were not received well by the participants. Participants highlighted that they were not actively engaged in the learning process. This study suggests the need for more active learning methods and techniques to the instructors so that students are a part of the interactions that take place in the classroom.

### **The existence of difficult social relationships among students**

Research findings indicate that the existence of difficult social relationships among students was prominent during the first-year experience. Difficult social relationships were created due to a number of reasons among them the fact that first-year students had non-equal material possessions and that they were impressions formed at the very beginning some of which were not based on informed actions. It is pellucid from this study that social relations influenced the way and manner in which studying takes place at the university.

### **Failure to access the library services by unregistered students**

Research has shown that there was a failure to access the library services by unregistered students. Participants stressed the fact that they could not adequately tackle their study tasks because of the inability to search for extra information. Findings from this study seem to suggest that a failure by participants to access the library services owing to the fact that they were unregistered would determine the knowledge and skills they acquired for the duration of their studies at WUA.

### **Lack of preparedness for academic rigors by new students**

It is clear from the study that participants indicated a lack of preparedness for academic rigors during the first-year experience. University education demands full engagement by the students and reflection on all the materials learnt for mastery and excellence. The findings of the study indicated that new students found this new form of rigor and portfolio of activities cumbersome. The study also seemed to suggest the importance of emphasis on building the thinking and writing skills of first-year students before they are asked to engage in rigorous academic tasks.

## **SECOND OBJECTIVE: INVESTIGATE THE EFFICACY OF SUPPORT SERVICES MEANT TO FACILITATE THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**

The second objective of the study yielded two themes: The Office of Student Affairs and participation and attendance at the First-Year Orientation Programme. These themes are summarised below:

### **The Office of Student Affairs**

The findings of this study indicate that there was an issue of the lack of awareness of the pivotal role of the Office of Student Affairs. The Office of Student Affairs, a unit of WUA, is managed by a single member of staff who is tasked with multiple roles in service of the students. It is clear from the study that there was a need for more visibility of the office as well as its central role in facilitating the transition of high school students to university education. A lack of awareness of the role of the Office of Student Affairs also implies that the Student Representative Council, its ally, would even be little known among the students.

### **Participation and Attendance in the First-Year Orientation Programme**

It was established in this study that participation and attendance in the First-Year Orientation Programme was critical to the first-year experience. The active involvement by new students in one of the core events done by WUA meant that they were integrated into the university community with as much assistance and support the University had at its disposal. Research has shown that students who participate as well as attend the First-Year Orientation Programme potentially gain information about their new learning environment and meet their instructors as

well as meet new study colleagues. The findings from the study suggest the need for publicisation of this important event as it is critical to easing the transition of new students to university education.

### **THIRD OBJECTIVE: EXPLORE THE COPING MECHANISMS USED BY STUDENTS DURING THEIR FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE AT WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA**

Four themes emerged under the third objective of the study: the use of on-campus peer support among new students; prioritisation, determination and first things first; making the most out of what comes one's way, and holding the peace and helplessness. These themes are summarised below:

#### **The use of on-campus peer support among new students**

It was discovered in this study that participants made use of on-campus peer support as a coping mechanism in response to the challenges they faced during their first year. On-campus support took many forms (e.g. social, financial and academic) and this allowed less privileged students to continue pursuing their university education. Findings of this study suggest that peers of a mature age were readily available to assist their colleagues despite the obvious age difference between them and fresh-from high school members of the class.

#### **Prioritisation, determination and first things first**

The findings of this study reflect that prioritisation, determination and first things first enabled the participants to cope with the challenges they faced during their first-year experience at WUA. These coping mechanisms allowed students to address the important tasks, rank them in

order of importance, and effectively deal with them as each need arose. Research has shown that participants continuously made tough choices during the course of their studies at university.

### **Making the most out of what comes one's way**

It is clear from the study that making the most out of what came one's way was a coping mechanism which allowed students to deal with the problems they faced in their first year. There was a need for a positive mental attitude so that the participants could create pleasant experiences and memories from their university days. Findings from this study suggest that making the most out of what comes one's way implies full engagement by students in their study programme.

### **Holding the peace and helplessness**

Findings from the study indicate that holding the peace and helplessness were among the coping mechanisms used by students during their first-year experience at WUA. Participants highlighted the need to maintain cordial relations with everyone including instructors and seek ways to diffuse tensions. The participants noted that the situations were not always favorable and this was not always in the best interest of their academic goals.

## **5.3. CONCLUSIONS**

It is clear from the study that the first-year experience has many dimensions, as observed in the study objectives, which the new student has to bravely address during the transition from high school to university education. Each dimension needs to be fully assessed as well as explored for its potential benefits and insights to higher education. The results from such an exploration have implications in the overall student's success including the completion of their chosen study

programme at WUA. This study showed that some new students at the university were aware of the new demands on them in the pursuit of a university education while others simply had to adapt quickly to the new learning environment.

#### **5.4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study recommends the following:

- There is a need for adequate preparation by WUA for execution of the First-Year Orientation Programme.
- There is a need for robust follow-up programmes after the First-Year Orientation Programme so as to improve the first-year experience of incoming students.
- WUA should foster high-quality services in all its units to create a positive first-year experience for its students.
- There is a need to improve the internet services at the University.
- There is a need to exposure students to learning activities outside the classroom (e.g. campaigns and field trips).
- There is a need for instructors to improve their teaching methods and styles.
- There is a need to teach new students about diversity.
- There is a need to make more explicit the fees payment options available to students who struggle to raise the full fees.
- There is a need for more visibility of the Office of Student Affairs and its functions.
- There is a need to explore ways to create a sense of belonging and community among new students at WUA.

## **5.5. AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research could focus on:

- Exploring ways to sensitise students on the functions of the Office of Student Affairs.
- Investigating ways to actively engage students in the classroom.
- Exploring the feedback mechanisms through which the University addresses students' first-year experience.

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## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Good day sir/madam

My name is Raymond Erick Zvavanyange. I am a graduate student registered for the Master of Science in Development Studies degree at the Women's University in Africa, Student I.D: W150496 (Intake 10).

As part of the requirements for the degree, I am conducting research titled: **Students' Perceptions of the First-Year Experience in Higher Education: The Case of Women's University in Africa**. The purpose of this study is to obtain detailed information which may facilitate student learning and in a small way contribute to an improvement in social and academic support to students who transition from high school to University as well as those from other backgrounds. This study will contribute to the development of policies which ease the first-year experience of students by University policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and other interested parties. These policies could, for instance, lead to a review of the scope and extent of reach of student support services provided by the University.

I therefore wish to invite you to participate in my study. Your participation is entirely voluntary and refusal to participate will not be held against you. If you are interested in taking part I will arrange for an interview with you at a time and place that is convenient to you. The interviews will take approximately one hour. If you feel at any time within the process of the study that you wish to withdraw you may do so as well as also refuse to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable with answering. The questions I will be asking you have no right or wrong answers. With your permission, the interview will be tape recorded. No one other than my supervisor will have access to the tapes. Participants may review the audio recordings and transcripts at any time. The tapes and interview schedules will be kept for two years following any publications or for six years if no publications emanate from the study. While every effort is made to ensure confidentiality, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. However, all responses will be held in the strictest confidence and every effort will be made to maintain your anonymity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant and your response will only be used for the purposes of this study. No identifying information will be included in the final research report.

Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the study. I will answer them to the best of my ability. I may be contacted on +263 773 294239 / [zvavanyanger3@gmail.com](mailto:zvavanyanger3@gmail.com). Should you wish to receive a summary of the results of the study; an abstract will be made available on request.

I thank you in advance for your time and cooperation.

Yours sincerely

Raymond Erick Zvavanyange

Supervisor's name: Dr. Victor Chikadzi / +263 778 608 808

Supervisor's office number: WUA Headquarters

Supervisor's email: [Victor.Chikadzi@wits.ac.za](mailto:Victor.Chikadzi@wits.ac.za) / [victorchic@gmail.com](mailto:victorchic@gmail.com)

For any enquiries regarding enrolled M.Sc. students: Dr. Eric S.M.S. Makura / +263 775 009 444: [emakurah@gmail.com](mailto:emakurah@gmail.com)

## **APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY**

### **DECLARATION BY THE PARTICIPANT**

I hereby consent to participate in the research project. The purpose and procedures of the study have been explained to me. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to answer any particular items or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. I understand that my responses will be kept confidential.

**Name of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

### **DECLARATION BY THE RESEARCHER**

I have explained the purpose and procedures of the study as well as the participant's rights. I agree with the conditions mentioned in the information sheet and consent forms.

**Name of Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM FOR AUDIO-TAPING OF THE INTERVIEW**

I hereby consent to tape-recording of the interview. I understand that my confidentiality will be maintained at all times and that the tapes will be destroyed two years after any publication arising from the study or six years after completion of the study if there are no publications.

**Name of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR THE STUDENTS:**

1. Tell me about your first-year experience at WUA?
2. What are the barriers that students encounter in the first-year experience at WUA?
3. In what ways do such barriers impact on your study?
4. What are some of the support services you accessed during your first-year at WUA?
5. What can you say about the Office of Student Affairs?
6. What are some of the coping strategies that you employed to address the challenges you faced during your first year at WUA?

## **APPENDIX E: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE:**

1. In your opinion, what do you understand by the first-year experience at WUA?
2. What are some of the challenges that first-year students face at WUA?
3. In your opinion, what constitutes a successful first-year experience for students at WUA?
4. What types of student support services (academic, social, financial, etc.) are available at WUA?
5. How do first-year students access these support services? What do they need to do?
6. Are there any particular challenges/opportunities with the student support services at WUA?
7. What are some of the coping mechanisms that students employ when they face problems/challenges in their first-year experience at WUA?
8. In your opinion, what are your recommendations to WUA to improve the first-year experience for students at WUA?

## APPENDIX F: PRINCIPAL REVIEW AND DATA SOURCES

This study benefited from the sources below:

- Scholarly journals, journal abstracts, and conference papers
- Text books
- Policy and advocacy publications
- Government plans, programmes, statements, reports, presentations, campaign materials, and dissemination publications
- Evaluations and analysis conducted by research institutions
- Commentaries

**RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY ADOPTED:** Interpretive / Constructivism

### INTERVIEWS

I conducted 12 interviews with participants at Women's University in Africa.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Name of Programme (Number of Participants)</b>
<b>First -Year Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Development (1)</li><li>• Diploma in Social Work (2)</li><li>• Post-Graduate Diploma in Child Sensitive Policies (1)</li></ul>
<b>Second-Year Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bachelor of Science in Agribusiness Management (1)</li><li>• Bachelor of Science in Sociology and Gender Development Studies (2)</li><li>• Bachelor of Science in Community Development (1)</li></ul>
<b>Third-Year Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bachelor of Science in Psychology (1)</li><li>• Bachelor of Science in Sociology and Gender Development Studies (1)</li></ul>
<b>Key Informants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Library Services (1)</li><li>• Information and Communication Technology Department (1)</li></ul>