Student Attrition in Higher Education:

An exploratory study of factors influencing student retention at a tertiary English language centre in Saudi Arabia

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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June, 2014
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

...........................................................................................................

Othman Ahmad Aljohani

10 June 2014
Acknowledgements

Before all else, all praise is due to the almighty Allah. Then my special thanks and appreciation go to my parents and my wife for their unlimited support and prayers.

This work was made possible through the support and cooperation of many individuals. I would like to express my sincere thanks and greatest gratitude to all those who have helped me through my study program. My greatest gratitude and appreciation goes to my senior supervisor Associate Professor Berenice Nyland for her unlimited support, help, great advice and valuable consultations. I also would like to thank my second supervisor Dr Rachel Patrick for her valuable comments, revisions and suggestions. My thanks also go to all the academic and administrative staff in the School of Education at RMIT University who helped me during different stages of my study.

I appreciate and acknowledge the support and assistance of my sponsor, the Institute of Public Administration, the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Australia and the sample college of this study which name was removed for privacy and ethical considerations. I also acknowledge the proofreading service of Elite Editing in according to RMIT university guidelines.

Finally, I thank all my PhD colleagues at RMIT and my friends in Australia and Saudi Arabia for their support, help and advice.
Preface

Parts of the findings of this study were presented in the following conference presentation (abstract referred):

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## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Integration</strong></td>
<td>The measurement of a student’s grade performance and intellectual development during the time of his or her study (Tinto, 1975).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attrition, Dropout, Withdrawal</strong></td>
<td>Refers to the state when a student leaves a study program before graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dismissal</strong></td>
<td>Refers to the state when a student is asked to leave a study program before graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goals Commitment</strong></td>
<td>Refers to a student’s commitment to achieving his or her educational and occupational goals (Tinto, 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incongruence</strong></td>
<td>Refers to the state when a student’s needs, interests and preferences do not match the college’s system (Tinto, 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Commitment</strong></td>
<td>Refers to a student’s commitment to a particular institution and his or her ability to achieve goals in this institution (Tinto, 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Experience</strong></td>
<td>Refers to the quality of a student’s experience in the academic and social systems of his or her academic institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Persister</strong></td>
<td>Refers to a student who leaves a study program before graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persister</strong></td>
<td>Refers to a student who stays in a study program until graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retention</strong></td>
<td>Refers to the state when a student stays in a study program until graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Integration</strong></td>
<td>The interaction of a student with different characteristics and other members of a college’s society. This involves the degree of the student’s congruency with the college’s environment (Tinto, 1975).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAT</td>
<td>General Aptitude Test (Saudi Arabia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Grade point average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIS</td>
<td>Institutional Integration Scales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>Institute of Public Administration (Saudi Arabia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qiyas</td>
<td>National Centre for Assessment in Higher Education (Saudi Arabia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMIT</td>
<td>RMIT University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPSS</td>
<td>Statistical Pack for Social Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVTC</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Training Cooperation (Saudi Arabia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UES</td>
<td>University Experience Survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Student retention is one of the most confronting issues in tertiary education. Low student retention rates reflect negatively on the image of the institution and possibly on its academic reputation. This in turn might affect the institution financially and affect future academic plans for development. This study is an exploration of the phenomenon of low student retention rates in an English language centre of a tertiary institution in Saudi Arabia. The aim was to investigate the factors affecting student retention and those to which non-persister students responded when making the decision to leave the sample college. The study also aimed to investigate the role of the institutional experience and whether there was a relation to students’ academic ability in the English language.

The adopted research design was sequential exploratory mixed methods with greater emphasis on the qualitative phase. The study consisted of an initial qualitative phase and subsequent quantitative phase. Student data were collected during the academic year of 2012–2013 through interviews, focus groups, surveys and questionnaires for the quantitative data. The participants of the qualitative phase were four non-persister students (interviews), 15 persister students (focus groups), 10 academic and administrative staff (surveys) and 163 students who participated in the quantitative study questionnaires. The college records indicated that 53 of the sample students withdrew by the end of the first year of the program.
The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the main sources of student attrition were the students’ poor institutional experience and satisfaction, particularly with the college administrative system; the poor level of their institutional commitment; and the high level of their educational and employment goals. These findings were tested quantitatively through a modified version of the Institutional Integration Scales (IIS) designed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) to check whether the qualitative data could be generalised to the larger population of the sample college.

The statistical analyses of the questionnaires confirmed that the non-persister students were significantly different from their persister counterparts in regard to many of the tested variables. They had significantly higher high school grades, higher levels of life and work commitment, lower levels of institutional commitment and lower levels of institutional integration according to their overall scores on the IIS. Moreover, the conclusion of the study suggested that the main motivator behind non-persister students withdrawing from the sample college was the availability to them of another study or job opportunity. No evidence was found to associate the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college with students’ low academic ability, especially in the English language.
Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis focuses on the issue of student attrition in higher education. The issue of low student retention rates is a serious one in education around the world and has been causing schools and higher education institutions concern since the establishment of formal education. Generally speaking, not every admitted student graduates from his or her study program. Some students fail to graduate because of academic issues, while others choose to voluntarily withdraw from their study programs before completion. This phenomenon is more common in higher education, and it is more likely to occur in two-year rather than four-year programs (Ramist, 1981; Seidman, 2005b; Tinto, 1993).

According to the Australian Council for Educational Research, 16% of university students in Australia withdrew from their study programs in 2011 (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011). For the Vocational Education and Training sector students, the expected completion rate for 2011 was as low as 27.1 according to a news release by The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2011). In addition, according to a report of the national survey of the first-year experience in Australian universities, the percentage of students who considered dropping out from their study programs between 1994 and 2004 was between 33% and 27.6% (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). This means that during this 10-year period, around one in four first-year students deliberated whether to withdraw from his or her study program (Krause, 2005). These
numbers decreased to 23% in the final first-year experience report of 2010 (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010).

In the United States, the average retention rate for private and public colleges in 2011 was 56% in two-year programs and 67% in four-year programs (ACT Inc, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, where this study was conducted, the retention rates were around 65% among students of four-year programs and between 35% and 50% among those in two-year programs (Bagazi, 2010; Riyadh Economic Forum, 2011). These numbers raise the question: Why do some students choose to leave their study programs before graduation?

This study, which has been designed to explore the phenomenon of low student retention in the ESL program of a two-year tertiary college in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, contributes to understanding this phenomenon by studying the factors that lead students to leave college before completing their programs of study. It does this by identifying the factors leading students to withdraw from their study programs, as perceived by the students and the academic and administrative staff of the sample college. Moreover, the factors suggested by previous research to be related to students’ decisions to leave a college before the completion of their degrees are investigated in relation to the decision to drop out. These factors include the students’ pre-entry characteristics, their academic and social experiences in the sample college, their educational and work goals and their educational and institutional commitments. These factors were studied in light of student retention theories and models from the literature. For ethical and privacy purposes, the name of the sample college was
removed from the thesis. It is referred to as ‘the college’, ‘the sample college’ or ‘the sample institution’.

1.2 Background to the research problem

Education, with its various types, is the basic foundation for building any nation seeking advancement and progress. It is an essential element in building a well-prepared workforce that can contribute to the country’s development and welfare plans. A society that has a greater percentage of educated people has more human capital than do societies with a less advanced workforce. Therefore, governments in most of the world’s countries, regardless of their economic status, allocate large portions of their annual budgets towards education and training programs. A general belief that education is one of the best investments the government can make to enhance a country’s development plans justifies this spending.

Schools and higher education institutions around the world have been concerned about the student attrition phenomenon for a long time (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012; Seidman, 2005b; Tinto, 1993). However, systematic studies of student retention did not appear until the beginning of the 1970s (Berger, Ramirez & Lyon, 2012). Every student lost is a loss for the institution too. Student attrition or low student retention rates in any educational institution indicate a problem that needs to be solved. Beyond the financial issue (Heagney, 2008; Seidman, 2012), educators have deeper concerns about the reasons that students do not complete their study programs or fail to achieve their academic and personal goals. Regardless of the angle from which the problem is viewed, educational institutions that have low student retention rates should investigate
the causes, study the factors that lead students to withdraw and develop retention plans to help students to graduate.

1.2.1 Local context

In Saudi Arabia, the government spends a significant amount of its annual national budget on education, training and human resource development programs. According to the 2012 national budget announced by the Saudi Ministry of Finance in the last week of 2011, the largest portion of the budget (24%) was allocated towards educational and training programs. This equates to US$44.1 billion (SR165 billion) and can be considered significant spending given the number of students and educational institutions in the country (Ministry of Finance, 2012).

This government investment includes general and higher education institutions and technical and vocational institutes. It also includes spending on the government employee training and development programs that are provided directly through government-owned training institutions such as the Institute of Public Administration and other institutions that belong to medical and military agencies. This investment also indirectly finances the scholarships offered by the various government bureaus to their employees to study inside and outside the country, as well as the contracts they sign with third-party training agencies. Moreover, by 2011, the King Abdullah scholarship program, which started in 2005, had financed more than 119,592 scholarships according to the latest report published on the Ministry of Higher Education (2012a) website. This investment will be wasted if it is not matched with outcomes.

Educational and training program goals and expectations might vary from one country to another, but in today’s business world, the number of graduates and people
who benefit from these programs can be counted as an indicator of the success of such programs (Walker, 2010). When governments spend money on educational projects or programs, they need to see outcomes. The number of graduates can give governments an indication of how well an educational institution works. Moreover, educational institutions, like other government agencies and companies that provide a service to the public, are established and financed for a specific purpose. If they do not fulfil that intended function, their continuity becomes questionable.

From this perspective, it is logical to question the feasibility of spending on educational institutions and programs that provide fewer than expected graduates based on the number of admitted students. In other words, colleges and institutes that have more than an average attrition rate should realise that they are ‘at risk’.

In Saudi higher education, low student retention is a critical issue. The average graduation rate for many tertiary institutions is around 50% (Ahmad, 2011; Alroshod, 2009; Bagazi, 2010; Institute of Public Administration, 2012; Riyadh Economic Forum, 2011). Although the average graduation rate from universities is around 65%, for the other three providers of higher education programs, the Technical and Community Colleges and the Institute of Public Administration, who provide two-year programs, retention rates are at less than 50%. These numbers show that the low student retention issue exists at all levels of higher education in Saudi Arabia. They also provide evidence coinciding with many studies in the literature that a low student retention rate is more serious in two-year programs (Ramist, 1981; Seidman, 2005b; Tinto, 1993).

The latest statistics on these attrition numbers came from a study presented at the fifth Riyadh Economic Forum in 2011. According to the report, the student attrition rate
in Saudi Arabia was 53% in community colleges and 43% in technical colleges (Riyadh Economic Forum, 2011). Further, the Vice President of the National Committee for Training announced that the attrition rate in technical colleges over the last seven years was 65% (Alroshod, 2009).

Universities are not exempt from this problem. According to a news report published by the Middle East Newspaper (Bagazi, 2010), the attrition rate in Saudi Arabia’s two largest universities—King Saud and King Abdulaziz Universities—was 35% and 30%, respectively. In the report, the Dean of the foundation year at King Saud University said that the attrition rate at his university in 2008 and 2009 was 35%. Similarly, at King Abdulaziz University, the attrition rate never fell below 30%, according to the Dean of Admissions and Registration (Bagazi, 2010).

1.2.1.1 The sample college

In the sample college, the dropout rate is one of the major problems facing both administration and faculty members. Annual reports for the last five years published on the official website of the sample college\(^1\) indicate that there is a huge gap between the numbers of admitted and graduated students. The numbers in Table 1.1 show that only half of the admitted students across all branches of the sample college managed to graduate from two-year diploma programs over a five-year period (2006–2010). Figure 1.1 gives a visual comparison between the total number of admitted and graduated students over these five years.

\(^1\) Reference removed for ethical considerations
Table 1.1 Student completion rates in the sample college (all branches) 2006–2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Applicants</th>
<th>Admitted</th>
<th>Graduated</th>
<th>Completion rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>18560</td>
<td>2350</td>
<td>1191</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>21803</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>1141</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>22410</td>
<td>2044</td>
<td>1001</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>23974</td>
<td>2033</td>
<td>937</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>20363</td>
<td>1762</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (2006–2010)</td>
<td>107110</td>
<td>10182</td>
<td>5255</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (2006–2010)</td>
<td>21422</td>
<td>2036.4</td>
<td>1051</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Jeddah branch of the sample college, which is the sample campus of this study, a closer investigation of the graduation rate of one group of students (Group 49, 2010) revealed similar results. This group had spent more than one year in the sample college and finished the first part of the diploma, the intensive English language preparation year. However, as Table 1.2 and Figure 1.2 indicate, only 61 out of 125 admitted students (48.8%) managed to finish the ESL program successfully.
Table 1.2 Student completion rates for a sample group in the sample college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Enrolled</th>
<th>Completed</th>
<th>Level completion rate</th>
<th>Accumulated program completion rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.2 Admitted and completed students in a sample group (sample campus)

1.2.1.2 Conclusion

The above sections provide some statistics that confirm the problem of the low student retention in the sample college, and by extension in the broader Saudi higher education sector. These statistics showed high student attrition rates that call into question whether the significant government spending on education and training is bringing the expected outcomes. As a large portion of the country’s budget goes to educational institutions and programs, expectations for educational institutions’ outcomes are high and these outcomes should match these expectations.
1.3 Study purpose

A student’s enrolment in college is an important decision in his or her life. Students are likely to remain in their study programs until they achieve the goals for which they enrolled and they do not usually withdraw without reason (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2012; Radloff & Coates, 2010; Tinto, 2009). This reason is usually forced or shaped by factors that contribute to the counter-decision to leave college. Thus, this study aims to investigate the nature of these factors, to provide guidance to educators and college administrators who are interested in solving the problem of low student retention. Further, this study aims to identify why some students respond to and interact with particular factors that influence their decision to stay in or leave school.

The broad aim of the study is to contribute to addressing low student retention issues among higher education students, in Saudi Arabia in general and in the sample college in particular, by providing evidence and empirical data that give a clearer view of the problem and allow for suggestions towards more effective solutions. As only a small number of studies have explored and investigated the low student retention phenomenon in the local context of Saudi Arabia, this lack of relevant studies in the Saudi higher education context might lead to strategies that have a negative impact on the problem. Further, importing study findings from outside the local educational context will not necessarily help to solve the retention problem, as these may not be applicable to the Saudi context (Astin, 1984; Berger et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993).

As an example of how ill-informed student retention strategies can fail to have the desired outcome, in the sample college, students often complain about certain disciplinary actions and strict rules relating to behaviour, college uniforms, timetabling,
student–teacher relations, unit registration and attendance and dismissal rules. These actions and rules are believed by both academic and administrative staff and administrators to make students ‘better and more serious’ and to enhance student retention. However, this belief is not based on, or supported by, empirical studies that show the efficiency of these strategies. Indeed, they might worsen the problem. This study provides a scientific framework to investigate such issues.

Moreover, in Saudi higher education, most of the academic programs have a compulsory foundation year, the first year of the program, which is taught in the English language or mainly consists of ESL units. Some institutions, such as this study’s sample institution, devote the first year to an intensive ESL program. It is widely argued that student attrition and academic failure in the first year can be attributed to the use of a foreign language as the language of instruction (Aldiyban, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2007; Gow, Kember & Chow, 1991; D. Marsh, 2006; Senkoro, 2005). Therefore, another objective of this research is to investigate whether the phenomenon of low student retention is related to the taught component of the ESL program.

1.4 Significance of the study

The negative impact of student attrition is not exclusive to the non-persister students themselves. This phenomenon also negatively affects their institutions, the broader educational sector (Ascend Learning, 2012; Griffith University, 2006, 2012) and the country’s economic growth and future plans (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; Hagedorn, 2005; Swail, 2003a; Tinto, 2004). For example, in the Saudi context, student attrition may result in a reduction in the qualified Saudi workforce. With all these serious consequences, any study that contributes to solving the student attrition problem can
claim to be significant. The study gains further importance by investigating the causes of student attrition in one of Saudi Arabia’s major educational institutions specifically. This institution has five campuses in different regions. An extensive search of the literature on student retention in Saudi Arabia suggests that this study is the first of its kind for the sample college, and one of the few studies to have been conducted in a Saudi higher education setting.

Although there are many theoretical models and studies that address low student retention in different types of educational institutions all over the world and most attrition factors have been classified into common categories (Al-Dossary, 2008; Astin, 1984; Bean, 1979, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Berger et al., 2012; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Ramist, 1981; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993), it is not recommended to generalise the findings of these studies to other contexts. This is because student attrition is a campus-based phenomenon and each individual college should investigate its own attrition problem rather than relying on the results of studies conducted in other colleges (Berger et al., 2012; Willcoxson et al., 2011).

Retention is a campus-based phenomenon, with different types of campuses tending to attract different types of students. According to Astin (1984), retention rates vary by campus due to differences in the types of students attracted and recruited by certain colleges. In addition, it was one of the recommendations of ‘the whole of university experiences report’ (Willcoxson et al., 2011) that findings from attrition research not to be ‘extrapolated’ between universities. Thus, it is imperative that institutions provide an environment and climate that fit well with their particular student
populations. In other words, ‘*each institution must tailor retention to fit the specific needs of its students and the context of that particular environment*’ (Berger et al., 2012, p. 9). Student attrition is seen as a product of the interaction of factors and college environments (Jones, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Thus, each college should investigate its own attrition problems and should not generalise the results of studies that have been conducted in other contexts. However, investigating attrition factors in a particular college can help to confirm the factors found in other studies in the literature and add new factors, if any, that can help in future studies of the student attrition phenomenon. Moreover, such studies can provide a better understanding of the student attrition phenomenon in the Saudi higher education sector.

Although most Saudi higher education institutions experience low student retention rates, student attrition remains an under-researched phenomenon in the Saudi higher education context, as discussed above in Section 1.2.1. Moreover, it appears that most Saudi institutions have no student retention plans or programs. In the sample college particularly, there is no evidence that the college administration has a systematic plan to address this issue. The only step taken in regard to this issue is that the students’ feedback regarding their satisfaction is collected at the end of each program, level and semester. However, this step is only taken as part of the process of measuring the quality of the college’s programs, rather than to establish an effective student retention procedure. The findings of this study will aid in the design of a retention program for the sample college that takes students’ specific needs into account and suggests the best ways to meet them.
1.5 Overview of the research methodology

1.5.1 Research paradigm

The main focus of this research was to investigate the quality of students’ experiences with the social and academic systems of the sample college and to ascertain what influenced their decisions to stay or leave. To understand how students saw their interactions with the college environment, the constructivist paradigm was deemed most suitable.

This paradigm mainly uses the qualitative techniques of collecting and analysing data. The subsequent research question in this study was also tested quantitatively through a scale that was designed specifically for this purpose. As the quantitative phase was conducted separately, the study used a sequential mixed method approach; the two methods have been merged and presented in the discussion chapter. This design will increase the reliability and validity of the findings.

1.5.2 Theoretical background of student retention studies

Increased demand in higher education made student retention a concern for researchers (Berger et al., 2012; MacKeogh & Lorenzi, 2006). Starting from the 1970s, more attention started to be given to the quality of the students’ interactions and integration with their college environment. Since that time, the personality and academic abilities of individual students have become less of a focus as the source of the problem (Berger et al., 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993). Instead, a greater emphasis on theoretical models started to emerge to conceptualise the role of the student–college interaction and the influence of these connections on the student attrition phenomenon (Bayer, 1968; Bean, 1979, 1980; Feldman & Newcomb,
1969; L. Marsh, 1966; Panos & Astin, 1968; Spady, 1970, 1971; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Tinto, 1975). These models have been classified in the literature as economic, environmental, interactional, organisational, psychological and sociological theoretical (Braxton, 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

The two theoretical models that have been most highly considered in the student retention field are the Institutional Departure Model (Tinto, 1975, 1993) and the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980, 1982). According to Cabrera et al. (1992), these theoretical models provide a comprehensive theoretical framework to study student retention. Although the nature and design of the current study is more exploratory, the assumptions and constructs of these two theoretical models and other models from the student retention literature have provided a theoretical lens to assist during the design of the study’s structure and the collection and analysis of the study data.

1.5.3 Research design

The adopted research design in this study was the exploratory sequential mixed methods strategy. This study consisted of an initial qualitative phase and subsequent quantitative phase. The question, data collection instrument and data analysis strategy of the quantitative phase were built on the findings and conclusion of the qualitative phase. The instruments used for the qualitative data were semi-structured interviews with non-persister students (n=4), focus groups with persister students (n=15), surveys with college staff (n=10) and student data analysis. For the quantitative phase, a questionnaire was given to the students (n=264) during the academic year of 2012–2013. The participants were the first-year students and the staff of the ESL program of a two-year tertiary institution in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
Thematic analysis was the strategy used in the analysis of the data of the qualitative phase. Initial frequency tables were designed to control for the most frequent issues that affect students’ retention in the sample college. Building on this frequency information, categories and themes were established and presented. For the analysis of the quantitative data, both descriptive and inferential techniques were adopted. An initial descriptive analysis helped in providing an image of the participants’ demographic information and pre-entry characteristics, while the subsequent Independent samples t-tests identified any differences between the persister and non-persister students of the sample college, after controlling for the factors that emerged from the qualitative data.

1.6 Research questions

This study consisted of two phases: qualitative and quantitative. In the qualitative phase, the following questions were investigated:

Q1: What are the main factors affecting student retention in the ESL program of the sample college?

Q2: What factors did the non-persister students respond to when making the decision to leave the sample college?

Q3: What is the role of the institutional experience in student attrition?

Q4: In relation to the ESL program, how did student attrition appear to be influenced by the students’ level of academic ability in English language subjects?

In the quantitative phase, based on the analysis of the qualitative data, the following question was developed and investigated:
Q: After controlling for the factors that emerged from the data of the qualitative phase and other demographic and pre-entry variables, is there a statistical difference between persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college?

1.7 Ethical considerations

All procedures and strategies used in this study have been approved by the RMIT Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (see Appendix A). In addition, a permission letter from the sample college was obtained before the commencement of the data collection process. This letter stated that the college would allow the study to be conducted on their campus and that students and faculty could be approached to participate in the study. This included permission to access the student database to obtain any data related to the study. A copy of this permission letter is attached in Appendix B.

The study involved a large number of participants, including all first-year students enrolled in the ESL program of the sample college in the academic year 2012–2013, as well as some teachers and administrative staff. Participation was voluntarily in all phases and instruments of the study. All participants were formally invited to participate in the study. Before participating in any phase of the study, all participants were informed in detail of the purpose of the study and how their identities and responses would be used in the study (see Appendix C). Moreover, each participant was given a consent form (see Appendix D) to declare that he gave permission for his data to be used in the research. Before the start of each data collection phase, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop at any time and ask for their data to
be deleted. Moreover, they were informed that their data would only be used for the purpose of the study and would be deleted after a period of five years after the completion of the study.

To respect the participants’ privacy and the information of the sample college, the name of the sample college was removed from the final copy of the thesis. It is instead referred to as ‘the college’, ‘the sample college’ and ‘the sample institution’. All collected data is stored in the researcher’s computer and is accessible only by him. It will be deleted five years after the submission of the thesis.

1.8 Organisation of the thesis

This study is divided into the following 11 chapters:

- Chapter One: Introduction
- Chapter Two: Tertiary Education and English as a Second Language Programs in Saudi Arabia
- Chapter Three: Review of the Local and International Literature on Student retention in Higher Education
- Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology
- Chapter Five: Description of Qualitative Data: The Non-Persister Students
- Chapter Six: Description of Qualitative Data: The Persister Students
- Chapter Seven: Description of Qualitative Data: The Academic and Administrative Staff
- Chapter Eight: Summary and Conclusion of the Qualitative Data
- Chapter Nine: Description Of The Quantitative Data
- Chapter Ten: Discussion of Study Findings
- Chapter Eleven: Implications, Recommendations and Conclusion
Chapter One introduces the topic and identifies the research problem, purpose of the study, importance of the topic and its significance. Second is the context chapter, in which an overview of the context of the study, the educational system and the student retention status in higher education in Saudi Arabia as well as a brief background to ESL programs in Saudi tertiary institutions are provided to give a background for the reader of this thesis. Next, the literature review chapter traces the history of the development of student retention theories, presents the findings of empirical studies and draws links between what happened and what is happening in the field. In Chapter Four, an overview of the methodology and the study design is given to shed light on the research approaches used in the study and why they were chosen. The data collection tools are also presented and discussed in this chapter. The data analysis chapters, Chapters Five through Seven, describe the qualitative data that emerged from the first phase of the study. A summary and conclusion of the qualitative data follows this in Chapter Eight. Chapters Nine and Ten, respectively, describe the quantitative data and discuss the research findings from both phases of the study. Finally, Chapter Eleven summarises and concludes the study and finishes the thesis with implications for policy and practice and recommendations for theory and future research.
Chapter Two: Tertiary Education and English as a Second Language Programs in Saudi Arabia

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the local educational context of the study. It focuses on providing information about the different structures, types and levels of tertiary institutions in the Saudi higher education system, to enable the reader to imagine the size and position of the sample college among other Saudi tertiary institutions and to make it possible to compare the sample college with other tertiary institutions in the same context. To achieve this, information is presented about the policies and requirements for admission to a Saudi tertiary institution, the differences between the on-campus and disciplinary rules of Saudi tertiary institutions, and the pathways for transfer between these different types of institution. The chapter is divided into five sections. Section 2.2 describes the sample college, Section 2.3 discusses the types of tertiary institution in Saudi Arabia, Section 2.4 explains the King Abdullah scholarship program, Section 2.5 details English as a Second Language (ESL) in the Saudi higher education and Section 2.6 outlines the student retention programs in the Saudi higher education. It is hoped this will facilitate a better understanding of the causes of the student attrition phenomenon being examined in the sample college and the findings and recommendations of this thesis.
2.2 The sample college

This study was conducted at a two-year tertiary government college in Jeddah, the second largest city in Saudi Arabia. The sample college is one of five campuses of a government institution that is based in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. Like all Saudi schools and institutions, all campuses of the sample college are single-sex colleges. The Jeddah campus is a male college. For more than 50 years, the sample college has offered, among other services and programs, two-year diplomas to secondary school graduates in a variety of administrative, business, financial, computer and public service disciplines. The students of these two-year diplomas are the focus of this study.

The two-year diplomas consist of intensive English language courses in the first year, specialised academic and training courses in the second year and supervised field training for one semester. The ESL part of the program is a one-year intensive English language program that consists of four levels of eight weeks. These four levels are distributed over the four quarters of the academic year. The subjects taught in the ESL program are Grammar, Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking, with a total of 24 hours’ contact time per week.

The Jeddah campus, which is the sample campus of this study, is administered by the rules and policies of the main campus in Riyadh. The campus administration is responsible for the daily operations, but decisions on funding, employment, admission rules, admission processes, offered programs, curriculum, the academic calendar, staff training programs and many other processes all come from the administration of the main campus in Riyadh.
Information about the sample college, including the institution type and qualification levels offered, the admission policies and the employment prospects of the graduates, is presented in the relevant sections of this chapter.

2.3 Types of tertiary institutions in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the main providers of higher education programs are the universities and the specialised tertiary colleges and institutes that belong to government bureaus. The universities and other colleges and institutes that belong to these universities, such as the community colleges, are the dominant tertiary institutions in Saudi Arabia. All universities in Saudi Arabia are administered and monitored by the Ministry of Higher Education. According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2012a) website, there are 25 government universities, nine private universities and 35 private tertiary colleges. These institutions comprise more than 500 colleges consisting of more than 2000 academic departments and more than 200 research institutes and centres. Moreover, most of the government universities have one or more additional campuses in the small cities and villages around the main campus. All of these universities and four-year colleges offer undergraduate bachelor programs and postgraduate masters, higher diplomas and doctoral programs in almost all major fields of study. In addition, many of these institutions, mainly the universities, provide two-year diplomas through their community colleges to target students who did not meet the minimum admission requirements of the four-year programs. There are also other providers of tertiary programs, mainly two-year diplomas, belonging to other government bureaus, such as the technical and industrial colleges, the Institute of Public Administration and some of the medical and military colleges and institutes.
The major provider of tertiary programs other than the universities is the Technical and Vocational Training Cooperation (TVTC). TVTC is the government bureau responsible for most of the specialised secondary and post-secondary vocational and technical training programs. This includes vocational secondary certificates, equal to the secondary school certificate, and tertiary programs. For the tertiary programs, TVTC governs 36 male and 18 female technical, telecom and electronics colleges, which are dispersed across every province of the country. These colleges offer three-year diplomas in various technical and administrative fields. Similar to these technical colleges are the four industrial colleges in the two major petroleum cities, Jubail and Yanbu, in the eastern and western provinces of Saudi Arabia. However, these colleges are administered and supervised by the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu.

Another main provider of tertiary programs is the Institute of Public Administration (IPA). IPA has four male and one female branch across four different provinces. In addition to short training courses, IPA provides tertiary programs at two levels: two-year diplomas and higher diplomas in administration, management, business and other similar fields, which prepare graduates for administrative jobs in the government and private sectors. The two-year diploma is offered to secondary school graduates, while the higher diploma, which is a postgraduate degree between the bachelor and masters degrees, is offered to graduates of the four-year undergraduate programs.

In addition to these major providers of tertiary programs in Saudi Arabia, other specialised tertiary colleges and institutes are operated by the different military departments and some of the major technical companies such as Saudi ARAMCO (the major petroleum company), Saudi Electricity and Saudi Airlines. The programs of these
institutions vary in duration and qualification level and include two-year diplomas and four-year bachelor-equivalent programs. However, as these programs are in-service programs, upon successful completion of which applicants are engaged in employment, they do not allow students to pursue studies at or transfer to other institutions or to apply for jobs upon graduation in other government bureaus or the private sector.

There is cooperation and coordination between the different providers of tertiary programs in Saudi Arabia in regard to the programs offered, their levels and durations and the admission policy and capacity. This is done through the Higher Education Council, which regulates the relationships between the different providers of tertiary education programs in Saudi Arabia (Higher Education Council, 2011).

2.3.1 Government and private institutions

The sample college, like most of the Saudi tertiary institutions, is a government institution. Private institutions were not permitted in the country until 1997 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012b). The first private university in Saudi Arabia was established in 2002. According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2012b) website, there are nine private universities and 35 private colleges located in 12 out of the more than 30 major cities of Saudi Arabia. However, these private tertiary institutions are non-profit institutions administered by the rules and regulations of the Ministry of Higher Education, which includes monitoring the institutions’ study programs, curriculum, plans and the appointment of the university board, president, vice presidents, deans and vice deans (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010).
2.3.2 Qualification levels and program durations

The study programs at the sample college for this thesis are two-year diplomas. However, the academic and training program qualification levels offered by Saudi tertiary institutions vary from diplomas to PhD degrees. The primary purpose of the Saudi four-year universities is to offer four-year bachelor degrees. In some cases, universities offer two-year diplomas through their community colleges. Most of the non-university tertiary institutions are limited to programs below the four-year bachelor level, which include two and three-year diplomas and lower training certificates. The qualifications available in Saudi higher education can be classified as diplomas, bachelors, higher diplomas, masters and doctorates. Table 2.1 ranks these categories according to their levels and duration.

Table 2.1 Qualification categories in Saudi Higher Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (degree)</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two to three years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Four to five years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher diploma</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>One to two years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two to three years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Three to five years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diplomas and bachelor degrees are the entry level of the Saudi higher education system. Both can be entered with secondary school certificates. However, the admission requirements are stricter at the bachelor level. Higher diplomas and masters degrees can be entered with a minimum qualification of a bachelor degree, generally in the same field of study. Masters degrees usually have more admission requirements than do higher diplomas. Finally, the highest qualification in the Saudi higher education system is
the doctoral degree. The minimum qualification to enter this level is a masters degree, generally in the same field of study.

### 2.3.3 Admission exams and requirements

In August 2000, a royal decree was issued to establish the National Centre for Assessment in Higher Education (Qiyas), to conduct standardised tests for all applicants to Saudi government universities (National Center for Assessment in Higher Education, 2011). Consequently, all of the government universities and tertiary institutions that are supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education were required to add these tests to their admission requirements. No such requirement was made for those tertiary institutions that are not under the administration of the Ministry of Higher Education, such as the Technical Colleges and the IPA and other institutions. Thus, these institutions did not add these tests to their admission requirements.²

Two tests are provided by Qiyas: the General Aptitude Test (GAT) and the Educational Attainment Test for science colleges. The GAT is the main test required by universities, while the Educational Attainment Test is an additional requirement for admission into science majors and colleges. Both tests have marks out of 100.

According to Qiyas, the GAT focuses on testing students’ learning ability in general by measuring their analytical and deductive skills. It has two sections, verbal and quantitative, with a total of 120 questions depending on the students’ majors in secondary school. The Education Attainment Test, on the other hand, aims to test

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² The institute of Public Administration replaced its admission exam with the Qiyas tests in 2013
students’ academic ability in the science subjects covering all three years of secondary school, including questions about biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics.

To apply to government universities, students are required to submit the results of these tests along with their average marks for the secondary school certificate. Each institution has a special equation to calculate a weighted percentage mark out of the marks of these tests and the secondary school average mark. The weighted percentage mark is then used to rank applicants for admission.

Since it was introduced, the GAT and the Educational Attainments Test have received criticism from students, parents and some educators. The Saudi Shura Council (equivalent to parliament) has even sent an enquiry to the Qiyas centre questioning the mechanism for choosing the questions for the centre’s educational tests (Almosallam, 2014). In addition, many articles and reports have been published documenting the complaints of students, parents and educators, who argue that the Qiyas exams are not sufficient to measure students’ abilities and that it is unfair to judge students’ academic achievements of secondary school based on two- or three-hour exams (Alrashed, Alatwi, Aljohar & Azayed, 2011; Salman, 2011). Moreover, because Qiyas exams are not free, many people argue that they are only offered for profit. These people claim that the Qiyas exams are just a government business and that they should not replace the universities’ entrance tests (Aldhahar, 2014; Alfawzan, 2010).

Unlike most Saudi higher education institutions, the sample college applicants are not required to submit the GAT and the Educational Attainment Test. The sample college has its own admission exam, which is offered simultaneously on all campuses a few weeks before the start of the academic semesters. Moreover, as the minimum required
secondary school average mark for admission is lower than the marks required by other tertiary institutions, the sample college is a possible alternative for those who did not gain admission to another institution.

2.3.4 Upgrading and transferring between tertiary institutions

Transferring between institutions of the same type and within the same field of study is possible. However, universities usually do not accept students from two-year institutions as transfer students, nor do they recognise credits from two-year study programs when these students apply to four-year institutions as new students. Thus, students of the two-year institutions who are eager to upgrade to the university level might sacrifice the credits of their previous study programs for the upgrade. However, in recent years, some of the private and new universities have started bridging programs to target the graduates of these institutions. These bridging programs are designed to recognise the academic credits of the two-year diplomas and to give students the chance to pursue bachelor degrees.

In the sample college, all applicants are treated as new students. There is no policy in the sample college to recognise the study credits of other institutions. However, the main focus for this research is on the withdrawal phenomenon of students from the sample college, which includes transferring from the sample college to other institutions. In this regard, there are two main scenarios: current students transferring to other institutions or graduates from the sample college looking to upgrade or pursue their studies in an institution of higher academic level. In both scenarios, all of the government four-year institutions consider the diplomas offered in the sample college as training rather than academic programs and thus do not recognise students’ study
credits. Thus, if a student wants to transfer, or upgrade, to a university-level institution, he needs to apply as a new student with no credits. The same applies when transferring to other two-year institutions of the same level or when applying for a bridging program. Due to the training theme of the sample college, study credits usually cannot be transferred.

2.3.5 Expenses and tuition fees

Education in Saudi Arabia is usually free in all government institutions. Moreover, all students of the Saudi government tertiary institutions receive a monthly allowance and free housing, if available. However, students need to pay for their books and study tools and they are not allowed to have jobs during the academic semesters, as long as they are enrolled. Education at private tertiary institutions, on the other hand, is not free. However, many students of private institutions are funded by the Ministry of Higher Education (up to 50% of the total number of new students in each institution) and the Human Resource Development Fund (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014b).

As the sample college is a government institution, these rules apply. Studying in the sample college is free and the students have access to free housing, if available. However, accommodation in the sample college is limited to the students whose families do not live in the same city. Students receive a monthly allowance and are not allowed to work during the academic year.

2.3.6 Employment future of the graduates

In recent years, having a higher education qualification in Saudi Arabia no longer guarantees a job of equivalent status. The last decade has seen a huge increase in the unemployment rates in the country among holders of higher education qualifications.
The job market in Saudi Arabia has become very competitive, with an unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2013 of 12%. According to the Central Department of Statistics and Information, 58.6% of unemployed Saudis hold tertiary qualifications. As shown in Figure 2.1, the majority of these tertiary qualification holders (48.2%) have bachelor degrees. This equates to 17.6% of the total number of graduates from higher education programs by the end of 2013 (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2013).

Some people claim that the high rate of unemployment among tertiary qualification holders can be explained by the preference of most Saudi graduates to have jobs in the public government sectors, as they are more secure, have a comparatively low workload and are generally less stressful (Alarabiya News, 2014). However, due to privatisation and a decrease in government funding for some of the public services, jobs...
in the public sector have become rarer and more competitive. Others have argued that Saudi graduates are in unequal competition, especially in the private sector, with the 8,000,000 foreign workers in the country. It is claimed that some workers from countries whose currencies are lower in value than the Saudi currency might accept lower than average wages and work for longer than the official average hours in the Saudi public and private sectors (Alshareedah, 2011; Kabli, 2013).

In the past, students of some specialised Saudi educational institutions, such as the IPA (programs for secondary school graduates) and the now defunct teachers’ colleges, were admitted as potential government employees and guaranteed jobs in the public sector in the field of their studies upon successful completion of their degrees. This is no longer the case. The IPA ceased admitting students under this system many years ago without clear reason, although this was likely a consequence of the expansion of other educational and training institutions and the increased demand of the public sector for more qualified graduates with higher levels of qualifications. Teachers’ colleges, on the other hand, were merged with the education colleges of the local universities in 2007. As a result, students are no longer admitted as potential teachers in government primary schools. One of the reasons for this merger was that these teachers’ colleges were established to fill a shortage of qualified primary teachers, which has been achieved. Indeed, there has been a high rate of unemployment in recent years among graduates of these colleges (Alriyadh WAS, 2011).

The sample college seeks to improve the career prospects of its graduates by holding an annual career day. As part of the graduation ceremony, the sample college organises a career day and a recruitment exhibition to which large local companies are
invited to meet with the new graduates. These companies also have the chance to meet with the students’ advisors and receive recommendations from them about potential employees. Moreover, the sample college publishes the graduates’ qualifications and contact details on a webpage designed for this purpose, to extend their recruitment opportunities.

2.4 King Abdullah scholarship program

Since its establishment in 2005, the King Abdullah scholarship program has become the main competitor to Saudi tertiary institutions. Every year the program offers thousands of international scholarship opportunities for Saudi students to study in major universities around the world. This scholarship includes tuition fees, medical insurance and living expenses (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014a). This opportunity to study, experience living abroad and receive a monthly allowance attracts many secondary school graduates.

As the scholarship program’s admission requirements are no higher than those of the government universities and other Saudi educational institutions, it has been suggested that local universities are no longer the first choice for secondary school graduates. There are also fears that the scholarship program might attract those students with better academic performance. Further, some current students might withdraw from their study programs if presented with the opportunity to enrol in the scholarship program. For all of the above reasons, it appears that the King Abdullah scholarship program may be a case of unfair competition to the local universities.
2.5 English as a Second Language in the Saudi higher education

In the Saudi higher education system, the English language has become an essential component for many study programs in recent years. Consequently, English language centres and units have become essential in all Saudi universities and many other smaller tertiary institutions.

Most of the Saudi universities and four-year tertiary institutions, such as the three largest universities in Saudi Arabia: King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, have implemented compulsory ESL courses in their foundation or preparatory years. These courses, along with other science, computer and research skills courses, are core requirements to proceed to a bachelor program. Similarly, other four-year tertiary institutions that do not require foundation programs have integrated independent compulsory ESL courses into most of their study programs that students must pass to graduate. The Saudi two-year tertiary institutions, such as the technical, industrial, telecom and electronics colleges, which do not require foundation programs due to the level and duration of their programs, also have some compulsory ESL courses that students must take as part of their study programs.

For the sample college, although it is a two-year institution, it has the toughest English language requirement of any Saudi tertiary education institution. It is the only tertiary institution in Saudi Arabia that devotes the first year completely to an intensive English language program. The first year in the sample college is divided into four levels of ESL courses that range from preparatory to advanced. Each level consists of 24 hours a week divided between English grammar, reading, writing, speaking and listening
subjects. This means that the students of the sample college, regardless of their study majors, spend more than 50% of their programs studying English language subjects. As English is the language used as the medium of instruction in the second year, a student cannot proceed to his study major without successfully completing the four levels of the ESL intensive course.

2.6 Student retention programs in the Saudi higher education

Although most Saudi tertiary institutions experience low student retention issues, most of these institutions appear to lack a systematic student retention plan. A careful search of all Saudi government universities’ and technical colleges’ websites supported this impression. There is no evidence of actions or activities built by or provided in Saudi tertiary institutions for the purpose of increasing student retention. In fact, the announcement of the Ministry of Higher Education in June 2013 that they are preparing for a program to solve the phenomenon of high rates of student attrition in Saudi government universities is evidence in itself of the seriousness of the high student attrition issue and the lack of plans to treat it (Alarabiya News, 2013; Alrasheed, 2013).

This was not the first acknowledgment of the lack of student retention plans in Saudi tertiary education by the Ministry of Higher Education. In 2009, four years before the above announcement, the Deputy Minister of Higher Education for academic affairs announced that the Ministry was preparing tools to measure the student attrition rates in Saudi universities and to study the factors that might lead to this phenomenon (King Abdulaziz University, 2009). Again, this statement not only supports the claim that there is a problem but also gives an indication that before 2009 the Ministry of Higher
Education and the government universities had underestimated the seriousness of the low student retention phenomenon and had not developed strategies to respond to it.

In 2007, from outside the educational field, the Saudi Shura Council, while reviewing the annual performance report of the Ministry of Higher Education, urged the Ministry and the government universities to study the problem of low retention among university students (Aleqtisadiah, 2007; Alshaibani, 2007). However, as is apparent from the discussion above, it took seven years from this first call from the Saudi Shura Council for the Ministry of Higher Education to start preparing student retention plans. At the time of writing, there is not yet any clear date for when implementation of these plans will commence.

In the sample college in particular, in spite of the high rate of student attrition, there have been no steps to prevent or minimise the problem. As part of the data collection, the procedures of the student services and registration departments were reviewed. No procedures to support students who are at risk of withdrawal were identified. When students withdraw while taking their first level English classes, they are immediately replaced with applicants from the waiting list. However, at advanced levels, classes might run at less than half their capacity.

Students who withdraw from the sample college are not surveyed in detail about the reasons for their withdrawal. Although they are asked to complete forms that include questions about the reasons for their withdrawal, these are only collected as part of a routine procedure aimed at returning students’ original documents to them. These forms are designed to collect information about the last level the student achieved and the reason of withdrawal, including whether he left for a job or to another academic
institution. This information is basic and essential in any student retention study. However, these forms are not entered into the student system or sent to the research department or the quality unit, nor are they used in any relevant study. Rather, they are stored as archived documents. Unfortunately, since they are not even stored and arranged in a way that makes them usable for researchers, these documents were not used in the current study.

2.7 Summary and conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to describe briefly the educational context in Saudi Arabia and the sample college of this thesis, to make it possible to compare the sample college with other tertiary institutions in the same context. It is hoped this will enable readers to visualise the position of the sample college among other Saudi tertiary institutions. Without such information, it might be difficult to understand the reasons behind the student withdrawal phenomenon in the sample college and the findings and recommendations of this thesis.

As detailed in the above sections, the sample college has many competitors in the Saudi higher education context that offer higher levels of qualifications and have a better reputation in the local context. This suggests two possible factors contributing to the student attrition problem. First, since the sample college has lower admission requirements compared to other tertiary institutions in Saudi Arabia, some students might enrol in the sample college only because they were not admitted into the institutions of their first choice. Second, as these competitors typically have less strict disciplinary and dismissal rules in regard to students’ on-campus behaviour, dress code and absenteeism, some students of the sample college might prefer to transfer to these
competitor institutions when they have the ability to do so. Thus, to understand the phenomenon of student attrition in the sample college, it was necessary to present a complete picture of the context of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Without such information, students’ reasons for enrolling in the sample college, their reasons for transferring or withdrawing from it and the significance of other educational and occupational opportunities might not be well understood. It is also necessary to know the rank of the sample college in the Saudi higher education context to understand the reasons behind students’ decisions to leave. Thus any findings, conclusion, suggestion, recommendation and or criticism of the situation in the sample college should be made in conjunction with the information from other providers of tertiary education programs in the same context. The following chapter, which reviews the local and international literature on student retention in higher education, will expand on the context of this study, to provide a foundation for understanding the student attrition issue at the sample college and how it might best be addressed.
Chapter Three: Review of the Local and International Literature on Student Retention in Higher Education

3.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the student retention literature, both international and Saudi-specific, relevant to the current study. It is designed to chronologically trace the historical development of the study of the student attrition phenomenon and includes a review of the theoretical and conceptual roots of the theoretical models of student retention and a presentation of the types of student retention studies as classified in the literature. Following this, the major theoretical models that address the problem of this research are reviewed, as are all of the available relevant studies that have been conducted on student retention both internationally and in the Saudi higher education context.

This chapter also sheds light on the variables that are commonly linked to the student retention phenomenon in higher education. These are the most reported student attrition factors in the literature. Moreover, since the targeted population of this study was ESL students, the issue of learning a foreign language or learning by a foreign language as a constraint in student persistence in tertiary education programs is discussed. Finally, the chapter gives a brief overview of the research techniques and strategies commonly utilised in student retention studies as reported in the literature, to
allow a comparison between the methodological techniques and instrumentation of the current study with other studies in the literature. This is to increase the credibility of and justify the findings.

The presentation of this information paves the way for both the reader and the writer of this study to identify the research gaps in the field of student retention and to link the current study with what is known in this field. Moreover, this background information was essential in building the theoretical views that informed the choice of the research questions, the methodological techniques and the study instruments and it will inform the discussion of the findings of this thesis. This information was mainly derived from the publications of the original authors of the student retention theoretical models, including the initial publications and the subsequent reviews and follow-up studies. Moreover, the findings of some recent PhD theses and scholarly journal articles were used as empirical data to discuss the constructs of the theoretical models and the student attrition factors, especially as they pertain to the specific Saudi study context.

Accordingly, besides the introduction and conclusion, this chapter consists of the following eight main sections:

- Historical background of student retention studies
- Development of student retention theoretical models
- Major student retention theoretical models
- Factors affecting student retention
- Limitations of student retention theories
- Student retention studies in the Saudi higher education context
- ESL as a constraint of student persistence
- Overview of the student retention research methods.
Additionally, these main sections contain some subsections that review the theoretical and conceptual roots of the student retention models, the types of student retention theoretical models and some of the distinguished studies in the student retention literature.

3.2 Historical background of student retention studies

Although the student attrition phenomenon has been a major concern for educational institutions and educators since the establishment of the formal education system (Habley et al., 2012; Seidman, 2005b; Tinto, 1993), theoretical models arising from the systematic study of the phenomenon were not developed until the early 1970s (Berger et al., 2012). Berger et al. (2012, p. 13) divided the development of student retention studies chronologically into nine eras, as listed in Table 3.1. These eras start from the prehistory of student retention, when retention was not considered as an issue because graduating was not the goal of students, and continue to the current era, in which the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the phenomenon have been established and the implications set.

Further, Berger et al. (2012) divided these eras into two main categories. In the first category, they grouped all the eras before the 1960s (four eras) together, as they share a lack of a systematic approach towards student retention. The second category includes the last five eras, starting from the 1960s and continuing until the present. The authors argued that during this period, student retention become a global concern and consequently systematic and theoretical studies were developed.
Table 3.1 Eras of the development of student retention studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Era</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retention Prehistory</td>
<td>1600s – mid-1800s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolving towards retention</td>
<td>Mid-1800s – 1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early developments</td>
<td>1900–1950</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with expansion</td>
<td>1950s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preventing dropout</td>
<td>1960s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building theories</td>
<td>1970s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing enrolment</td>
<td>1980s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadening horizons</td>
<td>1990s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early twenty-first century</td>
<td>Current and future trends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Development of student retention theoretical models

Before 1970, various attempts were made to study the student attrition phenomenon (Bayer, 1968; Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Marks, 1967; L. Marsh, 1966; Panos & Astin, 1968; Summerskill, 1962). However, the focus of these studies was principally on the characteristics of individual students, rather than on their interactions with college environments. The student attrition phenomenon was often explained in terms of the students’ characteristics, personal attributes and shortcomings (Berger et al., 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993, 2006). According to Berger et al. (2012), previous studies ‘had been grounded in psychology rather than sociology’ (p. 18). Moreover, as Spady (1970) noted, these studies lacked ‘theoretical and empirical coherence ... conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, complexity of design, breadth, and analytic sophistication ... definite theoretical basis’ (p. 64). He concluded his review of the student retention literature before 1970 with the assertion that the absence of what he called an ‘analytical-explanatory category’ is ‘unfortunate and glaring’ (Spady, 1970, p. 64).

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, systematic studies and attempts to conceptualise retention frameworks that included the notion of the student–college
relationship became more common (Bayer, 1968; Bean, 1980; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; L. Marsh, 1966; Panos & Astin, 1968; Spady, 1970, 1971; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Tinto, 1975). According to Berger et al. (2012), by 1970, the era of building retention theories had begun, largely with William Spady’s (1971) work, ‘Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis’. This was the first sociological student retention model. According to Spady, there are two systems in each college (academic and social) and at least two factors in each system that influence a student’s decision to withdraw: grades and intellectual development in the academic system and normative congruence and friendship support in the social system. After Spady’s work, later studies and models took into account the nature of students’ institutional relationships. By the 1970s, the introduction of the term ‘retention’ to describe student persistence included the concept that institutions shared responsibility in influencing students’ decisions regarding ‘dropping out’ (Habley et al., 2012).

Since then, many student retention studies have been conducted and theoretical models have been developed, such as Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model (1975, 1993), Bean’s Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982), the Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model (Pascarella, 1980), Astin’s Student Involvement Model (1984), the Non-traditional Student Attrition Model (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera et al., 1993). Some of these theoretical models are reviewed in this chapter.

**3.3.1 Theoretical and conceptual roots of student retentions models**

While the theoretical and conceptual backgrounds of the student retention models are varied, the authors of the most distinguished student retention models of the last
four decades, Spady, Tinto and Bean, point to three famous theories or conceptual theoretical sources as having inspired their work. These are the suicide theory (Durkheim, 1951) from the field of sociology, the theoretical views of the rites of passage in tribal societies (Van Gennep, 1960) from the field of social anthropology and the concept of labour turnover from the field of human resources (Price, 1977).

First, most of the psychological and sociological student retention theories and models developed after 1970 have their roots in Durkheim’s famous work, ‘Suicide’ (Durkheim, 1951). According to Durkheim, suicide can be attributed to the individual’s lack of social and intellectual integration into the social life of his or her society. This is the linking point, according to the early student retention models (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975), between suicidal behaviour and student attrition behaviour. Tinto (1993) argued that, although dropping out from a higher education institution is not necessarily equivalent to failing, there are some similarities with the process of suicide in the sense that both behaviours can be thought of as a form of voluntary withdrawal from a particular society. He stated that ‘there are enough intriguing analogies between the two situations’ (Tinto, 1993, p. 99). This adoption of the views of suicide theory in the study of the student attrition phenomenon was first introduced by Spady (1971). It was the foundation of his pioneer work ‘Dropouts from Higher Education: Toward an Empirical Model’.

Moreover, the famous and most cited student retention model of Tinto (1993) relied partially on Van Gennep’s (1960) study of the rites of passage in tribal societies from the field of social anthropology. In this work, Van Gennep described the three stages of separation, transition and incorporation as phases of transmission of
relationships between succeeding groups (Elkins, Braxton & James, 2000; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto (1993) utilised this concept of rites of passage to explain ‘the longitudinal process of student persistence in college’ (p. 94). He argued that, in the first phase, college students have to ‘separate’ themselves from their old communities to allow for the adoption of the norms and behaviour of their new ones. In the next phase, college students ‘transition’ towards the final stage of incorporation within the norms of the new community. Finally, in the third phase, after successfully separating themselves from the norms and behaviours of their old communities, students become integrated in the new societies of their colleges. The adoption of Van Gennep’s theoretical views is discussed in more detail later in this chapter in Section 3.4.2.

Another theoretical foundation of student attrition studies derived from the studies of turnover in work organisations; particularly from the works of Price (1977) and Price and Mueller (1981). The Student Attrition Model of Bean (1980) was the first model to adopt this concept. Employee turnover in work organisations is defined as ‘the degree of individual movement across the membership boundary of a social system’ (Price, 1977, p. 4). According to Bean (1980), student attrition is analogous to employee turnover and both employees and students leave for similar reasons. In both processes, organisational determinant variables play a vital role due to their effect on satisfaction, which is a major predictor of employee and student retention. Finally, while the ‘pay’ variable is seen as one of the most important predictors of employee turnover in work organisations, Bean claimed that student grade point average (GPA), development, institutional quality and practical value are the equivalent predictors in the education system.
Certainly, other studies have been built on psychological, sociological and economic views different to those outlined above. These studies are discussed later in this chapter.

### 3.3.2 Types of student retention theoretical models

For a long time, student retention studies and explanations relied heavily on physiological views that emphasised the role of the personality, abilities and motivation of individual students (Tinto, 1993). The main focus of such studies was on the individual students’ personal attributes and shortcomings (Berger et al., 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993) and many were labelled as psychological studies (Tinto, 1993, 2006). However, since the emergence of new trends in the field beginning in the 1970s, student retention theoretical models and studies have been classified in the literature under various categories based on the perspective being taken; for example, psychological, sociological, organisational, environmental, interactional and economic (Braxton, 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993).

However, scholars have disagreed in their classification of the perspectives in the student retention theories literature. While Habley et al. (2012) classified retention studies under psychological, cultural, sociological, organisational and economic theoretical perspectives, Tinto (1993) labelled the last three perspectives as variants of what he called the environmental perspective. According to Tinto, the environmental theories are those that emphasise the role of factors other than the individual (psychological) characteristics of the students on their behaviours within their academic institutions. Often, however, the psychological and sociological perspectives seem to be the umbrella categories under which most student retention models fall.
The psychological theories, as noted above, attribute student attrition to the shortcoming and weaknesses of the student him or herself. Tinto (1993) criticised this view, as it ignores the impact of students’ institutional and social context on their persistence. He argued that, while psychological theories claim that student attrition can be reduced by improving students’ skills or narrowing the initial selection process to target only those students who are academically suited to the given institution, there is no evidence to support such claims. Examples of psychological studies are the theoretical models of Astin (1984) and Bean and Eaton (2002).

In contrast to the psychological perspective, the sociological theories have been concerned with individuals’ attributes and their positions within the wider context of their academic institutions and their society, such as in terms of social status and race (Tinto, 1993). Many of the studies in the literature that have looked beyond the individual attributes of non-persister students can be classified as sociological. According to Habley et al. (2012), the sociological theories ‘have been the dominant retention construct for the last forty years’ (p. 20). However, Tinto (1993) suggested that the underlying perspectives of these theories vary according to the social theories from which they derive.

While, as mentioned, the psychological and sociological perspectives dominate the field, another perspective that is sometimes taken is the organisational perspective. This perspective focuses on the impact on student retention of the organisation of the tertiary institution, such as the administrative system, facilities, resources and number of faculty (Tinto, 1993). Examples of this perspective are the studies of Bean (1980, 1982, 1983). In addition, there is the economic perspective, which, as suggested by the name,
takes the view that students weigh the cost of their persistence in their study programs against the benefits (Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993). These costs include, as stated by Habley et al. (2012), the indirect cost of ‘the time and energy’ that students devote to external commitments along with the commitments of the college itself. Examples of this perspective are the works of Manski and Wise (1983) and John and Asker (2003).

Finally, there is the unique interactional perspective of Tinto’s paradigmatic Model of Institutional Departure (1975, 1993). This perspective explores the longitudinal interactions between individuals’ attributes, societies and academic institutions within the constructs and settings of all other perspectives. Tinto (1993) describes the model he built upon this perspective as seeking ‘to explain how interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution and the communities which comprise them lead individuals of different characteristics to withdraw from that institution prior to degree completion’ (p. 113).

### 3.4 Major student retention theoretical models

Having briefly presented a historical review on the development of student retention studies and the theoretical and conceptual roots and types of these studies, this section turns to a discussion of the leading student retention theoretical models of the last four decades as reported in the literature. These theoretical models have been cited and examined in many recent empirical studies and are usually considered as providing the conceptual foundations for many studies and assisting in understanding the explanations and interpretations of the findings of the citing and other studies.

Thus, despite the exploratory nature of the current study, the purpose of this section is to provide a theoretical lense for the study, to allow for linking its findings to
current understandings in the field of student retention and to the conclusions of these distinguished theoretical models in particular, to ensure the clarity and validity of the present study.

The models reviewed in this section are the six most-cited student retention theoretical models as appeared in the available literature. These theoretical models are the Undergraduate Dropout Process Model (Spady, 1970, 1971), the Institutional Departure Model (Tinto, 1975, 1993), the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980, 1982), the Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model (Pascarella, 1980), the Non-traditional Student Attrition Model (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera et al., 1993). They are presented chronologically according to their publication dates.

3.4.1 The Undergraduate Dropout Process Model (Spady 1970, 1971)

Many authors and researchers in the student retention field considered the Undergraduate Dropout Process Model of William Spady (1970, 1971) as the first theoretical and systematic model in the literature of student retention (Berger et al., 2012; Habley et al., 2012). Moreover, Berger et al. (2012) claimed that this work largely began the era of building retention theories. Only after Spady’s work did student retention studies and models begin to take into account the impact of student–college relationships on the student retention phenomenon.

In two consecutive years (1970, 1971), Spady published his pioneer sociological works: ‘Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis’ and ‘Dropouts from Higher Education: Toward an Empirical Model’. In these two works, Spady presented and revised his model of the undergraduate dropout process that has
since became the foundation for recent developments in the student retention field. This model was the first student retention model to link the process of student attrition to Durkheim’s Suicide Theory concept of social integration. This idea has gone on to be widely adopted in student retention studies and models, including the most cited and tested model of Tinto (Berger et al., 2012; Durkheim, 1951; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

In his first work, after reviewing the literature of what he called ‘college dropout’, Spady (1970) claimed that:

* beyond a few comfortable and familiar generalizations about the relationship between attrition and family background, ability, or academic performance, this literature lacks theoretical and empirical coherence ... conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, complexity of design, breadth, and analytic sophistication ... definite theoretical basis* (p. 64).

He reported the different categories of the previous studies in this field, as described by Knoll (1960) and L. Marsh (1966), as census, autopsy, case, prediction (or predictive), philosophical and theoretical and descriptive studies. Spady (1970) further asserted that the absence of what he called an analytical-explanatory category is *‘unfortunate and glaring’* (p. 65). To fill the gap in the student retention literature, Spady started to explain the dropout process by investigating the quality of the interaction between the students and the environment of their academic institutions. This interaction is the result of the exposure of individual students’ attributes such as dispositions, interests, attitudes and skills to the influences, expectations and demands of the different components of their institutions including courses, faculty members, administrators and peers.
Spady’s main assumption was that the outcome of this interaction determines the level of students’ integration within the academic and social systems of their institutions and subsequently their persistence. According to Spady, a student’s decision to stay or withdraw from his or her academic institution is influenced by two main factors in each of two systems: grades and intellectual development in the academic system, and normative congruence and friendship support in the social system.

In his later work, Spady (1971) tested these assumptions in a longitudinal study on a sample of 683 new students who entered the University of Chicago in 1965. The statistical analysis of the study variables resulted in a modification on the initial theoretical model. The final Undergraduate Dropout Process Model is presented in Figure 3.1.

3.4.2 The Institutional Departure Model (Tinto 1975, 1993)

Building on Spady’s (1970, 1971) theoretical views on the undergraduate dropout process, Tinto published the first version of his well-recognised Institutional Departure Model, also known as the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975). Between 1975 and
1993, this model went through many examinations and revisions by the original author, Tinto, and others (Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980, 1983; Terenzini, Lorang & Pascarella, 1981; Tinto, 1988). This resulted in the final modified version (Tinto, 1993), presented in Figure 3.2.

![Figure 3.2 The Institutional Departure Model](image)

The Institutional Departure Model is mainly based on Spady’s views of interaction between students and the academic and social systems of their institutions. Tinto also built on Spady’s link of the student attrition process to the theoretical views of social integration in Durkheim’s Suicide Theory (1951), discussed above. In addition, in his subsequent work ‘Leaving College’, Tinto (1993) adopted the views of the social anthropology work of Van Gennep (1960) on the rites of passage in tribal societies to describe the longitudinal process of students’ integration into the societies of their academic institutions. Van Gennep (cited in Tinto, 1993) argued that the transmission of
relationships between succeeding groups is marked by the three stages of separation, transition and incorporation.

Linking to this, Tinto argued that students’ experiences, especially in the first year of college, are also marked by these stages of passage. Accordingly, a student’s persistence or departure is a reflection of his or her success or failure in navigating the stages towards incorporation into the community of the institution. Tinto claimed that during the stage of separation, new college students need to detach themselves from the groups of their previous communities, such as family and high school, which have different values, norms and behaviour to the new communities of their academic institution.

Once a student has started the process of disassociating him or herself from his or her old communities, but before having successfully acquired the norms and values of the new college community, that student is said by Tinto to be in the transition stage. This stage can occur during or after the first one. Finally, having successfully passed through the first two stages, the student can begin the process of integration into the new community of the college.

The final version of Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure (1993) states that colleges consist of two systems: academic and social. Students need to be integrated into both systems to persist in their academic institutions. Academic integration can be measured by the students’ grade performance and intellectual development, while social integration is measured by students’ interaction with college society (peers and faculty). The model suggests that a student enters college with some goals and commitments. The student’s pre-entry attributes, which include the student’s family background, skills
and abilities and prior schooling, shape these initial goals and commitments. According to the model, the student’s experience at college (academic and social integration) will continuously modify (weaken or strengthen) his or her level of initial goals and commitments. The model suggests that the subsequent (modified) level of goals and commitments affects the student’s decision to stay in or leave the college (Tinto, 1975, 1993). The main amendment Tinto added to his model was the suggestion that the level of the student’s external commitments, such as family and job commitments, affects both the initial and subsequent level of his or her goals and commitments.

Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure (1975, 1993) has been subject to extensive testing and examination over the last four decades and has been cited in many studies investigating the attrition problem in which the constructs, hypotheses and postulations of the models were empirically used, tested and critiqued (Al-Dossary, 2008; Barnett, 2006; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Lien, 2000; Braxton, Shaw Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin & Bracken, 2000; Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Caison, 2007; Elkins et al., 2000; Liu & Liu, 2000; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Mannan, 2001; McCubbin, 2003; Pascarella, Duby & Iverson, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980, 1983, 1991, 1995; Sandiford & Jackson, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1981). These studies adopted and tested Tinto’s model in different college systems and environments, giving the model more credibility and validity.

3.4.3 The Student Attrition Model (Bean 1980, 1982)

Despite Bean’s statement that the theoretical foundation of his model was ‘consistent with the work done on Tinto’s model’ (Bean, 1980, p. 156), Bean criticised the use of views from Durkheim’s Suicide Theory in Tinto’s and Spady’s student attrition
models. He argued that the link between the student dropout process and suicidal behaviour was not evident. Moreover, he said that the models of Tinto and Spady and other past retention studies were simply correlations between attrition and the demographic characteristic variables of the students and their academic institutions without any analytical explanation of the students’ reasons for withdrawal (Bean, 1980).

Bean instead utilised the theoretical views of studies of turnover in work organisations; particularly the work of Price (1977). Employee turnover is defined in the original turnover work of Price (1977) as ‘the degree of individual movement across the membership boundary of a social system’ (p. 4). In this model, Bean argued that the process of student attrition in academic institutions is similar to the process of employee turnover in work organisations and that students and employees leave for similar reasons. He stated that his model shared with employee turnover models the postulation that student and employee satisfaction, and subsequently their persistence, is affected by organisational determinants.

To further adjust the employee turnover process to the context of higher education, Bean replaced the ‘pay’ variable, which is a significant indicator of employee turnover, with four educational indicators: student GPA, development, institutional quality and practical value. Therefore, the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980) contains the following four categories of variables: dropout as a dependent variable, satisfaction and institutional commitment as intervening variables, the organisational determinants and the background variables.

After statistical analysis of the hypothesis of Price’s (1977) turnover model, Bean concluded that the conceptual views of turnover in work organisation studies were
useful in explaining the student attrition process. The main findings of Bean’s study were that although men and women leave college for different reasons, institutional commitments were important factors for both genders. The main difference between men and women was satisfaction, whereby men might leave even though they were satisfied. The variables that had the greatest impact on determining institutional commitment were the opportunity variables, especially the opportunity to transfer.

In his second synthesised causal model of student attrition (presented in Figure 3.3) Bean (1982) conducted a second review of Tinto’s (1975) and Spady’s (1970, 1971) student attrition models. In addition, he incorporated ideas from other theoretical studies, such as the importance of intentions in influencing behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model of Pascarella (1980) and his own previous Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980). The purpose of this review was to compare the theoretical perspectives and the different variables of these models to synthesise a general attrition model that could be adjusted for application in different types of institution.

Figure 3.3 The Student Attrition Model
The model was built to identify the variables that affect students’ intentions to leave, which is, as argued by Bean, the main indicator of student attrition. To do this, Bean categorised the variables from the reviewed student attrition models into the following four main categories: background, organisational, environmental and attitudinal and outcome variables. According to Bean (1982), any student attrition study should include variables from these four categories. Additionally, because this model is not exclusive to a single theoretical foundation, it is possible to adapt it for application in different contexts and types of institution. By adding or deleting variables within these four categories, researches can adjust the model for their specific purposes.

3.4.4 The Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model (Pascarella, 1980)

Based on the assumptions of Spady’s (1970, 1971) and Tinto’s (1975) theoretical models that student interaction with faculty members is an important component of students’ integration with the social and academic systems of their institutions, Pascarella presumed that students’ more informal interaction with faculty members could increase the level of their institutional commitment and subsequently minimise the risk of withdrawal. Moreover, he argued that this assumption was supported, especially for students with low institutional commitment, by the findings of his extensive studies with Terenzini of Tinto’s model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1979, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977, 1978). However, Pascarella (1980) stated that there is not much evidence from previous studies to support the direct influence of student–faculty informal contact on student persistence.

Building on this argument, Pascarella (1980) constructed his Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model (presented in Figure 3.4). In addition to the above assumptions,
the model also relied on the view of the educational value and benefit of student–faculty non-class interactions, such as in Sanford (1967) and Gaff and Wilson (1971), and the concept of academic institutions as socialising organisations, as in Newcomb (1962) and Wallace (1967). Moreover, Pascarella (1980) discussed what he called the ‘philosophical stance which emphasized the importance of college impacts beyond the transmission of facts and knowledge’ (p. 545). Although the study investigated the impact of student–faculty informal contact on the various outcomes of college, student attrition was the focus of the model.

![Figure 3.4 The Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model](image)

The Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model is a longitudinal model that hypothesises, among other benefits, positive relationships between the amount of student–faculty informal interaction and student retention, especially in the first year. According to Pascarella (1980), the quality of the informal student–faculty non-classroom contact is influenced by a variety of factors including initial student differences, the
faculty culture and classroom experiences, peer-culture involvement and the size of the institution.

However, although the model took into account the college experience and other institutional factors, it emphasised the role of students' individual differences, such as the students’ personalities, abilities, educational and professional aspirations, prior schooling achievement and experiences and the characteristics of their families and home environments (Pascarella, 1980). Moreover, Pascarella (1980) argued that there are different forms of student–faculty interaction that have different levels of influence. He said the most positive influence comes from interactions that extend the intellectual content of the study program into informal non-classroom contexts.

3.4.5 The Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model (Bean and Metzner 1985)

Although Bean and Metzner (1985) described their Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model (presented in Figure 3.5) as sharing similarities with previous studies, they argued that it has a completely different structure. This model focuses on a different type of student: the non-traditional commuter student. Bean and Metzner stated that, while previous models have emphasised the important role of social integration within the academic institution on the student persistence process, this factor has a minimal impact on non-traditional students. Rather, non-traditional students seem to be affected principally by environmental factors, including family commitments and other external responsibilities.
Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that there was a lack of consideration in theoretical studies of the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students. They described the few studies that had focused on commuter students as ‘overwhelmingly descriptive’. Thus, Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that, since the most recognised theoretical models of student attrition were based on social perspectives and the lack of social integration was one of the defined characteristics of non-traditional students, there was a need to explain the attrition process of such students from a different theoretical perspective. To fill this gap in the student retention literature, Bean and Metzner (1985) built their Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model. This model was partially derived from the previous models of traditional student attrition, especially the Student Attrition Model of Bean (1982) and other behavioural theories (Bentler & Speckart, 1981; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Lewin, 1935; Locke, 1976). The model postulated that non-traditional students experience an environmental pressure that
includes more interaction with external environmental factors and less interaction with
the members or activities of the environments of their academic institutions. Thus, the
model gives more importance to external factors than to institutional socialisation
factors.

The conceptual framework of the model is based on four sets of variables:
academic performance, intent to leave, background and defined variables and, most
importantly, environmental variables. First, regarding students’ academic performance,
the model hypothesises that students with lower academic performance are more likely
to withdraw. Moreover, although high school grades do not have directly affect student
attrition, the academic performance of undergraduate students is directly affected by
their academic performance in high school. Second, students’ intention to leave is
influenced more by psychological outcomes than by academic variables. Third, students’
high school achievements and their educational goals, among other variables from other
categories, are the background and defining variables that are expected to influence
student persistence. Finally, according to the model, student attrition is most directly
affected by environmental variables such as finance, working hours, outside
encouragement, family responsibilities and opportunity to transfer.

3.4.6 The Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda 1993)

Based on the recommendations of the study by Cabrera et al. (1992), which
presented a suggested integrative framework by merging the variables of the two
distinguished student retention models of Tinto (1975) and Bean (1982), Cabrera et al.
(1993) conducted an empirical study to test this proposed integrative model. The
conclusion of the initial study, which is reviewed in the next section, supported the
convergence of the two theoretical models with some amendments. From this, the Integrated Model of Student Retention (presented in Figure 3.6) was developed.

![Figure 3.6 The Student Retention Integrated Model](image)

The Integrated Model of Student Retention consists of all the statistically confirmed variables from both theories. Those variables that were not validated through the initial analysis were excluded from the model and all similar constructs were merged. Accordingly, the ‘courses’ and ‘institutional fit and quality’ constructs of Bean’s theoretical model were merged with the ‘academic integration’ and ‘institutional commitments’ constructs of Tinto’s theoretical model, respectively. Further, some indicator variables were extracted from their parent constructs and included in the current model as independent variables. For example, Cabrera et al.’s (1993) statistical analysis found the ‘GPA’ variable, considered in Tinto’s model as an indicator variable of the ‘academic integration’ construct, to have an equivalent status to its parent construct. Hence, it was included in the Student Retention Integrated Model as a separate
construct. Finally, the ‘financial attitudes’ and ‘encouragement from friends and family’ variables under the ‘environment’ construct from Bean’s theoretical model were included in the current model as independent variables due to having been found to significantly affect academic integration, institutional commitments and persistence decision.

The findings of Cabrera et al.’s (1993) study indicated that the integration of the two models of Tinto and Bean provided a better explanation and understanding of the student attrition process. Moreover, the statistical analysis confirmed that environmental variables have a more complex role in the student retention formula than was perceived by Tinto. This supports Beans’ claims of the importance of such factors.

Finally Cabrera et al. (1993) recommended that academic institutions, when designing student retention plans and strategies, focus on the variables that strongly encourage students to persist in their study programs and seek to address the past behaviour of students towards withdrawal. They also stressed the importance of constant monitoring and revision of these retention plans and strategies by the research units of the academic institutions.

3.4.7 Other significant student retention theories and models

In addition to the theoretical student retention models reviewed in the above sections, some other theoretical models and empirical studies have gained consideration in the literature of student retention in higher education. Some of these theoretical models have not been subjected to the same extensive application and examination as those reviewed above. Other studies only synthesise the variables of earlier theoretical models in attempts to develop new models containing only validated variables while
excluding all others. An example of this type of study is Cabrera et al. (1992), which merged the famous models of Tinto (1975, 1987) and Bean (1982). Some of these studies are briefly reviewed in the following sections.

**3.4.7.1 The Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984)**

The Student Involvement Theory, as defined by Astin (1984), *refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience* (p. 307). Astin postulated that the amount of students’ involvement in college is positively related to the amount of their learning and personal development.

Although the Student Involvement Theory is an educational theory that focuses on enhancing the student development and learning environment in higher education, it has some implications for the student retention phenomenon. First, it was partially derived from Astin’s (1975) study of college dropouts. Second, according to Astin (1984), student retention is the other face of student involvement, whereby the greater the students’ involvement in their academic institutions, the greater is the rate of their persistence. Astin also argued that most of the reasons given by students for dropping out of college indicate a lack of involvement, which provides support for this theory.

**3.4.7.2 The convergence between Tinto (1975, 1987) and Bean (1982) theoretical models**

*The convergence between two theories of college persistence* was the title of the study as suggested by Cabrera et al. (1992). This study integrates Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975, 1987) and the Student Attrition Model of Bean (1982), which are two of the major and most recognised and cited models of student retention. In this proposed integrative framework, Cabrera et al. (1992) empirically examined the
similarities and the discriminant validity between these two theoretical models. The purpose was to determine how merging these two theories could enhance understanding of the student attrition phenomenon in higher education.

A statistical analysis of the longitudinal study data, which was derived from 446 participants of a large tertiary institution, revealed that the variables of both theoretical models significantly overlapped. Moreover, the statistical analysis confirmed the assumptions of both theoretical models that student attrition is a result of a complex process of interaction between students’ personal attributes and the characteristics of their academic institutions and the significant impact of student–college fit on students’ intention to persist.

However, the result of the study showed that the Student Integration Model was more robust in regard to the number of confirmed hypotheses. The statistical analysis confirmed almost 70% of the Student Integration Model’s hypotheses compared to 40% of the Student Attrition Model’s hypotheses. Conversely, Bean’s Student Attrition Model contributed better to revealing the significance of the role of external factors in the student retention phenomenon. The main conclusion of the study was that the results of the statistical analysis supported the merging of the two theoretical models, as this gave a comprehensive understanding of the student attrition process. Such a merger was achieved by integrating the variables from both models most related to the student attrition process. These findings led to the development of the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera et al., 1993) reviewed earlier.
3.4.7.3 Theory elaboration of Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model (Berger and Braxton, 1998)

In contrast to the theory integration method utilised in the above study, Berger and Braxton (1998) revised the distinguished student retention theoretical model of Tinto (1993) through what they called ‘theory elaboration’. They defined the process of theory elaboration as ‘the application of new concepts borrowed from other theoretical perspectives to explain the focal phenomena’ (Berger & Braxton, 1998, p. 104). Unlike theory integration, whereby two validated theoretical models are merged to develop a more comprehensive model, theory elaboration is suitable for use with those theoretical models that are insufficient or limited to particular contexts or situations. The purpose of the ‘borrowed concepts’ is thus to fill the voids in these models.

Berger and Braxton (1998) claimed that, although Tinto’s student retention theoretical model had ‘near-paradigmatic status’ in the student retention field and had been empirically tested in many studies, only five of the 13 assumptions of the model were ‘robustly supported’. Moreover, they argued that the social integration construct that formed two of the supported assumptions of Tinto’s model lacked explanation. Thus, Berger and Braxton (1998) developed the required explanations through theory elaboration of Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model (1993).

To do this, Berger and Braxton (1998) omitted the variables from Tinto’s model that lacked support; that is, those related to initial and subsequent goals and commitments and the academic integration construct. Meanwhile, to develop an explanation for the social integration construct, they added three organisational attribute variables expected to provide a possible source of influence and lead to
different levels of social integration. These organisational attribute variables were institutional communication, fairness in policy and rule enforcement and participating in decision making.

The statistical analysis of the study supported the elaboration made to Tinto’s theoretical model. The study findings suggested that organisational attribute variables could be added to the model as a possible source of social integration. Moreover, the influence of the organisational attributes was not limited to social integration. The analysis of the study variables also suggested an indirect influence of the organisational attributes on students’ intentions to withdraw. Thus, it was one of the key findings of the study that organisational attributes play a significant role in the student retention phenomenon.

3.5 Limitations of the student retention theories

Studies of the student retention issue in higher education, including the theoretical models, as in other research fields, have their shortcomings and limitations. One of the most well-recognised limitations of the student retention studies concerns their generalisability (Jeffreys, 2012). Most student retention studies are undertaken in particular institutions and their findings are usually not easily generalised to other institutions (Boston & Ice, 2011; Pascarella, 1980). This might be because low student retention is a campus-based phenomenon (Berger et al., 2012). Hence, every case has unique characteristics and circumstances that make it difficult to generalise its findings to other cases (Cabrera et al., 1993; Caison, 2007; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; McInnis & James, 2004). However, the high frequency of these theoretical models and distinguished empirical studies being tested and replicated in other contexts should
enhance their generalisability (Cabrera et al., 1992; Ho Yu, DiGangi, Jannasch-Pennell & Kaprolet, 2010; Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle, 1986).

Other limitations of student retention studies relate to the research strategies they utilise and the types of sample institutions and participants they study. One of the criticisms of student retention studies is that they have primarily focused on traditional academic institutions and traditional types of students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton & Lee, 2005). As noted by Bean and Metzner (1985), most of the early studies were conducted in ordinary four-year institutions with students of average age group and social background. These authors claimed that among the great number of studies that investigated the low student retention problem, only a few studies focused on the commuter four-year institutions (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Moreover, there was a lack of studies on students of minority groups and part-time older students.

Regarding the research strategies used, one of the shortcomings of the student retention literature has been the dependence of the leading theoretical models and early distinguished studies on the quantitative research techniques (Jones, 2008; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997). As a consequence, students’ experiences in the academic and social systems of their academic institutions and in their own external off-campus communities might have been inadequately explored. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.10 of this chapter.

Finally, concerning the theoretical and conceptual background, Bean (1982) pointed to an overabundance of non-theoretical descriptive studies in the field of student retention research. He argued that such studies are only useful if they aim to find who is leaving rather than why they are leaving. Instead, he suggested that the
relations between the variables of these studies should be reinvestigated using theories. However, as noted by Bean and Metzner (1985), many student retention studies have relied heavily on the assumptions of Tinto’s models (1975, 1993), which were not designed to study non-traditional students and did not include some of the major attrition factors such as the organisational factors. Moreover, Tinto (1982) discussed the student retention models’ inadequacy in distinguishing between transferring and withdrawing completely from the higher education system. He criticised his earlier theoretical model of 1975, stating ‘it does not adequately distinguish between those behaviours that lead to institutional transfer and those that result in permanent withdrawal from higher education’ (Tinto, 1982, p. 689).

3.6 Contemporary international student retention studies

The library of student retention research is rich in theoretical and empirical models as well as studies that extensively explored the student attrition phenomenon and the experiences of students in higher education contexts (Berger et al., 2012; Hagedorn, 2005; Tinto, 2004, 2010). These studies took the form of books, scholarly papers and articles, institutional and government projects and reports and postgraduate theses and dissertations. Some of these studies tried to understand the reasons behind students’ early withdrawal and to collect information about the most frequent factors that might influence tertiary students to take such decisions. Other studies focused on the factors that might improve student retention and support students to persist in their study programs towards completion.

This section discusses some of the more recent retention studies and reports, published in the last decade, from different international contexts. The larger body of
student retention studies, including all of the above-reviewed theoretical models, were designed and conducted in the American higher education context (Jones, 2008). However, as the current study was based on Australia and conducted in Saudi Arabia, the focus in this section and the next section, respectively, is on the studies pertaining to these two particular contexts. The aim is to present and list the key contemporary studies and reports on student retention in different international educational contexts. Following this, the student attrition factors from these and other studies are discussed in Section 3.8.

As discussed earlier, research on student retention in higher education has gone through different stages of development since the emergence of the student retention field in the early 1970s (Berger et al., 2012). While the early stages of the 1970s and 1980s formed the era of building the theoretical foundation of the student retention studies, the focus in the last decade has been on putting these theoretical and conceptual frameworks into practice. Tinto (2006) described this period as characterised by ‘a heightened focus on what works’ (p. 4). Therefore, recent student retention studies are based heavily on the theoretical models and frameworks of the 1970s and 1980s and early 1990s. As a result, despite disagreements over the detailed theoretical explanations of the student attrition phenomenon, educational institutions now have a better understanding of the factors involved in student attrition and, more importantly, the process of promoting student retention in their study programs (Tinto, 2010).

3.6.1 Australian higher education context

In the Australian higher education context, student experience and retention has received serious attention and focus in the last two decades. Between 1994 and 2013,
many university and government projects were conducted reporting on students’ experience in Australian higher education institutions, with a focus on quality and the first-year experience (Adams, Banks, Davis & Dickson, 2010; Asmar, Brew, McCulloch, Peseta & Barrie, 2000; Burnett, 2006; Hodges et al., 2013; James Cook University, 2008, 2009; James et al., 2010; Krause et al., 2005; Radloff, Coates, James & Krause, 2011; Willcoxson et al., 2011).

The reports also included information and statistics about the factors affecting and related to student persistence in higher education programs, such as the impact of students’ abilities and commitments and the institutional characteristics. These issues and factors and other information from these reports are included in the analysis of the factors associated with student attrition presented in Section 3.8.

In addition to these institutional and government efforts, some individual studies have been conducted to explore and attempt to conceptualise the student attrition phenomenon in the Australian higher education context. Some of these studies explored the phenomenon and reported the most frequent factors leading students to withdraw from their study programs, while others focused on strategies and plans to increase retention rates (see, for example, the following selected publications from the last decade: Archambault, 2008; Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009; Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; Krause, 2005, 2007; Krause et al., 2005; Lodge, 2011; Maher & Macallister, 2013; McInnis & James, 2004; Olsen, 2008; Polesel & Rice, 2012; Rienks & Taylor, 2009; Roberts, McGill & Hyland, 2012; Rowlands, 2004; Scott, Shah, Grebennikov & Singh, 2008; Shah, Grebennikov & Singh, 2007; Taylor & Bedford, 2004).
Generally, the findings and conclusions of the above-listed studies did not differ from the constructs of the famous student retention theoretical models reviewed earlier or from the findings of other international studies. There is no single factor that can be claimed to motivate students to withdraw from their study programs. Rather, the findings of these studies point to the influence of a range of personal, institutional and financial factors on students’ withdrawal and transfer decisions. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.8.

In regard to efforts made in Australia to measure and collect valid and reliable student data, many institutional and national questionnaires and surveys have been designed for this purpose. The latest instrument is the University Experience Survey (UES), which was developed and funded by the Australian government (Radloff, Coates, Taylor, James & Krause, 2012). The purpose of the UES is to act as a national instrument that can measure the quality of tertiary education at the national level. The survey focuses on the quality of tertiary students’ experiences with three main conditions. These conditions limit the students’ experiences to those aspects that can be measured, related to educational outcomes and are under the responsibility of the educational institutions. The data generated from the UES will provide the Australian government and Australian universities with ‘reliable, valid and generalizable information’.

According to the UES team, the UES is the first and largest Australian independent data collection instrument that collects data on students’ experiences in higher education. However, according to Radloff et al. (2011), some other national instruments and surveys are currently used by Australian tertiary institutions to report on students’ experiences. These include the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), the Australian
Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), the Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ),
the Postgraduate Survey of Student Engagement (POSSE), the International Student
Barometer, the First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYE), the Graduate Destination
Survey (GDS) and the Graduate Pathways Survey (GPS).

3.6.2 American higher education context

The American higher education context was the home of the early works and
research on student retention. Moreover, all of the early pioneer theoretical and
conceptual student retention models and frameworks, such as the theoretical models of
Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bean (1980, 1983), were designed and
conducted in this particular educational context. These theoretical models were among
those already reviewed comprehensively earlier in this chapter. Much of the current
research in the student retention field has been influenced by these early theoretical
views (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Evans, Carlin & Pott, 2009; Troxel, 2010).

Following the development of the student retention field and the establishment of
the student retention theoretical models, thousands of studies and scholarly works were
conducted and published in the American higher education context (Demetriou &
Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Seidman, 2005a; Troxel, 2010). This included some of the most
distinguished books and edited compilations in this particular field (Braxton, 2000; Forest
& Altbach, 2006; Habley et al., 2012; Hermanowicz, 2003; John & Asker, 2003; Pascarella
& Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Seidman, 2005b, 2012; Tinto, 1993) as well as the first and only
student retention academic journal devoted solely to student retention studies and
research: the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*
(Seidman, 2014).
In addition, issues related to student retention in the American higher education context were monitored and reviewed through many institutional and state and federal government reports and studies that focused on student attrition rates, the associated costs and strategies to ‘what works’ to increase student retention (see, for example, the following institutional and national reports: ACT Inc, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Adelman, 2006; AFT Higher Education, 2011; Aud et al., 2013; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Horn & Weko, 2009; Humboldt State University, 2012; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Muraskin & Lee, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2012; Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 2002; Radford, Berkner, Wheless & Shepherd, 2010; The College Board, 2012).

Finally, although the majority of the early American student retention studies focused on traditional students in ordinary four-year colleges and universities (Borglum & Kubala, 2000), many of the recent studies in the American higher education context focused on students’ experiences and retention in community colleges and other two-year academic institutions (Bailey, Leinbach & Jenkins, 2006; Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Fike & Fike, 2008; Gao, 2003; McIntosh & Rouse, 2009; Roman, 2007; Summers, 2003; Szelenyi, 2001; Wells, 2008; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Other studies also focused on studying access and diversity issues as well as the experiences, attrition factors and retention rates of non-traditional students and students from minority and other under-represented communities (Carter, 2006; Chang, 2002; Gardner, 2005; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Ishitani, 2003; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup & Kuh, 2008; Seidman, 2005a; Sólorzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005; Swail, 2003b; Thayer, 2000).
3.6.3 UK higher education context

In the UK higher education context, the last decade has seen the student retention issue broadly explored and investigated through reports and empirical studies (Brunsden et al., 2000; Fleming & Finnegan, 2010; Nevill & Rhodes, 2004; Park, 2005; Reay, David & Ball, 2001; Thomas, 2002, 2011; Thomas & Jamieson-Ball, 2011). Jones (2008) presented a comprehensive review synthesising the research on student retention in this particular context. In this synthesis, in addition to studies from other international contexts, Jones (2008) reviewed 10 key institutional and government reports on students’ experiences and retention in the UK higher education context as well as some other individual studies conducted either in single institutions or at the national level (Action on Access, 2003; Dodgson & Bolam, 2002; House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts Committee, 2008; National Audit Office, 2007; Quality Assurance Agency, 2008; Quinn et al., 2005; Thomas, Quinn, Slack & Casey, 2002; Van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift & Levitt, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Jones (2008) classified the issues addressed by the UK research into the following four categories: calculating student attrition rate, exploring and identifying student attrition factors, examining student retention enhancement procedures and exploring the attrition experiences and implications for all affected parties including students and their educational institutions. The conclusion of this research synthesis helped in identifying the types of students most likely to persist in their study programs and those most at risk of withdrawing within the context of the UK higher education sector. Moreover, it listed the factors frequently associated with student attrition in the UK studies. These factors included issues related to individual students’ characteristics, such
as their academic abilities, educational goals and preparation and readiness for higher education, and institutional issues, such as student–college fit, teaching quality, dissatisfaction with college and lack of institutional integration and other commitment, financial and employment issues. These factors were in line with those proposed by the reviewed international theoretical models. They are also included in the discussion of the most frequent student attrition factors, presented in Section 3.8 below.

3.6.4 European higher education contexts

In addition to the above-presented studies published in English, there are some studies and reports from other international contexts, such as the European higher education context (not including the UK), that might add to the current review. However, due to the language barriers, the search was limited to English language resources. In this European higher education context, there are few available student retention studies and reports published in English. These were mainly reports prepared for the RAND corporation (RAND Europe, 2014) and the ATTRACT project (2014), which is funded by the European commission (Kairamo, 2012; Lucas, Gonçalves & Kairamo, 2012; Rintala, Andersson & Kairamo, 2011; Rintala & Kairamo, 2011, 2012; Severiens & Schmidt, 2009; Van Stolk et al., 2007). These studies also provided access to the details of some other European student retention studies through their literature reviews.

These studies and reports focused on providing background information about the academic institutions in the different European countries, reporting and reviewing the statistics relating to student attrition in different types of study programs and assessing the different retention policies and strategies utilised by the academic institutions. Moreover, these reports comprehensively compared the above information from the
European tertiary context with other international higher education contexts, such as the North American and Australian and New Zealand contexts.

The findings from these studies emphasised the importance of the first-year experience on student retention in higher education institutions. A review of the statistics from the data for both four-year and two-year institutions from different European countries (Finland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Sweden) revealed that most withdrawals occurred during the first year (Kairamo, 2012). In addition, a report from the ATTRACT project revealed that ‘wrong choice of programme’ was one of the most-reported student attrition factors (Rintala et al., 2011).

One of the conclusions of the ATTRACT reports was that most of the reported student attrition factors were beyond the direct control of institutions (Lucas et al., 2012). Moreover, participants in the studies reported only minimal impact of the other social, cultural and institutional factors. Another report recommended that academic institutions focus on building personal relationships with their students and take the necessary steps to identify ‘at risk’ students (Rintala et al., 2011). Other findings from the above-listed studies and reports are included in the discussion of the factors associated with student attrition in higher education in Section 3.8.

3.6.5 Arabic higher education contexts

The higher education contexts of the Arabic countries are very similar to the Saudi context, which is the local context of the current study. Many student retention studies have been conducted in higher education institutions in different countries in the Arab world. However, despite the large number of studies, especially doctoral and masters theses and dissertations, that were found in Arabic indexes, the majority of these were
either not available or accessible online or were available only as abstracts. In addition, many of the Arabic studies that were labelled as student retention studies focused on issues outside this field, such as on academic failure and the time spent by students on their study programs above the average study duration. For these reasons, the review in this section is limited to only six studies (Abyati & Ibraheem, 2007; Alhawli & Shaldan, 2013; Ali, Anhar & Dawood, 2010; AlKandari, 2008; Bafatoom, 2010; Jalal, 2011).

Two of these studies were conducted in universities in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, the context of which is extremely similar to that of Saudi Arabia. These two studies were the study of Jalal (2011) on student attrition at the University of Bahrain and AlKandari’s study (2008) on the factors affecting student retention at Kuwait University. Both of these studies utilised quantitative instruments to collect information about the most frequent factors associated with the student attrition phenomenon.

It was found that the factors affecting student retention at the University of Bahrain were mainly personal and institutional, with the most important factors being time management and the absence of tests able to predict students’ educational problems, respectively. At Kuwait University, on the other hand, achieving educational and occupational goals, the quality of student–faculty relationships and the encouragement by the university of students to progress in academic programs were the most important factors contributing to students’ decisions to stay or leave their study programs.

Another Arabic study, conducted in a four-year college in Yemen (Bafatoom, 2010), investigated the attrition factors among ESL students, which is an aim of the current study. Bafatoom’s study focused on collecting information about the impact of the
curriculum, faculty members, quality of assessment and the students themselves on the student attrition phenomenon. The study found that factors related to student assessment were highly influential on the student attrition problem, while faculty member–related factors showed the least impact. The study also identified weaknesses in all of the four studied variables that might lead students to withdraw from their study programs.

Two other studies were conducted in Iraq, where financial and economic factors played an important role in student attrition, due to the war and the economic situation of the country (Abyati & Ibraheem, 2007; Ali et al., 2010). Abyati and Ibraheem (2007) reported a yearly incremental increase in student attrition rates between the academic years of 2000 and 2004, with the highest rate reported in 2003 and 2004, during the first years of the American occupation. These authors also listed a number of economic, social and cultural factors that might be related to student attrition in Iraqi academic institutions. Similar findings were found by a study from a similar context, in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, which is under an economic blockade by Egypt and Israel. Alhawli and Shaldan (2013) found that financial and economic factors, related to the economic situation of the state, had the greatest role in causing postgraduate students at Gaza University to leave their study programs.

The other Iraqi study (Ali et al., 2010) focused on designing a data-mining system to predict which students might be at risk of attrition based on some of the frequently reported student attrition factors from the literature and previous studies. These factors were limited to statistical information in regard to the variables of gender, attendance, academic history, parents’ level of education, work load and the influence of friends.
However, the study did not present information about the feasibility of the system or its ability to predict at risk students.

Most of the above-reviewed studies found no difference between persister and non-persister students in regard to their genders and study major. Moreover, there are some other Arabic studies that investigated the student attrition phenomenon in higher education (Alsaud & Aldhamen, 1995; Khalifat & Algodhah, 2010). However, as mentioned earlier, due to the difficulties in accessing these studies online they were not included in this review. The next section is devoted solely to the student retention research and studies that were conducted in the Saudi Arabian higher education context, which is the local context of the current study. In this section, all of the available literature, past and current, is comprehensively reviewed and synthesised to formulate a foundation for the discussion of the findings of the current study.

### 3.7 Local student retention studies

As mentioned earlier, few studies have been conducted in the Saudi higher education context that address the student attrition problem. Al-Dossary (2008), in his study of the student attrition factors at King Saud University, said that ‘there is currently no study which has examined the retention of Saudi students’ (p. 11). While some retention studies in the Saudi higher education context have since been published, many of the available Saudi retention studies are government and institutional reports that are limited to reporting student retention, attrition and graduation rates and statistics without any analysis. This is problematic, as decisions regarding low student retention in Saudi higher education institutions might be based on these statistics and rates rather than on in-depth investigations of the factors that cause the problem.
Compounding the problem of the paucity of Saudi student retention studies, many are inaccessible to researchers. This is due to the restrictions in publishing, obtaining and borrowing doctoral and masters theses from Saudi universities and the lack of academic databases and thesis repositories\(^3\) (Alabullateef, 2008). While some empirical studies investigating the problem of student attrition in the Saudi higher education have recently started to be published, a careful online search of all available Saudi academic databases and university websites and other Arabic and international databases returned only 15 theses, dissertations, reports and studies focusing on student attrition in the Saudi higher education context between 1986 and 2012.

Only 10 of these were available and accessible online and so could be reviewed in this section (Abuelma'atti, 2006; Al-Abdulkareem, 2012; Al-Dossary, 2008; Al-Ghnaim, 2010; Alabdulgader, 1992; Fayed & Gasem, 2012; Hakeem, 2007; Khan & Osman, 2011; Malah, 1994; Mobarak, Alharthi & Kees, 2000). The other five studies were only available as online abstracts and were thus excluded (Abdullaal, 2010; Alabdullah, 1995; Almaneea, 2003; Felemban, 1986; Ghaban, 1999). A further two Saudi student retention studies were excluded from the review, as they focused on student retention in online courses, which is outside the scope of the current study (Dahan, 2008; Ibrahim, Rwegasira & Taher, 2007).

Certainly, 10 studies seems a small number compared to the size of the Saudi higher education sector as described in Chapter Two. However, these studies investigated the low retention phenomenon among the students of both two-year and

\(^{3}\) In 2013, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education introduced the Saudi Digital Library (http://sdl.edu.sa) as a repository for Saudi masters and doctoral theses and dissertations.
four-year Saudi higher education institutions. The following section presents a comprehensive review of all of the available Saudi retention studies.

3.7.1 The available Saudi student retention studies

This following sections present and review the few published studies that investigated the student attrition phenomenon in the Saudi higher education context. These studies are considered chronologically.

The study of Alabdulgader (1992) on the factors contributing to student attrition in the Saudi higher education sector appears to be the oldest available Saudi student retention study. Alabdulgader (1992) studied the factors associated with the student attrition phenomenon in Saudi universities as perceived by students and faculty staff of universities and tertiary colleges in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia (nine academic institutions). The statistical analysis included student data from all Saudi universities. The study sample included both voluntary non-persister students and academically dismissed students.

Alabdulgader's (1992) study aimed to define student attrition and retention and to measure the rates of student attrition in tertiary institutions in Saudi Arabia and government spending on higher education programs. Moreover, the study aimed to find the most frequent factors associated with the student attrition phenomenon in Saudi higher education. To do this, a 78-item questionnaire was designed to collect information on the personal, family, social and economic and educational factors affecting student attrition, based on the findings of previous studies. Responses to the study instrument (n=395) were analysed using the descriptive analytical method.
The study found that student attrition rates were dependent on students’ study majors. The student attrition rates across all Saudi tertiary institutions range between 20 and 68%. However, at 50–68%, the attrition rates were higher for science majors. For the social and literature study majors, on the other hand, the rates were between 20 and 37%. In regard to loss of government spending on higher education, the study found that the student attrition problem cost 43% of the total annual Saudi higher education budget.

The factors found by the study to relate to the student attrition phenomenon were grouped under the following categories: personal, family, social and economic and educational. The personal factors included gender, age and emotional status; while the family factors included maternity, preparing for marriage, family relationships, parents’ divorce, death of one or both parents and family income. The social and economic factors included social integration, life commitments, financial crises, transportation, friends’ commitments and home sickness. Finally, the educational factors included pre-entry academic ability, admission policy, low English language skills, weak preparation for higher education, lack of social integration into the university environment, financial support, class size and relationship with the university administration.

Two years later, Malah (1994) studied the student attrition factors in Saudi technical colleges (formerly, intermediate technical colleges). The study aimed to identify the main motivators of students to leave their study programs before completion and how this related to students’ educational and occupational goals and their awareness of the importance of vocational and technical education. The study also focused on the
impact of other background factors such as students’ previous qualifications, students’ social and residential status and the educational levels of their parents.

The study utilised student questionnaires for the data collection, which were then analysed quantitatively. The sample of the study was limited to the students of Riyadh Intermediate Technical College (currently known as Riyadh College of Technology) in the academic year of 1990. In that year, 16% of first-year students voluntarily withdrew from their study programs before graduation. The factors that led them to withdraw, as found by the study, were as follows:

- Transferring to four-year institutions
- Found a job
- Poor orientation to the vocational education system
- High secondary school grades
- Parents’ level of education
- Home sick (especially for non-resident students)
- Family crisis

An important finding of this study was the correlation between non-persister students’ secondary school grades and the educational level of their parents and their educational and occupational future after withdrawal. Specifically, the study found that students with higher secondary school grades and/or whose parents attained a higher educational level tended to leave the two-year college to transfer to better academic institutions. Conversely, those students with lower secondary school grades and/or whose parents had a lower educational level tended to leave to find a job or withdraw completely from the higher education system. Moreover, the majority of non-persister
students (65%) reported having no idea about the technical and vocational education system and the job opportunities and future of the graduates from this system.

A field study was conducted in Umm Al-Qura University by Mobarak et al. (2000) to collect information from the students and faculty staff about the factors that lead some students to fail and/or withdraw from their study programs. The student participants were limited to male students that had failed some courses during their study programs (at risk students) and who had GPAs of less than one out of four points, or those that had withdrawn from the university between the academic years of 1987 and 1997.

The researchers utilised three different questionnaires to collect information from these three different participant groups, which numbered 110 non-persister students, 130 at risk students and 136 faculty members. The statistical analysis of the participants’ responses revealed that both student groups and the faculty members listed some personal, social and institutional factors that might affect students’ experiences in their study programs and lead them to fail or withdraw. As the focus of the current study is on the student attrition problem, only those factors that were identified as leading students to leave their study programs before completion are considered here.

Student participants reported that the most frequent factors that affected their withdrawal decisions were the difficulties in choosing the desired study majors, lack of academic advising, life commitments and friends’ influence. Moreover, the students reported that university was not their first choice and that they had enrolled either because it was the only available opportunity after high school or because it was their parents’ preference. Faculty members agreed with the student participants that the inability to enrol in the desired study major was one of the most influential factors
leading students to withdraw from their study programs. Moreover, they viewed social commitments and financial crises as the other important factors affecting students’ persistence at Umm Al-Qura University.

A more recent study is that of Abuelma’atti (2006) on the problems facing engineering education in the Saudi higher education context. The paper focused on student retention, attrition and graduation rates. Although the scope of the paper was all Saudi universities and technical colleges that provide engineering education, specific statistics on student retention, attrition and graduation rates were presented for the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, one of the largest and most prestigious universities in Saudi Arabia. The statistics showed that in 2004 the number of students who left the university without a degree was higher than the number of graduated students in the same year. In that year, 732 students withdrew before completion compared to 658 who managed to graduate. However, only 50 students withdrew for non-academic reasons; the remainder left or were asked to leave due to weak academic performance. Of the 1781 students enrolled in the university’s foundation program in the same year, 345 students were academically dismissed and 40 students voluntarily withdrew for other reasons.

Abuelma’atti concluded that the major causes of student attrition from Saudi tertiary engineering education programs could be classified under the following factors:

- Poor educational skills and abilities, especially in science and English
- Poor educational commitment
- Heavy learning loads
- Poor academic integration
• Poor teaching quality, including untrained teachers and poor course administration
• Poor admission and registration policy, including poor student orientation, poor preparation for the transition to higher education level and lack of student advising and support
• Personal problems.

In 2007, Hakeem studied the student attrition factors in Makah Teachers College. The study sample was 70 students who withdrew from the college in the academic years of 2004 and 2005 (Hakeem, 2007). The sample was limited to those students who had GPAs higher than 2.0 points at the time of withdrawing, to exclude students who had been academically dismissed. The study was quantitative and utilised statistical analysis techniques. Based on the literature, the study instrument was limited to five dimensions: personal, academic, family and external factors and student–faculty relationships. The statistical analysis of the participants’ responses aimed to identify the impact of these variables on the student attrition problem.

The study found that the main factors that affected student retention in Makah Teachers College could be classified under the categories of personal, academic and student–faculty relationships. The non-persister students showed lower motivation towards higher education, lower academic integration and poorer relationships with the academic staff. Other factors from other categories that were important but to a lesser degree included family commitments and problems, external commitments and students’ thinking about getting a job instead of studying.

Al-Dossary’s (2008) PhD thesis on the factors affecting student retention at King Saud University was the most in-depth study that investigated the student attrition
problem in the Saudi higher education context. In his study, Al-Dossary investigated the attrition phenomenon among the students of the first and largest Saudi university, King Saud University. The study was a comprehensive mixed methods study, guided by Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilised in the collection and analysis of the study data. For the quantitative phase, two student questionnaires were used to collect data from 414 persister first-year students, with analysis conducted using the Structural Equation Modelling technique. Qualitative data were collected from 17 non-persister students (phone interviews), 15 persister students (focus group interviews) and 37 academic and administrative staff (surveys). The qualitative data were analysed using the Constant Comparative Analysis method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The main findings of the study revealed that the constructs of Tinto’s theoretical model did not explain the student attrition phenomenon in King Saud University. The statistical analysis showed that only 30% of the hypothesised variables of Tinto’s theoretical model were supported by the participants’ responses. These variables were the students’ initial goal and institutional commitment, later goal and institutional commitment and pre-college schooling. These findings were supported by the qualitative data. As concluded by Al-Dossary, the analysis of the qualitative data showed that persister students were more motivated towards higher education and had higher levels of institutional commitment. In addition, the study found factors additional to those postulated in Tinto’s theoretical model that might affect student retention in the Saudi higher education context. These factors were the difficulties in selecting or transferring to the desired study major, a lack of academic advice and the irregularity of the students’ monthly allowance.
Al-Ghnaim’s (2010) was the only student retention study conducted on a Saudi female campus. In her masters thesis, Al-Ghnaim investigated the attrition factors among the first-year female students at Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. The aim of the study was to identify the student attrition factors as perceived by the students and the university administrative staff. Al-Ghnaim utilised a quantitative descriptive method to analyse the responses of the 475 female students and 24 administrative staff who participated in the study.

The major findings of the study were classified by the researcher under the following categories: personal, academic and social. For these categories, the most important factors leading students to withdraw from their study programs as reported by both students and administrative staff were, respectively, maternity and low commitment to higher education, getting poor academic grades and family crisis. Moreover, administrative staff pointed to students’ difficulty in enrolling in their desired study major as another major factor in student attrition.

In 2011, Khan and Osman presented a conference paper on the factors affecting students’ satisfaction and retention at Dammam Community College (Khan & Osman, 2011). The study aimed to investigate the causes of dissatisfaction among accounting and marketing students that led them to either withdraw from their study programs before completion or transfer to other institutions. The sample of the study was 74 students and six (Information Technology) IT staff. The study utilised a mixed methods approach for data collection and analysis. Student questionnaires were used to collect the quantitative data, while staff interviews were the instrument for the qualitative data.
The quantitative data were analysed statistically using descriptive and regression analysis techniques, and the interviews were analysed qualitatively.

The major findings of the study attributed student dissatisfaction and subsequent attrition to the following factors: financial issues, employment, academic performance, scheduling, registration processes, administrative processes, classroom/lab and IT support services. The last factor had the strongest impact on the student attrition phenomenon at Dammam Community College.

In 2012, Fayed and Gasem (2012) investigated the relationship between the ‘adjustment with university life’ factors and the probability of student dropout. The study was conducted on the male campus of Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study population were the undergraduate students from all colleges and study majors of the male campus. The study sought any significant differences between the ‘adjustments with university life’ factors and the probability of student dropout and tested the predictability of a scale to identify the students who are at risk of dropping out.

To achieve these aims, the researchers utilised a translated and modified version of the Adjustment to College Scale (R. Baker & Siryk, 1983). The scale consists of four subscales that measure academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal and emotional adjustment and goal commitment. The study questionnaires were completed by 170 male participants from different colleges of the university, study levels and majors.

The statistical analysis of the participants’ responses revealed that there is a negative significant relationship between most of the ‘adjustment with university life’ factors and the probability of student dropout. This means that the higher the level of
student adjustment with university life, the lower the chance of dropping out. However, these significant statistical relationships were found only in the social and academic adjustment and goal commitment items. No significant difference was found in the study sample for the personal and emotional adjustment items. The study concluded with the statement that students who have a higher level of adjustment to the academic life of the college and have higher levels of goal commitment are usually at a lower risk of dropping out from their study programs.

Finally, the most recent available Saudi student retention study was Al-Abdulkareem’s (2012) masters thesis on the factors leading to the high attrition rates among trainees in Saudi technical colleges. According to Al-Abdulkareem, the graduation rate in the academic year of 2010 across all Saudi technical colleges was as low as 24.1% of the total number of students enrolling in the same year.

The study was limited to the views of the faculty members of the 36 Saudi technical colleges at the time of the study. A total of 246 responses were analysed quantitatively to identify the most frequent trainee attrition factors and to investigate the statistical differences between the participants’ views based on their demographic characteristics. The main findings of Al-Abdulkareem’s study attributed the student attrition phenomenon, as perceived by the faculty members, to three primary factors: the level of qualification (two-year diplomas), the students’ poor institutional commitment and the low reputation of technical colleges in Saudi society.

### 3.7.2 Student attrition factors across Saudi studies

Table 3.2 lists the most frequent student attrition factors in the Saudi higher education context as found in the available studies reviewed in the previous section. The
numbers in the table indicate how frequently these factors were found in the studies of two-year and four-year institutions, as well as in total. As shown in the table, although the attrition factors appear similar for both types of institution, it can be inferred from the conclusions of the reviewed studies that student attrition factors might be slightly dependent on the type and level of the institution. This is more obvious for the two-year institutions, for which transferring to four-year institutions and getting a job were the most frequently reported factors. The qualification level of the institution, the lack of students’ knowledge about the differences between the two-year and four-year education systems and the types of jobs each system prepares students for played a major role in leading students to withdraw or transfer from two-year institutions.

Table 3.2 Frequent student attrition factors in the Saudi higher education context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Two-year institutions</th>
<th>Four-year institutions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutions’ rules and policies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family commitments and problems</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor academic integration</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial issues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low academic ability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type and level of the institution</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor educational commitments</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor orientation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends’ influence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The institution is not my first choice</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ level of education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home sick (non-resident students)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High secondary school grades</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal problems</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor teaching qualities</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level of motivation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of academic advice</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in choosing the desired study major</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the four-year students, on the other hand, non-institutional factors such as the students’ academic abilities and their level of motivation and educational commitment were the most frequently reported reasons for withdrawal. Moreover, two of the reviewed studies found that some students withdrew because of difficulties enrolling in or transferring to their desired study majors. However, this may be attributable to institutions’ admission policy or students’ pre-entry academic performance not meeting the requirements of entry to some study majors.

### 3.7.3 Gender differences in Saudi retention studies

As stated before, all Saudi academic institutions are sex-segregated. Thus, investigating the differences between male and female students in regard to the research problem might enrich the Saudi student retention literature. Of those studies reviewed in this chapter, the majority were conducted at male institutions and campuses. Only one of the 10 studies was conducted on a female campus, of a four-year university.

In general, apart from maternity, which was one of the withdrawal reasons reported by the female participants of Al-Ghnaim (2010) and Alabdulgader's (1992) studies, the factors identified as affecting female students’ retention were not different from those reported for the male participants of the other Saudi studies. The other student attrition factors found in the female only study (Al-Ghnaim, 2010) were related to the students’ level of educational and family commitment and the level of their academic abilities, which were common factors in most of the reviewed studies. Thus, it can be concluded from the findings of the available Saudi retention studies that a
student’s gender does not have a significant influence on the student attrition phenomenon.

### 3.7.4 Summary of the Saudi retention studies

To summarise the findings of the Saudi retention studies, student attrition factors can be classified as personal, social, academic and institutional. Personal and social factors are all those factors not related to the academic institution and its systems. These factors are related to students’ personalities and their external communities, such as their financial situation, occupational and job commitments and family problems and commitments. Academic factors, on the other hand, can be related to individual students, such as in the case of the student’s pre-entry or current academic performance, or to the academic systems of the institution. Finally, the institutional factors are those factors related to the institution’s rules and policies, such as its admission policies and registration rules and the quality of the services, advice and facilities provided for students.

The institutional factors were found to contribute most significantly to the student attrition phenomenon in higher education in Saudi Arabia. These institutional factors, such as institutions’ rules and policies, were reported in studies of both two-year and four-year institutions. While students’ low academic abilities were reported as an important factor in three of the four-year studies, but not in the two-year studies, this factor is usually related to academic dismissal rather than to voluntary withdrawal. In contrast, it was found by one of the two-year studies that high academic ability can lead to students withdrawing from the institution to transfer to a better institution.
Finally, although the student gender variable was not studied in all available Saudi retention studies due to the single-sex education system of the country, the comparison of the findings of the reviewed studies revealed that, apart from maternity, the factors identified by the reviewed studies, whether conducted in a male or female institution, were similar.

3.8 Factors associated with student attrition

As presented earlier in this chapter, student retention theoretical models have been classified in the literature under a number of common categories. Similarly, the factors or direct reasons associated in the literature with students’ attrition from their study programs and academic institutions can be grouped under broad variables. Some of these broad variables associated with the withdrawal behaviour of undergraduate students include low academic abilities and financial difficulties. The specific role of the student attrition factors varies between students and between academic institutions, as they are dependent on the unique characteristics of these students and college environments (Astin, 1984; Berger et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993).

However, the focus of the student retention theoretical models was not on the specific reasons that students withdraw from their study programs, but rather on why some students react to these specific factors by withdrawing. This is because these factors, while constituting challenges, are not necessarily the actual causes of withdrawal. For example, a student having academic difficulties might persist if successfully integrated into the college environment and vice versa (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Another example is student transfer, which can be attributed to many different variables, such as students’ levels of educational goals and academic abilities, lack of
academic and/or social integration and financial issues. The factors involved in student transfer are far from straightforward. A student might transfer from his or her current institution to a better one because of his or her higher levels of educational goals and academic abilities. Conversely, another student might transfer to what seems a less strict institution because of his or her lower educational goals and academic abilities. In both scenarios, the direct withdrawal reasons reported by the non-persister students are the same, transfer; however, the motivations are contrastive.

Thus, owing to the complexity of the issue, theoretical and conceptual studies of the student attrition phenomenon are interested in investigating the wider phenomenon. Classifying the factors of student withdrawal under some common categories of variables assists in achieving this. These categories include the institutions’ policies and rules, the student–college fit, the students’ integration into the college academic and social systems, the students’ academic abilities and their educational and occupational goals and commitments.

It is worth mentioning that the common factors affecting student retention in higher education were investigated and discussed differentially in the student retention models. The classification in the theoretical models of the constructs or variables of student attrition depends on the type and theoretical background of the models. For example, the student attrition factors of the psychological models relate to the attributes of the students themselves, whereas sociological models consider the impact of social and institutional factors.

It would not be useful to list all of the specific reasons for student withdrawal as reported in the literature due to the number of these that are likely to be irrelevant and
inapplicable to other situations. However, Table 3.3 lists some of the common constructs, factors and independent variables investigated by the major models in the literature of student retention that were reported as playing a primary role in influencing students’ decisions to withdraw from their study programs. Although it is outside the scope of this chapter to present a comprehensive discussion of these factors, the variables relevant to the current study will be discussed further in the discussion chapter.

The factors associated with student attrition presented in Table 3.3 were collected from the constructs and independent variables of the major theoretical models and the findings of the empirical studies reviewed above as well as from other studies in the literature of student retention (AlKandari, 2008; James, 2000; Jensen, 2011; Jones, 2008; Severiens & Schmidt, 2009; Thomas, 2011; Thomas & Jamieson-Ball, 2011; Wetzel, O’Toole & Peterson, 1999). Alongside these, the factors reported by the Australian first-year experience reports that were conducted in many of Australia’s universities over the last two decades were taken into account (Asmar et al., 2000; Burnett, 2006; Hodges et al., 2013; James Cook University, 2008, 2009; James et al., 2010; Krause et al., 2005; Radloff et al., 2012; Willcoxson et al., 2011). Some of these factors are interchangeable and others can be classified under ‘other variables’.

Among all of the variables of student attrition, the quality of the student’s institutional experience and the level of his or her integration into the academic and social system of the academic institution were the most influential variables as reported by the major student retention models (Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993).
### Table 3.3 Common student attrition factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family background</td>
<td>Family income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents’ level of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family approval of institution choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family socioeconomic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family support and encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level of goals, institutional and external commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-related factors</td>
<td>Academic abilities and background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High school grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intent to leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social factors</td>
<td>Being a member of a minority group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External job commitments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family and occupational responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residency status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends’ support and encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic factors</td>
<td>Student and family income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost–benefits match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ goals</td>
<td>Institution is the first choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major certainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic goals commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occupational goals commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Availability of other opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional experience</td>
<td>Quality of institutional experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level of academic and social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intellectual development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality of student–student interactions and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality of student–faculty interactions and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional factors</td>
<td>Quality of college services and facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institution level, type and size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic and social advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fairness in policy and rules enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participating in decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institution preparation for future job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.9 English as a Second Language as a constraint of student persistence

This section responds to one of the aims of the current study, to investigate the alleged relationship between students’ academic ability in English language subjects and their persistence in their study programs. As discussed earlier, these claims attributed students’ early withdrawal from their tertiary study programs or ESL programs to the difficulties they faced in English language subjects and/or in learning through the English language as a medium of instruction.

It is widely argued, particularly in the higher education context of this study, that student attrition and academic failure in the first year can be attributed to the use of a foreign language as the language of instruction (Aldiyban, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2007; Gow et al., 1991; Ignash, 1995; D. Marsh, 2006; Senkoro, 2005). Thus, although it is outside the scope of the study of student retention to investigate academic dismissal, which is a common outcome of low academic achievement, one of the focuses of the current study is to explore whether the academic abilities in the English language of the non-persister students that voluntarily withdrew affected their withdrawal decisions.

There is a rich literature on the challenges of learning other languages or using other languages as the medium of instruction in classrooms. Many studies discussed the advantages and disadvantages of learning or learning by a foreign language in tertiary programs. Many of these studies focused on the academic benefits and challenges of this method and its effect on the academic achievements of students. The academic challenges include academic failure, leading to academic dismissal or voluntary withdrawal, and/or a reduction in the quality of their experience at the academic
in institution, which, as argued by most of the studies reviewed above, may affect their persistence in their study programs.

Some studies have identified a direct impact of students’ academic abilities in English and their ability to overcome the challenges they encounter in learning English to persist in their study programs (Ignash, 1995; Jalili-Grenier & Chase, 1997; Memmer & Worth, 1991; Phillips & Hartley, 1990; Tonge, 2011). In 1997, Jalili-Grenier and Chase studied the retention rates of ESL students in an undergraduate nursing program (Jalili-Grenier & Chase, 1997). They found statistical evidence of higher attrition rates among ESL students compared to other students studying in their first language. Phillips and Hartley (1990, cited in Memmer & Worth, 1991) found similar findings. They argued that although ESL students are highly motivated, they are more likely to withdraw from their study programs than are native speakers of English.

Other studies have noted an indirect impact of students’ abilities in the English language on their persistence. Memmer and Worth (1991) claimed that ESL students who use English as a medium of instruction face more educational challenges than do their English as a first language–speaking counterparts. Moreover, Tonge (2011) argued that ESL students with low academic ability in English subjects might have a lower level of integration into their institution than other students, which might affect their persistence.

The conclusion of these studies, including the major student retention models reviewed in the above sections, is that the low academic abilities of students in the English language or more generally might directly affect their decision to leave. In
addition, the same situation might indirectly affect students’ institutional experience and levels of academic and social integration, leading them to withdraw.

3.10 Overview of the research methods of student retention studies

After reviewing the historical development of the student retention studies, their types, theoretical and conceptual roots and backgrounds and the findings of the major theoretical models and empirical studies, it might be useful for the current study to review briefly the research methodologies and strategies that were utilised in these theoretical models and empirical studies in the literature. The purpose of this review is to illustrate how the current knowledge of student retention was shaped. Moreover, it is hoped that knowing the commonly used research strategies and techniques used to collect and analyse the data will help in making the decision on what strategies to adopt in the current study to fill some of the research gaps and to achieve the best possible findings.

As presented in the above sections, all of the major theoretical models were synthesised through quantitative research strategies for both the collection and the analysis of the data. The data of all of the theoretical models reviewed in the above sections were collected through quantitative instruments, mostly student questionnaires. Similarly, the constructs, variables and assumptions of these theoretical models were examined through statistical techniques, including, but not limited to, factor analysis, correlation and regression analysis techniques. Most of the empirical studies that tested or adopted these theoretical models used similar data collection and analysis strategies and techniques.
The quantitative nature of the early student retention theoretical models and studies is evident. Tinto (2006) criticised this shared character of the previous models and studies, as this narrowed the knowledge about the phenomenon, such that ‘the study of student retention lacked complexity and detail’ (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). By this statement, Tinto referred to the lack of detail about students’ experiences, which are more appropriately investigated through qualitative research. Harvey-Smith (2002) also recommended that researchers adopt more qualitative research strategies in student retention studies. She claimed that qualitative techniques could facilitate greater and more in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon.

In response to these calls, many recent empirical studies, mostly PhD and masters theses and dissertations, have utilised qualitative strategies in the investigation of the student attrition phenomenon, either as an exclusive research methodology or as part of a mixed methods study. These studies have been able to give much detail about the quality of students’ experiences in both the college environment and their own off-campus communities.

Another issue with the research strategies of the student retention studies concerns the data collection techniques. Some studies have been based solely on the information acquired from the student database of the investigated institution. Such information might be deceptive, as no detail is provided of students’ perceptions about their experiences within the academic and social environments of their colleges. These studies might be useful to present statistics on the student attrition phenomenon, such as the number of non-persister students and their demographic, academic and background information. It might also be useful in quantifying students’ most frequently
cited reasons for withdrawing. However, any attempt to correlate such information to the phenomenon under investigation as actual causes would be insufficient and misleading.

3.11 Summary and conclusion

This chapter presented an overview of some of the areas of the student retention literature that are related to the focus of the current study. This included an overview of the historical development of student retention studies and theoretical models and their different types and categories, as well as a review of their conceptual roots and backgrounds. Moreover, the chapter reviewed the most-cited theoretical student retention models of the last four decades, since the emergence of retention studies. The chapter also covered some other topics related to the student retention phenomenon, such as the factors that are most frequently associated with student attrition in the literature, and the potential impact of students’ English language abilities on their persistence in their study programs.

In addition, and to improve the credibility and validity to the techniques and strategies utilised in the current study, a brief review of the research methodologies, strategies and techniques that were frequently used in the literature of the student retention studies was presented. Finally, a separate and detailed section was devoted to an extensive review of all available student retention studies that have been conducted in the higher education context of Saudi Arabia, which is the context of the current study.
In conclusion, in spite of the extensive research, theoretical models and empirical studies in the field, low student retention remains an ambiguous phenomenon (Hagedorn, 2005; Tinto, 2006, 2010). Tinto (2006) stated that:

*despite our many years of work on this issue, there is still much we do not know and have yet to explore. More importantly, there is much that we have not yet done to translate our research and theory into effective practice. (p. 2)*

However, the literature of student retention of the last four decades facilitates a better understanding of the phenomenon and provides a comprehensive set of factors shown often to affect student withdrawal decisions.

A summary of the factors associated with the student attrition phenomenon suggested that, among the hundreds of factors and variables proposed and reported by the theoretical models and empirical studies as having either a direct or indirect influence on students’ decisions to leave their study programs before completion, the central factors were the quality of students’ institutional experiences and their level of integration into the academic and social systems of their academic institutions (Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Moreover, the findings of the studies conducted in the Saudi higher education context were not very different from those of the other international studies reviewed above. Although the factors reported in the reviewed Saudi studies were classified under personal, academic, social and institutional categories, the institutional factors were the most common across all of the studies. These factors relate to students’ experiences with the administrative system of their academic institution, including the admission, registration and disciplinary rules and policies and the availability and quality of student
services and facilities. Alongside this, another important factor was students’ low academic abilities. However, this factor was primarily related to academic dismissal rather than to voluntary withdrawal, which is outside the scope of most retention theoretical models and studies, including the current study.

Finally, a comprehensive analysis of the conclusions of the Saudi student retention studies revealed some research gaps. These research gaps include both uncovered issues and issues that were studied using an inappropriate or inadequate method. However, the biggest gap identified by a review of the Saudi studies was the paucity of such studies. As reported above, despite the high rate of student attrition in Saudi higher education institutions, especially in two-year institutions, only 10 studies investigating this phenomenon in the Saudi context could be accessed for consideration in this study.

The analysis of these studies revealed some defects in the utilised research strategies and techniques. Some of the reviewed studies were statistical descriptive only (Abuelma’atti, 2006), while others relied solely on the perceptions of faculty staff without reporting the experiences of persister or non-persister students (Al-Abdulkareem, 2012). In addition, most of the reviewed Saudi studies, although not exploratory, were lacking in conceptual and theoretical background (Abuelma’atti, 2006; Al-Abdulkareem, 2012; Hakeem, 2007; Malah, 1994).

Another major gap in Saudi retention studies was the lack of studies on female tertiary institutions and campuses. As Saudi Arabia has a single-sex education system, researchers need to conduct their studies on two different campuses if they want to include both genders in their study samples. As mentioned above, out of the 10 available Saudi retention studies, only one study was conducted on a female campus and none of
the above-reviewed studies included both genders in their samples. This might raise questions about the lack of information on the role of gender on student attrition in Saudi Arabia. However, the impact of gender on student attrition may be less important considering the views proposed by some studies that student attrition is primarily a campus-based phenomenon (Astin, 1984; Berger et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993).
Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter details the overall research design, the research methodology and the methods that were utilised to achieve the research objectives. It also describes the study setting and participants, and details the theoretical and philosophical perspectives of the study, the framework and the research paradigm.

Crotty (1998) suggested that there are four elements for social research: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. These four elements are related to and informed by each other. Crotty suggested that researchers answer questions about the methodologies and methods they are going to employ and justify these choices. Such justifications are mainly based on the researcher’s view of reality and understanding of human knowledge. The aim of this chapter is to clarify these issues in relation to the current research. This chapter consists of the following sections:

- Introduction
- Aims and objectives
- Research paradigm
- Theoretical background of retention models
- Research questions
- Research design
- Ethical considerations
4.2 Aims and objectives

Having established that low retention is a major issue at the sample college, the aim of this study is to understand the phenomenon of low student retention in the ESL program of the sample college, which suffers from a high level of attrition. To address this aim, the study has the following objectives:

- To identify the main factors affecting student retention at the sample college and to explain why the response of some students to these factors was to withdraw from their programs of study.
- To investigate the role the sample college has played and how this might have influenced student attrition.
- To investigate whether the low student retention rate in the ESL program can be related to the students’ academic ability in English.

4.3 Research paradigm

A research paradigm can be defined as ‘a basic set of beliefs that guide actions’ (Guba, 1990, p. 17). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the research paradigm is the worldview, or the basic belief system, that guides the research ontologically and epistemologically and helps the researcher to choose appropriate research methods. Guba (1990) claimed that paradigms are shaped by three main elements: ontology, epistemology and methodology. These are three of Crotty’s (1998) four elements for social research as mentioned above.

4.3.1 Ontology and epistemology

Ontology was defined by Blaikie (2000) as:
Claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality (p. 8)

Crotty’s (1998) definition of ontology is ‘the study of being’ (p. 10). However, he did not include it in his elements of social research. He claimed that ontology and epistemology ‘tend to merge together’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Thus, he suggested that talking about construction of meaning is talking about construction of meaningful reality.

Epistemology on the other hand can be described as ‘the relationship between the enquirer and the known’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22) or ‘the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be. In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known’ (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). Crotty (1998) defining epistemology as ‘how we know what we know’ (p. 8) and suggested three main epistemologies: objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism. Each of these has a different explanation as to how meanings relate to different objects and events. In objectivism, the existence of meaningful realities is independent from any consciousness. At the opposite end is a subjective view of the meanings of objects: that they are ‘created out of nothing’ and that meaning is imposed by the subjects. Between these, a constructivist epistemology suggests that meanings are constructed out of the object by the interplay between the subject and the object.

The epistemological view of this research is constructivism. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as ‘all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between
human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within essential context’ (p. 42). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), ‘The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), subjective epistemology (knower and respondent concrete understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological set of procedures’ (p. 24).

In this study, the focus is an investigation of the quality of students’ experiences in a college’s social and academic systems, through the understanding of student interaction within the institutional environment and the researcher’s interpretation of these views. Therefore, the main sources of study data are the participants’ own views and descriptions of the nature and quality of their interactions with peers, college staff, the rules and culture of the institution. The role of the researcher is to analyse, interpret and explicate meaning from these participant perspectives. In such a study, reality is constructed in cooperation between the participants and the researcher (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Different students can understand the role of the college and the quality of their social and academic interactions with other students and college staff in many different ways and can utilise these understandings in building different views and judgments. Adopting a constructivist paradigm allows for these multiple views of reality.

4.4 Theoretical and conceptual background

4.4.1 Theoretical background of student retention studies

There is an increased demand for higher education across the globe as the nature of work changes (Forest & Altbach, 2006; Hayton & Paczuska, 2004). In Saudi higher education, there are government plans to increase the number of tertiary students (King Abdulaziz University, 2012). In 2012, 97% of Saudi high school graduates enrolled in
tertiary institutions, up from 90% the year before (Asharq Alawsat, 2011; Omar, 2012). Accordingly, the number of universities increased dramatically over the last decade from eight government universities to 32 government and private colleges and universities (Asharq Alawsat, 2011; Omar, 2012). In Australia, the number of enrolled tertiary students almost doubled after the introduction of the Unified National System of Higher Education in 1987, levelling off about 15 years later (McInnis & James, 2004).

With the promotion of higher education and greater investment in the tertiary sector, student retention rates have become a focus for research, as retention is a major concern in higher education (MacKeogh & Lorenzi, 2006; Tichenor & Cosgrove, 1991). This is not a new problem; student attrition issues have been considered problematic for decades.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the student attrition studies field has seen many developments over the last century. However, it was during the early 1970s that the theoretical retention models started to emerge (Astin, 1975; Gaff & Wilson, 1971; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, different theoretical and conceptual views from psychological, sociological, environmental, economic and organisational theories and perspectives were adopted in student retention models in attempts to explain the student attrition phenomenon (Braxton, 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Tinto, 1993). These theoretical models and studies of the 1970s and early 1980s contributed to correcting the misconceptions of previous studies that attributed the attrition problem to the students themselves. After this point, the phenomenon was to be studied in conjunction with the college environment, the community of individual students and other social and economic factors.
The authors of the major theoretical retention models relied on the views of some distinguished theories from fields outside student attrition. These included the suicide theory (Durkheim, 1951) from the field of sociology, the theoretical views of the rites of passage in tribal societies (Van Gennep, 1960) from the field of social anthropology and the labour turnover conceptual views from the human resources context (Price, 1977). These theories were first adopted in the student retention studies of three pioneer scholars: Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto (1993) and Bean (1980), respectively. These authors, their studies and their adoption of these theoretical views were discussed in detail in Section 3.4 of Chapter Three.

Over the last four decades, many student retention models and studies emerged to investigate the student retention phenomenon in different contexts. Among these theoretical models, some gained a special rank. Cabrera et al. (1992) stated that ‘the two theories that provide a more comprehensive theoretical framework on college departure decisions are Tinto’s Student Integration Model and Bean’s Model of Student Departure’ (p. 1). Tinto’s interactional Model of Institutional Departure (1975, 1993) ‘become one of the best known and most often cited theories’ (Berger et al., 2012, p. 19). Many researchers claim that it is the most widely recognised and cited student retention theoretical model (Habley et al., 2012; Hagedorn, 2005). Some have even said that it enjoys a ‘near-paradigmatic stature’ (Braxton, 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Braxton & Lien, 2000; Braxton et al., 1997). Bean’s Model of Student Attrition (1980, 1982) has also received considerable attention in the field of student retention.
4.4.2 The theoretical lenses of the current research

Although the aim of the current research is to explore the low retention phenomenon in the sample college, the theoretical backgrounds, constructs, hypotheses and assumptions of the leading theoretical models, such as those of Tinto and Bean among others, provided the theoretical lenses used in the design of the study structure and the collection and analysis of the study data. Moreover, the process of designing the instruments and collecting and analysing the data was influenced by the constructs and findings of these theoretical models and other principal theoretical models and the rich literature of student retention over the last four decades.

4.5 Research questions

Research questions are the central element of any research project. According to Clark and Badiee (2010), research questions set the boundaries for the research project and play an essential role in choosing the research methods.

This study was governed by four qualitative questions and a fifth subsequent quantitative question. In the first phase, the four qualitative questions were answered through the analysis of the responses of all participants to the questions and discussion topics of the interviews, focus groups and staff surveys. In the second phase, the fifth subsequent question was investigated using quantitative techniques to determine the generalisability of the findings that emerged from the first phase of the study.

4.5.1 Questions

This study consisted of two phases: qualitative and quantitative. In the qualitative phase, the following four questions were investigated:
Q1: What are the main factors affecting student retention in the ESL program of the sample college?

Q2: What factors did the non-persister students respond to when making the decision to leave the sample college?

Q3: What is the role of institutional experience in student attrition?

Q4: In relation to the ESL program, how did student attrition appear to be influenced by the students’ level of academic ability in English language subjects?

To address the first two questions, the responses of persister and non-persister students and the academic and administrative staff of the college were sought through direct and indirect questions in interviews, focus groups and staff surveys. Topics were introduced regarding the most common factors leading non-persister students to withdraw or think about withdrawing, and respondents’ answers were used to compile a list of the most commonly cited factors that had caused, or might cause, these students to withdraw from their programs of study before graduation.

Addressing the third question relied on the responses of persister and non-persister students and the academic and administrative staff of the college to direct and indirect questions and discussion topics regarding the quality of students’ integration into the social and academic systems of the college and the effect this has on students’ later goals and level of institutional commitment.

Question four was motivated by claims that associated students’ withdrawal in the first year of study to their level of academic ability in English and therefore in subjects taught in English. These claims were discussed in Chapters One and Three of this
research. To investigate this question, the responses of persister and non-persister students as well as the academic and administrative staff of the sample college, collected through interviews, focus groups and staff surveys, were analysed. The focus of this investigation was on students’ academic abilities in English language subjects, the difficulty of the ESL intensive course and the relationship between academic failure and the low retention phenomenon.

In the quantitative phase, based on the analysis of the qualitative data, the following subsequent question was investigated:

Q: After controlling for the factors that emerged from the data of the qualitative phase and other demographic and pre-entry variables, is there a statistical difference between persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college?

This subsequent quantitative question was set to determine whether the findings that emerged from the qualitative phase could be generalised to the larger student population of the study sample. The main purpose of this question was to assess whether it was possible to differentiate between persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college based on the findings that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. This was done by utilising the most appropriate statistical techniques using the IBM Statistical Pack for Social Science (SPSS) v21. These techniques will be detailed in Section 4.6.7.2.

4.6 Research design

A research paradigm guides the process of choosing the research methods. However, despite a view that considers the constructivist paradigm most closely
associated with the use of qualitative techniques for collecting and analysing data, it is possible to utilise data collection tools from both the qualitative and quantitative approaches, regardless of the epistemological view (Blaikie, 2000; Bryman, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), both qualitative and quantitative techniques can be used with any research paradigm. Patton (2002) asserted that ‘in real-world practice, methods can be separated from the epistemology out of which they emerged’ (p. 136). Bryman (2008, p. 593) claimed that the connection between research strategy and epistemological and ontological commitment is ‘not deterministic’.

Sometimes, the research questions call for the use of a certain method. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) noted that some scholars ignore the link between epistemology and methods. Rather they use ‘whatever methods seem appropriate for their research questions’ (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 97). In the case of this research, the initial questions were investigated in an exploratory way, while it was more appropriate to investigate the subsequent question in a confirmatory way. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) said that: ‘A major advantage of mixed methods research is that it enables the researcher to simultaneously ask confirmatory and exploratory questions and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study’ (p. 33). Although greater weight was given to the qualitative phase of the study, a quantitative technique was utilised to determine the generalisability of the findings emerging from the qualitative data. The combination of these two methods in a study is known as a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2009; R. Johnson & Onwuegubuzie, 2004; A. Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Therefore, to reach valid and reliable findings, to build strong claims, to achieve
the stated aims and objectives and to answer the questions of this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilised in this research.

4.6.1 Mixed methods approach

A mixed methods approach can be defined as ‘a type of research design of which QUAL and QUAN approaches are used in types of questions, research methods, data collection and analysis procedures, and/or inferences’ (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 7), or as ‘an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms’ (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). The concept of mixing different data collection and analysis techniques started with a study conducted by Campbell and Fiske (1959) and developed over the years (Creswell, 2009). However, the mixed methods approach did not become popular as a separate approach to research until the early 1990s (Creswell, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Different research strategies can be adopted in conducting mixed methods research, with various researchers having supplied a range of different types, terms and classifications of mixed method strategies and their variations over the past 20 years. Creswell (2009) classified these strategies into three general types:

- Sequential
- Transformative
- Concurrent (parallel).

Each of these strategy types has its variations that differ among themselves in terms of the priority given to one technique over another and the order and timing of data collection and analysis procedures. In this research, the exploratory sequential
strategy has been chosen, as it best serves the purpose of the investigation. The next section details this more.

4.6.2 The exploratory sequential mixed methods

The adopted mixed methods design in this study is the exploratory sequential strategy (see Figure 4.1). In this design, the researcher collects and analyses the qualitative data first and then conducts a second qualitative phase, building from the result of the initial exploration in the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Clark, 2010).

![Sequential Exploratory Design](image)

Figure 4.1 The adopted research design (Creswell & Clark, 2008)

Accordingly, this study consisted of two phases: an initial qualitative phase, followed by the quantitative phase. These phases were conducted separately, the data were triangulated and the findings of both phases were merged in the discussion in Chapter Ten. The quantitative phase was built on, and conducted after, the analysis of the qualitative data.

4.6.3 Why mixed methods for this research?

According to Creswell, Klassen, Clark and Smith (2011), mixed methods should be used when a single method is inadequate to develop a complete understanding of the research questions. The questions of this research were not suited to investigation by
one single method. Moreover, the research stood to be enhanced and enriched by utilising multiple perspectives, which is a strength of a mixed method approach (Creswell et al., 2011).

Using a variety of data collection and analysis techniques is believed to give better and more valid findings and enable a better understanding of the research questions and the research topic. Creswell (2009) claimed that biases may occur in any study if a single method is used; the use of the mixed methods approach will help to neutralise this. R. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 21) listed some strengths of mixing methods:

- They combine the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods.
- The strengths of one method can overcome the weakness of the other method.
- They can answer broader range of questions.
- They can provide stronger evidence for the conclusions.
- They add insights and understanding that might be missed if one method was used.
- They can increase the generalisability of the results.

In this research, the sequential mixed methods strategy allows for the generalisation of the findings of the initial exploratory qualitative study to the larger student population of the research sample. According to Creswell and Clark (2010), ‘the primary purpose of the exploratory design is to generalize qualitative findings based on a few individuals from the first phase to a larger sample gathered during the second phase’ (p. 86).
4.6.4 The setting

This study took place at the Jeddah branch of the sample college. This branch is a government male single-sex college that was established as an extension to the main campus in Riyadh, the Saudi capital city. It is located in Jeddah, the second largest city in Saudi Arabia and the country’s economic capital.

The sample college, as described in Chapter Two, offers two-year diploma programs to secondary school graduates. These diplomas consist of a first-year intensive ESL program and a second year of specialisation in a major such as management, business, accounting or computer programming. In addition, as a requirement for graduation, two months of in-field training in any public or private sector organisation is required by the end of the study program. This study was limited to first-year students, as the focus was only on the students of the intensive English program (first-year students). Moreover, the students of the first year comprise the group with the highest attrition rate in the sample college.

The sample college was selected as a sample for this research for two reasons: first, the published annual reports on the website of the sample college confirmed that there was a low student retention rate, with around 50% of students dropping out of their study programs in the last five years. Although this phenomenon was observed at all branches of the sample college, the attrition rate was highest at the Jeddah branch. Second, the sample college is the only institution in Jeddah that devotes the whole first year of study to English language teaching. This made it possible to focus on investigating the link between student attrition, the teaching of a foreign language and using a foreign language as a medium of instruction. This was an aim of the research.
4.6.5 Study population

The admission capacity of the ESL centre of the sample college is 200 new students each semester. The age range of the students is between 18 and 21. The average number of enrolled students in all majors is around 600 students, while the average number of students in the intensive ESL program (year one) is around 400 students.

The research population include all first-year students who were enrolled in the ESL program during the academic year of 2012–2013. This included both persister students and the non-persister students who voluntarily withdrew from their study programs during the year of the data collection. In addition, the data included the perspectives of academic staff of the ESL centre and administrative staff from departments related to the students and their study programs, such as the student services and registration departments and the library. At the beginning of the academic year of 2012–2013, the records indicated that there were 396 students enrolled in the ESL centre, 15 teachers, five administrative staff and three librarians. The participant sample for this study was derived from this population.

The study samples for each data collection instrument are detailed in the relevant sections below. However, the total number of participants included 220 students who participated in the questionnaire, 15 students who participated in the focus group, 4 non-persister students who participated in the telephone interviews and 10 faculty members who completed staff surveys.

4.6.6 The qualitative research

A qualitative approach may be defined as ‘the techniques associated with the gathering, analysis, interpretation and presentation of narrative information’ (Teddle &
In this phase of the study, the research questions were analysed using qualitative methods. The following four data sets were utilised:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus groups
- Staff surveys

The participants included 15 persister students for the focus groups, 4 non-persister students for the in-depth semi-structured interviews and 10 teachers and administrative staff of the sample college for the staff surveys. The sampling, data collection and analysis procedures are detailed in the following sections.

**4.6.6.1 In-depth semi-structured interviews**

The first technique deployed in the qualitative phase was the in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews with non-persister students. Interviewing is a useful technique for collecting information about people’s experiences, as they help to reveal facts that are unreachable in quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Esterberg (2002) ranked interviewing ‘at the heart of social research’ (p. 83). It is the most commonly known and adopted data collection technique in qualitative research (Liamputtong, 2013). Interviews can be defined as ‘a specific form of conversation where knowledge is produced through the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee’ (Kvale, 2007, p. xvii). There are different forms of interviews depending on the degree of structure and the role of the interviewer in the process. Among the several types of interviews in social research, the three most common are structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Bryman, 2008; Esterberg, 2002; Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995).
In-depth semi-structured interviews were used in this research. Since the interviews formed part of the qualitative phase of the study, structured closed-ended interviews were not suitable. Interviews in qualitative research are usually less structured than they are in quantitative research (Bryman, 2008). On the other hand, since this study was partially based on some theoretical views, and some of the interview questions were guided by predetermined themes from the student retention literature, unstructured open-ended interviews were not suitable for this study either. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed participants to be asked some confirmatory questions about the predetermined themes while also being encouraged to talk about their experiences more freely using their own expressions, thoughts and ideas, helping to provide a broader view of the topic (Esterberg, 2002).

Owing to the difficulty in meeting with students after they had withdrawn, telephone interviews were conducted with these participants. According to Minichiello, Aroni and Hays (2008), telephones are now more frequently used in conducting in-depth interviews and they are also useful in providing various recording options. Moreover, telephone interviews are thought to have some advantages over face-to-face interviews. For example, Bryman (2008) emphasises the advantage of the ‘interviewer’s remoteness’, which can help in removing a ‘potential source of bias’ (p. 198). Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) also stated that telephone interviews can help in minimising the effect of the interviewer on the responses of the interviewee.

**Interview questions**

During the interviews, non-persister students were directly asked about the reasons behind their decision to leave the college before they completed their programs
of study. They were also asked about why they had first chosen the college, their experience in the college’s academic and social systems and how these two factors influenced their decision to withdraw. Although the interview questions were designed to gain general exploratory information, they were partly influenced by some of the common themes in the literature of student retention models (see Appendix E). The following two questions are examples of the interview questions:

- Q: While you were enrolled, would you have stayed in the college if you had been accepted into another college/university?
- Q: What were the main factors that made you leave the college?

**Interview participants**

The participants in these interviews were four non-persister students who did not return to the college in the second semester of the study. They were selected randomly from the list of non-persister students provided by the college.

Early in the students’ study programs for the year during which data were collected, students were given the self-administered quantitative questionnaire for this study (as discussed in Section 4.6.7.1 below), which asked them to leave their telephone number if they were willing to be interviewed if they withdrew from their program before graduation. To cover a wider field, those non-persister students that did not leave their numbers in the first week were approached through the registration department. Staff in the registration department contacted those students and asked them for permission to forward their contact details to the researcher. Eighteen students initially agreed to participate, but some did not provide their telephone numbers, and some said
that they did not have time to participate. This reduced the number of participants to four non-persister students.

*Interview procedure*

During the last three months of 2012, four telephone interviews were conducted with non-persister students who had withdrawn during their first year of study from the sample college. The interviews were recorded using smartphone software and were transcribed on the same day. The length of each interview was between 35 and 45 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in the Arabic language and translated into English during the analysis stage. Although some of the participants had read the invitation letter and signed consent forms when they participated in the questionnaire, all participants were again given information about the study at the beginning of each interview and asked for their permission to conduct and record the interview and to use the information in the research.

4.6.6.2 *Focus groups*

Focus groups were used with the persister students to investigate their views on the attrition phenomenon in the sample college’s language programs. A focus group can be defined as ‘a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions of a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment’ (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5). The focus group technique was selected for many reasons. First, in focus groups, larger numbers of participants can be reached in less time. Second, it was assumed that students would encourage each other to talk and would suggest topics regarding the quality of their relationships with the college staff (Colucci, 2008; Liamputtong, 2013). However, there are some wider advantages of using such an
interview technique. A focus group has the strength of other qualitative techniques, such as interviews and observations (Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The interaction between the participants in the focus groups makes it possible to collect more data and participant views that are not always accessible when using other data collection tools (Liampittong, 2013; Morgan, 1997).

**Focus group topics and questions**

The topics and questions in the focus groups were guided by the themes derived from the literature on student retention models. In addition, the discussion topics covered the issues that were raised by, and emerged from, the interviews with non-persister students and the staff surveys. These topics included but were not limited to the following:

- The students’ pre-entry characteristics
- The students’ educational and job goals and level of commitment
- The students’ social and academic experience in the sample college
- Academic difficulties
- Life and work commitments.

Discussion sometimes was in the form of direct and indirect questions addressing the above topics as well as other topics that emerged from other data collected (see Appendix F). The following are examples of the questions asked:

- Q: Have you ever been informed about your rights as students in this college?
- Q: What, in your opinion, are some of the reasons that led to the withdrawal of some of your colleagues?
Focus group participants

The participants of the two focus groups were 15 students who had just finished their first year of the program. They were chosen randomly from different study majors. The participation was restricted to these students for two reasons. First, they had spent their first year in the language program, so they had enough experience in the college system to enable them to give a comprehensive impression of their experiences and integration. Second, as they no longer had a connection with the language program and its teachers, they were expected to be able to speak more freely and independently. These participants were recruited through an invitation to participate in one of two discussion sessions via notices posted on the announcement boards in the public areas of the college. This invitation had five nominated times to suit the different timetables of the students. The participants were the 15 students who selected the two top times.

Focus group procedure

The focus groups took place during the academic year of 2012–2013. After selecting the 15 participants for the two focus groups, these were divided into two groups of seven and eight. This was the recommended number of participants (Liamputtong, 2013; A. Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The sample college assigned a meeting room for conducting the interviews. This room was booked for two different days and times to offer students the flexibility of attending the session that best suited their availability. Each session lasted for about one and a half hours, as suggested by many researchers (Liamputtong, 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). At the beginning of each session, the participants were given a brief summary of the research topics and they were asked to sign the participation consent forms.
The topics of the discussion were derived from the student retention model literature and the other data collected for this study. These topics were listed on the board and discussed in turn. In addition, some topics emerged during the discussion. For example, the participants were asked about their institutional experience in the language program, why they thought non-persister students had left the program and the factors that might have encouraged them to stay in the program.

The researcher took notes during the discussion. In addition, each participant was given a pen and paper and asked to write down his responses to the questions and chosen topics. All these data were entered into a computer in preparation for analysis.

4.6.6.3 Staff surveys

Surveys were conducted with the teachers and administrative staff. These participants included teachers and coordinators of the ESL program as well as administrative staff from the library, registration department and student services department. Staff surveys were conducted with this cohort because of the difficulty of conducting interviews with staff during business hours. Thus, they were given surveys to complete at their convenience.

Survey questions

For this data collection, teachers, librarians and administrative staff from the registration and student services departments were sent open-ended questions asking for their views on the causes of the student attrition rate at the sample college. These staff members were also asked about the quality of their relationship and interactions with students inside and outside class. The survey questions were derived from the common themes of the student attrition factors reported in the student retention
research literature. The questions were open-ended to allow participants to provide as much information as they wanted (see Appendix G). Moreover, the participants were asked to identify any factors they believed to be related to the phenomenon that were not included in the survey questions. This request was included for its potential to enrich the data. The following are example of the survey questions:

- What are, in your opinion, the main factors of student attrition in the ESL program of the sample college?
- Do you think that students are satisfied with the performance of the college? If not, why?

Survey participants

The participants who replied to the staff surveys were 10 members of the academic and administration staff. Initially, the study sample included all 23 teachers and administrative staff working in the departments and sectors related to the students, such as the ESL centre, the library and the registration and student services departments. However, by the end of the data collection period, only 10 responses had been received.

Survey procedures

At the beginning of the data collection process in the academic year of 2012–2013, all academic and administrative staff who had positions related to the students were identified. This included teachers of the ESL centre and staff of the library and the registration and student services departments. These teachers and administrative staff were sent copies of the study surveys via the college’s internal email system and were given a deadline and instructions for returning the staff surveys to the researcher.
4.6.6.4 Qualitative data analysis procedure

Unlike quantitative data analysis, the analysis of qualitative data is often an ongoing process that occurs simultaneously with the data collection phase. It can be more of an iterative process than quantitative analysis. Qualitative data analysis is often less systematic and more challenging in regard to time and effort (Bryman, 2008; Suter, 2012). According to Bryman (2008), there are more flexible rules for the analysis of qualitative data and less that are well-established and widely accepted.

The qualitative data of this research was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can be defined as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Bryman (2008) described thematic analysis as the process of extracting the key themes from the data. According to Creswell (2012), themes are major ideas in the database formed by the process of grouping similar codes, which are the ‘labels used to describe a segment of text or an image’ (Creswell, 2005, p. 238).

Although thematic analysis is a commonly used analytical method in qualitative research, there is no clear agreement on its definition and procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2008). Creswell (2005, p. 230) suggests that the following six steps are the most commonly used in analysing qualitative data:

- Preparing and organising the data
- Exploring and coding the database
- Describing, finding and forming themes
- Representing and reporting findings
- Interpreting the meaning of the findings
- Validating the accuracy of the findings.
These steps were used as a guideline for the qualitative data analysis in this research. Accordingly, in preparation for the qualitative data analysis, the collected data from the focus group and interviews were transcribed. Next, they were merged with the other data from the surveys.

The next step was exploring and coding the transcribed data to describe the study findings and explicate the main themes. According to Minichiello et al. (2008), coding is an essential tool at this stage. Codes are the key means of shaping data into categories (themes). These themes were categorised into two main groups: predetermined themes and emerging themes. The predetermined themes were those derived from the student retention literature in general and more specifically from the theoretical models of student retention (Astin, 1975, 1984; Bean, 1980, 1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera et al., 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1993), while the emerged themes represent the major patterns extracted from the data. While the emerged themes helped in exploring the data in a wider way, the predetermined themes helped in confirming the findings of the theoretical models from the literature of student retention. Gomm (2004) stated that, in qualitative data analysis, sometimes the themes are ‘inspired’ by the researcher’s own views about existing theoretical ideas, and sometimes the themes simply ‘float up’ from the data. However, Gomm did comment that in both scenarios, the analysis procedures are similar.

After categorising the data under the appropriate themes, the findings were described and reported in preparation for the interpretation. Finally, the validity and reliability of the data and the data collection tools was justified.
4.6.7 The quantitative research

The quantitative approach may be defined as ‘the techniques associated with the gathering, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of numerical information’ (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 5). In this phase of the study, the subsequent research question was investigated quantitatively. To achieve this, a questionnaire was administered during the academic year of 2012–2013 to collect information about the students’ demographic characteristics and pre-entry academic performance and to apply the Institutional Integration Scales (IIS) developed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980). The final number of participants in the questionnaire, after excluding the unusable cases, was 163 students, including both persister and non-persister students. The sampling, data collection and analysis procedures are detailed in the following sections.

4.6.7.1 Questionnaire

For the quantitative phase of the study, a self-administered questionnaire was distributed to all first-year students during the academic year of 2012–2013. Questionnaires are the most frequently used data collection tool in quantitative research. According to Johnson and Christensen (2012), a questionnaire is ‘a self-reporting data collection instrument that each research participant fills out as part of a research study’ (p. 162). By using questionnaires as a data collection tool, the researcher is able to collect a large volume of data in a short time. Moreover, using questionnaires can result in more standardised data and help to eliminate the possible effect of the researcher’s presence (Blaikie, 2000; Bryman, 2008).

The study questionnaire was designed to test the quality of the students’ academic and social experiences in their academic institution and to collect information about
their level of institutional and goal commitment. The data from this questionnaire assisted in exploring the statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students of the sample college. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to determine whether there were any differences between the participants after controlling for the findings of the qualitative phase of the study and the students’ persistence status.

**Questionnaire variables**

The questionnaire consisted of two sections and contained 40 items (see Appendix H and I). The first section, containing 10 items, was designed by the researcher. The first seven items collected information about the students’ demographic characteristics and pre-entry academic performance. This included the students’ marital, residency and financial status, parents’ education level and scores on the secondary school certificate and the GAT. The last three items collected information about the participants’ level of external commitments. This covered the influence on the participants of their family and friends and the impact of their life and work commitments on their study.

In the second section of the questionnaire, the IIS developed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) was utilised for the data collection (see Appendix J). The IIS section consisted of 30 items divided into the following five subscales:

- Peer-Group Interactions (7 items)
- Interactions with Faculty (5 items)
- Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching (5 items)
- Academic and Intellectual Development (7 items)
- Institutional and Goal Commitment (6 items).

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The first and second subscales (Peer-Group Interactions and
Interactions with Faculty; items 1–12) were designed to test students’ level of social integration into the sample college, while the third and fourth subscales (Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching and Academic and Intellectual Development; items 13–24) were designed to test the students’ level of academic integration. The fifth subscale (Institutional and Goal Commitment; items 25–30) was designed to test students’ level of institutional and goal commitment.

The IIS instrument is short and simple to administer. It is simple in wording and can be completed in around 10 minutes. Since its development in 1980, the IIS has become widely recognised as an instrument that measures students’ level of institutional integration in relation to their persistence. It has been adopted in many retention studies and tested for validity and reliability (Al-Dossary, 2008; B. Baker, Caison & Meade, 2007; Berger & Milem, 1999; Bers & Smith, 1991; Caison, 2007; English, 1993; Fox, 1984; French & Oakes, 2004; Howell, 1999; Mannan, 2001; Peterson, 1993; Robinson, 2003; Stage, 1989; Thompson, 1994).

*Questionnaire participants and procedure*

The data collection took place in the sample college during the academic year of 2012–2013. Both persister and non-persister first-year students participated in the study. To include the students who withdrew early, copies of the questionnaire were given to the registration department for completion by students who withdrew before the planned administration of the study questionnaire. This was useful in including many non-persister students in the study sample.

During the academic year of 2012–2013, copies of the questionnaire were distributed to first-year students of the ESL intensive program. According to the student
records of the sample college, 396 students were enrolled at the beginning of that year. However, this number had decreased to 264 students by the second week due to early transfer and withdrawals. Copies of the study questionnaire were distributed to all of these 264 students. By the end of the year, a total of 220 usable responses (83%) had been returned. After matching the questionnaires with the persistence status of the participants from the student database of the sample college, it was revealed that 57 participants had been dismissed from the sample college for academic reasons. Thus, as the focus of the study was on voluntary withdrawal, these participants were excluded from the data analysis. Therefore, by the end of the data collection period, only 163 usable questionnaires were included in the data analysis.

4.6.7.2 Quantitative data analysis procedure

The aim of the qualitative data analysis was to determine whether there were any statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students in regard to the observed study variables and the persistence status of the participants. To achieve this, the following three statistical techniques from SPSS v21 were used for the data analysis:

- Independent samples t-test
- Mann-Whitney U test
- Chi-square test

The primary statistical analysis technique was the Independent samples t-test. It is designed to identify statistical differences between two independent groups of participants by comparing the mean scores of their responses to some continuous parametric variables (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005).
However, as this technique was not suitable to test the non-parametric categorical variables, such as the five demographic items, a second non-parametric technique was required. For this, the Mann-Whitney U test was selected, as it is the equivalent non-parametric technique to the Independent samples t-test (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005). As stated by Pallant (2005), the Mann-Whitney U test compares the medians of the two groups instead of their mean scores. To support the findings of the Mann-Whitney U test, these five demographic non-parametric variables were also re-tested through a second statistical test: the SPSS Chi-square technique.

Finally, because the normality of some of the parametric variables tested through the Independent samples t-test was not perfectly distributed as required by that test, these variables were re-tested using the Mann-Whitney U test, which does not have this requirement. This approach was suggested by Field (2007), Pallant (2005) and Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) to overcome the normality of distribution issue. This is discussed in more detail in the quantitative data chapter.

**4.6.8 Overview of data chapters**

The following six chapters present and analyse the data from this study. Chapters Five to Seven provide a description of the qualitative data. This includes a chapter for each of the three participant groups—the non-persister students, persister students and college staff. The analysis of this qualitative data is presented in Chapter Eight. In Chapter Nine, the quantitative data is presented and analysed. Chapter Ten then brings together both the qualitative and quantitative data to present and discuss the findings of the study.
4.7 Pilot study

A pilot study can be referred to as a feasibility study. It can be an implementation of a small version of the study instrument in preparation for the full deployment of that instrument, or a step taken to ensure the feasibility of the data collection procedure. A pilot study is important in identifying problems in the study instrument or the protocol of data collection before the actual implementation (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). In the current study, before the actual administration, all data collection instruments were tested and tried for execution time and clarity with a small representative sample of the larger target sample of the study. For the telephone interviews, staff surveys and focus groups, all questions and wording of the statements were reviewed through the feedback of the participants in the pilot study. The voice recording techniques, where applicable, were tested to check their efficiency. The visual presentation tools for the focus groups were also tested to prevent any malfunction during the implementation to save the participants’ time.

For the IIS, a sample of the questionnaire was given to a small sample of students (n=25) in the first week of the academic year before it was distributed to the whole sample. The participants’ feedback was useful in reviewing the questionnaire before it was distributed to the larger sample. The pilot study resulted in rephrasing some of the Arabic sentences and changing the wording of other items to match the participants’ situation. Moreover, the pilot study was useful in ascertaining the time needed for students to complete the whole questionnaire.
4.8 Validity and reliability

Assessing the validity and reliability is an important criterion in evaluating the quality of social research (Bryman, 2008). According to Bryman (2008), validity refers to the integrity of the research conclusion, while reliability refers to the stability of a measure. However, the terms and the criteria of testing the validity and reliability of qualitative data are quite different from those used with quantitative research (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Clark, 2010). In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the trustworthiness of the instrument can be justified by addressing the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability. These criteria are equivalent to internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity in quantitative research, respectively.

Creswell and Clark (2010) suggested strategies and procedures for determining the validity and reliability of qualitative data and recommended that researchers use more than one. For the validity, the most commonly used strategies are member checking and data triangulation. Member checking refers to the researcher discussing the summary of the findings with the participants, while triangulation refers to using multiple data collection tools and including a range of participants in the study.

For the member checking, the researcher adopted a number of steps to ensure that the themes developed from the initial analysis of the qualitative data coincided with what the participants wanted to say. First, during the interviews and focus groups, the researcher asked confirmatory questions to check that the participants understood the questions and that the researcher had recorded the answers accurately. Second, at the
end of each interview and focus group, the researcher summarised the main issues and ideas (themes) emerging and discussed them with the participants.

For the triangulation of the data, the data for the study were drawn from three different sources: interviews, focus groups and staff surveys. Moreover, the study participants comprise five different groups: persister and non-persister students, academic staff, librarians and administrative staff.

To test the reliability of the instruments used to collect the qualitative data, Creswell and Clark (2010) suggested the use of inter-coder agreement. This refers to the level of agreement between different individual coders when coding the same data. For this reason, the codes and themes that emerged from the initial analyses of the qualitative data and the predetermined themes were given to two different PhD students to check the accuracy of their representation of the data. The feedback and comparisons resulted in adding and removing some codes as well as changing and regrouping some of the emergent themes.

For the quantitative data, Creswell (2009, p. 149) states that traditionally the researcher, if using an existing instrument, which is the case in this research, should report the validity and reliability scores established by the original author of the instrument. This includes describing the content validity, predictive validity and construct validity and reporting the measures of internal consistency and test-retest correlation. Content validity tests the validity of the scale’s items to test the content, predictive validity tests the accuracy of the answers predicted from the scale’s scores and construct validity tests whether the scale’s items represent the concepts and constructs they claim to test. For the reliability, internal consistency tests whether the responses are
consistent in all constructs, while test-retest correlation tests the stability of the scores if the instrument were to be used in the future (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Clark, 2010).

The validity of the IIS was measured by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), the authors of the original instrument, by conducting a factor analysis for the items forming the academic and social integration and institutional and social commitment constructs. The test resulted in a five-factor solution that accounted for 44.45% of the variance of the correlation matrix. The eigenvalue of these five factors ranged from 6.14 to 1.67. These factors were the five subscales of the instrument. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) concluded that the composition of these five factors (subscales) appeared to be consistent with the constructs of the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975).

Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) tested the predictive validity of the IIS in differentiating between persister and non-persister students by employing multivariate analysis of covariance and discriminant analysis. In the discriminant analysis, based on the pre-entry attributes, the five IIS subscales increased the correct identification of persister and non-persister students from 58.2 to 81.4% and from 34.5 to 75.8%, respectively. Moreover, in a cross-validation sample, IIS scores identified 78.9% of the persister students and 75.8% of the non-persister students.

Regarding the reliability of the IIS, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), reported scores of alpha reliabilities for the five subscales ranging from .71 to .84, which they considered as ‘adequate for using the scales in further analyses’ (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, p. 67). Table 4.1 shows the alpha reliability for each scale as reported by the original authors. In addition to the reported validity and reliability of the IIS by the original authors, many studies in the literature have aimed to confirm these (Fox, 1984; French & Oakes, 2004).
For the current study, as these subscales were utilised in a slightly different way to originally intended, their reliability was checked accordingly. The original IIS was designed to test the validity of Tinto’s Interactional Model of Institutional Departure (1975). However, in the quantitative phase of this study, it was used in a descriptive customised way to address the specific issues of the current research. In this study, the subscales of the IIS were utilised to measure the students’ social and academic integration, the level of their institutional and goal commitments and the overall quality of their institutional integration. To do this, some of these subscales were used separately, while others were merged, as suggested by the original author.

As advised by the original author of the instrument, the first and second subscales were merged to measure the level of students’ social integration into the sample college, while the third and fourth subscales were merged to measure the level of students’ academic integration. The last subscale was used separately to measure the students’ level of institutional and goal commitment. Finally, the total of the 30 items of these five subscales were used to measure the quality of the students’ institutional integration. Therefore, the reliability test was conducted according to the above classification. The result of the reliability test is presented in Table 4.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer-Group Interactions</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with Faculty</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and Intellectual Development</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional and Goal Commitment</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2 Alpha reliability of the study scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social integration scale</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic integration scale</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional and goal commitment scale</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIS (total)</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in the table, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient values for all of the questionnaire’s scales were acceptable. According to Pallant (2005), the ideal Cronbach’s alpha value of a scale should be above .7. However, the initial analysis showed that two of the scales had lower Cronbach’s alpha values that the recommended cut-off point of .7. First, the initial Cronbach’s alpha value for the academic integration scale was .59. This score was enhanced to .7 by deleting three items from the scale, as suggested by the SPSS software. These excluded three items were items 14 and 15 from the Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching subscale and item 21 from the Academic and Intellectual Development subscale. The remaining nine items in the academic integration scale showed better internal consistency. For the institutional and goal commitment scale, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient value was lower than required at .61. However, this result was expected. According to Pallant (2005), the Cronbach’s alpha value is sensitive to scales with fewer than 10 items. She suggested instead reporting the mean inter-item correlation, which is recommended to be between .2 and .4. For the institutional and goal commitment scale, the mean item-item correlation was .19. Although this value was close to the recommended cut-off point of .2, a further analysis was conducted to obtain a more reliable value. To achieve this, item 29 was deleted, as suggested by the analysis software. The final mean item-item correlation for the five items that form this scale, after deleting item 29, was .25, which is above the
recommended cut-off point of .2. Following the above, a second non-parametric statistical analysis technique was used in analysing all of the above subscales, which has been recommend for situations such as this (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005).

Finally, as the original IIS instrument was written in English, to use it with Arabic speakers, the items in the instrument had to be translated into the Arabic language to ensure that participants’ responses were based on an accurate understanding of the statements. The translation was performed by the researcher, who is an English language teacher, and was checked by two English language teachers in the ESL centre of the sample college and a PhD student in applied linguistics in Australia. Moreover, the translation was reviewed again after the pilot study.

4.9 Ethical considerations

This study involved a large number of undergraduate students, including all first-year students enrolled in the ESL program of the sample college in the academic year 2012–2013, as well as some teachers and administrative staff. All students were asked to participate voluntarily in the questionnaire, some students were asked to participate voluntarily in interviews or focus groups and some academic and administrative staff were asked to participate in a survey. Each participant was given a consent form (Appendix D) to sign before participating in the questionnaire, interviews, focus groups and staff surveys. In addition, each participant was given an information sheet (Appendix C) that explained the purpose of the study. All participants were informed before the start of each data collection that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop at any time and ask for their data to be deleted. Moreover, they were informed that
their data would only be used for the purpose of the study and would be deleted after a period of five years after the completion of the study.

A permission letter from the participating college was obtained before applying for ethics approval. This letter stated that the college would allow the study to be conducted on their campus and that students and faculty could be approached to participate in the study. This included permission to access the student database to obtain any data related to the study. A copy of this permission letter is attached in Appendix B. All collected data were stored in the researcher’s computer and accessed only by him. This will be deleted five years after the submission of the thesis. These strategies have been approved by the RMIT Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (Appendix A).
Chapter Five: Description of Qualitative Data: The Non-Persister Students

5.1 Introduction

This is the first chapter presenting the emergent themes of the qualitative data analysis. In this chapter, the data from the telephone interviews with non-persister students are analysed according to the procedure described in Chapter Four. This includes presenting the most frequent issues and factors that affected student retention in the sample college. These issues and factors were explored from the perspectives of four non-persister students at the sample college. Moreover, the chapter presents the new themes that emerged from the data and confirms the predetermined themes derived from the student retention models and previous studies of student retention in higher education, as presented in Chapter Three (see Table 3.3).

This chapter consists of four main sections: the introduction, a description of the participants’ demographic and personal characteristics, the emergent themes from the non-persister students’ interviews and a brief summary of the major findings.

5.2 Participants’ demographic characteristics

The participants in the qualitative phase of this study were four non-persister students, 15 persister students and 10 academic and administrative staff of the sample college. To collect the qualitative data from these participants, three data collection
instruments were utilised, one for each group (non-persisters, persisters and staff). These were in-depth telephone interviews with the non-persisters, focus groups with the persisters and surveys of staff. This section highlights the demographic and personal characteristics of the non-persister students relevant to this study. The four non-persister students participating in this study were coded with the letters (NS) and serial numbers were given to each participant starting from number one.

Due to the type and admission requirements of the sample college, detailed in Section 2.2 of Chapter Two, all of the students in the sample college, including the four non-persister participants in this study, shared some demographic characteristics such as gender, nationality and age: all were Saudi males, aged between 18 and 20 years. All of the students in the sample college held a minimum qualification of a secondary school certificate and none of the participants in this study held a higher qualification. Table 5.1 presents some other demographic and personal information of the non-persister students relevant to this study.

Table 5.1 Demographic information of non-persister students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Secondary school average</th>
<th>GAT Mark</th>
<th>Parents’ highest education</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Financial status*</th>
<th>Time spent in college**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NS1</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4 levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS2</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2 levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS3</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>2 levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS4</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>4 levels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*as perceived by the participants; **out of four levels

5.3 The emergent themes from the non-persister students’ interviews

In-depth telephone interviews of between 30 and 45 minutes duration were used to collect the data from the four non-persister students. These interviews were recorded
and their transcription revealed a large volume of data. To reduce the data and eliminate superfluous information, the data were coded according to the procedure detailed in Chapter Four. These codes were later labelled according to their similarities under 18 statements as the major issues and factors that might have affected the experience of the four non-persister students, leading them to withdraw from their study programs. Table 5.2 lists all of these 18 statements, including counts of their frequencies among the four participants.

Table 5.2 Most frequent factors in the non-persister students’ interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Frequency out of 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities are important</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative staff attitude</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreasonable restrictions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-academic environment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps between classes negatively affected me</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will not come back to this college</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will not recommend this college to anyone</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret my decision of enrolling in this college</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not regret withdraw decision</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will leave at the first opportunity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most withdrawals due to college strict rules</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not care about students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational and job goals are higher than the sample college</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends support withdrawal decision</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespecting students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sample college was not my first choice</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative system needs reform</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules of the college violate the student rights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To establish the thematic analysis process, these 18 most frequent issues were labelled as subcategories and regrouped according to their similarities under eight categories. These were timetabling, low student satisfaction, lack of extracurricular activities, college rules, staff attitude, student goals, external influences and poor
system. After repeatedly re-reading the interviews and the above statements and categories, the outcome of the thematic analysis was the following two main themes:

- Poor institutional experience
- Student characteristics

Table 5.3 shows the subcategories, categories and the main themes that emerged from the data of the in-depth telephone interviews.

Table 5.3 Non-persister students' interview themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor institutional experience</td>
<td>Poor system</td>
<td>Non-academic environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administrative system needs reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timetabling</td>
<td>Gaps between classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of extracurricular activities</td>
<td>Extracurricular activities are important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low student satisfaction</td>
<td>Will not come back to this college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Will not recommend this college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regret my decision of enrolling in this college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Do not regret the withdrawal decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students will leave at the first opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College rules</td>
<td>Unreasonable restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Most withdrawals due to college strict rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rules of the college violate the student rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff attitude</td>
<td>Negative staff attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Do not care about students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disrespecting students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student characteristics</td>
<td>Student goals</td>
<td>The sample college was not my first choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Educational and job goals are higher than the sample college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External influences</td>
<td>Family and Friends support withdrawal decision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that the thematic analysis of the non-persister students’ data resulted in two main themes that include eight major categories with 18 subcategories. These themes, categories and subcategories summarise the main issues that might have affected the non-persister participants’ experiences and consequently their decisions to leave the sample college. The following sections detail the findings of
each of these themes, with supporting quotations from the responses of the non-persister participants to the interview questions.

5.3.1 Poor institutional experience

The first theme that emerged from the non-persister students’ telephone interviews was that of poor institutional experience. This theme consists of all attrition factors that were related to the students’ experience with the administrative system of the sample college, including its rules, services and practices, as perceived by the four non-persister participants. Repeated reading through the participants’ interviews suggested that these issues or factors were related to or under the responsibility of the college administrative departments and staff. These issues or factors included the direct factors that the non-persister students stated as their reasons for withdrawal, along with other factors that might have affected their experience at the sample college. As described above, these factors were grouped under the following six categories:

- Poor system
- Timetabling
- Lack of extracurricular activities
- Low student satisfaction
- College rules
- Staff attitude

The following sections detail the findings under each of these categories as perceived by the non-persister participants.

5.3.1.1 Poor system

The poor system category lists the participants’ views of their experience with the college administrative system in general. In this category, all of the four participants
raised issues in relation to their judgment of the quality of the college environment. These views were classified under the following two subcategories:

- Non-academic environment
- Administrative system needs reform

The following sections detail these views with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses during the interviews.

**Non-academic environment**

In this subcategory, three of the participants shared some ideas concerning the quality of the environment of the sample college. In regard to the administrative procedures, they stated that they did not consider this a satisfactory environment for an academic institution. Their statements were based on the way the college rules were applied and the manner of the administrative staff in dealing with the students. In the following quotation, participant NS1 said that during the whole year he spent at the sample college, he did not find anything to make him consider the college environment to be suitable for students. Moreover, he compared the environment of the sample college with the environment of the new college to which he had transferred. In his response, the words he used to describe the environment of the institutions are notable. He described his new college as ‘more open’ and his feelings towards it as ‘more comfortable’. Conversely, he described the sample college as ‘strict’ and his feelings while there as ‘more stressed’:

*Participant NS1:* It is not a suitable environment; it is not an academic environment.
*Interviewer:* Didn’t you find anything to make you stay in the year you spent in this college?
Participant NS1: Not at all ... I feel more comfortable in my new college. In the sample college they were strict and I used to feel more stressed, but here in this college they are more open.

In the following quotation, in response to a question about the college environment, participant NS3 did not find anything positive about the college society, other than the friendships he made with other students during his study at the sample college. Further, when he described a situation in which he needed to discuss a particular absence with the staff of the registration department, he described the discussion as a ‘police investigation’:

Interviewer: How do you see the college environment?
Participant NS3: The only thing I liked about the college environment was my friends ... I dealt with the staff at the beginning as if it is an educational institution but their style was a police investigation style.

Participant NS4 compared the environment of the sample college with King Abdulaziz University, which is the largest local university and the second largest university in Saudi Arabia. Participant NS4 believed that despite its larger number of students, the less strict rules of King Abdulaziz University had not negatively affected the educational process at that university and that this example should be followed by the sample college:

Participant NS4: If you ask me about the administrative system no it is not an academic environment at all ... being nice to students didn’t harm King Abdulaziz University which is bigger and better than the sample college and has better reputation and offers better qualifications to their students.

Administrative system needs reform

The second subcategory under the poor system category presents the participants’ opinions that the college administrative system needs reform. The following two
quotations from the responses of participants NS2 and NS4 reflect their views of the administrative system as corrupted or outdated. Participant NS2 suggested a complete reform for the administrative system. He said that this was the reason behind his withdrawal from the college. He stated that, based on what he had heard, this view applies only to this campus, not to other campuses of the same college. His last statement gives an indication that it is his belief that the problem of the administrative system was obvious to the extent that it can be distinguished when compared to the systems of other campuses. Participant NS4 expressed a similar view. He asserted that most of his friends disliked the sample college because of this issue:

*Participant NS2: The problem is in the system, it needs a complete reform from the beginning ... I couldn’t continue in this college, I didn’t like their system ... the system in this campus is not good at all, I heard it is good in other campuses but I’m talking about what I saw.*

*Participant NS4: Yes indeed. Their way administrative system approach is completely wrong ... all of the guys I know hate this college because of this ... I suggest a reform for both the system and the staff.*

### 5.3.1.2 Timetabling

**Gaps between classes**

Another issue was that of timetabling. In this category, three of the four participants talked about the problem of the long breaks between classes. They discussed the impact of this issue on their experience in the sample college and on their abilities to fulfil their external commitments.

In the sample college, the timetables of the ESL courses are not fixed. Students might have their study hours distributed over the working hours of the ESL centre, which was between 8 AM and 8 PM. Students sometimes had gaps of up to four hours between classes, as stated by participant NS4. For the students, this was considered a major
problem, especially for those who did not have cars. Moreover, this problem was more serious when linked to the lack of student clubs and extracurricular activities and the restrictions of waiting in classrooms during breaks, as discussed in the ‘unreasonable restriction’ category under Section 5.3.1.2 below.

In the following quotation, participant NS2 put the timetabling problem at the top of the three main problems with the college system in his opinion. He said that this problem affected him strongly. He stated that he could not reconcile his study and other responsibilities:

*Interviewer: Regarding your college system, from your experience, what are the main things you don’t like?*
*Participant NS2: 1- The timetabling system ...*  
*Participant NS2: in fact the impact of the timetabling was too strong ... It was just like work shifts, the study hours were distributed on the whole day... I needed to drive my brothers to their work and drive them home at the end of the day ... I couldn’t take rest at all ... I know this is the nature of the intensive courses but my problem was with the system especially the timetabling system.*

**5.3.1.3 Lack of extracurricular activities**

*Extracurricular activities are important*

In this category, all of the four participants agreed that the sample college had no clubs or extracurricular activities for the students. Three of these participants said that students would be interested if the college offered them such activities. Participant NS2 put this as the second major problem that affected his experience when he was a student in the sample college. The following are quotations from the responses of the participants:
Participant NS1: What student activities! There is nothing like this.
Participant NS2: We didn’t see any activities for students ... there should be activities and a club ... the main defects are 1- ... 2- lack of a club and activities for students
Participant NS3: There were no students clubs and activities ... I think a lot of the students will be interested in such activities
Participant NS4: I haven’t heard about extracurricular activities ... I wish if there were some activities so students feel like there is something different ... we were thinking about bringing a football and playing in the large area in the middle of the campus.

5.3.1.4 Low student satisfaction

In this category, the problem of low student satisfaction is presented in regard to the participants’ experience within the college administrative system. This issue was classified under the poor institutional experience theme because all of the participants’ statements indicate that the student dissatisfaction was related to the administration of the sample college. These views were classified under the following five subcategories:

- Will not come back to this college
- Will not recommend this college
- Regret my decision of enrolling in this college
- Do not regret the withdrawal decision
- Students will leave at the first opportunity

The following sections detail the responses under these subcategories with supporting quotations from the participants.

Will not come back to this college

This subcategory presents the participants’ responses to the interview question pertaining to the probability of the students returning to the sample college if given the opportunity. The purpose of this question was to ensure that the participants who had left the sample college were convinced of the wisdom of their decision to withdraw.
Three of the four participants, as shown in the following quotations, stated that they would not come back to this college. Despite one of these three participants (participant NS2) not having transferred to another institution or having secured a job, he stated that he would not return to the sample college because of its poor performance:

Interviewer: If you have the chance will you come back to this college?
Participant NS1: No. I don’t think so.
Participant NS2: No. I swear to Allah with this performance I will never come back.
Participant NS4: No. I don’t think I would come back to this college again.

Will not recommend this college

Moreover, three of the four participants stated that they would not recommend the sample college to other people. This gives an indication of the quality of their experience in the sample college. These students based their statements on the administrative practices of the sample college. Participant NS2 linked his recommendation with the college’s performance. The following quotations are examples of the responses of these three participants:

Interviewer: If someone asked you, would you recommend this college to him?
Participant NS1: I would advise him not to rush the decision and to look for a better place.
Participant NS2: No. I swear to Allah I will tell him not to go.
Participant NS4: No. Only if there is no other choice

Regret my decision of enrolling in this college

When asked about their satisfaction with their decision to enrol in the sample college, three of the four participants stated that they regretted this decision and had done so many times during their study. Participant NS1 stated that he sometimes used to
ask himself before sleeping why he had enrolled in this college. The other two participants, NS2 and NS4, said that they had blamed themselves many times for rushing the decision to enrol in the sample college. The following quotations are from their responses:

*Participant NS1: In fact I regret my decision of enrolment in this college many times ... sometime I ask myself before I sleep what brought me here.*
*Participant NS2: Yes. I used to ask myself why didn’t I go to another place it might be better ... I think I rushed the decision and didn’t care more and look for a better place.*
*Participant NS4: Yes. Not once but many times ... I used to blame myself when I think about my future after graduation.*

*Do not regret the withdrawal decision*

When asked about their feelings after they left the sample college, two of the four participants (participants NS1 and NS4) said that they did not regret the decision. A third participant (participant NS2) did not say this clearly in his answer, but his answers to other questions during the interview indicate the same feeling. The following are quotations from their responses:

*Participant NS1: Not at all, I’m so happy with the decision I made.*
*Participant NS4: No, I didn’t regret the withdrawal decision at all ... thanks to Allah every one told me I made a good decision ... I’m totally satisfied.*

*Students will leave at the first opportunity*

The non-persister participants were asked about their probability of leaving the sample college if provided the opportunity. Although the answers of the four participants varied, all of them expressed a willingness to leave upon finding a better opportunity. This might show a low level of commitment to the sample college.
Two of the participants (participants NS1 and NS4) had left the sample college upon gaining admission to other institutions. Participant NS2 said that when presented with an opportunity to leave the sample college during the early days of his study he had decided to stay; however, his experiences in the sample college soon showed him that he had been wrong. Finally, participant NS3 stated that he would have been tempted to leave if presented with a new opportunity that would provide or qualify him for a better job. The following are quotations from their answers to the interview questions:

Participant NS1: For sure I will withdraw.
Participant NS2: At the beginning of my study at the sample college I had that opportunity and did not leave ... but then after I saw and studied I discovered that it is not better ... if I did not like the college I will go and find a job, I should not waste my efforts.
Participant NS3: Yes, if I got admission to a place that qualify me for better job ... or if I got a job better than the expected job after graduation.
Participant NS4: Students might leave if they have an alternative place ... yes, and this exactly what happened to me; I withdrew when I got admission in another institution.

5.3.1.5 College rules

This category groups all students’ views and complaints related to the college rules. This includes the college rules themselves and the way they were applied, as well as the consequences of applying them to students. In this category, the students’ responses were classified under the following three subcategories:

- Unreasonable restrictions
- Most withdrawals due to the college’s strict rules
- Rules of the college violate the student rights
Issues related to the above subcategories were raised by all of the four participants. The following sections detail the responses under these subcategories with supporting quotations from the participants.

*Unreasonable restrictions*

Unreasonable restrictions were among the main issues that negatively affected the experiences of the non-persister students in the sample college. All of the four participants talked about the rules and restrictions of the registration department that they believed had no goals or objectives. These participants mainly focused on the absence of logic and objectives more than on the rules and restrictions themselves. This suggested that students might have coexisted with the strict rules if they had at least understood their purpose.

Most of the participants stated that the administrative staff of the sample college tended to focus on minor issues. They talked about the rules and restrictions related to the external appearance of the students, such as hair length and clothes. Participant NS1 wondered why the staff of the registration department were concerned about hair length rules when it was compulsory to wear the national dress, which includes a head cover that completely covers the hair. The same issue was raised by participant NS3, who asked about the point of controlling hair length if students already cover their heads with the national dress. Moreover, he added that when applying these ‘meaningless’ rules, the administrative staff did not consider individual students’ needs. He stated that although he has a medical problem with his head that requires him to wear his hair long, and although he used to cover his head with the national dress at all times while on campus, the administrative staff continued to ask him to have his hair cut.
Comments on other ‘meaningless’ rules were made by participant NS2, who did not understand the reasons behind the rules that prevented students from waiting in the classrooms between lectures. His confusion was expressed when he said ‘this is their system what should I say’. This confusion can also be found in the response of participant NS4, who concluded his comments about the focus of the administrative staff on minor issues with the phrase ‘I want to know why!’ The following quotations are from the participants’ responses to the interview questions:

_Participant NS1:_ Some of the restrictions have no objectives ... hair rules for example we already cover our heads with /shamgh/ (national head cover for men) and preventing us from wearing beaded /thobs/ (national dress).

_Participant NS2:_ These are basic personal rights, when they talk about hair and dress no freedom ... in fact they are unreasonably strict ... when they prevent waiting in classrooms during breaks ... this is not good but this is their system what should I say ... they should leave a space for some freedoms.

_Participant NS3:_ rules should respect individual student needs. For example I have a problem in my hair and I try to cover it with long hair and although I’m wearing the head cover when I’m in the college they ask me to make my hair shorter

_Participant NS4:_ they only care about minor things like hair length ... in such things they are strict, even in regard to what students wear, I want to know why!

_Most withdrawals due to college strict rules_

This is one of the most important issues for the research topic. Three participants talked about the impact of the college rules on student persistence. They did not only talk about themselves, but also about the experiences of their colleagues who had left the sample college before them. While discussing the strictness of the college rules, these three participants were asked about the impact of this on students’ desire to stay in the sample college. One student (participant NS2) stated that he himself withdrew because of his experience with the college administrative system. He said that he had no
study difficulties and the only reason behind his withdrawal was that he did not like the rules of the college. Participants NS1 and NS4 agreed with this view. They also thought that other students of the sample college had been negatively affected by the strict rules and regulations.

In fact, participant NS1 said that he knew of some cases of students withdrawing from the sample college because of these issues. Moreover, participant NS4 reported that most of the students he knew hated the environment of the sample college because of the practices of the administrative staff and that the only reason they stayed is that they did not have other places to go. The following are quotations from the responses of these three participants:

*Interviewer: Do you think students might leave because of this (the strict rule)?*
*Participant NS1: Yes possibly ... I know some cases.*
*Participant NS2: They are too strict ... Yes it is possible ... yes indeed ... for me I didn’t face any academic difficulties but I withdrew because of the system.*
*Participant NS4: The way they deal with students might negatively affect them. Most of the students I know hate this college because of this and if they have a place in another institution they will not stay.*

*Rules of the college violate the student rights*

Finally, in the last subcategory under college rules, participant NS2 talked about how the sample college’s rules violate students’ rights. He repeated this point many times in his interview when he was talking about the hair and dress rules. He also talked about this when he was describing how the administrative staff asked the students to leave the classrooms immediately after the end of their classes:
Participant NS2: Look when they talk about the hair I think this is personal freedom ... They should give students their rights ... or at least ask if I have a car ... where do they want me to go if I didn’t have a car!

5.3.1.6 Staff attitude

The attitudes of academic and administrative staff can play an important role in forming the quality of the student experience in any educational institution. In the sample college of this study, all of the four participants raised issues related to the way the administrative staff dealt with students and how they applied the college rules. Accordingly, this category groups all students’ views and complaints that are related to the attitude of the administrative staff of the sample college together. In this category, the students’ responses were classified under the following three subcategories:

- Disrespecting students
- Do not care about students
- Negative staff attitude

The following sections detail the findings under these subcategories with supporting quotations from the participants’ interview responses.

Negative staff attitude

The first subcategory was the negative staff attitude. All of the four participants talked about how they did not like the way the administrative staff dealt with them. Participant NS1 stated that the administrative staff overused their power against the students who disagreed with them. He said that he used to do what the administrative staff wanted to avoid arguing with them. This gives an indication that this student (participant NS1) might have been intimidated by the behaviour of the administrative
staff and might not have asked that his rights be respected. By reporting that administrative staff ‘have different treatments’ and ‘overuse their power’ with the students who do not obey their rules, participant NS1 indicated his concern that the administrative staff might use ‘their power’ against him.

Participants NS2 and NS3 expressed similar opinions about the attitude of the administrative staff. Moreover, participant NS3 added that this was not a problem of the college system but a problem with the administrative staff themselves. Finally, participant NS4 reported that many of his friends ‘hate’ the sample college because of the attitude of the administrative staff. This suggested that these students might have a negative experience in the sample college with consequences for their persistence. The following quotations are drawn from the interview responses:

Participant NS1: It depends on the student, if he argues with them they have different treatment; for me I usually do what they want ... they overuse their power.
Participant NS2: The way they deal with us is not good.
Participant NS3: As I said before the problem is in the administrative staff themselves not the system ... I have no problem with the system but the attitude of the administrative staff was completely wrong.
Participant NS4: Many of my friends hate this college because of the administrative staff attitude.

Do not care about students

Some participants were more specific concerning staff attitudes. Participants NS3 and NS4 reported that, during their study in the sample college, they did not feel that the administrative staff cared about the students. They stated that applying the college rules seemed more important to the administrative staff than did the future of the students. Moreover, it can be understood from the statement of participant NS3 that the way the administrative staff deal with students might affect students’ experiences or decisions
about withdrawal. The following are some of the non-persister students’ responses on this issue:

*Participant NS3:* *From the way they apply the rules you feel that they don’t think about the consequences, you feel like they don’t care if the students fail or withdraw from the college.*  
*Participant NS4:* *They don’t care about students they only care about the rules.*

**Disrespecting students**

Another issue concerning staff attitudes is the claims of some participants that the administrative staff of the sample college did not respect the students. In the quotation below, participant NS3 reported on his own story with the staff of the registration department. He said that he gave them some private information about a case in the courts as an excuse for his absence and that this information was later used to humiliate him. The administrative staff reminded him of the case and that they had accepted his excuses every time he needed to deal with them. This story indicates a lack of respect on the part of the administrative staff, which could influence students’ levels of trust:

*Participant NS3:* *I had a case in the court I told the registration staff about it because I was absent ... they start to disgrace me and remind me with this problem ... they should respect students’ privacy.*

In the quotation below, participant NS4 expressed his irritation about how one of the administrative staff used to address the students. He said that this staff member used to use the Arabic word /weraa/, which is close to the meaning of the English word ‘kid’, to address students. In the Saudi culture, this word is not recommended for use even with children, as it conveys a meaning of degradation. Using this word to address an adult, and especially for teenagers, is considered very offensive. Participant NS4 considered disrespectful and humiliating. He also stated that students felt humiliated
when administrative staff would publicly inspect the length of the students’ hair at the front door on arrival:

Participant NS4: No it is the attitude of the registration staff themselves, there is that staff (name removed) who used to call students with the word ‘kid’ … also sometime they do hair inspection in the front door.

5.3.2 Student characteristics

The second theme that emerged from the non-persister students’ telephone interviews was that of student characteristics. This theme consisted of all attrition factors that are related to the students’ personal life outside the sample college as perceived by the four non-persister participants. This includes the students’ educational and job goals, family and social commitments and other factors that are not related to the academic and administrative systems of the sample college. The analysis considered the direct factors that the non-persister students stated as their reasons for withdrawal, along with other factors that might have affected their experience. As described above, these factors were grouped under the following two categories:

- Student goals
- External influences

The following sections detail the findings under each category as perceived by the non-persister participants.

5.3.2.1 Student goals

This category groups all of the issues that are related to the students’ goals, motivations and expectations. This includes higher desired qualifications and the
students’ expectations of future jobs. Moreover, the purpose of enrolling in the sample college was examined during the analysis.

In this category, the student responses were classified under the following two subcategories:

- The sample college was not my first choice
- Educational and job goals are higher than the sample college

Three of the four participants raised issues that can be grouped under these two subcategories. The following sections detail the findings under these subcategories with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

_The sample college was not my first choice_

One of the major concerns of the interviews was to explore whether the sample college was the students’ first choice when they first applied. This was important to investigate, as some students who enrolled in this college only did so because they had failed to be admitted to the institution of their first choice, indicating a likelihood to leave when given the opportunity. Two participants stated in their responses to this question that they came to the sample college because it was their last opportunity. Participant NS1 wanted to study at one of the local universities but he was admitted at a university in another city. He said that his financial status at that time did not allow him to move to that city, so he applied to the sample college. Participant NS4’s experience was similar: he had wanted to study in any university that offered a higher qualification than that offered by the sample college, but as he could not get admission, he applied to the sample college.
Eventually, both participants were admitted to the institutions of their first choice and left the sample college. These participants both left the sample college in the last level of the ESL program, which lasts for the duration of the academic year. They sacrificed credits for almost four two-month levels of intensive English language study to transfer to the institutions of their first choice. These credits were sacrificed because, according to the rules of the sample college, non-persister students do not receive certificates for the English courses they have studied, nor can they transfer their credits to their new institutions. The following are their responses:

*Participant NS1: No the sample college was not my first choice ... to some extent it was the only choice.*
*Participant NS4: I didn’t get admission in the university I can say I had no other choice.*

*Educational and job goals are higher than the sample college*

Associated with the above subcategory are the questions pertaining to students’ educational and job goals. Students’ educational and job goals and expectations may be essential to their persistence in their institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983; Tinto, 1975, 1993). This topic was investigated in the interviews to determine whether there was any link between student persistence status and the level of their educational and job goals, taking into account that the highest qualification offered by the sample college is an undergraduate diploma.

Three of the four participants stated that their desired highest educational qualifications were higher than what was offered by the sample college. Participant NS1 stated that even a bachelor degree would not be enough for him. The highest degree for
him and participant NS4 were masters degrees, which cannot be achieved through the sample college. The following are quotations from their responses:

Participant NS1: My goal is to get master degree ... even bachelor degree is not enough.
Interviewer: What is the highest qualification you are looking for?
Participant NS2: Bachelor
Interviewer: What is the highest qualification you are looking for?
Participant NS4: Master degree
Interviewer: You don’t think this college is suitable for your job and educational goals?
Participant NS1: No
Participant NS2: To be honest, no.

Further, the following quotations show that two of these three participants (participants NS1 and NS2) did not consider the level of the sample college suitable for their job and educational goals:

Interviewer: You don’t think this college is suitable for your job and educational goals?
Participant NS1: No
Interviewer: What is the highest qualification you are looking for?
Participant NS2: Bachelor.
Interviewer: Do you think this college is suitable for your goals?
Participant NS2: To be honest, no.

5.3.2.2 External influences

Family and Friends support withdrawal decision

The final category in the analysis of the non-persister students’ interviews was the external influence. This category investigates the influence of students’ family and friends on their decisions to leave the sample college. The people around students can encourage them to continue in their study programs or push them to withdraw or transfer to other institutions.
In the case of this study, the following quotations show that three of the four participants stated that their decisions to leave the sample college were supported by both friends and family members:

*Participant NS1*: Yes my friends support my withdrawal decision ... my father supports my decision to transfer to the university he thinks it gives me a higher qualification.

*Participant NS2*: To be honest they were encouraging me at the beginning to study in the sample college ... but when my family heard about my experience in the sample college they advise me to withdraw and look for a better place ... my friends said no one can blame me if I want to withdraw, they can see it is too strict.

*Participant NS4*: Thanks to Allah all the people around me supported my decision to leave the sample college.

Although there might be many reasons behind this support towards the withdrawal decision, one of the major factors shaping the attitudes of a student’s family and friends towards the sample college, as revealed by the data, is the experience of the student himself. In the above quotation, participant NS2 stated that, at the beginning his family and friends supported his decision of enrolment in the sample college, but that when they heard about his experience they advised him to look for a better institution.

Another factor is the level of the sample college qualification. Participant NS1 stated that his father supported his decision to withdraw from the sample college because he transferred to a university that offered ‘a higher qualification’.

**5.4 Summary of the non-persister students’ interviews findings**

In summary, the analysis of the non-persister students’ interviews resulted in the emergence of 18 subcategories that were regrouped under eight categories and subsequently two themes. The 18 subcategories resembled the most frequent issues and factors affecting students’ experiences and consequently their retention in the sample
college, as perceived by the four non-persister students participating in this study. These common issues and factors were grouped under the following eight categories: timetabling, low student satisfaction, lack of extracurricular activities, college rules, staff attitude, student goals, external influences and poor system.

The four participants of the interviews discussed issues related to the above eight categories and explained how they had negatively affected their persistence to remain enrolled in the sample college. The final step in the thematic analysis of the non-persister students’ data was to classify these eight categories according to their similarities under bigger themes, to help in identifying the source of the research problem. These eight categories were classified under the following two themes: poor institutional experience and student characteristics.
Chapter Six: Description of Qualitative Data: The Persister Students

6.1 Introduction

This is the second chapter presenting the emergent themes of the qualitative data analysis. In this chapter, the data from the persister student focus groups are analysed according to the analysis procedure discussed in Chapter Four. This includes presenting the most frequent issues and factors that affected student retention in the sample college. These issues and factors were explored from the perspectives of 15 persister students at the sample college. Moreover, the chapter presents the new themes that emerged from the data and confirms the predetermined themes derived from the student retention models and studies in the literature of student retention in higher education, as presented in Chapter Three.

This chapter consists of four main sections: the introduction, the descriptions of the participants’ demographic and personal characteristics, the emergent themes from the persister student focus groups and a brief summary of the major findings.

6.2 Participants’ demographic characteristics

The participants in the qualitative phase of this study were four non-persister students, 15 persister students and 10 academic and administrative staff of the sample college. These participants were divided into the following three main groups: non-
persisters, persisters and staff. Three different data collection instruments were used to collect the qualitative data from these participants: in-depth telephone interviews, focus groups and surveys. This section highlights the demographic and personal characteristics of the persister students relevant to this study. Persister students were coded with the letters (PS) and serial numbers were given to each participant from number one.

Due to the college type and admission requirements, as detailed in Chapter Two, all students in the sample college, including the 15 persister participants, shared some demographic characteristics such as gender, nationality and age. They were all Saudi males, aged between 18 and 20 years. All of the students in the sample college held a minimum qualification of a secondary school certificate and none of the participants in this study held a higher qualification. Table 6.1 presents some other demographic and personal information of the persister students.

Table 6.1 Demographic information of persister students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Secondary school average mark</th>
<th>GAT</th>
<th>Parents’ highest education</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Financial status*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P01</td>
<td>70–79%</td>
<td>71–80%</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P02</td>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P03</td>
<td>70–79%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P04</td>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>51–60%</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P05</td>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>50% or lower</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P06</td>
<td>70–79%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P07</td>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P08</td>
<td>80–89%</td>
<td>51–60%</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P09</td>
<td>70–79%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>80–89%</td>
<td>71–80%</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>80–89%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>80–89%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>80–89%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>51–60%</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P15</td>
<td>70–79%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*as perceived by the participants
6.3 The emergent themes from the persister students’ focus groups

The two focus groups were used to collect data from the 15 persister students who participated in this study. The collected data were in the form of written notes taken by the researcher and the participants during the discussions. Participants were given time and asked to write down their views on and responses to every point discussed in the focus groups. All relevant statements, phrases and signal words were highlighted and identified as codes. These codes were later labelled according to their similarities under 18 statements as the major issues and factors that might affect student retention in the sample college from the perspective of the persister students. Table 6.2 lists all of these 18 statements, showing how frequently they were mentioned by the participants.

Table 6.2 Most frequent factors in the persister students’ focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Frequency out of 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor student facilities</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will leave at the first opportunity</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of extracurricular activities</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcing students to attend extracurricular lectures</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative first impression (Terrifying day)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative staff attitude</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No communication with administration</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students have no rights</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sample college was not my first choice</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External commitments</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreasonable restrictions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespecting students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College has no plans</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No student cards</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a job</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps between classes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidating students if they complain</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another study opportunity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To proceed with the thematic analysis, all of the above 18 statements were later labelled as subcategories and grouped according to their similarities under nine
categories, which were student services, poor orientation, low student satisfaction, college rules, timetabling, low sense of belonging, staff attitude, student goals and external commitments. Next, these nine categories were grouped under two main themes: poor institutional experience and student characteristics. Table 6.3 shows all of these subcategories, categories and themes.

Table 6.3 Persister students’ focus group themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor institutional experience</td>
<td>Student services</td>
<td>Lack of extracurricular activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor student facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of communication with administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor orientation</td>
<td>Negative first impression (Terrifying day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low student satisfaction</td>
<td>Will leave at the first opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College rules</td>
<td>Students have no rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timetabling</td>
<td>Unreasonable restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low sense of belonging</td>
<td>Forcing students to attend cultural lectures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff attitude</td>
<td>Gaps between classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No student cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student goals</td>
<td>Students have no rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negative staff attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disrespecting students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intimidate students if complain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student characteristics</td>
<td>The sample college was not my first choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student commitments</td>
<td>Getting a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Another study opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External commitments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that the issues that emerged from the thematic analysis of the persister students’ focus group data were classified under the following two main themes:

- Poor institutional experience
- Student characteristics

Under each one of these two themes, there are categories and subcategories that cluster the key ideas in relation to the low student retention phenomenon in the sample
college from the perspective of the persister students who participated in the focus
groups. The following sections detail the findings of each theme, supported by
quotations from the participants’ responses to the focus group discussion topics.

6.3.1 Poor institutional experience

The poor institutional experience theme emerged as a result of seeking to identify
commonalities in the responses of the persister students who participated in the
discussion of the factors affecting student retention in the sample college. The grouping
of similar issues in the responses suggested that some could be classified under the
umbrella of the administrative system of the sample college. These issues were divided
into the following seven categories:

- Student service
- Poor orientation
- Low student satisfaction
- College rules
- Timetabling
- Low sense of belonging
- Staff attitude.

Issues and factors of student attrition under the above categories, as perceived by
the persister students, were raised by all of the 15 participants in both focus groups. The
following sections detail these findings, with supporting quotations from the
participants.

6.3.1.1 Student services

The student services department is one of the most important administrative
sectors for the students of the sample college. This department is responsible for all non-
academic rules and procedures, including but not limited to admission, registration, timetabling and discipline, as well as monitoring students and applying the college rules. In this category, all of the 15 participants raised issues related to the practices and the rules of the student services department. These issues were:

- Lack of extracurricular activities
- Poor student facilities
- Lack of communication with administration
- Poor planning.

The participants’ views of these four issues are now presented with supporting quotations.

*Lack of extracurricular activities*

Extracurricular activities including social activities, student unions and sports clubs are essential for any campus of a modern tertiary institution (Tinto, 1993). Fourteen of the 15 participants in the two focus groups raised this issue when describing their experience in the sample college. They postulated that the lack of such activities had a negative impact on the quality of the student experience and the strength of their bonds with the sample college. The following quotation was taken from the responses of participant PS4, who was talking about the quality of the social life of the campus:

*Participant PS4: No clubs, no activities, ... forcing students to attend the cultural lectures*

Other participants agreed with the above quotation and further emphasised the important role of these activities in motivating students and strengthening their bonds.
with the college. The following quotations are from the responses of participants PS1, PS9 and PS15, respectively.

Participant PS1: There are no clubs ... if there are clubs in the college students will be more motivated and rethink about the withdrawal decision

Participant PS9: Can you believe that there are no clubs for young people! These clubs will make young people love their college

Participant PS15: There are no students clubs ... they are very important to strengthen the bond between students and the college

Finally, participant PS10 believed that introducing extracurricular activities at the sample college would help to increase the rate of student retention:

Participant PS10: There are no student clubs and very few cultural activities ... the existence of student clubs can minimize the risk of student attrition

Poor student facilities

The second issue under the student services category is the quality of the student facilities such as the library, internet devices, student lounges, restaurants and housing. The majority of the participants (14 out of 15 participants) in the two focus groups believed that the student facilities at the sample college were poor and did not match the quality of services available at other government tertiary institutions. By raising this issue while discussing low student retention, these participants shed light on the importance for student retention of the quality of student facilities. They believed that the low quality of the student facilities compared to other local institutions could make the student experience worse and influence their decision to transfer at the first opportunity. The following are quotations from the participants’ responses:
Participant PS2: There are no services, no care, everything is bad and does not match the status of our beloved country ... I can’t believe it is a government college, it doesn’t even belong to this century
Participant PS4: The student restaurant is too bad because of the management ... the library is not good and there are not enough computers
Participant PS5: The restaurant ... I don’t think it deserves to be a government property ... the student housing ... not suitable it is not designed for the students who benefit from it, just a bed and closet but other facilities such as the laundry and the entertainment lounge are closed
Participant PS8: Student facilities are too bad, student restaurant is too bad and it is not appropriate for an educational institution, the services in the student website are too bad, there is no club
Participant PS11: Student services are too bad ... student restaurant is too bad and the management is responsible for this ... there are not enough computers in the library; the internet service is so bad

Lack of communication with administration

Another issue affecting student retention in the sample college and related to the student services department, as experienced by these persister students, was the lack of communication with the college administration such as hearing from the students and addressing their complaints. Twelve of the 15 participants raised issues related to the quality of the communication with the administration of the sample college, including the student services department and the higher administration. These participants believed that the students’ voice was not heard in terms of delivering their complaints and asking for their needs to be met. They raised this issue in the context of discussing the factors they felt most affected the student experience in the sample college that could lead them to withdraw:

Participant PS5: There is no communication between the students and the college staff
Participant PS7: There is no connection between the students and the college administration
Participant PS9: There is no communication channel between the students and the college administration, they are completely separate

Poor planning

The following quotations are from the students’ responses regarding their experience with the student services department of the sample college. According to some of the participants (5 out of 15), the student services department has no clear plans for the requirements of the study programs and the student services procedures. The students feel lost in regard to the requirements of their study programs. Moreover, there were no clear procedures for the students to deal with the student services department. According to these participants, this is one of the major issues affecting the student experience with the college administrative system and may lead some students to withdraw.

Participant PS1: Mistreatment, poor services and there are even no plans for the study majors
Participant PS3: There are no study plans to explain to the students their programs’ requirements
Participant PS6: The treatment is so bad they even have no plans for students
Participant PS11: The staff negative attitude, the very poor services, the disrespect, the lack of study plans
Participant PS12: Their treatment is bad their services are bad they do not have study plans for students

6.3.1.2 Poor orientation

Orientation is usually the first activity students experience in their campus life. The quality of the orientation procedures and enrolment process gives students their first impression of the administrative system of their institution (Hon & Brunner, 2002; O’Neill, 2003). In the sample college, the first two hours of the first day are assigned to
distributing students’ timetables and informing the new students about the college rules and policies. However, new students are given no time to socialise together or become familiar with the facilities, services and environment of their new college, as they start classes two hours after they first arrive, often without even having the textbooks for the classes in which they are enrolled.

Most of the participants in the two focus groups raised issues related to the quality of the orientation day, stating that it gave them a negative first impression of the college. They claimed that the activities of the orientation, the enrolment procedure and the practices of the administrative staff negatively affected their future experiences in the sample college. Thirteen of the 15 participants related this issue to student withdrawal. All of those participants agreed with the suggestion of some students to call the orientation day ‘the terrified day’. The following quotations show that the majority of the participants were extremely unhappy with their experience of the orientation day and had been negatively affected by the reception they received on that first day:

Participant PS1: The orientation day was too bad … I agree with the students who say there was more intimidation than motivation
Participant PS2: The orientation day had everything related the rules, the punishments, the intimidations and even the humiliation … the first day is only about intimidating and distrusting students
Participant PS5: The orientation day is better to be called the day of informing students of the strict rules
Participant PS7: The orientation day was just about the punishments just like prisons
Participant PS9: All the orientation day was about explaining the college’s penalties and how to cut off from the students marks, the reception of new students was very very bad it was the day of intimidation that lacked any motivation
Participant PS11: The orientation day was only about explain penalties and distributing students’ timetables
6.3.1.3 Low student satisfaction

Low student satisfaction is another major issue that was reported by the persister students. This category contains all of the issues related to students’ level of satisfaction. The initial analysis revealed that 14 of the 15 participants reported some major issues that might give an indication of students’ low level of satisfaction. These issues were classified under the following two subcategories:

- Will leave this college at the first opportunity
- Students have no rights.

The findings under these subcategories are detailed in the following sections, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

Will leave at the first opportunity

As mentioned above, 14 of the 15 participants (93%) stated that they would leave the sample college at the first opportunity. That almost all of the participants interviewed were awaiting their chance to leave the sample college gives an indication of the poor level of student satisfaction with the sample college. Although this issue might be classified under the student goals theme, all of these participants spoke about taking advantage of the opportunity to leave without specifying whether they were waiting for another study or job opportunity. Moreover, all of the supporting quotations relate to the context of the quality of the student experience in the sample college. These students asserted that they were dissatisfied with the institution and that the only reason they remained enrolled was that they had no other choice.

In the following quotation, participant PS2 used an Arabic expression that has an equivalent English proverb. This proverb is translated here to illustrate his poor
experience with the sample college and his strong desire to pursue any alternative
opportunity that presents to him:

Participant PS2: If I have another opportunity I will consider it as a
drowning man who clutches at a straw, I will withdraw without thinking
or hesitation

In the next three quotations, participants PS5, PS9 and PS14 share the same idea to
that of the above participant. All of them emphasised two main points: ‘immediate
leaving’ and ‘without thinking’. This indicates a very low level of satisfaction:

Participant PS5: If I have another opportunity I will take this advantage
as fast as I can
Participant PS9: If there is a chance out of this college I will leave
immediately without a bit of thinking
Participant PS14: When I find a chance out of this college I will leave
immediately

Moreover, in all of the above quotations and other responses in the students’ data,
all of the participants spoke about withdrawing, without specifying whether they would
do so for a study or job opportunity. This might suggest that these students did not care
about the type of future opportunity, provided it took them out of the sample college.

Finally, in the next quotation, participant PS11 used a very strong local expression
/Aseeb Aboh/ to express his desire to leave. The best possible translation of this
expression is that he would leave the college and everything related to it, as if he wanted
to remove his relationships with the college from the roots:

Participant PS11: When I find an opportunity outside this college I will
/Aseeb Aboh/ leave it and leave everything related to it
Students have no rights

The second issue under the low student satisfaction category is the lack of students’ rights in the sample college, as perceived by the majority of the participants in the two focus groups. Seventy-three per cent of the persister students (11 of 15 participants) reported that they had no rights as students in the college. This was classified as a low student satisfaction issue because all of the complaints were reported during the discussion of the student experience with the administrative sector of the college. The following quotations are examples of the participants’ statements:

Participant PS1: We do not get our human rights in this college … you have no rights in this college and you fear from the negative consequences if you ask about them
Participant PS2: No rights, no dignity, there is nothing for students, just study and shut up
Participant PS9: Students have no rights in this college, only a student, a table, a paper and a pen
Participant PS10: There are no rights for students
Participant PS14: Students have no voice

6.3.1.4 College rules

The college rules category groups all of the issues that are related to the negative impact of the college rules on the student experience and consequently their persistence. In this category, 93% of the participants (14 out of 15) reported issues related to the rules and restrictions of the sample college. These issues were classified under the following two subcategories:

- Unreasonable restrictions
- Forcing students to attend cultural lectures.

The following sections detail these issues, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.
Unreasonable restrictions

Participants from both focus groups talked about the irrational restrictions of the sample college. Eight students (53% of the participants) raised issues regarding rules that they thought did not make sense. They spoke about the administration ‘forcing’ students to wear the national dress and preventing them from spending their break times in the planted areas of the college and in the empty classrooms. During the discussion of these issues, the students noted being particularly unhappy about the non-negotiable and illogical nature of these restrictions. The following quotations are from the students’ responses:

*Participant PS3:* The compulsion in the college to wear the national dress is very bad thing
*Participant PS4:* Preventing students from standing on the planted places
*Participant PS5:* Forcing students to wear the national dress and to keep their hair short is a childish attitude
*Participant PS7:* Forcing students to wear the national dress is one of my biggest criticisms of the college system
*Participant PS8:* Standing on grass is prohibited ... it is not allowed to stay in the empty classes during breaks and they force us to sign a pledge not to do that
*Participant PS9:* My experience in the college is good to some extent but it was full of restrictions and difficulties
*Participant PS11:* They do not allow us to stand on the grass
*Participant PS15:* We can’t even stand on the grass

Forcing students to attend cultural lectures

Forcing students to attend cultural lectures another of the most frequent issues raised by the participants. In the focus groups, 14 participants expressed their irritation and dissatisfaction with being forced to attend cultural lectures that were not related to their study programs. According to the participants, the college administration occasionally arranged public ‘awareness’ lectures on a variety of topics. All of the
participants in the two focus groups reported that, when there was to be a lecture, the staff of the student services department usually came to their classes to ask them to attend. The participants stated that if they did not attend, they would ask their teachers to mark them absent for that class. According to the students, most of the topics of the lectures were not of interest to them and they were not keen to attend, especially considering the long learning hours of the ESL intensive program. The following are examples of the participants’ responses.

*Participant PS3:* Attending cultural activities is compulsory they are useless lectures we do not benefit from them at all
*Participant PS9:* Some of these symposia are unimportant for students, forcing them to attend will make them ignore to pay any attention to the topics

Some students stated that forcing students to attend these lectures meant that they had a negative impact on students. In the following quotations, participants PS1, PS6 and PS15 asserted that students could not benefit from these lectures so long as they were forced to attend; they would only be affected negatively:

*Participant PS1:* Because attending these lectures is mandatory they have negative consequences and students do not benefit from them
*Participant PS6:* Forcing students to attend these lectures does not help and has negative impact on the students
*Participant PS15:* Forcing students to attend the extracurricular lectures affects their ability to benefit from them

Further, some students considered this issue quite a serious one. In the next quotation, participant PS4 likened forcing students to attend extracurricular activities to controlling their minds. He believed that the college administration saw the students as minors that needed their behaviour and way of thinking monitored:
Participant PS4: Forcing students to attend the elective cultural lectures is a type of controlling our minds

This idea was supported by statements from participants PS7 and PS8, who believed that the college management did not see them as adults:

Participant PS7: Attending the extracurricular activities should not be compulsory, we are not their kids, they don’t even announce for them in advance
Participant PS8: You have to attend these lectures, it is nonnegotiable, you don’t feel like a student you feel like they own us

6.3.1.5 Timetabling

Timetabling policy issues were reported by many participants during the two focus groups. One of the major problems from the perspectives of three students was the large time gaps between lectures. According to the participants, the reason the ESL program timetables had such long breaks between classes was that the number of student groups exceeded the capacity of the language centre. The participants raised this issue when describing the things that they did not like about their college. They asserted that this issue had negatively affected their experience at the sample college.

Moreover, most of the students associated this issue with some other issues reported above, such as the poor student facilities and unreasonable restrictions, especially those that prevented students from spending their breaks in the empty classrooms or the planted areas of the college. It is clear from the participants’ responses that they were struggling between the long waiting times and the lack of student lounges and facilities. This was especially true for students who did not have cars (see the statement from participant NS2 in the previous chapter). The following are quotations from the persister students’ responses:
Participant PS8: During the breaks students can’t even stay in the empty classes and if they did they will be asked to sign a pledge not to do it again
Participant PS10: We do not have a place to stay during break times
Participant PS11: Break times make me sick, in addition we are not allowed to spend these times in our classes

**6.3.1.6 Low sense of belonging**

During the discussion of the quality of the student experience in the sample college, some of the participants’ responses indicated a low level of engagement with the system of their college. Four students reported that they did not even have student cards to affiliate them with the college. In the following quotation, one of these students (participant PS7) indicated that this might weaken students’ trust in their college:

*Participant PS7: There are no cards for the students, they are important to build the students trust on the college*

In the next quotation, while describing his relationship with the college, participant PS12 emphasised the importance of the student card as a symbol of students’ belonging to the college society:

*Participant PS12: Even a card to identify you as a student in this college does not exist*

The next two quotations from the responses of participants PS10 and PS15 support these concerns. These two participants raised this issue of having no student card while listing the most negative issues they had experienced during their study in the sample college:

*Participant PS10: We have no student cards
Participant PS15: Students do not have identification cards*
6.3.1.7 Staff attitude

The last category under the poor institutional experience theme is that of staff attitude. In this category, 12 of the 15 participants from the focus groups raised issues related to the behaviour of college administrative staff and the way they dealt with students. These issues were classified under the following three subcategories:

- Staff negative attitude
- Disrespecting students
- Intimidating students if they complain

In their discussion of these issues, the participants focused more on the actions and behaviours of the administrative staff than on the college rules. These participants believed that the sample college had no clear procedures regulating the role of the administrative staff to control their power over the students. Moreover, they believed that there were no regulations to prevent the college administrative staff from dealing with the students in a controlling way. The next sections present these issues with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

Negative staff attitude

The issue of the negative attitude of the administrative staff was one of the most discussed issues in both focus groups. Eighty per cent of the participants (12 participants) reported having had negative experiences regarding the way the administrative staff dealt with them and how they applied the college rules:

Participant PS3: The attitude and treatments of the administrative staff is too bad
Participant PS4: The attitude of the administrative staff is too bad, they are prejudiced against students
Participant PS5: Regarding the social experience or how they deal with me I see it as bad and more than bad
Participant PS7: Student service is bad the treatment is bad
Participant PS12: The treatment of the administrative staff is bad

Moreover, some participants believed that this strict way of dealing with the students had become the normal approach for all of the administrative staff:

Participant PS2: The treatment of the administrative staff is too bad it becomes a habit as if they are forced to do their jobs

In the following quotation, in addition to his agreement with the above views, participant PS8 suggested that this problem is due to a lack of training and education on the part of the administrative staff of the sample college, who he perceived not to be well trained enough to deal with the students:

Participant PS8: The treatment in this college is bad there is no education they do not accept dealing in a nice way

Disrespecting students

The second issue under the negative staff attitude category is the issue of the administrative staff not respecting students, as reported by six of the 15 participants (40%). When describing their experience with the student services department, these six persister participants said that when they needed to deal with the staff, they often felt like they had been disrespected. The following three quotations are examples from the students’ responses:

Participant PS2: Students have no rights or dignity
Participant PS11: When talking about the student services department: There is no respect
Participant PS14: Very bad treatment in the student services department, they do not respect students
Intimidate students if complain

The last issue in this category pertains to the claims of some participants that they would be intimidated by the administrative staff of the sample college if they made any complaints or asked for their needs to be met. Twenty per cent of the 15 participants from the two focus groups reported their fear of the negative consequences of either asking for their rights or complaining. The following three quotations are from the participants’ responses:

Participant PS1: We don’t have rights here; it might have a negative result if you ask for them
Participant PS3: You can’t ask for your rights I’m afraid of the bad consequences on me
Participant PS8: My right to complain about staff is being violated and I’m afraid from the bad consequences if I complain

6.3.2 Student characteristics

The student characteristics theme is the second theme that emerged from the data of the persister students who participated in the two focus groups. During the discussion of the factors affecting student retention in the sample college, 14 participants from the focus groups (93%) raised issues that could be grouped under this theme. These issues were regrouped according to their similarities under the following two main categories:

- Student goals
- Student commitments

In the following sections, the findings on the factors of student attrition under these categories, as perceived by the persister students, are reported, with supporting quotations from the responses of the participants in the focus groups.
6.3.2.1 Student goals

The student goals category is the first category under the student characteristics theme. This category includes all of the issues related to student goals that were perceived by the persister students as having a negative impact on their persistence. These issues were reported by 13 of the 15 participants (87%). They were grouped under the following three subcategories:

- The sample college was not my first choice
- Getting a job
- Another study opportunity

The following sections report the findings of each subcategory, with supporting quotations from the persister participants’ responses.

The sample college was not my first choice

A remarkable 67% of the persister students who participated in the two focus groups reported that the sample college had not been their first choice. Ten of the 15 participants stated that they had enrolled at the sample college only because they had no other place to go. Some of them said that they had applied for but failed to get admission into local universities. Most said that this was due to their low high school GPAs, although some could not apply to any institution other than the sample college because they achieved low marks in the GAT or did not sit for the exam, which is a requirement for all Saudi universities but not for the sample college. This was an important factor because most students, as mentioned above in the low student satisfaction category, stated that they might leave the sample college at the first
opportunity. Thus, if they have the opportunity, they are more likely to take advantage of it. The following quotations are from the responses of those students:

Participant PS1: Not my choice in other words it was the only choice  
Participant PS2: Most students got here by chance, they did not get admission in universities or they did not find any other educational or job opportunities  
Participant PS4: Because of the low GPA of the high school  
Participant PS6: The GPA of the high school that force most students to come here  
Participant PS10: I come here because I was not admitted in any other institution

Getting a job

The second issue under the student goals category is getting a job. It is worthwhile recalling that, according to the rules of the sample college, students are not allowed to have a job during their study. In discussing students’ needs and goals, some participants stated that they would leave the sample college if they found the right job before graduation. If presented with the right job offer, these participants did not consider it would be worthwhile to remain in their study program preparing for a job. In the next two quotations, two participants support this idea:

Participant PS3: Yes I will leave this college if I find a job  
Participant PS7: If I get a job opportunity I will leave this college without any thinking

Some of the persister students attributed the majority of student withdrawals from the sample college to this factor. In the following quotations, three participants from the two focus groups said that most of their non-persister classmates withdrew from the sample college for this reason:

Participant PS5: Most of the withdrawal can be attributed to getting a job, admission in a better institution
Participant PS11: *I think jobs are the main reason behind student withdrawals*

Participant PS15: *Some of the students left this college because they found jobs*

**Another study opportunity**

Some participants stated that they would leave the sample college if they were offered an opportunity to study in another educational institution. Three participants said that they came to the sample college only because they could not gain admission into the institutions of their first choice and that once they were admitted, they would leave. The following are quotations from their responses:

*Participant PS3: Yes I will leave this college if I get admitted in a better institution*

*Participant PS5: Most of the withdrawal can be attributed to getting a job, admission in a better institution*

*Participant PS6: I’m here because there is no better study opportunity … I will leave when I find this opportunity*

**6.3.2.2 Student commitments**

The second category under the students’ characteristics theme is students’ commitments. In this category, 10 of the 15 participants (67%) discussed how students’ external commitments could affect their ability to persist in their study programs. This includes the students’ family and work commitments and all life responsibilities outside college. These participants argued that these commitments are usually stronger than students’ study goals and commitment. They asserted that if a student were not able to reconcile his external commitments and his study, he would most likely withdraw. The following are quotations from the responses of the persister students in the focus groups:
Participant PS2: Sometimes the student’s life commitments force him to withdraw from his study
Participant PS9: I don’t think the student’s goals will help him to persist; the reality of his commitments will be stronger
Participant PS10: External commitments play main role in my opinion and I don’t think that the student will persist
Participant PS11: I think the student’s external commitments are stronger than his passion to study
Participant PS14: I think the student’s external commitments are stronger than his study goal

6.4 Summary of the persister students’ focus group findings

In summary, the analysis of the data from the persister students’ focus groups resulted in the emergence of 18 subcategories, regrouped under nine categories and subsequently under two themes. The 18 subcategories represented the most frequent issues and factors affecting students’ experiences at the sample college and their subsequent retention as perceived by the 15 persister students participating in this study. These common issues and factors were grouped under the following nine categories: student services, poor orientation, low student satisfaction, college rules, timetabling, low sense of belonging, staff attitude, student goals and external commitments. The 15 participants of the two focus groups talked about issues related to the above nine categories and how they negatively affected student persistence in the sample college.

The final step in the thematic analysis of the persister students’ data was to classify these nine categories according to their similarities under umbrella themes, to help in identifying the source of the research problem. These nine categories were classified under the following two themes: poor institutional experience and student characteristics.
Chapter Seven: Description of Qualitative Data: The Academic and Administrative Staff

7.1 Introduction

This is the third chapter presenting the emergent themes of the qualitative data analysis. In this chapter, the data from the academic and administrative staff surveys is analysed according to the analysis procedure discussed in Chapter Four. This includes presenting the most frequent issues and factors that affected the students. These issues and factors were explored from the perspectives of the academic and administrative staff at the sample college. Moreover, the chapter presents the new themes that emerged from the data and confirms the predetermined themes derived from the student retention models and studies in the literature of student retention in higher education, as presented in Chapter Three.

This chapter consists of five main sections: the introduction, the descriptions of the participants’ demographic and personal characteristics, the role of the academic and administrative staff in the sample college, the emergent themes from the academic and administrative staff surveys and a brief summary of the major findings.

7.2 Participants’ demographic characteristics

The participants in the qualitative phase of this study were four non-persister students, 15 persister students and 10 academic and administrative staff of the sample
college. These participants were divided into the following three main groups: non-persisters, persisters and staff. Three different data collection instruments were used to collect the qualitative data from these participants: in-depth telephone interviews, focus groups and surveys. The sample in this section includes 10 academic and administrative staff from the sample college departments related to the ESL students; that is, the ESL centre, the student services and registration departments and the library. During the analysis, these 10 participants were coded with the letter (F) for ‘faculty’ and numbered randomly from 1 to 10. Table 5.3 highlights some of the other relevant demographic characteristics of this study sample.

7.3 The role of the academic and administrative staff

To obtain a better understanding of the data that emerged from the staff survey in the next section, the roles of the academic and administrative staff of the sample college are presented. This includes their duties as they relate to the students, their power and their responsibilities. See Section 2.3 for a detailed description of the sample college.

First, the academic staff of the sample college are only responsible for teaching. They have nothing to do with the students other than teaching and taking their
attendance. There are no office hours to meet students after class, there is no academic supervision and their contact details are not even published anywhere on campus or on the college website. If a teacher has any problem with a student, that student is sent to the registration department.

Conversely, the administrative staff are responsible for all non-teaching interactions related to the students. In addition to the regular administrative duties of a registration department in any other tertiary institution, the registration and student services departments of the sample college are responsible for the entire admission process, admission exams, placing students into the appropriate ESL levels, applying absence and dismissal rules, accepting or refusing students’ excuses for absence, applying the college behaviour rules, assembling and conducting disciplinary committees and applying disciplinary procedures (including student suspension and dismissal), arranging and distributing student timetables, calling students from their classes if any problems require investigation and conducting daily rounds to maintain order, especially during breaks.

All these practices are done in a complete absence of any academic supervision. They are conducted by administrative staff that have not received training in such duties. The only academic staff member in these departments is the director of the student services department, who is generally not responsible for the regular daily practices of these departments. His role is more like an administrative manager of the employees of these two departments.

For the students, knowing that the administrative staff are responsible for all these duties and that they have this power makes them more cautious when dealing with
administrators. Typically, students acquiesce to the requests of the administration, without questioning their legitimacy. In fact, the sample college is well known in the tertiary education community in Saudi Arabia for its strict rules and student discipline.

7.4 The emergent themes from the staff surveys

Staff surveys were conducted through email interviews with the academic and administrative staff of the sample college. The total number of participants in this phase of data collection was 10 academic and administrative staff from the departments related to the students. These staff included ESL teachers, librarians and staff from the registration and student services departments. The collected data were in the form of written detailed responses to interview questions.

First, a frequencies table was created to identify the most cited issues and factors affecting students’ experiences and their consequent retention in the sample college as perceived by staff participants and related to the research questions. The initial descriptive analysis revealed 19 issues and factors stated by the staff participants as potentially affecting the student experience in the sample college and leading some students to withdraw from their study programs. These issues and factors were phrased as 19 statements. Table 5.8 lists these statements and shows the frequency with which the statements appeared in the staff surveys.
Table 7.2 Most frequent factors in the staff surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Frequency out of 10</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low admission standards</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will leave at the first opportunity</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students' weak English ability</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff have not heard about retention plans</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a job</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferring to a better or higher institution</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuses are not accepted</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of extracurricular activities</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor student facilities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff negative attitude</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps between classes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak academic level in high school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative first impression</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of social consultants</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students do not know their rights</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor preparation for the transition to the new system</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespecting students and racism</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules and restrictions</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectations beyond students’ abilities</td>
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</table>

Later, these 19 most frequently mentioned statements were grouped according to their similarities to establish broader categories. The grouping of the similar issues and factors resulted in the emergence of 11 categories. These categories are admission policy, low student satisfaction, lack of retention plans, timetabling, dismissal policy, student services, poor orientation, college rules, high expectations, students’ academic abilities and student goals. Finally, repeated readings of the participants’ responses led to the grouping of similar categories under the following three main themes: poor institutional experience, high academic requirements and student characteristics. Table 5.9 shows all of these subcategories, categories and themes.
Table 7.3 Staff survey themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor institutional experience</td>
<td>Admission policy</td>
<td>Low admission standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low student satisfaction</td>
<td>Will leave at the first opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of retention plans</td>
<td>Staff have not heard about retention plans</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timetabling</td>
<td>Gaps between classes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dismissal policy</td>
<td>Excuses are not accepted</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student services</td>
<td>Lack of extracurricular activities</td>
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<td>Poor preparation for the transition to the new system</td>
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<td>College rules</td>
<td>Rules and restrictions</td>
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<td>Administrative staff negative attitude</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disrespecting students and racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High academic requirements</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>Expectations are beyond students’ abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student characteristics</td>
<td>Students’ academic abilities</td>
<td>Weak English ability</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Weak academic level in high school</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Goals</td>
<td>Getting a job</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transferring to a better or higher institution</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that the issues that emerged from the data of the staff surveys were classified under the following three main themes:

- Poor institutional experience
- High academic requirements
- Student characteristics.

Under each theme, there are categories and subcategories that cluster the key ideas in relation to the low student retention phenomenon in the sample college from the perspective of the college’s academic and administrative staff. The following sections detail the findings of each theme, supported by quotations from the participants’ responses to the survey questions.
7.4.1 Poor institutional experience

The poor institutional experience theme encompasses all those factors related to students’ experiences with the college administrative system that might influence their retention. Ninety per cent of the staff participants (9 out of 10) raised issues about and commented on some rules, policies and practices of the sample college that might affect students’ experiences during their study. These issues were grouped according to their similarities into the following eight categories:

- Admission policy
- Low student satisfaction
- Lack of retention plans
- Timetabling
- Dismissal policy
- Student services
- Poor orientation
- College rules.

The following sections detail the findings of each category, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

7.4.1.1 Admission policy

Admission is the gateway to the college, where the quality of the admitted students can be controlled according to the academic requirements of the offered programs and capacity of the college. During this stage, the process of selecting students to be admitted can depend heavily on the number of applicants. This means that the larger the number of applicants, the greater the chance for the college to select students they deem more suitable to the college’s objectives and programs. However, although
the last annual report of the sample college showed that the number of applicants is 20 times larger than the admission capacity of the college, 80% of the staff participants indicated that the sample college’s student retention problem was related to low admission standards.

The analysis of the data showed that eight of the 10 staff participants, including teachers and registration staff, suggested a reform to the admission policy. Some spoke specifically about entrance and placement exams, while others (5 participants) focused more on their belief that the sample college uses its low admission standards to attract a larger number of applicants.

Participants F2 and F3 believed that a key factor in addressing the student attrition phenomenon would be reforming the admission policy. During the discussion of the actions needed to increase retention, participant F3, who works in the registration department, said:

*Participant F3: There is no any action to stop student attrition and if I have authority I will do the following: reform the admission policy*

Participant F2, who works in the student services department, had the same view. He stated in response to a question regarding the attrition factors:

*Participant F2: The sample college should review the input procedure*

Participant F4, who works in the registration department, believed that student attrition was related to the college admission policy. He claimed that there was no clear admission procedure and the college management was focusing on quantity over quality.
He said in response to a question regarding the role of the admission policy on student retention:

*Participant F4: For admission policy, yes it is related because of the unsystematic admission and looking for quantity over quality*

This point was also raised by participant F3. He claimed that the college management had lowered the admission requirements without explanation. He stated that this action resulted in admitting students who were not capable of persisting and who were thus more likely to withdraw before completion:

*Participant F3: Lowering the admission standards resulted in admitting unqualified students who can't persist in their programs later*

A quotation from the interview of participant F5, the director of the ESL centre, supported the claim that some of the admitted students had a lower academic level than required. Commenting on the low academic level of some of the students and on how they had come to be admitted, participants F5 stated:

*Participant F5: Some students have very low academic ability. I really wonder how they get admitted*

The previous quotation gives an indication of a more serious issue beyond that of low admission standards. If the director of the ESL centre has to wonder how some students are admitted, who is responsible for determining this?

Some participants were more specific when criticising the admission policy of the sample college. Participants F6 and F8 relate the admission problem to the way of examining new applicants. They suggested a new admission exam and a review of the current exam. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the sample college requires applicants to sit for an entrance exam. Although 30% of the questions in this exam test applicants’
ability in the English language, the results of these questions are not used to place the students in their levels of the ESL program.

Participant F6, who is an English teacher, noted that the English ability of some students in the ESL program might not help them to persist. He suggested a placement test to be added to the admission procedure to help in selecting students who have the minimum level of English that matches the ESL program requirement:

*Participant F6: There is a problem with the admission procedure. I suggest an English placement test ...*

Participant F8 shared similar concerns regarding the admission exam. When talking about the actions that the college should take to minimise student attrition, participant F8 said:

*Participant F8: The college should review the entrance exam*

He believed that this phenomenon could be partially solved by paying more attention to the applicant selection process through an exam that identifies those students with the ability to complete their study programs.

**7.4.1.2 Low student satisfaction**

Low student satisfaction was another serious issue raised in the staff surveys. Eight of the 10 participants perceived that students were not satisfied with their experiences in the sample college. The reasons suggested varied between the college’s practices, the type and level of the qualifications offered by the college and the employment prospects of the graduates.
As mentioned in the context chapter, the sample college has some rules and regulations regarding the way they deal with students that differ from those of other local institutions. This was noted as a source of dissatisfaction for some students. Participant F5, the director of the ESL centre, believed that the students were not pleased with the type of education provided by the sample college when compared to other Saudi institutions:

*Participant F5: Students are used to a different type of education and I don’t think they are satisfied with the type of this college*

Participant F2 shared a similar view. He believed that low student satisfaction was related to the practices of the sample college over recent years. He stated that:

*Participant F2: I don’t think the students are satisfied with the college practice; there is nothing to prove this in the college history*

In the following quotation, participant F4 gave more details to support the above claim that students are not pleased with their experience in the sample college. He also talked about students’ dissatisfaction with the level of academic qualification offered by the college. Moreover, he stated that the rules and restrictions of the sample college place the students under pressure:

*Participant F4: No the students are not satisfied, the general view is that universities are better, the pressure of strict rules of the sample college…*

The importance of the student satisfaction level to the research problem is that it might encourage some students to transfer to other institutions or leave the educational system. Four of the 10 participants stated that students are likely to transfer to other educational institutions if given the opportunity. They asserted that the only reason that
students remain enrolled in the sample college is that they do not have other places to go. The following quotations are from the participants’ responses:

Participant F2: If a student has another opportunity he will not stay in the sample college because he doesn’t trust what the college offer to him

Participant F4: No he will not stay ... the reason is that if it is a study opportunity he looks for a better place and if it is a job he enrolled in the college to get a job and if that job came was available there is no need to study

Participant F7: Sure he will withdraw without thinking and he will not regret that

The language used in the last quotation by participant F7, who is an English teacher and a coordinator in the ESL program, gives an indication of the extent of the student dissatisfaction, as perceived by a teacher who works with the students on a daily basis.

7.4.1.3 Lack of retention plans

Retention plans are important procedures in many educational institutions that help students to persist in their study programs. The importance of such strategies is even greater in those institutions that experience high student attrition, such as is the case of the sample college of this study.

However, in spite of the high attrition rates that were reported in the annual reports of the sample college and confirmed by the data of this study, eight of the 10 staff participants stated that no actions were being taken by the sample college to address this phenomenon. In the following quotation, participant F7, an English teacher and a coordinator in the ESL program, claimed that the college officials were not interested in addressing the low student retention problem:
Participant F7: *In my view the last concern of this college is to take action to solve this phenomenon, they are still living their past repetition*

A similar view was reported by participant F4, who works in the registration department. In the following quotation, he stated that the college management was aware of the issue with student retention, but was doing nothing to solve it:

*Participant F4: The college knows that there is a problem with student retention but they don’t take any action*

The following two quotations from a registrar and a librarian support the above arguments:

*Participant F3: There is not any action to stop student attrition ...*

*Participant F8: In fact there is no any action the sample college takes to stop student attrition*

### 7.4.1.4 Timetabling

Issues related to the timetabling and the process of distributing the class’s hours are classified under the college administrative system because they are the responsibility of the registration and student services departments. As discussed in Chapter Two, five and six, students of the sample college usually complain about the gaps between classes in the ESL program. This issue was also considered by many of the staff participants as an important issue that might affect students’ persistence in the sample college. They claimed that long gaps between classes might affect the students’ attendance, especially in view of the absence of student facilities and the strict rules on minimum attendance hours.

Importantly, participant F1, the manager of the student services, put this issue at the top of his recommendations to solve the low student retention phenomenon:
This indicates the seriousness of the timetabling problem and the impact it has on student retention, but also suggests that even the people in charge, despite having an idea of what needs to be done, have no authority to reform the system. The following is the response of participant F1:

*Participant F1: Focus more on distributing the hours of the timetables and not to leave gaps between the classes*

The following quotations from the responses of two administrative staff of the registration and student services departments supported this view. Talking about attrition factors, these respondents argued that students might be negatively impacted by the way their class hours were distributed:

*Participant F2: The language programs starting time and the long breaks between classes*

*Participant F4: There are huge breaks between classes and there isn’t any suitable place for the students to spend this time and they are not allowed to stay in classes during breaks*

### 7.4.1.5 Dismissal policy

One of the most cited issues affecting student retention in the sample college as perceived by the academic and administrative staff respondents was the dismissal policy. While the dismissal policy affects students who fail academically or exceed the limit on absence hours and the focus of this study is on voluntary withdrawal only, this point is nevertheless considered here, as some students may be indirectly influenced by the stress of this policy and the way it is applied in the sample college. The result may be students either transferring to other institutions that have less strict rules or otherwise leaving the sample college before they have been asked to do so.
The sample college is the only tertiary institution among those in Jeddah city, and among most of those in Saudi Arabia, that does not accept medical or official excuses for absence. If a student’s absence exceeds 20 per cent of the total hours of the course, he will be dismissed from his course the first time and from the college system the second time. Further, even if a student’s absence is only in one subject, he will be dismissed from all of the subjects in which he is enrolled in that semester.

The following quotations from the surveys of the manager of the student services (F1), two staff from the student services and registration departments (F2, F3), a librarian (F8) and a teacher and a coordinator in the ESL centre (F7) support this finding:

*Participant F1: When asked about student satisfaction: most of the complaints are about that the college does not care about the absence excuses*

*Participant F2: When taking about the actions to increase retention: The college should review the following ... absence and dismissal policy*

*Participant F3: One of the most common factors of student attrition is the dismissal policy. They don’t consider the students circumstances*

*Participant F7: The most complaint I heard from students was about the absence policy*

*Participant F8: Yes, especially not considering the students absence excuses*

7.4.1.6 Student services

The student services category combines all of the issues affecting the low student retention phenomenon that are related to the practices and duties of the student services department, as perceived by the academic and administrative staff. These issues were classified under the following three subcategories:

- Lack of extracurricular activities
- Poor student facilities
- Lack of social consultant.
The following sections detail the findings of each subcategory, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

**Lack of extracurricular activities**

Regarding the lack of extracurricular activities, six of the 10 staff participants spoke about the important role of having sports and social activities in increasing student retention. At the time of the surveys, the sample college ran no extracurricular activities, as confirmed by some of the participants (participants F1, F6, F7 and F10).

The following quotations are drawn from the responses of some of the teachers and administrative staff to the question of whether low retention was related to the lack of extracurricular activities:

- Participant F6: Yes, I strongly agree with this. The college is missing this approach
- Participant F8: Yes, the students will never think about withdrawing from such society
- Participant F7: Sure, such activities are essential and compulsory in any institution other than this

The last quotation, taken from the responses of a teacher and coordinator in the ESL centre, confirms that this college lacks some of the services considered basic and fundamental in any other institution.

**Poor student facilities**

Student facilities are essential to students during their study in any institution. Students do not spend all of their time in classes. They have other needs to fulfil during their study day, such as printing and photocopying, eating, using the bathroom and many other daily needs. If these facilities are poor, especially when compared to other
institutions in the same city, students might have weaker bonds with their campus community, making it easier for them to decide to transfer when given the opportunity.

In the staff surveys, five of the 10 participants raised the issue of the poor quality of the student facilities, with some participants relating this to student persistence. In the following quotations, the poor facilities issue was confirmed by the manager of the student services (F1) and another staff member of the same department (F2).

*Participant F1: All of the student facilities need improvement*
*Participant F2: Student facilities in this branch are very poor*

Participant F5, who is a teacher and a coordinator in the ESL centre, also confirmed this:

*Participant F5: Other than the library students facilities are not as they should*

Participants F3 and F4, who work in the registration department, not only confirmed the poor quality of the student facilities but also spoke about the influence of this issue on student persistence. The following are quotations from their responses:

*Participant F3: They are very poor and related to the attrition problem*

*Participant F4: Facilities are very poor, I don’t think this is a big problem to good students they can coexist with it, but for those in risk this might push them to leave the college*

**Lack of social consultants**

Academic and social consultations can help students in many ways; for example, they can help them to solve their personal problems before they become more serious and begin to affect their performance. Two of the English teachers noted that having social consultants could help in minimising the risk of student attrition. When talking
about the actions the college should take to improve student retention, participant F6 said:

*Participant F6: The college should have a department to help students to deal with their social and psychological issues ... this will make the educational process goes on*

Further, when participant F10 was asked about the role of the college administrative system on the student attrition phenomenon, he said:

*Participant F10: Yes, admission policy, ESL courses distribution and the lack of social consultants*

### 7.4.1.7 Poor orientation

The sample college usually allocates the first two hours of the first day of the new academic year to distributing timetables and giving the new students a brief orientation to the college’s rules and restrictions. Five of the 10 staff participants raised issues regarding the negative impact of this orientation day on students’ future experiences. These issues were classified under the following three subcategories:

- Negative first impression
- Students do not know their rights
- Poor preparation for the transition to the new system.

The following sections detail the findings of each subcategory, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

*Negative first impression*

Some teachers and administrative staff believed that talking about the college’s strict rules and restrictions on the first day might give students a negative first impression. Participant F4, who works in the registration department, which is the
department responsible for organising the orientation day, believed that this was not the appropriate way to welcome new students. As part of discussing the actions required for minimising student attrition, he raised the point that the college intimidates students on their first day instead of motivating them:

Participant F4: They use the first day to talk about the restrictions, disciplines and warnings instead of taking about the advantages

Participant F3, another staff member of the registration department, was of the same opinion about the way the college receives new students. He agreed with participant F4 that negative student orientation may affect student retention in the sample college. The next quotation was taken from his answer regarding the most frequent factors affecting student retention in the sample college. He placed ‘bad orientation’ as the third of six factors:

Participant F3: The way they meet new students in the first day is too bad

Student rights

Another issue raised by two staff participants was that students did not know their rights as members of the sample college. Participants F4 and F6 raised this issue in the context of the actions needed to minimise the student attrition problem. Both participants assumed that if students knew their rights, they would be able to ask for help instead of giving up and transferring to other institutions. Further, participant F4, who works in the registration department, claimed that some of the administrative staff were happy that students did not know their rights and wanted this to continue. The next two quotations were taken from the responses of participants F4 and F6, respectively:
Participant F4: Students don’t know their rights. Some of the staff in the registration departments want this to continue

Participant F6: There should be an effort to inform students about their rights

Poor preparation for the transition to new system

Another issue under the poor orientation category relates to the poor preparation of students for the transition to the higher education system. Some staff participants attributed the early student withdrawals to their poor preparation for the transition from the high school system to the tertiary education system. Although other parties might share the responsibility for this preparation with the sample college, participants F8 and F10 blamed the college for not making an effort during the orientation day to minimise the risk of stress for students. In the following quotation, participant F8 ranked this as the first and most important factor affecting student attrition in his opinion:

Participant F8: The difference between the two education systems ... the college does not prepare students to this transition... Moreover, the students are under huge stress from what they hear from the non-persister students about the college system

Participant F10, an English teacher, shared a similar idea about the influence of the fear of transition. In his discussion of the relation between the teaching method used in the ESL program and the student attrition problem, participant F10 stated that students were not prepared for the college system and did not know about the teaching methods used in the ESL centre until they started. He said:

Participant F10: Students may be surprised by the language, the intensive teaching method and quit

The above statement clearly shows that participant F10 believed student confusion in the new system to be a direct cause of attrition.
7.4.1.8 College rules

Every institution has a set of rules and regulations designed to help both students and the institution to reach their goals. However, for adult learners, such as for the students of the sample college, having to follow such rules and regulations could be a sensitive issue that might affect their experiences in their college. The way these rules are applied and the meaning they convey are important to students. When rules seemed ‘meaningless’, their enforcement could negatively affect students’ experiences.

In the case of this study, issues regarding the rules and the ways they were applied were raised by a teacher and coordinator in the ESL centre and two staff from the registration department. These issues were classified under the following three subcategories:

- Rules and restrictions
- Administrative staff negative attitude
- Disrespecting students and racism.

The following sections detail the findings of each subcategory, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

Rules and restrictions

According to some staff participants, some of the college’s rules acted as restrictions and had the potential to affect student persistence in the sample college. Participant F3, who worked in the registration department, believed that these restrictions could lead students to transfer, especially if they compared the rules of the college with those of the surrounding institutions. In the following quotation, participant F3 discussed why students transfer to other institutions:
Participant F3: Too many restrictions on students compared to other institutions

Participant F4, who also works in the registration department, put this issue as one of the most important factors leading students to withdraw from the sample college. The following is a quotation from his responses:

Participant F4: The strict system of the student services and registration departments

Administrative staff negative attitude

Many institutions around the world have gained their reputation partially from the strictness of their rules. In the following quotation, participant F10, an international ESL teacher, relayed his observation that good and serious students had no problem with the strict rules of the sample college:

Participant F10: Yes, there is withdrawal because the system of this college is so good for some students

However, according to some staff participants, students might be willing to coexist with the strict rules but not with the way these rules are applied and the attitude of the staff responsible for applying them. When talking about the way the administrative staff applied the rules, participant F4 stated that they were overly serious and strict about minor issues undeserving of such a focus. The following is a quotation from his responses:

Participant F4: They exaggerate when they look after things that are related to the external appearance of the students such as what they wear and how they look
In the next two quotations, an English teacher (F7) and an administrative staff member (F3) stated that one of the steps that the college should take to increase student retention is to improve the way the college staff deals with students. By discussing this issue when taking about retention plans, both participants agreed that staff members’ negative attitudes had a negative effect on student retention. The following are quotations from the responses of participants F3 and F7, respectively:

**Participant F3:** Staff of the student services department should be trained on how to deal with students

**Participant F7:** Most of the students’ complaints were about … and how staff deal with them … I think the college should accept and understand the students’ needs

**Disrespecting students and racism**

Another related issue concerns the claims of two participants that characterised some of the administrative staff’s dealings with students as racist and disrespectful. These claims were found in the responses of participants F3 and F4. Both participants raised these issues in the context of the factors that lead students to withdraw from the sample college and the actions needed to minimise this. Participants F3 and F4, who work in the registration department, believed that staff attitudes towards students was a key factor in the low retention phenomenon. In the following quotation, participant F3 stated that some of the administrative staff dealt with students in an unprofessional manner with the potential to affect students’ experiences in the college negatively:

**Participant F3:** The way the staff of the student services department deal with students … many restrictions … disrespecting them
In the next quotations, participant F4, who also works in the registration department, agreed with this claim. First, he claimed that the administrative staff are arrogant in their relations with students.

*Participant F4: They deal with students as if they are lower than them*

He even raised the serious issue of staff racism and abuse of power. He claimed that some of the staff gained their power from the authority they had over students. He stated that students knew that administrative staff had the power to dismiss them from the college if they did not obey their rules, as proven in some cases in the past:

*Participant F4: They overuse their authority they sometimes threaten students with dismissal ... students know they can do this from past experience ... the pressure of the college rules ... the way of dealing with students, rigidity, racism, looking for mistakes ... students feel like administrative staff deal with them with disdain ... they lose hope in change*

### 7.4.2 High academic requirements

The second theme to emerge from the staff survey data was that of high academic requirements. This theme grouped all of the factors that are related to the high academic requirements of the sample college that might have an influence on student persistence, as perceived by staff participants. Initially, this theme consisted of the following three categories: academic advising, curriculum and high expectations. However, further readings of the data suggested that only the high expectations category could be validated by quotations from the participants’ responses to the survey questions. Thus, this theme only consists of one category: high expectations.
The following section details the findings of this category, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

7.4.2.1 High expectations

Expectations are beyond students’ abilities

According to two ESL teachers participating in the surveys, the high expectations placed on ESL students might negatively influence their ability to persist in the language program, especially at the first level. Although this issue was classified initially as related to students’ academic ability, the participants related this more to the ESL teachers’ approach and the ESL centre policy. They considered that, separate from students’ academic ability, the levels of the ESL program and teachers’ expectations of new students did not match the average English proficiency level of Saudi high school graduates.

Participants F6 and F7 noted that the college’s expectations of ESL students were beyond their academic ability. They suggested that English teachers should be more realistic regarding what they require from new ESL students. The following quotations are from the responses of participants F6, who is an English teacher, and F7, who is an English teacher and coordinator in the ESL centre.

Participant F7 believed that one of the most important factors influencing student attrition in the ESL program of the sample college is that the starting level in the ESL centre is higher than the English ability of some of the new students. In his response to a question asking about the most important factors that lead students to withdraw from the ESL program, participant F7 said:
Participant F7: First the level of English offered in the ESL is beyond the ability of some students

Participant F6 agreed with the above statement. In the next quotation, he confirmed that there was a gap between the level of the new students’ ability and the first level of the ESL program.

Participant F6: The first level in the ESL centre is an intermediate level which is higher than the level the students should start with

Participant F6 also agreed with participant F7 that this issue might affect student persistence. His quotation above was mentioned in the context of the relationship between the level of the ESL program and the low student retention phenomenon.

Moreover, participant F7 spoke about the teachers’ high expectations of new students. He ranked this issue as the second most important factor leading students to withdraw from the ESL program. He asserted that the expectations of some of the ESL teachers are higher than the students’ academic ability in the English language. He suggested this might make it difficult for some students to continue, leading them to withdraw from the ESL program. In his words:

Participant F7: Second I think that high expectations of some English teachers could be another factor

7.4.3 Student characteristics

The student characteristics theme includes all factors of student attrition in the sample college that are related to students’ characteristics and personal attributes, as perceived by the staff participants. This includes all of the factors that are not related to the sample college, such as the students’ educational background, social and financial status, external commitments and family-related issues. These include the issues that
students bring with them when they enrol in the college or the challenges they experience outside the college environment during their study. The views and issues that were raised as relating to this theme were grouped under the following two categories:

- Students’ academic abilities
- Student goals

The following sections detail the findings of each category, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

7.4.3.1 Students’ academic abilities

‘Students’ academic abilities’ is the first category under the student characteristics theme. This category consists of the following two subcategories:

- Weak English ability
- Weak academic level in high school

Issues related to these two subcategories were raised by nine of the 10 staff participants. The following sections detail the findings under each subcategory, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

Weak English ability

The low level of students’ ability in the English language was one of the most frequently cited factors of student attrition in the sample college, as perceived by some of the staff participants. Eight staff listed this factor as the main reason for the low retention phenomenon in the sample college. They stated that some of the admitted students did not meet the English-proficiency requirement of the ESL program and
consequently found the program difficult and withdrew. The following quotations are
from the responses of some of the teachers and administrative staff participants:

Participant F1: The problem is in the low ability of some students in
English language, that makes them less interested in their programs
and then withdraw
Participant F4: Sure, some students are not qualified to enter ESL
program ...
Participant F6: Some students do not even have the basics of English
language
Participant F7: I think English curriculum in high sc
hool did not prepare
students well and in most of the cases we find that we need to teach
the students the basics of English again

Weak academic level in high school

The second subcategory under students’ academic abilities is the students’ weak
academic preparation in high school. Some of the staff participants believed that some
students were not academically capable of pursuing their studies after high school. They
considered that many of the applicants to the sample college apply because they do not
meet the admission requirements of the local universities. According to this view, such
students are more likely to withdraw at the first challenge they face during their study.
The next three quotations exemplify this view:

Participant F4: Most of the admitted students are from those who could
not get admission in universities ... in every semester we find 60% to
70% of the students like that
Participant F5: I don’t think the students of this college have the skills to
pursue their studies after high school
Participant F10: The admitted students are not academically prepared
to study in the college

7.4.3.2 Student goals

The student goals category contains all of the cited issues pertaining to students’
goals. Students usually have some educational goals and objectives that they want to
achieve by enrolling in a particular college. Some of the staff participants raised the issue that when some students find a better way to achieve their goals, they become more likely to withdraw from the sample college. These goals could be related to employment or to enrolment in an institution of a higher level. The participants’ views were classified under the following two subcategories:

- Getting a job
- Transferring to a better or higher institution

The following sections detail the findings of both subcategories, with supporting quotations from the participants’ responses.

Getting a job

According to the staff participants, ‘getting a job opportunity’ was one of the most frequent reasons for students’ withdrawal from the sample college. Seven of the 10 staff participants presumed that most students would withdraw from the sample college if they were offered a suitable job opportunity. They believed that most students came to the sample college to obtain training to qualify them for the job market. Therefore, in the case of a student finding a suitable job opportunity before finishing his study program, he would be likely to withdraw from the sample college. All of the following quotations are drawn from participants’ responses to the question on the most frequent attrition factors:

Participant F2: Getting a good job opportunity
Participant F3: Jobs are not granted after graduation so once a student finds a job he will withdraw
Participant F4: Students look at the college programs as job training programs so when they find jobs there is no point of studying
Participant F7: For sure the student will withdraw when they have a job or another study opportunity, no doubt of that
Participant F10: Most of non-persisters stop attending their classes because they have jobs

Transferring to a better institution

The second category under student goals is ‘transferring to a better institution’. According to some of the staff participants, some students might see the sample college as an institution with a lower rank than the universities. They presumed that these students came to the sample college only because they could not gain admission to a ‘better’ four-year institution. Thus, if these students were to have the opportunity to enrol in a higher ranked university after starting at the sample college, they would be likely to transfer to that institution. The following quotations are drawn from the responses of the survey participants to the question on the most frequent factors contributing to student attrition at the sample college:

Participant F1: The opportunity of an admission in an institution higher than the sample college
Participant F2: Admitted in a university
Participant F3: Admitted in a better study place
Participant F4: The availability of a place in a university
Participant F5: Admission in another institution

7.5 Summary of the staff surveys’ findings

In summary, the analysis of the staff surveys resulted in the emergence of 19 subcategories, that were regrouped under 11 categories and subsequently under two themes. The 19 subcategories resembled the most frequent issues and factors affecting students’ experiences and consequently their retention in the sample college, as perceived by the 10 academic and administrative staff participating in this study. These common issues and factors were grouped under the following 11 categories: admission policy, low student satisfaction, lack of retention plans, timetabling, dismissal policy,
student services, poor orientation, college rules, high expectations, students’ academic abilities and student goals. The 10 participants of the staff surveys talked about issues related to the above 11 categories and how they negatively affected student persistence in the sample college.

The final step in the thematic analysis of the staff participants’ data was to classify these 11 categories according to their similarities under broader themes to help in identifying the source of the research problem. These 11 categories were classified under the following three themes: poor institutional experience, high academic requirements and student characteristics.
Chapter Eight: Summary and Conclusion of the Qualitative Data

This chapter concludes the qualitative phase of the study. It consisted of the following three sections: summary of the qualitative data, conclusion to the qualitative data and a link to the quantitative phase. The summary section gives a brief overview of the data of all three qualitative chapters to facilitate comparison. The conclusion section discusses the similar issues that emerged from the combined data of the three preceding qualitative chapters. It provides a short and clear list of the major issues affecting student retention in the sample college as perceived across all participant groups. Finally, the last section links the qualitative phase of the study to the statistical analysis of the quantitative data to be presented in Chapter Nine.

8.1 Summary of the qualitative data

This section summarises the findings of the qualitative data presented in the previous chapters. As detailed earlier, the qualitative data were collected using the following three instruments:

- In-depth telephone interviews
- Focus groups
- Surveys
These instruments were used, respectively, to collect data from the following three participant groups:

- Non-persister students
- Persister students
- Academic and administrative staff

The thematic analysis of each data collection instrument revealed a considerable number of findings related to the research aims and questions. These findings were organised according to their similarities as subcategories, categories and themes. The number of emergent subcategories, categories and themes varied among the three data collection instruments.

For the first group, the analysis of the non-persister student interviews resulted in the emergence of 18 subcategories, which were regrouped under the following eight categories: timetabling, low student satisfaction, lack of extracurricular activities, college rules, staff attitude, student goals, external influence and poor system. These eight categories were classified under the following two themes: poor institutional experiences and student characteristics.

For the second group, the analysis of the persister student focus groups resulted in the emergence of 18 subcategories, which were regrouped under the following nine categories: student services, poor orientation, low student satisfaction, college rules, timetabling, low sense of belonging, staff attitude, student goals and external commitments. These nine categories were classified under the following two themes: poor institutional experiences and student characteristics.
For the third and last group, the analysis of the staff surveys resulted in the emergence of 19 subcategories, which were regrouped under the following 11 categories: admission policy, low student satisfaction, lack of retention plans, timetabling, dismissal policy, student services, poor orientation, college rules, high expectations, students’ academic abilities and student goals. These 11 categories were classified under the following three themes: poor institutional experiences, high academic requirements and student characteristics.

Of the seven themes emerging from the data of the three groups, each group shared two common themes (accounting for six of the seven themes in total), with an additional theme found only in the staff surveys. Thus, excluding duplicate themes, the final number of themes to emerge from all qualitative instruments was three. These were:

- Poor institutional experiences
- High academic requirements
- Student characteristics.

The following sections summarise the findings of each theme.

The first theme was poor institutional experiences. Issues under this theme were raised by participants of all groups. All of these participants talked about similar issues in relation to the administrative system of the sample college. This included issues related to the college’s rules, restrictions, policies and services as well as the practices of the administrative staff. The most commonly raised issues across all three groups related to the attitude of the administrative staff, the way they dealt with students, the admission and dismissal policies, the lack of student facilities and extracurricular activities,
timetabling and the low student satisfaction with the practices of the administrative
departments and staff of the sample college.

Although the complaints, comments and suggestions of the persister and non-
persister students and the academic and administrative staff varied in terms of the
number of negative issues cited and their wordings, all of the participants across all
groups perceived that these issues might negatively affect the students’ experiences in
the sample college and consequently their persistence. Moreover, some of the non-
persister participants stated that their dissatisfaction with the college administrative
system was the direct reason of their withdrawal decision, as detailed in Section 5.3.1 of
Chapter Five.

The second theme to emerge from the qualitative phase of the study was the high
academic requirements. Issues under this theme were raised only by the participants of
the academic and administrative staff group. The analysis of the staff surveys revealed
that some of the academic and administrative staff expected that the students of the
sample college, especially new students, would be affected by the high expectations of
the ESL teachers. Moreover, they stated that the starting level of the ESL program was
higher than the average English level and abilities of new students. They considered that
these issues might result in early withdrawals from the ESL program and consequently
from the sample college.

The third and last theme was the student characteristics. Issues under this theme
were raised by the participants of all three groups. They included all student-related
issues that might affect student persistence but that were not related to the sample
college. This included the students’ educational background, their goals and commitments towards education as well as students’ family and life commitments.

Under this theme, participants’ views on the issues raised were sometimes similar and sometimes different between groups. All of the participants mentioned students having educational and job goals that exceeded the qualification level provided by the sample college. Moreover, it was noted that the sample college was not the first choice for most of the students and that students would leave if given the opportunities to enrol in the institution of their first choice.

However, the participants of the academic and administrative staff group were the only participants to attribute some of the withdrawals from the sample college to students’ weakness in the English language and their low academic abilities in general. They also mentioned the poor preparation of students in high school to pursue higher education. These participants perceived that this issue might make it difficult for students to persist in the ESL program and consequently in the sample college. However, none of the responses of the participants from either student group suggested that academic weakness in the English language was one of the reasons behind students’ withdrawal. In fact, all of the persister and non-persister students who participated in the study stated clearly that they had no academic issues that might have affected their persistence in the sample college. Moreover, all of the four non-persister participants said that they had been progressing well in the sample college and that they withdrew for other reasons.

Finally, these findings will be tested statistically in the quantitative phase and merged with the quantitative findings in the discussion in Chapter Ten, as described in
the methodology chapter. Also in that chapter, all of the findings from both phases will be discussed in relation to the aims and questions of this research and the literature on student retention in higher education.

8.2 Conclusion to the qualitative data

This section presents a conclusion to the qualitative data. The purpose of this section is to merge all of the major issues affecting student retention in the sample college as perceived by members of all three of the participant groups. This was done by combining the data that emerged from the three data collection instruments and matching the similar issues across different groups. The outcome is a comprehensive list of the issues most frequently affecting student retention at the sample college. As this list is to show the issues for which there was cross-group agreement, to be included in this list, the issues needed to have been reported by members of at least two groups as a minimum requirement. This step will help in providing a broader understanding of the issues affecting student retention in the sample college as agreed upon by members of two or all groups.

As detailed earlier, the analysis of the three study instruments suggested some factors and issues that have influenced students’ experiences in the sample college and led them either to withdraw or to be at risk of withdrawal. The analysis of these factors and issues resulted in the emergence of three themes. Two of these themes, poor institutional experience and student characteristics, emerged from all the data collection instruments, while an additional theme, high academic requirements, emerged from the staff surveys only. This third theme consisted of only one category: that the teachers’ expectations of students exceeded their abilities. However, as this theme was not
confirmed by the data of the persister or non-persister students, it did not have the strength of cross-group agreement found in the other two themes, which were confirmed by the participants of all groups. It was thus excluded from this conclusion to the qualitative phase of the study. However, the meaning of this is further explored in Chapters Nine and Ten.

The next section presents the issues considered most frequently to affect student retention, as perceived across participant groups. Following this, the major sources of the factors affecting student retention in the sample college are identified as the final finding of the qualitative phase of the study.

8.2.1 Issues affecting student retention across all participant groups

During the analysis of the qualitative data, a number of similarities were identified in the factors and issues discussed by the participants across the three groups as affecting student retention in the sample college. Most of the participants’ discussions were about two major topics: the students’ poor experiences in the college environment, especially with the administrative system, and the students’ characteristics, especially their educational and job goals. Issues under these two topics were reported by almost all of the participants in the three groups. Other factors and issues were reported by a high percentage of participants, but only in two of the three groups; for example, students’ external commitments were considered an important factor by participants in the two student groups. Table 8.1 presents a list of all of the issues on which there was some level of inter-group agreement, showing which groups considered each issue important in influencing student attrition at the sample college.
Table 8.1 Issues affecting student retention across all participant groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Non-persister students</th>
<th>Persister students</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students will leave at the first opportunity</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low student satisfaction with the college system</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sample college is not the students’ first choice</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff negative attitude</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff disrespecting students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ educational and job goals are higher than the college level</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of extracurricular activities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps between classes</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students have no or do not know about their rights</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict rules</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreasonable restrictions</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External influence and commitments</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor student facilities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor orientation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of student–college communication</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Issues categorised under the theme of the students’ poor institutional experience were identified from the data of all three of the participant groups. This theme comprised issues such as students’ dissatisfaction with the sample college administrative system, rules, policies, restrictions, services, facilities and the practices of the administrative staff. In their discussions of the issues under this theme, participants from all groups talked about how these issues affected students’ experiences and resulted in their withdrawal or transfer to other institutions. The data showed that, because of their poor experiences, the students in the sample college, especially the non-persisters, had a low level of integration into the college environment, a low sense of belonging to the college system and a low level of satisfaction. These factors were reported to make the decision to leave the sample college easier, especially in cases in which the student had an alternative opportunity.
Members of all three of the participant groups also discussed issues related to the students’ characteristics, such as their educational and job goals, level of educational commitments, external commitments and the influence of the external community outside the college on their decisions to stay in or to leave the sample college. These issues were classified in each of the three groups under the student characteristics theme. The data showed that some of the non-persister students had educational goals that exceeded the type of qualifications offered by the sample college. Thus, when they were admitted to an institution that offered a higher qualification, they left the sample college. Conversely, other non-persister respondents had a low level of educational commitment, leading them to withdraw upon finding a suitable job. Non-persister students also reported having received support from their surrounding communities outside college, including from family members and friends, to proceed with their decision to transfer to the new opportunity that match their goals.

8.2.2 Major sources of the factors affecting student retention in the sample college

Based on the data that emerged from the three instruments of the qualitative phase of the study, and with reference to the list of issues agreed upon across participant groups as most affecting student retention, the major sources of factors influencing student retention in the sample college were identified. These can be classified under the following four major categories, representing the major sources of student attrition for the sample college:

- Poor institutional experiences
- Low satisfaction with the college system
- Students’ educational and job goals
• Students’ external commitments

All of the issues and factors that were reported as influencing student retention in the sample college either came from the quality of the students’ experiences, especially with the administrative system, or were brought with them from outside the college environment as personal characteristics over which the sample college had little control.

These categories are in line with the themes that emerged from the three instruments of the qualitative data, with the first category being identical to the poor institutional experience theme that emerged from each of the qualitative instruments. Meanwhile, the second category encompasses those issues reported as affecting students’ institutional experiences in the administrative system of the sample college, as perceived by all participant groups. Finally, the last two categories comprise issues from the student characteristics theme found in the data of all participant groups.

8.3 A link to the quantitative phase

Now that the end of the qualitative phase of the study has been reached, it is necessary to bridge to the subsequent quantitative phase. In the exploratory sequential mixed method design, which is the adopted design in this study, a second phase of quantitative data collection and analysis is conducted to follow from and build on the findings of the initial qualitative phase. According to Creswell (2009) and Creswell and Clark (2010), generalising the findings of the qualitative data is the primary purpose of the exploratory sequential mixed method design. Accordingly, building on the findings of the qualitative data, a quantitative statistical study was designed. The main purpose of the quantitative phase was to discover whether the outcomes of the qualitative phase
are generalisable to the larger student population of the sample college. To this end, the following subsequent quantitative question directed the analysis:

Q: After controlling for the factors that emerged from the data of the qualitative phase and other demographic and pre-entry variables, is there a statistical difference between persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college?

To answer this question, data were collected through a questionnaire adopted from the student retention literature: the IIS, designed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980). This questionnaire comprises five scales that were suitable to cover all of the issues that emerged from the qualitative data. These scales were designed to measure the quality of the students’ institutional experiences and the level of their goals and institutional commitment. Moreover, additional items were added to the questionnaire by the researcher to collect information about the participants’ demographic and pre-entry characteristics and level of external influence and commitments, to control for the other factors found in the qualitative phase of the study and the most frequent factors associated with low student retention as found in the literature.

This questionnaire was applied to the whole population (n=264) of first-year (ESL) students in the sample college. It was analysed using the statistical techniques of the IBM SPSS software through two levels. First, a statistical descriptive analysis was conducted to give a brief overview of the participants’ demographic and pre-entry characteristics. Second, a statistical inferential analysis was conducted using the Independent samples t-test, Mann-Whitney U test and Chi-square techniques to identify any significant statistical differences between the two groups of participants (persister and non-
persister students) after controlling for the factors that emerged from the data of the qualitative phase. A more detailed explanation on the purpose, procedure and results of the quantitative phase is presented in the next chapter.
Chapter Nine: Description of Quantitative Data

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative data analysis. In this chapter, the data that emerged from the questionnaire utilised in the quantitative phase are analysed according to the procedure outlined in Chapter Four. This includes exploring for significant statistical differences between the two groups of participants, the persister and non-persister students, after controlling for the factors that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. Accordingly, the main aim of this chapter is to answer the following question:

**Q:** After controlling for the factors that emerged from the data of the qualitative phase and other demographic and pre-entry variables, is there a statistical difference between persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college?

Building on the findings of the qualitative data, as concluded in the previous chapter, the issues that are compared in this chapter are the participants’ demographic characteristics, pre-entry academic performance, level of external influence and commitment and their responses to the IIS (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). These issues were explored for both the persister (n=110) and non-persister (n=53) students of the sample college. The chapter consists of the following sections: a description of the
participants’ demographic and pre-entry characteristics, the variables of the quantitative data, the preparation and screening of the quantitative data, the quantitative data analysis, a summary and the conclusion to the quantitative phase.

9.2 Participants’ demographic and pre-entry characteristics

The participants in the quantitative phase of this study were the first-year students of the academic year 2012–2013 who were enrolled in the intensive ESL program of the sample college during the time of the data collection. These students were from the same population from which the participants in the qualitative phase of the study were derived. As detailed in Chapter Four, an average of 400 students are enrolled in the sample college’s intensive ESL program each year. According to the sample college records, there were 396 at the beginning of the academic year of 2012–2013. However, due to early transfer and withdrawals, the number of enrolled students in the second week, when the study questionnaire was conducted, had decreased to 264 students.

The total student population of the sample college was targeted in the quantitative phase. During the data collection period, copies of the study questionnaire were distributed to all students (n=264) of the intensive ESL program of the sample college. In total, 220 usable responses (83%) were returned by the end of the assigned data collection period. However, later analysis of the participants’ persistence status revealed that, by the end of the academic year, 110 respondents had successfully completed their ESL programs and enrolled for the second year, 53 respondents had withdrawn from their study programs or did not return to the sample college for the second year and 57 participants had been dismissed from their study programs for academic reasons. As the study focus was on voluntary withdrawal, the responses of the 57 participants who were
academically dismissed were excluded from the analysis. Thus, the final number of participants for the quantitative questionnaire was 163 (62%).

This section details the participants’ demographic and personal characteristics that relate to the topic of this study, including their residency, marital and financial statuses and parents’ education level, as well as their pre-entry academic performance, as measured by high school grade and score on the GAT.

In general, as stated earlier, because of the college’s type and admission requirements, detailed in Chapter Two, all students in the sample college, including the 163 participants of the quantitative phase of the study, shared some demographic characteristics such as gender, nationality and age: all were Saudi males ages between 18 and 20 years. All of the students in the sample college held a minimum qualification of a secondary school certificate and none of the participants in this study held a higher qualification. Below, some other demographic and personal information of the participants in the quantitative phase of the study is presented, taken from their responses to the quantitative instrument and the student database of the sample college.

9.2.1 Pre-entry academic performance

Table 9.1 shows the students’ performance as measured by their secondary school final grade and the GAT, a standardised test administered by Qiyas that is an essential admission requirement for most Saudi tertiary institutions.

In this study, the students’ secondary school grades were categorised as 50–59%, 60–69%, 70–79%, 80–89% and 90–100%. Table 9.1 indicates that 35% of the participants in the study sample achieved an average grade of 80% or higher in their secondary
school examinations. These results are around the minimum acceptable admission grade required for many Saudi four-year tertiary institutions (when combined with the GAT scores) and almost all two-year tertiary institutions. Moreover, 9.8% of the participants achieved grades of 90% and higher, potentially qualifying them for institutions with stricter admission requirements. However, the majority of the participants (55.2%) achieved grades below the minimum acceptable for admission for all Saudi four-year tertiary institutions. These students achieved grades between 70–79% (23.9%), 60–69% (28.8%) and 59% and below (2.5%). These last two grade categories (50–69%) are not acceptable for admission to many of the two-year tertiary institutions other than the sample college.

Table 9.1 Students’ pre-entry academic performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary school grade</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>GAT mark</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90–100%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>81–100%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80–89%</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>71–80%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70–79%</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>61–70%</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>51–60%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>50% or lower</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Out of 163

For the GAT, Table 9.1 shows that the majority of the students (56.4%) achieved marks of 61–70%, which is the average range as reported by Qiyas statistics published on their official website (2013). Moreover, the percentage of participants who achieved marks higher than 71% (30.1%) coincides with the statistics of the Qiyas, which show that 30% of exam takers achieved marks of 70% and higher over the previous three years. Finally, only 13.5% of the participants achieved marks lower than 60%, compared to an average 30% according to the Qiyas. However, at the time of data collection, the GAT mark was not an admission requirement for the sample college.
9.2.2 Residency and marital status

Table 9.2 shows that 97.6% of the participating students were single, while only a small number (4 students, 2.5%) reported that they were married. Of the single students, 77.9% reported that they lived with their families, while 22.1% said that they lived on campus or on their own.

Table 9.2 Residency and marital status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residency and marital status</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Out of 163

9.2.3 Financial status

Table 9.3 shows how the study participants described their (and their families’) financial status. In total, 73.6% of the participants described their financial status as good or average (37.4% and 36.2%, respectively). For the other categories, 13.5% of the participants reported that they had a very good financial status, while 10.4% described their financial status as acceptable (lower than the average). Only four participants (2.5%) reported having a weak financial status.

Table 9.3 Financial status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial status*</th>
<th>Frequency**</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*as perceived by participants ** out of 163
9.2.4 Parents’ education

Table 9.4 shows that only 1.8% of the participants’ fathers held a postgraduate qualification, and only 19% of the fathers held only an elementary qualification or lower. The majority of the participants’ fathers had finished at least secondary school (30.1%) and 27% of them had finished at least intermediate school. Finally, 22.1% of the sample’s fathers held an undergraduate qualification.

Table 9.4 shows that none of the participants’ mothers held a postgraduate degree, and 42.3% of the mothers held only elementary qualifications or lower. For the other qualification categories, 19.6% of the participants’ mothers had intermediate certificates and 23.3% had completed at least secondary school. Only 14.7% of the participants’ mothers held undergraduate qualifications.

Table 9.4 Parents’ education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary or lower</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Out of 163

9.2.5 Summary of the participants’ demographic and pre-entry characteristics

This section summarises the participants’ demographic and pre-entry academic characteristics. As shown in the tables above, the participants of this study were quite average in regard to their demographic backgrounds and pre-entry academic performance. The majority of the students who participated in this study were single commuter students (77.9%) who lived with their families and had a good financial status.
(37.4%). In terms of their pre-entry academic performance, most of the participants had ‘very good’ grades on their secondary school certificate (35%) and scores on the GAT within the average range as reported by the test provider (56.4%). Finally, although the educational levels of most of the participants’ fathers were secondary and above (30.1%), the majority of the participants’ mothers had only attained an elementary education or lower (42.3%).

9.3 The quantitative instrument

9.3.1 Study variables

The instrument utilised in the quantitative phase of the study was a questionnaire of 40 items (see Appendices H and I). These items covered the following six categories:

- The participants’ demographic characteristics
- The participants’ pre-entry academic performance
- The participants’ level of external influence and commitments
- The participants’ level of academic and social integration
- The participants’ level of institutional and goal commitment
- The participants’ level of overall institutional integration (students’ experience).

The participants’ demographic characteristics category consisted of five items that collected information about the participants’ marital, residency and financial status and the level of their parents’ education. Second, the pre-entry academic performance category consisted of two items that collected information about the participants’ grades on the high school certificate and the GAT. The third category comprised three items to collect information about the influence of the participants’ families and friends on their decision to stay or leave the sample college and the level of the participants’ external life
and work commitments. Finally, the last two categories were measured through Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1980) IIS.

The original IIS consisted of five subscales (30 items) to measure the validity of Tinto’s Interactional Model of Institutional Departure (1975). However, in this study, the subscales were used in a slightly different way to address the specific issues of the current research. As presented in Table 9.5, the subscales of the IIS were utilised differently in this study to measure the students’ social and academic integration, the level of their institutional and goal commitment and the quality of their institutional integration (experiences) in accordance with the instructions of the original authors. Moreover, some items were deleted from the scales before the analysis as discussed in Section 4.8 of Chapter Four. The IIS was chosen for the data collection because its scales were suitable to collect the type of information required in this phase of the study, such as the students’ academic development and social integration, the level of their commitment to their educational goals and to the sample college, and the quality of their overall institutional integration (students’ experience).

Table 9.5 Institutional experience scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
<td>Peer-group interactions (subscale 1)</td>
<td>1–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interactions with faculty (subscale 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic integration</td>
<td>Faculty concern for student development and teaching (subscale 3)</td>
<td>13–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic and intellectual development (subscale 4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional and goal</td>
<td>Institutional and goal commitment (subscale 5)</td>
<td>25–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commitment</td>
<td>Subscales 1–5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall institutional</td>
<td>Subscales 1–5</td>
<td>1–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Except for the categorical non-parametric items in the demographic characteristics category, all items of the quantitative instrument used a five-point Likert scale ranging
from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All of these items maintained the same direction, except for a few negatively worded items that were reversed before the analysis. These variables were treated in the statistical analysis as numerical continuous variables. However, as the five items under the participants’ demographic characteristics category were non-parametric categorical variables, they were treated differently in regard to the data cleaning and screening and the choice of suitable statistical analysis techniques, as detailed in Chapter Four.

9.3.2 Preparation and screening of the quantitative data

With quantitative data, before starting statistical analysis, it is necessary to prepare, clean and screen the data. Errors and missing values can occur in any data set and might affect the effectiveness of the statistical analysis (Pallant, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The normality of distribution is an essential assumption for all statistical parametric techniques. The procedures that were used to check the data set for errors and missing values and to test the normality of distribution of the parametric data are now presented.

9.3.2.1 Errors and missing data

In quantitative research, errors in data entry and data with missing values are quite common (Field, 2007). Errors are items with values that do not correspond to the values of the original items, and missing values occur when the values of items are omitted, either intentionally or by accident. It is important to deal carefully with these errors and missing values, as they can potentially affect the conclusion of the analysis (Pallant, 2005).
In this study, error-checking procedures started during the data entry and they were again conducted before the statistical analysis. This included revising the data entry process with a second person three times during and after the data entry as well as before the statistical analysis. Moreover, an initial descriptive analysis was conducted to detect out of range values by checking the minimum and maximum value of each item, checking the number of cases and items and checking the mean scores of the continuous variables.

For the missing data, all cases that were analysed in this study had no missing data. This was achieved through the following procedure. First, the majority of the missing data were in the questionnaires of the excluded cases; that is, the cases that were not classified under any of the two observed categories because they refer to students (n=57) who failed to continue in their study programs because of their weak academic abilities. As the study focus is on voluntary withdrawal, these cases were not used in any stage of the analysis.

After deleting these excluded cases from the data set, some questionnaires with missing items remained. These items were completed either by returning the questionnaires to the participants for completion through the students’ email addresses or the internal mail system or by collecting the missing details from the college’s student database. This was made possible by the fact that participation in the study was limited to the ESL students of the sample college and the students’ college identification numbers were used to identify the study cases.
9.3.2.2 Normality of distribution

In statistical analysis, the techniques that are used to analyse parametric variables assume a normally distributed data set (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). In this analysis, all items except for the five demographic items were treated as parametric variables. Thus, before conducting the Independent samples t-test, the primary adopted statistical analysis technique in this study, the normality of distribution of the data was tested. To do this, a two-step analysis approach was utilised. First, the distributional characteristics of these variables were assessed by examining the skewness and kurtosis values. Second, the histogram of each variable was visually checked. A table of the skewness and kurtosis values and the histograms of all observed items are attached in the appendices (Appendix K).

According to Pallant (2005) and Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), the skewness value refers to the symmetry of the distribution, while the kurtosis value refers to the ‘peakedness’ of the distribution. A perfect normal distribution has skewness and kurtosis values of 0. However, as asserted by Pallant (2005), this value is not common in social science. According to Curran, West and Finch (1996), the range of acceptable normal skewness and kurtosis values is not precise. They suggested that skewness and kurtosis values less than 2.0 and 7.0, respectively, might be considered as moderately non-normal. Moreover, for studies with large samples, as in this study, skewness and kurtosis values are not effective (Field, 2007) because the tests to evaluate these values are ‘too sensitive with large samples’ (Pallant, 2005, p. 52). Therefore, in the case of a large sample, it is usually recommended to assess visually the distribution shape of the individual variables’ histograms (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).
In this study, the skewness values of all observed parametric items ranged between .72 and -2.2, while the kurtosis values ranged between 4.44 and -1.28, which might be slightly problematic. However, as discussed above, such values might be expected with large samples, such as the sample of this study. Visually analysing the histograms showed that, although most of the variables were reasonably normally distributed, with most of the scores clustered in the centre and tapering towards the peak, there were a few items on which the participants’ scores were slightly positively or negatively skewed.

To overcome this issue, as suggested by Field (2007), Pallant (2005) and Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), and to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings of the statistical analysis, these variables were re-tested with another non-parametric technique that does not assume a normal distribution. This technique was the Mann-Whitney U test, which is the alternative non-parametric technique of the Independent samples t-test used in this analysis (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Although this test (and other non-parametric tests) is suitable for analysing data that is not normally distributed, the Independent samples t-test was chosen as the primary analysis technique for two reasons: because of the parametric nature of the data and because the findings of non-parametric techniques are not as strong as are those of their parametric counterparts. However, concerning the strength of the non-parametric techniques, Field (2007, p. 540) stated that ‘Some people believe that non-parametric tests have less power than their parametric counterparts, but … this is not always true’. For this study, the result of the Mann-Whitney U test revealed exactly the same findings as the Independent samples t-test for almost all variables, except for one item under a
scale of seven items (item 20). However, the scale itself has similar results in both tests. More details are given in the following analysis section.

9.4 Quantitative data analysis

9.4.1 Introduction

In this section, the statistical differences between the persister and non-persister participants in regard to the observed study variables are presented. To achieve this, three different statistical techniques were utilised. The primary statistical technique used in this analysis to detect the statistical differences between the two observed groups of participants was the SPSS Independent samples t-test. This technique is used to compare the mean score of two independent groups or subjects on some continuous variables to detect statistical differences (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005).

However, as discussed in the study variables section (see Section 4.6.7.1), some items of the study questionnaire were treated as non-parametric categorical items. These were the five items to collect information about the participants’ demographic characteristics. Thus, as the primary analysis technique, the Independent samples t-test, cannot be utilised with non-parametric categorical data (Field, 2007; Pallant, 2005), these variables were analysed through a Mann-Whitney U test, which is the equivalent non-parametric technique to the Independent samples t-test. Unlike the latter, the former technique is used to test whether there are statistical differences between two independent groups on a continuous variable by comparing the medians of these two groups instead of their means (Pallant, 2005). In addition, these five non-parametric variables were re-tested through a second statistical test, the SPSS Chi-square technique, to support the findings of the first technique.
Moreover, as discussed in the data screening and cleaning section above, the normality of some of the other parametric variables that were analysed through Independent samples t-test were not perfectly distributed, which is a requirement for this technique. To overcome the normality of distribution issue, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used to confirm the statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students for these parametric variables.

The following sections report the statistical differences between the two groups of participants according to the following categories:

- Demographic characteristics
- Pre-entry academic performance
- External influence and commitments
- Institutional integration (students’ experience).

In each section, before presenting the results of the inferential statistics techniques, a brief report of the outcome of the descriptive analysis was presented to provide a clearer picture of the study variables.

**9.4.2 Demographic characteristics**

The demographic variables observed in this study were the participants’ marital, residency and financial status and the educational level of both of their parents as individuals and total. As discussed earlier, all demographic variables are categorical non-parametric variables. Thus, the suitable techniques for the descriptive analysis, and to test the statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students for these variables, are the frequencies and the Mann-Whitney U test, which is the non-parametric alternative of the Independent samples t-test.
To give a clearer view of the participants’ data, a descriptive analysis was conducted to present the frequencies of the demographic variables for each group. Table 9.6 provides these frequencies along with their percentages to enable comparison. As shown in the table, the two groups of participants seem to share the same demographic information for all variables. However, this needed to be confirmed in the next level of analysis, wherein the significant statistical differences were examined.

Table 9.6 Description of the demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-persisters</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>96.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residency status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuters</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary or lower</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary or lower</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the statistical differences between the two groups of participants, the two important values from the output of the Mann-Whitney U test are the Z value and the
significance level (p-value 2-tailed). The significance level must be equal to or less than .05 to indicate significant difference between the two observed groups. As shown in Table 9.7, none of the p-values of all variables achieved the significance level of equal to or less than .05. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are no significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students regarding their observed demographic characteristics.

### Table 9.7 Demographic differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Z value</td>
<td>p-value (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residency status</td>
<td>-.52</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial status</td>
<td>-.76</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents education</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father education</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother education</td>
<td>-.89</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To enrich the findings of the above analysis, a second assessment was conducted to test the statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students in terms of their observed demographic information. This was done through the SPSS Chi-square technique, which can give an additional indication of the relationships between the variables (Pallant, 2005). The Chi-square technique tests whether the observed proportions for a categorical variable differ from hypothesised proportions. The output of the Chi-square test revealed similar findings to those of the first analysis technique, the Mann-Whitney U test.
As shown in Table 9.7, the results of the Chi-square test indicate that there are no significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students in regard to the observed demographic characteristics. The 2-sided p-values did not achieve the required significance level of \( p = .05 \) or less. Therefore, it can be conclude that there are no significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students on all of the observed demographic variables.

### 9.4.3 Pre-entry academic performance

To measure the level of the participants’ pre-entry academic performance, two variables were observed. The first was the participants’ final high school grades and the second was the participants’ grades on the GAT. As these two variables, high school grades and GAT grades, were treated as parametric numerical data, the most appropriate analysis technique to assess the statistical differences between the two participant groups after controlling for these variables was the SPSS Independent samples t-test. The scores and standard deviation for each group were also presented for the descriptive analysis.

As shown in Table 9.8, non-persister students had slightly higher high school grades then their persister counterparts. They reported an average score of 3.55 compared to 3.05 for the persister students. Conversely, persister students reported higher scores on the GAT. The mean of their grades was 3.25 compared to 3.02 for the non-persister students.

For the statistical differences between the two groups of participants, the result of the Independent samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between persister and non-persister participants in regard to their high school grades but not
their GAT grades. The result shows that the high school grades of the persister students ($M=3.05, SD=1.06$) were significantly lower than the grades of the non-persister students ($M=3.55, SD=.93$) at a significance level of $t(161) = -2.94, p = .004$. However, this was not the case for the GAT grades. The result shows that there was no significant difference between persister ($M=3.25, SD=.77$) and non-persister students ($M=3.02, SD=.82$) for GAT grades.

Table 9.8 Pre-entry academic performance differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Persistence</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>T-value</th>
<th>T-test Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>T-test Eta square</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School Grade</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>-2.94</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-2.86</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAT Grade</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-1.70</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, the output of the Mann-Whitney U test revealed exactly the same result. As shown in the table, there is a significant difference between persister and non-persister students for their high school grades but not for their GAT grades. Persister students had significantly different high school grades to non-persister students at a significance level of $U = 2141.5, Z = -2.86, p = .004, r = -.022$.

9.4.4 External influence and commitments

The level of external influence on participants and their external commitments was measured by the sum of their responses to three questionnaire items that asked about the influence of participants’ family and friends and their life and work commitments. As in the above procedure, these items were treated as parametric variables and analysed
through the Independent samples t-test technique. They were also analysed descriptively by presenting the mean scores and standard deviation for each group.

As shown in Table 9.9, non-persister students reported slightly higher mean scores on all of the three items of the scale as well as on the total score of the scale. The largest difference between the mean scores of the two groups of participants was on the level of external life and work commitments. For this item, the mean score of the non-persister students was 2.74 compared to 2.20 for their persister counterparts.

Table 9.9 External influence and commitments differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Persistence</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>T-test</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Eta square</th>
<th>Z value</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family influence</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.286</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.189</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends’ influence</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1.172</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-1.32</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>1.210</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life and work Commitments</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.312</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-1.23</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>1.403</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External influence and</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-1.23</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commitments total</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the statistical differences between the two groups of participants, as presented in the table non-persister participants had a significantly higher level of external influence and commitments than did the persister participants. This result was indicated by the total score of the participants’ responses to the external influence and commitments scale items, and more specifically to the life and work commitments item. For the life and work commitments item, non-persister participants ($M=2.74$, $SD=1.403$) were significantly different from their persister counterparts ($M=2.20$, $SD=1.312$) at a significance level of $t(161) = -2.388$, $p = .018$. Moreover, for the total score of the
external influence and commitments scale, non-persister participants ($M=2.64$, $SD=.73$) were significantly different to the persister participants ($M=2.34$, $SD=.88$) at the significance level of $t(161) = -2.162$, $p = .032$. However, the analysis of the participants’ responses to the other two items, on family and friends’ influence, did not show any significant statistical differences between the two groups.

Exactly the same result was found by the Mann-Whitney U test. Table 9.9 shows that persister and non-persister participants were significantly different in regard to their level of life and work commitments $U = 2273.5$, $Z = -2.36$, $p = .018$, $r = -0.18$ and in the total score of the external influence and commitments scale at a significance level of $U = 2238.5$, $Z = -2.41$, $p = .032$, $r = -0.19$. However, there were no significant statistical differences between these groups concerning the level of their family and friends’ influence.

9.4.5 Institutional integration (students’ experience)

The quality of the participants’ institutional integration (experience) was measured by their responses to the following five subscales of the IIS (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980):

- Peer-group interaction
- Interaction with faculty
- Faculty concern for student development and teaching
- Academic and intellectual development
- Institutional and goal commitment.

In this analysis, as advised by the original author of the scales (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980), the participants’ responses to the first two subscales were combined to measure the level of their social integration, while the combination of the third and
fourth subscales measured the participants’ level of academic integration. The level of the participants’ institutional and goal commitment was measured by their responses to the last subscale. Moreover, the total scores of the participants’ for all items of the five subscales were reported to indicate the level of their institutional integration, which is presented to give an indication of the students’ overall experience in the sample college. Accordingly, the results of the statistical analysis for all items of the above scales are presented below, under the following four categories:

- Social integration
- Academic integration
- Institutional and goal commitment
- Overall institutional integration (experience).

These results are presented in Table 9.10.

Table 9.10 Output of the statistical analysis of the IIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>Persistence</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>T-value</th>
<th>T-test Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Eta square</th>
<th>Z value</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Integration</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.52</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Integration</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional and goal commitment</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIS (total)</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-1.90</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.10 presents the differences between the two groups of participants, the persister and non-persister students, in regard to the questionnaire’s variables. An initial investigation of the presented numbers showed that the mean scores of the non-
persister participants’ responses to all of the five subscales’ items and the overall scale were slightly lower than the mean scores of their persister counterparts. The gap between the mean scores of the two groups of participants was larger for the institutional and goal commitment scale. For this scale, the reported mean score of the non-persister students was 4.00 compared to 4.39 for the persister students. While this does not confirm a significant difference between the two participant groups, such a finding can be concluded from the following analysis, where the results of the statistical tests are presented and described in separate sections for each subscale. As already mentioned, each of the questionnaire subscales was analysed through two statistical techniques: Independent samples t-test and Mann-Whitney U test.

9.4.5.1 Social and academic integration

For the social and academic integration subscales, the level of the students’ social integration was assessed through the sum of the items of the ‘peer-group interaction’ and ‘interaction with faculty’ subscales from the IIS (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). The level of their academic integration was assessed through the sum of the items of the ‘faculty concern for student development and teaching’ and ‘academic and intellectual development’ subscales. Each of the social and academic integration subscales consisted of 12 items. However, as detailed in Section 4.8 of Chapter Four, three items were deleted from the academic integration subscale to increase its reliability. These were items 14 and 15 from the ‘faculty concern for student development and teaching’ subscale and item 21 from the ‘academic and intellectual development’ subscale.

The first technique utilised to test the statistical differences between the two participant groups, the persister and non-persister students, was the SPSS Independent
samples t-test. As shown in Table 9.10, the analysis of the participants’ responses to the items on both academic and social integration did not show any significant difference between the two groups. Regarding the participants’ responses to the social integration scale, there were no significant differences between persister ($M=3.50$, $SD=.560$) and non-persister students ($M=3.37$, $SD=.519$). The output of the t-test for the social integration scale $t(161) = -1.436$, $p = .153$ did not satisfy the required $p$-value. Similarly, for the academic integration scale, the analysis showed that the non-persister students ($M=3.48$, $SD=.608$) were not significantly different from the persister students ($M=3.57$, $SD=.585$). The academic integration scale $t(161) = -.904$, $p = .367$ did not reach the required significance level of $p = .05$.

Moreover, the result of the Mann-Whitney U test revealed similar findings to the Independent samples t-test; that is, that persister and non-persister participants were not significantly different for all of the observed subscales’ items. Table 9.10 above shows that the statistical differences between the two groups of participants in social integration $U = 2485.5$, $Z = -1.524$, $p = .128$, $r = -0.12$ and academic integration $U = 2797$, $Z = -.419$, $p = .675$, $r = -0.03$ did not meet the required significance level of $p = .05$ or less. Thus, it can be concluded that, based on both statistical tests, the persister and non-persister students of the sample college were not significantly different in regard to their social and academic integration.

**9.4.5.2 Institutional and goal commitment**

The participants’ level of institutional and goal commitment was assessed through the ‘institutional and goal commitment’ subscale from the IIS (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). The original subscale consisted of six items that covered participants’ levels of
commitment towards their educational goals and graduation from a particular institution, with three items for each. However, as detailed in Section 4.8 or Chapter Four, one of the items (item 29) was deleted, as it did not show internal consistency with the other five items of the subscale in regard to the responses of the participants of the current study.

Table 9.10 presents the mean scores of the responses of the persister and non-persister students to the institutional and goal commitment subscale as well as the output of the inferential tests. The numbers show that non-persister students reported slightly lower mean scores on this scale. The mean score of the non-persister students was 4.00 compared to 4.39 for the persister students.

In the first step, to test the statistical differences between the two groups of participants after controlling for these items, the SPSS Independent samples t-test technique was used. As shown in the table, the output of the analysis revealed a significant difference between the persister ($M=4.39, SD=.515$) and non-persister students ($M=4.00, SD=.763$) in regard to their level of institutional and goal commitment at a significance level of $t(75.62) = 3.39, p = .001$.

This difference between the two groups of participants can be attributed to two of the scale’s five items: items 26 and 27. These two items were among the three items set to measure the students’ commitment towards graduation from the current institution (institutional commitment). Item 26 asked about the students’ confidence that they had chosen the right place to study. For this item, persister students ($M=4.43, SD=.872$) were significantly different from the non-persister students ($M=3.89, SD=1.12$) at a significance level of $t(161) = 3.37, p = .001$. Item 27 asked whether the students thought
they would re-enrol in the current institution for the next semester. The participants’ responses showed that persister students ($M=4.55$, $SD=.737$) were significantly different from their non-persister counterparts ($M=3.49$, $SD=1.37$) at a significance level of $t(66.96) = 5.26$, $p = .001$.

As discussed above, the same variables were tested again through the SPSS Mann-Whitney U test technique. The output of the test confirmed the finding of the Independent samples t-test, that there were significant statistical differences between persister and non-persister students in regard to the level of their institutional and goal commitment. Table 9.10 shows that persister students were significantly different from the non-persister students in the total score of the institutional and goal commitment subscale at a significance level of $U = 2059$, $Z = -3.1$, $p = .002$, $r = -0.24$. Similar to the result of the t-test, the significant statistical differences for items 26 and 27 were $U = 2054$, $Z = -3.35$, $p = .001$, $r = -0.26$ and $U = 1537$, $Z = -5.37$, $p = .001$, $r = -0.42$, respectively.

Thus, based on the results of these statistical tests, it can be concluded that persister and non-persister students were significantly different in regard to the level of their educational institutional and goal commitment. More specifically, non-persister students of the sample college had a significantly lower level of institutional commitment towards their current institution than did their persister counterparts.

### 9.4.5.3 Overall institutional integration scales (students’ experience)

The final step in the analysis of the IIS was to test the level of the students’ overall institutional integration. This was done through the analysis of the significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students in regard to their responses to all of the 26 items of the IIS collectively. As described earlier, the original IIS
consisted of 30 items. However, items 14, 15, 21 and 29 were excluded from the analysis to enhance the scales’ reliability. The level of the students’ institutional integration was utilised in this analysis to give an indication of the overall quality of the students’ experience in the sample college. Similar to in the analysis of the above scales, two statistical techniques were utilised: the Independent samples t-test and Mann-Whitney U test.

First, the output of the Independent samples t-test, as presented in Table 9.10, showed that there were significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students in regard to the level of their overall institutional integration. The table shows that non-persister students reported lower mean score ($M=3.53$, $SD=.484$) than their persister counterparts ($M=3.70$, $SD=.454$) in regard to their responses to the scales’ items. This gap was confirmed as statistically significant at a significance level of $t(161) = 2.16$, $p = .033$.

Specifically, out of all items of the IIS, some played a main role in differentiating between the responses of the two groups of participants. These items were item 17 from the ‘faculty concern for student development and teaching’ subscale, item 20 from the ‘academic and intellectual development’ subscale and items 26 and 27 from the ‘institutional and goal commitment subscale’. For item 17, persister students ($M=4.21$, $SD=.802$) and non-persister students ($M=3.85$, $SD=.907$) were significantly different at a significance level of $t(161) = 2.57$, $p = .011$. This item asked to what extent students believed that their teachers were interested in teaching. Non-persister students had less confidence in their teachers than did their persister counterparts. Chapter Ten discusses what this signifies.
Item 20 was the most direct statement in relation to the aim of utilising these scales in the current study. This item asked the participants directly about their satisfaction with their academic experience in the sample college. The responses of the non-persister students \((M=4.04, SD=1.07)\) showed a significantly lower quality of academic experience compared to the responses of the persister students \((M=4.35, SD=.783)\) at a significance level of \(t(161) = 2.07, p = .040\).

Finally, items 26 and 27 were designed to collect information about the students’ institutional commitment. Specifically, item 26 asked whether the students regretted their decision to enrol in the sample college in the first place, while item 27 asked whether students intended to re-enrol for next semester. These two items were discussed in detail in the previous section.

These results were also confirmed by Mann-Whitney U test. The output of the Mann-Whitney U test, as presented in Table 9.10, showed that persister and non-persister students were significantly different in regard to the level of their overall institutional integration at a significance level of \(U = 2378, Z = -1.90, p = .05, r= -0.15\).

Similar to the result of the Independent samples t-test, the items explaining this difference were item 17 \(U = 2247.5, Z = -2.6, p = .011, r= -0.20\), item 26 \(U = 2054, Z = -3.35, p = .001, r= -0.26\) and item 27 \(U = 1537, Z = -5.37, p = .001, r= -0.42\). Although item 20 \(U = 2486.5, Z = -1.66, p = .09, r= -0.13\) did not reach the required significance level of \(p=.05\), it was nevertheless very close to this value.

9.5 Summary of the quantitative data

This section summarises the main findings of the quantitative data reported in the above sections. The variables tested in this chapter were derived from the factors, issues
and themes found in the analysis of the qualitative data of this study. Moreover, the quantitative analysis included some other demographic and background variables that were suggested by the review of the relevant student retention literature, which might add to the study findings. These variables were tested statistically for significant differences between the two participant groups: the persister and non-persister students. The following are the main categories of the variables and subscales that were tested statistically in this chapter:

- The participants’ demographic characteristics
- The participants’ pre-entry academic performance
- The participants’ level of external influence and commitments
- The participants’ level of academic and social integrations
- The participants’ level of institutional and goal commitment
- The participants’ level of overall institutional integration (students’ experience).

The variables under these categories were tested through three different statistical techniques: the Independent samples T-test, the Mann-Whitney U test and the Chi-square test. The result of the analysis did not show any statistical differences between the two groups of participants in regard to the demographic characteristics variables or the items of the academic and social integration subscales. However, the output of the statistical tests showed some significant statistical differences between persister and non-persister students in regard to some of the variables and items under the other categories and subscales.
In summary, after controlling for the factors that emerged from the qualitative data analysis, the persister and non-persister student groups were significantly different in regard to the following five variables and scales:

- High school grades
- Life and work commitments
- External influence and commitments scale
- Institutional and goal commitment
- IIS.

The output of all statistical techniques, parametric and non-parametric, utilised in the analysis showed that, compared to their persister counterparts, non-persister students had significantly higher high school grades $t(161) = -2.94, p = .004$; higher levels of external influence and commitments (total) $t(161) = -2.162, p = .032$, especially in the level of their life and work commitments $t(161) = -2.388, p = .018$; a lower level of institutional and goal commitment $t(75.62) = 3.39, p = .001$ and a lower level of the overall quality of their institutional integration (experience) $t(161) = 2.16, p = .033$.

9.6 Conclusion of the quantitative phase

The aim of this chapter was to describe the findings of the statistical analysis of the quantitative data, including exploring for significant statistical differences between the two groups of participants, the persister and non-persister students, to confirm, or refute, the factors, issues and themes that emerged from the qualitative data as summarised in Chapter Eight. The above-presented findings showed that most of the issues that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data could be classified under, and explained by, the variables confirmed in the quantitative phase of the study. This is explained and discussed in more detail in the following discussion, in Chapter Ten, in
which the subsequent quantitative research question is answered and the findings of both phases are merged for further comparison and discussion.
Chapter Ten: Discussion of the Study Findings

10.1 Introduction

This research was an exploratory study of the factors affecting student retention in an English language centre of a higher education institution in Saudi Arabia. The aim of this study was to understand the phenomenon of low student retention in the ESL program at the sample college. To address this, the study has the following objectives:

- To identify the main factors affecting student retention at the sample college and to explain why the response of some students to these factors was to withdraw from their programs of study.
- To investigate the role the sample college has played and how this might have influenced student attrition.
- To investigate whether the low student retention rate in the ESL program can be related to the students’ academic ability in English.

To achieve these objectives, the study utilised a sequential exploratory mixed methods approach with a larger emphasis on the qualitative instruments. This approach helped in identifying the most frequent student attrition factors in the sample college (including the specific factors leading non-persister students to withdraw), as reported and perceived by both persister and non-persister students and the faculty and administrative staff of the sample college. Moreover, the utilised approach made it
possible to study the students’ experiences in the academic and social systems of their institution, to investigate the role in the phenomenon of students’ institutional experiences and academic abilities in English. Accordingly, the study was governed by a series of initial exploratory qualitative questions and a subsequent quantitative question.

The following are the qualitative questions:

**Q1:** What are the main factors affecting student retention at the ESL program of the sample college?

**Q2:** What factors did the non-persister students respond to when making the decision to leave the sample college?

**Q3:** What is the role of institutional experience in student attrition?

**Q4:** In relation to the ESL program, how did student attrition appear to be influenced by the students’ level of academic ability in English language subjects?

These questions were analysed comprehensively using the thematic analysis technique, as discussed in Chapter Four. This included identifying the most frequent factors affecting student retention in the sample college as perceived by the three groups of participants in the qualitative phase. Later, these factors were clustered under categories according to their similarities. Finally, these categories were classified under broader themes. The thematic analysis was conducted and reported separately for each qualitative instrument. At the end of the analysis of the data from all qualitative instruments, a summary and analysis of the factors that affected student retention across all qualitative instruments was conducted in a separate chapter (see Chapter Eight) and linked to the subsequent quantitative phase.
In the quantitative phase of the study, the analysis of the initial qualitative data led to the development of the following subsequent quantitative question, which was investigated statistically:

**Q: After controlling for the factors that emerged from the data of the qualitative phase and other demographic and pre-entry variables, is there a statistical difference between persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college?**

This question was analysed at two levels: descriptive and inferential, using a variety of techniques of the IBM SPSS statistical analysis software. At the descriptive level, the frequencies and mean scores of the participants’ responses to each study variable were reported. At the inferential level, these variables were analysed for significant statistical differences between the two groups of participants, persister and non-persister students, using the Chi-square, Mann-Whitney U test and Independent samples t-test techniques as applicable.

Although the issues investigated by these questions were addressed earlier in the previous chapters, their findings are summarised, merged and discussed in this chapter. Moreover, in this chapter, these findings are compared to the findings of the previous research, studies and theoretical models in the student retention literature. Accordingly, this chapter consists of the following four sections: summary of the study findings, integrating the qualitative and quantitative findings, addressing the research questions and the conclusion of the discussion chapter.
10.2 Summary of the study findings

This section summarises the major findings that emerged from both phases, qualitative and quantitative, of the study. The findings of these phases are briefly summarised below to enable the subsequent integration of the study findings to address the research questions.

10.2.1 Summary of the qualitative findings

The qualitative data were presented earlier in this study over three separate chapters (Chapters Five to Seven), one for each participant group and data collection instrument. In addition, the themes, issues and factors that emerged from each data collection instrument were merged with the issues of other instruments and summarised briefly in Chapter Eight, which also served as a link to the subsequent quantitative phase presented in Chapter Nine.

The qualitative data were collected through the following three data collection instruments: in-depth telephone interviews (non-persister students), focus groups (persister students) and staff surveys (academic and administrative staff). As mentioned above, the data that emerged from these three instruments were analysed using the thematic analysis technique, as described in Chapter Four and reiterated in the qualitative data chapters.

The initial analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the emergence of three major themes. Two of these themes were found as common among the three participant groups, while an additional theme emerged only from the data of the academic and administrative staff group (staff surveys). These three themes are:
Poor institutional experiences
High academic requirements
Student characteristics.

These themes describe the views and perceptions of the persister and non-persister students and the academic and administrative staff in relation to the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college. However, as mentioned above, issues under the second theme ‘high academic requirements’ were reported and perceived only by members of the academic and administrative staff group.

After analysing the data of the three instruments of the study and presenting the perceptions of each participant group separately, the analysis process was taken to a higher level by merging the data from all sources to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon and to identify agreements and disagreements across all instruments and participants. The aim of merging the issues arising from the analysis of the three qualitative data collection instruments was to identify those issues and factors that members of more than one participant group agreed affected student retention. However, those issues that were reported by members of only one group were not ignored in the analysis. The cross-group analysis of the data of all three instruments revealed that the following 13 issues gained agreement among members of all participant groups:

- Students will leave at the first opportunity
- Low student satisfaction with the college system
- The sample college is not the students’ first choice
- Negative administrative staff attitude
- Administrative staff disrespecting students
- Educational and job goals are higher than the sample college
• Lack of extracurricular activities
• Gaps between classes
• Students have no or do not know about their rights
• Strict rules
• Unreasonable restrictions
• External influence and commitments
• Poor student facilities.

The following two issues gained agreement only by members of the persister and non-persister students groups:

• Poor orientation
• Lack of student–college communication.

Finally, three issues were reported by members of only one participant group, the academic and administrative staff group, and were thus not included in the cross-group analysis. However, as these issues are important in their own right as a disagreement in the perceptions between groups, they were included in the discussion:

• High expectation of ESL teachers
• The students’ weak English abilities
• The students’ weak academic abilities.

Finally, as discussed in the conclusion to the qualitative phase in Chapter Nine, the cross-group issues were discussed by the study participants from the perspective that they are the main sources of the factors that might lead students to leave the sample college, either by withdrawing or transferring to another academic institution. These cross-group issues were further classified under the following four categories:
- Poor institutional experience
- Low satisfaction with the college system
- Students’ educational and job goals
- Students’ external commitments.

Therefore, the conclusion of the cross-group analysis was that these four categories were the major sources of the factors that negatively affected student retention in the sample college. These categories are in line with the three themes of the qualitative data that were reported earlier. The first category was identical to the poor institutional experience theme as perceived by members of all participant groups, while the second category comprised some of the issues related to students’ low satisfaction with their experiences with the administrative system of the sample college. The last two categories were included in the student characteristics theme as perceived by members of all participant groups.

10.2.2 Summary of the quantitative findings

The quantitative phase of the study was designed to test statistically the findings of the qualitative phase on the larger student population of the sample college. The statistical analysis included some of the demographic and background variables and issues that are most frequently associated with the student attrition phenomenon in the literature of student retention in higher education. These issues, variables and factors were covered in the data collection and analysis through different types of items and were tested through two levels of analysis: descriptive and inferential. The qualitative analysis was guided by the following question:
Q: After controlling for the factors that emerged from the data of the qualitative phase and other demographic and pre-entry variables, is there a statistical difference between persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college?

Based on the qualitative findings summarised in the above section, the analysis in the quantitative phase was focused on the following six categories of variables:

- The participants’ demographic characteristics
- The participants’ pre-entry academic performance
- The participants’ level of external influence and commitments
- The participants’ level of academic and social integration
- The participants’ level of institutional and goal commitments
- The participants’ level of overall institutional integration (students’ experience).

As discussed earlier, variables under these categories cover the main findings that emerged from the qualitative phase of the study. To test these variables, a 40-item questionnaire, comprising two parts, was used. In the first part, information about the variables under the first three categories was collected through 10 items that were designed by the researcher. These 10 items collected information about the participants’ marital, residency and financial status, parents’ educational level, high school grade, GAT score, level of their family and friends’ influence on them and level of their external life and work commitments.

The second part of the questionnaire covered the last three of the categories listed above. Information about the variables of these three categories was collected through the 30 questionnaire items that comprise the IIS designed by Pascarella and Terenzini.
The IIS consists of five subscales, which covered different issues concerning students’ experiences in the sample college, such as their academic and social integration and the level of their educational goals and commitment. The choice of the IIS to test the participants’ levels of institutional experience and institutional and goal commitment and the use of the subscales in the study were discussed and justified earlier in Chapter Four and reiterated in Chapter Nine.

The first level of the quantitative analysis was the descriptive analysis of the participants’ demographic information and pre-entry characteristics. The descriptive analysis was done through the presentation of the variable frequencies and percentages for the two participant groups: persister and non-persister students. This information was presented in Tables 9.1 to 9.4 in Chapter Nine. The outcome of the quantitative descriptive analysis can be summarised as follows:

- The majority of the students (57 students, 35%) had ‘above average’ high school grades of 80–89%.
- The majority of the students (92 students, 56%) had ‘average’ GAT scores of 61–70%.
- The majority of the students (159 students, 97.5%) were single.
- The majority of the students (127 students, 77.9%) were commuters.
- The majority of the students (61 students, 37%) reported that they had a good financial status.
- The majority of the students’ fathers (30%) held secondary school certificates.
- The majority of the students’ mothers (42%) held elementary school certificates or lower.
At the second level of the quantitative analysis, the inferential level, the variables were tested statistically through the following three statistical techniques from the SPSS analysis software: Chi-square test, Mann-Whitney U test and Independent samples t-test. The purpose of the analysis was to answer the subsequent quantitative question by looking for significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students after controlling for the findings of the qualitative phase of the study. The conclusion of the quantitative inferential analysis was that non-persister students were significantly different from their persister counterparts in regard to the following variables and subscales:

- High school grades
- Life and work commitments
- External influence and commitments
- Institutional and goal commitment
- IIS.

Specifically, the statistical analysis revealed that, compared to their persister counterparts, the non-persister students had significantly higher high school grades \( t(161) = -2.94, p = .004 \); higher levels of external influence and commitments (total) \( t(161) = -2.162, p = .032 \), particularly in the level of their life and work commitments \( t(161) = -2.388, p = .018 \); a lower level of institutional and goal commitment \( t(75.62) = 3.39, p = .001 \), particularly on the institutional commitment items; and a lower level of the overall quality of their institutional integration (experience) \( t(161) = 2.16, p = .033 \). The statistical analysis also revealed that there were no significant statistical differences between the two groups of students in regard to the other tested variables, such as the students’ demographic characteristics and, most importantly, the level of their academic
and social integration. However, the social and academic integration subscales were included as part of the overall IIS, which was reported as one of the sources of the significant statistical differences between the two groups of participants.

Finally, although the quantitative question will be discussed in detail and answered later in this chapter, a general comment on the quantitative analysis’s confirmation of the qualitative findings is that most of the issues that comprised the three qualitative themes and the issues under the qualitative cross-group categories were statistically supported by the statistical analysis of the quantitative phase of the study. A further and more detailed discussion of this is presented in the next section and when addressing the research questions.

10.3 Integrating the qualitative and quantitative findings

After presenting a brief summary of the findings of both phases of the study, this section integrates these findings in preparation for the final step of addressing the research questions. The purpose of integrating the findings of the two phases of the study is three-fold: it enables a check of whether the findings of the quantitative phase of the study confirm those of the qualitative phase, it provides a final and collective conclusion of the research findings and it establishes a basis upon which to answer the research questions. It is worth mentioning again here that the larger emphasis of the study methodology was on the qualitative data, while the quantitative question and analysis aimed only to identify the significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college after controlling for the findings of the qualitative phase. The quantitative data also provides a source for further in-depth discussion of these factors.
As described above, the issues from the qualitative data were categorised under the following three themes: poor institutional experience, high academic requirements and students’ characteristics. Issues under the high academic requirement theme were reported only by the participants of the academic and administrative staff group, while issues of the other two themes were reported by members of all participant groups.

A subsequent analysis of these issues showed that the most frequent student attrition factors and issues across all participant groups could be grouped under the following four categories: poor institutional experience, low satisfaction with the college system, students’ educational and job goals, and students’ external commitments. These cross-group categories are similar to the themes of the initial analysis of the qualitative data. The first category is identical to the poor institutional experience theme that emerged from the data of all qualitative instruments and participant groups, while the students’ satisfaction categories can be grouped under the same theme. The other two categories represent some of the issues that comprised the student characteristics theme, which was also reported by members from all participant groups.

In the quantitative phase, these qualitative findings were tested statistically to identify the significant statistical differences between the persister and non-persister students in the larger population of the sample college. The quantitative data collection instrument was a questionnaire that consisted of items covering the issues found in the qualitative phase of the study as well as other major issues associated with student retention as found in the local and international literature. Table 10.1 shows the qualitative themes and cross-group categories of the most frequent attrition factors in
the sample college as emerged from the qualitative phase of the study and the equivalent quantitative variables that were assigned to test them.

The results of the different statistical analysis techniques revealed that most of the issues and themes that emerged from the qualitative data were statistically confirmed. The results of the quantitative data revealed that only one qualitative theme and three specific issues from the qualitative data were not supported by the statistical analysis of the quantitative variables. The following sections describe these results in more detail.

Table 10.1 Qualitative findings and equivalent quantitative variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative findings</th>
<th>Quantitative variables</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Poor institutional experience theme</td>
<td>- Social integration subscales</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Poor institutional experience cross-group category</td>
<td>- Academic integration subscales</td>
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<td>Higher academic requirements theme</td>
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<td>Students educational goals cross-group category</td>
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<td>External commitments cross-group category</td>
<td>- Educational goals and institutional commitments subscale (educational goals items)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>External influence and commitments variables</td>
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10.3.1 Statistically confirmed qualitative data

This section presents the issues and themes of the qualitative data that were confirmed by the statistical analysis of the quantitative data. It highlights the similarities, or agreements, across both phases of the study. The conclusions of both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study, as summarised in the above section, showed a great amount of similarity across all utilised instruments. However, the focus of this
section is on the qualitative data that were statistically confirmed by the analysis of the quantitative data. For a qualitative variable to be statistically confirmed, it must significantly differentiate between persister and non-persister students when tested through the appropriate statistical tests. The following sections discuss the findings of the quantitative statistical analysis and compare them to the similar issues, factors and themes that emerged from the qualitative thematic analysis.

10.3.1.1 High school grades

The high school grades variable was included in the quantitative analysis for a number of reasons, but mainly to serve as a demographic or personal characteristic variable. It collected information about the students’ pre-entry academic performance, which was a key factor associated with the student attrition phenomenon by some participants in the qualitative phase of the study. Moreover, the students’ pre-entry academic performance as indicated by their high school grades was a major factor in many student retention theoretical models and proven by many empirical studies (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera et al., 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

In this study, the high school grade variable was also specifically utilised to investigate the following three qualitative perceptions that emerged from the findings:

- Weak academic level in high school
- Students’ weak English ability
- Low admission standards.

These three factors were perceived only by some members of the academic and administrative staff group as affecting student retention in the sample college and leading them to withdraw from their study programs before completion. Regarding the
first two of these three factors, some of the academic and administrative staff of the sample college believed that non-persister students did not have sufficient academic ability, especially in the English language, to qualify them to continue in their study programs. In addition, they pointed to the sample college’s ‘low admission standards’ as allowing students with ‘low academic abilities’ to enrol.

These claims were not statistically confirmed by the findings of the quantitative data, with statistical tests revealing that the non-persister students had significantly higher high school grades than those students who remained in their study programs until completion ($t(161) = -2.94, p = .004$).

This comparison between the qualitative and quantitative data allows two conclusions to be drawn. First, students’ low academic ability appears not to be an issue that is associated with the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college, as the persister students had lower high school grades than did the non-persister students. Second, the claims that attributed the student attrition problem to the ‘low admission standards’ of the sample college can be refuted, as non-persister students’ significantly higher high school grades compared to their persister counterparts would qualify them for admission in the sample college regardless of the strictness or weakness of the admission requirements.

Finally, there were some other indirect links between the students’ higher high school grades and some other qualitative findings. The higher high school grades of the non-persister students might indirectly support the two qualitative findings that the students of the sample college would leave at the first opportunity and that the attrition phenomenon in the sample college might be linked to the students’ institutional and
goal commitment. The fact that non-persister students had higher high school grades might have given them the ability to ‘leave at the first opportunity’, as they had a greater chance to upgrade to colleges of higher levels. Their higher level of ‘educational and goal commitment’ might motivate such an upgrade. This is discussed in more detail below in the sections on the educational and goal commitment subscales and the overall IIS.

10.3.1.2 Life and work commitments and external influence and commitments scale

The external influence and commitments scale comprised three items. The first two items collected information about the influence of students’ family and friends on their decisions to stay at or leave the sample college, while the third item collected information about the level of students’ life and work commitments, to test the influence of these commitments on the students’ persistence in their study programs. The purpose of these three items was to check the validity of the following two qualitative findings:

- Family and friends support the withdrawal decision
- External commitments.

These two issues were reported by members of both the persister and non-persister student groups as affecting their persistence in the sample college. The statistical analysis was conducted in two levels, separately for each individual item and collectively for all three of the items as a scale to measure the overall influence of the external factors.

The findings of the statistical tests only confirmed one of the three items of the external influence and commitments scales: the life and work commitments item. This
item was used to test the impact of the external commitments factor that was reported by 10 of the 15 persister students and one of the four non-persister students who participated in the study. The output of the statistical tests showed that non-persister students had a higher level of external life and work commitments ($t(161) = -2.388, p = .018$).

The results of the quantitative analysis of the other two items, the family and friends’ influence items, did not statistically confirm the qualitative findings that the influence of family and friends might affect students’ persistence in the sample college. However, the results of the overall scale showed that non-persister students had a higher level of external influence and commitments compared to their persister counterparts.

10.3.1.3 Institutional and goal commitment

The institutional and goal commitment scale is one of the five scales that comprise the IIS. The scale’s items collect information about students’ commitment towards their current academic institution and towards their educational goals. The scale was included in the quantitative analysis to test the following three qualitative findings:

- Students’ high educational and job goals
- The sample college is not the students’ first choice
- Students’ are transferring to better academic institutions.

These issues emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. The first two issues were perceived and reported by the participants of the persister and non-persister student groups, while the last issue was perceived by the majority (60%) of participants in the academic and administrative staff group. The responses and comments of the
participants concerning the above issues, as presented in the three qualitative data chapters, were said in the context that the level of the sample college was lower than the students’ educational and occupational goals. Moreover, the participants perceived that the non-persister students had no or a weak level of commitment towards the sample college. According to the participants, these students enrolled in the sample college only because they were not admitted into the institutions of their first choice. Thus, they tended to leave the sample college at the first opportunity, as discussed further below.

The result of the statistical analysis of the institutional and goal commitment scale confirmed these qualitative findings. The statistical analysis of the scale items revealed that the non-persister students had significantly lower levels of institutional and goal commitment than did the persister students \((t(75.62) = 3.39, p = .001)\). This significant statistical difference was particularly apparent for the two items that measured the level of students’ institutional commitment. However, although this confirmed the qualitative finding that the non-persister students had a lower level of commitment towards the sample college, the results of the analysis of the other three scale items that measured the level of students’ commitments towards their educational goals did not find any statistical difference between the persister and non-persister students.

**10.3.1.4 Overall Institutional Integration Scales**

The final step in the statistical analysis of the quantitative data was to test the differences between the persister and non-persister students for the overall IIS. As already described, the IIS consist of five subscales that measure students’ levels of institutional and goal commitment and integration into the academic and social systems
of their academic institution. Students’ overall scores for all items of the five subscales can indicate their level of social and academic integration into the college environment. In this study, the overall IIS was used to investigate the quality of the students’ experiences in the sample college, which was one of the factors identified in the qualitative phase.

The results of the statistical analysis revealed a finding that coincides with some of the findings of the qualitative phase of the study, that students’ poor institutional experience might be one of the causes of the student attrition problem in the sample college. The output of the statistical tests showed that non-persister students had lower levels of institutional, social and academic integration than their persister student counterparts in regard to their overall scores on the IIS ($t(161) = 2.16, p = .033$). Out of the 30 items that comprise the IIS, the following four sentences represent the items accounting for the statistical difference between the two groups of participants:

- Most faculty members I have had contact with are genuinely interested in teaching
- I am satisfied with my academic experience at this college
- I am confident that I made the right decision in choosing to attend this college
- It is likely that I will register at this college next semester

This finding is in line with the issues reported in the qualitative data by both persister and non-persister students and some members of the academic and administrative staff group as affecting student attrition at the sample college. Many of the factors and issues reported by the participants in the qualitative phase concerned students’ dissatisfaction with the college system, their poor relationships with the staff
of the sample college, their regret of the decision of enrolling in the sample college and their desire to leave the sample college at the first opportunity.

Therefore, based on the finding that the above sentences were the institutional integration items that significantly differentiated non-persister students from persister students, it can be concluded that the poor institutional experience theme that emerged from the qualitative data was confirmed by the quantitative finding of low institutional integration.

10.3.2 Statistically refuted (unsupported) qualitative data

The presentation of the statistically confirmed qualitative findings in the above section indicated a high level of agreement between the findings that emerged from the two phases of the study, and more particularly in regard to the wider themes and categories of variables. However, some data from the qualitative phase were not supported statistically by the analysis of the quantitative data. This included one of the three qualitative themes and some specific issues reported by some of the participants of the qualitative phase under the statistically confirmed themes. This section highlights and discusses these unsupported qualitative data.

First, it is important to state that the focus of the analysis of the quantitative data was on testing and confirming the wider themes and categories of variables that emerged from the qualitative data, rather than on investigating the specific reasons for student attrition. This is because many of the studies in the student retention literature argued that the focus of student retention studies should be on the wider issues or the sources of the factors of student attrition rather than on the direct reasons of
withdrawal reported by non-persister students. This argument was presented earlier in Section 3.8 of Chapter Three.

In regard to the themes that emerged from the qualitative data, the only theme that was not supported statistically by the analysis of the quantitative data was the ‘high academic requirements’ theme. Issues under this theme were reported only by the participants of the academic and administrative staff group. This theme was investigated in the quantitative phase through the statistical results of the academic integration subscale, the educational goals and commitments subscale and the pre-entry academic performance variable.

The findings of the academic integration and educational goals and commitments subscales did not show any statistically significant differences between the persister and non-persister students. Therefore, there was no indication that the ‘high academic requirements’ of the sample college was an issue that might lead some students to withdraw from their study programs. In fact, the findings of the pre-entry academic performance variable showed that the non-persister students had statistically significant higher academic performance than their persister counterparts, which might have been expected to give them an advantage over their persister counterparts to cope with the ‘higher academic requirements’.

Moreover, as the issues that comprise this theme were reported only by members of one participant group, this theme was not included in the cross-group analysis. Unlike the other two qualitative themes, which encompassed a large number of attrition factors, this theme only comprised one issue: that the college’s requirements and
teachers’ expectations being higher than students’ capabilities. Consequently, this theme did not gain the same level of cross-group agreement as the other qualitative themes.

Regarding the specific qualitative issues that were not confirmed in the quantitative phase of the study, some of these were not supported, while others were not tested directly by the quantitative statistical techniques. Among this latter group were the college’s strict rules and restrictions, students’ rights and the poor facilities. These were included under the confirmed wider themes and categories of variables, as they indicate either the students’ poor levels of institutional experience or their poor levels of satisfaction with the college system.

However, the following specific qualitative issues were not supported by the analysis of the quantitative data:

- Students’ weak English abilities
- Students’ weak academic abilities
- Low admission standards.

As with the above discussed ‘high academic requirements’ theme, which was not supported by the quantitative findings, these specific issues were reported only by the participants of the academic and administrative staff group and consequently were not included in the cross-group analysis. However, these issues were included in the statistical analysis of the quantitative phase. Regarding the first two issues, the academic and administrative staff who participated in the qualitative phase perceived that the students’ ‘low academic abilities’, in the English language and in general, was one of the factors that influenced their retention in the sample college. These claims were tested statistically in the quantitative phase through three different variables: the academic
integration subscale, the educational commitments items and the pre-entry academic performance variable.

None of the findings from the above variables indicated that the non-persister students had academic issues different from their persister counterparts that might affect their persistence in the sample college. In fact, the result of the statistical analysis of the pre-entry academic performance variable showed that the non-persister students had statistically significant higher academic performance than did the persister students. This is discussed in more detail below when addressing the research questions.

These findings of the non-persister students’ higher high school grades also refuted the third issue that attributed the student attrition problem in the sample college to low admission standards. Considering the non-persister students’ statistically significant higher high school grades compared to their persister counterparts, they were actually more qualified than the latter group for admission to the sample college. Thus, the strictness or weakness of the admission requirements does not appear to be a contributing factor in student attrition at the sample college.

10.3.3 Conclusion of the integrated findings

The above sections presented the similarities and differences between the findings of both phases of the study. More particularly, the above sections highlighted the qualitative findings that were either supported or not supported by the statistical tests of the quantitative phase. Based on the above-presented data, there was a high level of agreement between the findings of both phases of the study. Most of the findings that emerged from the qualitative data were statistically supported and confirmed by the statistical tests of the quantitative data. This included most of the specific issues that
were reported by the members of the three groups of participants as well as two of the three qualitative themes and all of the four cross-group categories of variables.

Finally, only one qualitative theme and three specific issues from the qualitative data were not supported by the statistical tests of the quantitative phase. These were the high academic requirements theme and the issues of students’ weak English abilities, students’ weak academic abilities and the college’s low admission standards. It is worth emphasising that all of the issues, themes and cross-group variables that were reported in the qualitative phase by the student participants, both persister and non-persister, were statistically confirmed in the quantitative phase. Conversely, all of the unsupported qualitative issues were perceived only by participants of the academic and administrative staff group. None of the cross-group variables was statistically refuted.

10.4 Addressing the research questions

Understanding the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college was the main aim of the current study. This aim was explored through a series of research objectives and questions in order to reach such understanding. In addition, many steps were taken as a preparation for this stage. After presenting and summarising the findings that emerged from all of the instruments of both phases of the study and integrating these findings through the presentation of the statistically supported and unsupported qualitative issues, factors and themes, it is possible to address the four research questions that guided the current study.

Most of the student attrition factors and issues were discussed in the qualitative and quantitative findings chapters and summarised and integrated earlier due to the exploratory and emergent nature of this study. The following sections focus on
addressing the objectives of the current study, as presented at the beginning of this chapter. This was done by providing more detailed answers to the research questions that are linked to and explained through the findings of the current study, as well as the findings and assumptions of the other studies and theoretical and conceptual models from the Saudi and international research literature on student retention in higher education. Accordingly, the following four sections discuss the factors affecting student retention in the ESL program of the sample college, the factors that the non-persister students responded to when leaving the sample college, the role of the institutional experience and the influence of the students’ academic abilities in English language on the student attrition phenomenon.

10.4.1 Factors affecting student retention in the ESL program of the sample college

This section answers the first research question that asks about the factors affecting student retention in the ESL program of the sample college. Discovering the factors that affect the student retention in the ESL program of the sample college was the first and the principal objective of the current study. The conclusions of the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study suggested a wide range of factors that might be associated with the low rate of student retention in the sample college. Moreover, the cross-group analysis of the findings that emerged from the three qualitative instruments and the discussion of the integrated findings of both phases of the study, indicated a high level of agreement among the student attrition variables, as perceived by all of the study participants.
As presented in the above sections the factors influencing student retention in the sample college were categorised under wider themes and categories of variables that cover the students’ characteristics, educational levels and goals, external commitments and institutional experiences. However, in order to present a comprehensive answer to the first research question identify the influence of each party in relation to the research problem, the student attrition factors found in this study are categorized and discussed under the following two main categories:

- Student related attrition factors
- College related attrition factors

Such identification is important for the implication of the research findings and reflects to recommendations for the conducting and designing of student retention plans.

**10.4.1.1 Student related attrition factors**

Student related issues such as their characteristics, educational and occupational goals and commitments, financial status and other personal factors, that are not under the direct control of the academic institutions, are important to their retention in higher education programs (Bafatoom, 2010; Bean, 1980; Braxton, Brier, & Hossler, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993). In the current study, some student related issues were found to be associated with the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college. However, according to the findings of both qualitative and quantitative phases of the study, these issues were limited to the following two factors:
• The students’ higher educational goals and levels
• The students’ high external commitments

First, the students’ higher educational goals and levels factor has played a main role in their withdrawal from the sample college. More particularly, the students’ higher grades at the high school level and their desire to enrol in a better academic institution, particularly four-year universities, was found to be one of the main factors associated with the students withdrawal from their study program in the sample college. This was statistically confirmed by the analysis of the quantitative data as the non-persister students had significantly higher high school grades than their persister counterparts.

According to the responses of both persister and non-persister students, as well as the responses of some the academic and administrative staff, it can be argued that the academic level of the sample college, that of two-year diplomas, is not the first preference for most of the students. Therefore, most of the students reported that they enrolled in the sample college because they were not admitted in a four-year institutions and this was their last opportunity for a tertiary place. Moreover, the majority of the students stated that they would withdraw immediately if they got admission to the institution of their first choice. In addition, these claims were also recognized by the academic and administrative staff who participated in the study. As argued earlier in this chapter, it seems the students’ higher high school grades was the key factor in this regard. The higher high school grades of the non-students gave them the advantage and ability to gain admissions to another academic institution of a higher level, a four-year program, especially in the second semester when the university admissions become less competitive.
These findings coincide with some of the findings of Saudi and international student retention studies, particularly those studies that focused on the student attrition rates in two-year institutions. In the Saudi context, many studies found two-year institutions are not the first preference of the Saudi students. In such institutions, students usually have a low level of institutional commitment and will leave, if offered the opportunity, to four-year institutions at the first chance (Al-Abdulkareem, 2012; Malah, 1994). Moreover, Tinto (1993) argued in his student retention model that many students consider their withdrawing as “quite positive steps toward goal fulfilment” (p. 3).

The second student related attrition factor concerned the students’ high external commitments. This factor emerged as an important issue in many of the student retention theoretical models and empirical studies (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Tinto, 1993). These commitments are described in many different terms and represented by many different variables such as the “external commitments” in Tinto’s theoretical model (1993), “environmental factors” in Bean and Metzner’s theoretical model and the influence of family, friends and job commitments in other models. Moreover, the influence of the students’ external commitments was reported as an important student attrition factor in many of the Saudi studies reported on earlier in the review of the research literature such as Abuelma'atti, 2006; Al-Ghnaim, 2010; Hakeem, 2007; Mobarak and Alharthi and Kees, 2000.

In the current study students’ high external commitments, such as their family and job commitments, were perceived by many persister and non-persister students and academic and administrative staff, as factors that negatively affected the student...
retention in the sample college. These perceptions were confirmed by the statistical analysis of the quantitative data as the non-persisters showed significantly higher levels of external commitments than those students who persisted in their study programs.

However, although the student external commitment factor was presented here as a student related factor, it is important to mention that the participants who reported the external commitments factor as influential factors also associated ability to meet external commitments with the practices like the timetabling system and gaps between classes which was reported as one of the most important college related attrition factors. These participants emphasised the negative impact of the college administrative system, as represented by the poor distribution of the study hours in the of ESL program timetables, on their external commitments.

The students who identified the impact of external commitment to their decisions about their studies argued that they could not compromise between their study and external, family and job, responsibilities and duties because study hours were spread over the whole academic day. Considerations like the long waiting periods between classes especially when accompanied with the lack of transportation and the absence of student facilities and activities meant study requirements and external responsibilities could not coexist. These views are similar to Tinto’s 1993 views on the impact of students’ external experiences after they started their study programs. Tinto argued that although the student external experiences are important to their decisions to enrol in college, their impact tends to be dependent on the quality of the students integration in
their academic institutions. In the case of the sample college everyday practices were a barrier to quality integration occurring

**10.4.1.2 College related attrition factors**

Assumptions in regard to the role of the college related factors on the student attrition phenomenon in higher education, such as the institutional experience, college admission policy, rules, service and facilities and other college related issues are essential parts of most of the student retention theoretical models and studies (Bafatoom, 2010; Bean, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1983, 2005; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993). In the current study most of the factors that were perceived by members from all of the participant groups and confirmed by the analysis of the quantitative data as affecting student retention, were under the direct control of, or related to, the administrative system of the sample college.

The majority of the issues found by the three qualitative instruments, as summarised by the cross-group analysis and confirmed statistically, were related to systems within the sample college, particularly the administrative system. This is in direct comparison to the two issues, or factors, identified above as student related factors. Moreover, even some of the student related issues can be attributed to the poor quality of institutional experience the students had in the sample college.

The following reasons for non-persisters are the most agreed upon, by members from all participant groups, as they relate to college issues that might negatively affect student retention in the sample college and lead them to either withdrawal or transfer to other academic institutions:
• Students will leave at the first opportunity
• Low student satisfaction with the college system
• Administrative staff negative attitude
• Administrative staff disrespecting students
• Lack of extracurricular activities
• Gaps between classes
• Students have no or do not know about their rights
• Strict rules
• Unreasonable restrictions
• Poor student facilities
• Poor orientation
• Lack of students - college communication

The above points clearly to college related issues that can be attributed to the administrative system of the sample college. Moreover, these factors and issues were not only limited to a single aspect of the college administrative system, rather they can be grouped, as perceived by the study participants, as factors related to the rules and administrative system of the sample college and factors related to the attitude of the administrative staff and the way they deal with the students and apply the college rules.

For the factors that are related to the rules and the administrative system of the sample college, the study participants, from all of the participant groups, expressed their dissatisfaction with the strictness of some of the rules applied in the sample college, such as dismissal, absence and dress and external appearance rules, especially when compared to other government tertiary institutions of the same context. These participants perceived that even the institutions that have higher levels than the sample college, such as the four-year universities, do not have such strict rules. The participants believe that this factor might play an important role in the students’ decisions to
transfer. Especially when it is known that most of the students, as found by the study data, are not satisfied with the level of the sample college and they look for an upgrade at the first opportunity.

As well as the strictness of the rules some of the participants also perceived that some of these rules are meaningless and have no objectives. These participants stated that they have no problem in coping with such strict rules if they understand their objectives and the purpose behind them. According to their responses to the study instruments, these students found problems with what they called “meaningless rules”. First, they believe that many of the rules, such as the dress and hair length and rules, do not make sense and they are applied only to control the students and to create a fake reputation at the expense of the students. Second, they believe that the sample college is a government institution and it should apply the same type of rules applied in other government institutions. Third, some of the participants believe that some of the rules are illegal and invented by the sample college administration which might even constitute a violation of their student rights.

All of these issues negatively impact the student institutional experience and their integration, especially into the social system of the sample college. Such an impact is discussed more comprehensively later in this chapter in the section of the role of institutional experience in relation to the third research question.

In addition to staff attitude factors participants from all groups, including the academic and administrative staff group, complained about the way the college rules are applied and the way the students are treated by some of the administrative staff of the sample college. These participants perceived that in addition to the general student
dissatisfaction with some of the college rules they were also not satisfied with the ways in which these rules are applied. They stated that the administrative staff of the college should deal with the students in a more professional way and treat them with respect.

The quality of the student-faculty relationship is an important factor when determining the quality of the students’ experience in their academic institution which has a subsequent impact on their retention. Such a relationship were a key element in the academic and social integration constructs of many of the student retention theoretical models developed in the research literature (Bean, 1980; Cabrera et al., 1992; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Walker, 2001). More particularly, the study of Pascarella (1980) on student-faculty informal contact concluded that “statistically significant, positive associations exist between amount of student informal, nonclass contact with faculty and such educational outcomes as satisfaction with college, .... and freshman to sophomore year persistence in college” (Pascarella, 1980, p. 564). Similarly, it was also found by a study in the Saudi context, that the quality of the students’ relationships with the staff of their academic institutions was one of the commonly reported student attrition factors (Hakeem, 2007).

Finally, it can be concluded from the perceptions of the participants that these college related factors and issues worked together to create an environment of poor institutional experience where the students expressed their dissatisfaction and their regret at enrolling in the sample college as well as their desire to leave the sample college at the first opportunity.
10.4.2 Factors that the non-persister responded to when leaving the sample college

This section discusses the second research question which asked about the factors that the non-persister students responded to when making the decision to leaving the sample college. These factors are limited to the factors that the four non-persister students who participated in the phone interviews referred to when asked about the reasons behind their withdrawals.

First, the following table (Table 10.1) lists the factors that were reported by the four non-persister participants as the direct factors that led them to take the decision to withdraw from the sample college before the completion of their study programs.

Table 10.2 Direct factors of withdrawals for the non-persister students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Direct factors of withdrawals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| NS1 & NS4    | - The availability of a better study opportunity  
|              | - The sample college was not my first choice |
| NS2          | - Timetabling system (gaps between classes)  
|              | - No facilities to spend the time between classes |
| NS3          | - Registration staff negative attitude |

As shown in Table 10.1 non-persister students reported three different direct reasons for their withdrawal from the sample college. The first factor was the availability of another study opportunity, especially because the sample college was not the students’ first choice. The second factor was regarding the timetabling system and the huge gaps between classes, especially when associated with the lack of student facilities and activities and the students’ high level of external commitments. The third factor was the negative attitude of the administrative staff and the way the students are treated in the sample college.
For the first factor, two out of the four non-persister participants (NS1 and NS4) reported that the sample college was not their first choice and they enrolled only because it was their last opportunity. Thus, according to them, when a better opportunity became available they did not hesitate to withdraw. However, both of these two non-persister students did not withdraw until they were guaranteed places in the new institutions.

It is worth noting that, from the data of these two participants, both of the students withdrew after successful completion of the ESL one-year intensive program which forms 50 per cent of the duration of the two-year diploma offered by the sample college. Because of the system of the sample college, as described in Section 2.2 in the context chapter, students cannot use the credits they earned in other academic institutions when transferring from the sample college. This means that the two students sacrificed a whole successful academic year to transfer to the institution of their first choice. This is an indication of how unattractive the sample college was to these students.

These findings coincide with the findings of most of the Saudi studies that were conducted in two-year institutions that also found that the students who are able will leave at the first opportunity (Al-Abdulkareem, 2012; Malah, 1994). However, such findings can be also referred to other factors such as the institutional experience and integration that is discussed in the next section that addresses the third research question.

On table 10.1 “direct factors of withdrawals” the second factor listed has participant NS2 reporting that he could not bear the timetabling system of the ESL
program and the waiting periods during the huge gaps between classes. He also said that what made this factor influence him more was the lack of student facilities and activities. The student would prefer to spend this time attending to his family commitments without the conflict with study times. Moreover, he reported that he did not understand why the students are restricted from staying in the classrooms during the long breaks. This factor alone was among the most frequent student attrition factors reported by members of all of the participant groups.

The answer of participant NS2 introduced two different issues. First, it indicates a failing in the administrative system of the sample college that is not designed to fit student needs therefore leading to poor student satisfaction. Second, it indicates a lack of communication between the students and the college administration as the students were confused in regard to the reasons behind some of the college rules and restrictions. Both of these issues reflect student dissatisfaction with the administrative system of the sample college and subsequently their poor institutional experiences. These issues are discussed in the next section when addressing the third research question.

The third factor from table 10.1 has participant NS3 talking about how he chose to withdraw from the sample college because of the negative attitude of some of the staff from the registration department and the way he was treated by them. He said that he had an issue with the registration department and felt that they had treated him with disrespect and in an unprofessional way. He also said that he felt his privacy and rights as a student had been violated. The staff attitude and the way they dealt with students was one of the important student attrition factors found this current study which support many of the Saudi and international theoretical models and studies. This issue was also
discussed in the section of the third research question as a factor that might negatively affected the students’ institutional experience.

Finally, all of the above factors were reported by many of the participants from all of the other participants’ groups and were among the other concerns that formed the qualitative themes. Moreover, they were statistically confirmed by the analysis of the quantitative data. The first withdrawal factor that attributed student withdrawal to the availability of another study opportunity was confirmed by the quantitative finding that non-persister students had lower institutional commitments than their persister counterparts and this finding was also supported by their significantly higher high school grades. The other two factors were confirmed by the low level of institutional integration that the non-persister students had and this was also a finding to emerge from the statistical analysis of their responses to the IIS.

10.4.3 The role of the institutional experience

This section discusses the third research question which asked about the role of the institutional experience in the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college. The simple answer to this question was that the students’ institutional experience in the sample college played a major role in their decisions to withdraw from their study programs before completion. This answer was based on both the qualitative and quantitative findings of the current study, the discussion of the factors affecting student attrition in the sample college in the first question and the specific attrition factors that the non-persister students responded to when making the withdrawal decisions as discussed in the section of the second question. The following is a discussion of the impact of the students’ institutional experiences, as found by the current study discussed
other studies from context of the research literature on student retention in higher education.

As found by the qualitative data and confirmed statistically, the majority of the factors reported by the study participants, as affecting student retention in the sample college, referred to the college administrative system and contributed to the students’ experiences in this system. Moreover, all of the direct reasons for withdrawal, that were reported by the four non-persister students, were about their satisfaction with the college academic level and administrative system and the attitudes of some of the administrative staff. Moreover, there was some evidence from the persister students’ data, which was supported by the perceptions of some of the academic and administrative staff, that even the persister students were not satisfied with the administrative system of the sample college. Evidence to the claim that the students’ poor institutional experiences were more particular within the administrative system is that all of the four non-persister students and the 15 persister students stated that they had a good academic experience and good relationships with the academic staff and other students.

The quality of the students’ Institutional experiences, integration and engagements, especially in the social system of their academic institution was a key element in the foundation of most of the student retention studies and theoretical models (Astin, 1975, 1984; Bean, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1983; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983, 1995, 2005; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2009, 2010). In fact it can be claimed that most, if not all, of the student retention
studies put the students integration within the college system as the major factor that
determined the level of influence level of all other factors. Moreover, most of the
student retention studies emphasised on the greater impact of these factors in the first
year of college, which is also the case of the ESL program in the current study.

In 2006 Tinto, who is one of the most distinguished scholars in the student
retention field, reviewed the state of the student retention research and practice and
stated that “Throughout these changes and the putting forth of alternative models, one
fact has remained clear. Involvement or what is increasingly being referred to as
engagement, matters and it matters most during the critical first year of college”(p. 4).
Moreover, Braxton (2000) found that “social integration, not academic integration, is the
key to understand student departure” (Braxton 2000 cited in Berger & Lyon, 2005).
Finally further evidence from outside the student retention research field was preserved
by Walker (2001) who listed some of what he called the satisfaction drivers for ESL
students in English language schools where he found the school environment friendly,
comfortable and a relaxed place was a top factor. Accordingly, most of the efforts and
actions taken by academic institutions to enhance retention rates are focused on
improving the students’ experiences and satisfaction and strengthening their bonds and
integration with the college system and community.

Although the role of the academic institutions in the student experience was a key
variable in many of the student retention studies and theoretical model, it was
particularly investigated by the theoretical model of Berger and Braxton (1998). In their
study Berger and Braxton (1998) studied the impact of the organizational attributes
(institutional factors) on the quality of the students social integration (institutional
experience) and consequently on their persistence. They found a strong impact of the organizational attributes such as the student-college communication, fairness of college rules and the students’ engagement in decision making processes on the students’ social integration and persistence. These findings and variables were close to the factors found by the current study. Moreover, there is a strong agreement between the findings of the current study and the findings of Berger and Braxton’s study, especially in regard to the importance of the “intent to reenrol” and the “type of institutional setting”.

In the local context, as presented and discussed in Section 3.7 in the literature review chapter, the student dissatisfaction with the rules and policies of their academic institutions was the most frequent student attrition factor as emerged by many of the reviewed studies (Abuelma’atti, 2006; Al-Abdulkareem, 2012; Khan & Osman, 2011; Malah, 1994). Moreover, other factors such as student satisfaction with the college level and type, the academic institution being the students’ first choice and the students desire to upgrade to institution of higher levels were among the student attrition factors that were found in the academic institution from the Saudi context, especially the two-year institutions. Such agreement between findings of the current study and other findings from the local Saudi context suggests many recommendations and implications that are addressed in the next chapter have a broader value that goes beyond the one institute that was the focus of this research.

Finally, it can be concluded from the study findings that, although the statistical analysis showed that non-persister students had significantly lower levels of institutional commitment and integration than their persister counterparts, the dissatisfaction with the college administrative system was widespread among all students of the sample
college, as found by the persister students’ data from the focus groups. However, the critical factor that might differentiate between the persister and non-persister students in regard to the withdrawal decision is the availability of the other study opportunities due to academic ability to upgrade to other academic institutions of higher level such as the four-year universities. These perceptions were supported by the statistical data which revealed that the non-persister students had significantly higher high school grades which might made such upgrade more possible coupled with less competitive condition after the first term these students were able to transfer.

10.4.4 The influence of the students’ academic abilities in English language

The impact of the students’ academic abilities in the English language on their retention in the sample college was investigated as a response to the claims, in the local context of the study, that assumed that the phenomenon of student attrition in higher education programs was due to such a factor. In fact this was also one of student attrition factors perceived by the academic and administrative staff of the sample college as reported in the study findings. Therefore this section focusses on addressing these claims.

Before going further in addressing these claims a couple of points should be highlighted. First, the study sample was drawn from the English language centre where the students study nothing but English language subjects. Thus all the information collected about the students’ educational abilities and academic performance in the sample college, was interpreted as their educational abilities and academic performance in English language subjects. Second, as described in Section 2.2 in the context chapter, the sample college has strict rules of academic dismissal that filter all students with low
academic abilities. Therefore, since the academically dismissed students, who have academic issues, were excluded and the study sample was limited to those students who voluntarily withdrew, it can be claimed that the non-persister students who participated in the current study would not have academic issues to the level that might affect their persistence. This was supported by Tinto (1993) views in the difference between academic dismissal and voluntary withdrawals.

Although the academic abilities and performance of the students is seen as a predictor and a key factor to their persistence in higher education programs, as perceived by many student retention studies and theoretical models (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 1993) and other studies from the local context (Abuelma'atti, 2006; Alabdulgader, 1992; Khan & Osman, 2011), it did not have such influence on the sample students of the current study. All of the four non-persister students who participated in the study interviews reported that they had no academic difficulties during their study in the sample college and their withdrawal from the sample college was not related to any academic issues. In fact two of the non-persister participants (NS1 and NS4) had successfully completed all of the four levels of the ESL programs before they transferred to other institutions with higher academic requirements. Moreover, 11 out of the 15 persister students (73%) who participated in the two focus groups reported that they had good academic experience in the sample college.

The claims that blame the students themselves for the attrition from the sample college due to their poor educational abilities and academic performance came only from the members of the academic and administrative staff participants group. Out of
the ten academic and administrative staff participants, eight staff (80%) referred student attrition to the students’ weak abilities in English language. In addition, another 3 staff (30%) perceived that non-persister students had lower academic abilities in the high school level than the students who persisted in their study programs. However, these claims were refuted by the statistical analysis of the quantitative data. In fact, the statistical analysis revealed totally opposite findings.

The statistical analysis of the student data of the larger population of the sample college revealed that the non-persister students had significantly higher grades in the high school level than the persister students. In addition, the analysis of the academic integration subscale and the educational goals items of the institutional and goal commitment subscale, as presented in the quantitative data chapter and summarised earlier in this chapter, did not show any differences between the persister and non-persister students of the sample college.

The indication of the sample college staff to blame the students’ academic abilities could be explained in two ways. First, although it was clarified at the beginning of the data collection, some of the participants from the academic and administrative staff group might have confused the difference between voluntary withdrawal and academic dismissal. These are completely two different concepts (Tinto, 1993). This confusion was also found in some of the student retention studies, particularly in local Saudi research as discussed in Section 3.7 in the literature review chapter. It is important to distinguish between these two concepts before any claims, or assumptions, can be made, or any retention plans are designed. Thus, this matter is addressed in the recommendation section of the current study.
Second, for a long time studies of student retention in higher education relied heavily on psychological views and perspectives that emphasized the role of the personality, abilities and motivation of individual students (Tinto, 1993). These views refer the student attrition phenomenon in tertiary institutions to the shortcoming and weakness of individual students, including their poor academic abilities and performance (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyon, 2012; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993, 2006).

These ideas used to be dominant until recent developments in the field of student retention research gave more importance to the students’ integration with the college environment. However, due to the lack of systematic institutional retention studies, in the sample college in particular and in the Saudi higher education context in general, it might be possible that the management and educational practitioners of Saudi academic institutions do not have the full image that gives them the ability to deal with such an issue. This matter is also included in the recommendations arising from this research.

Thus based on the above arguments, it can be concluded that the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college is not related to the students’ academic abilities in general and more particularly in English language subjects. In fact, if the students educational abilities and academic performance can be related to the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college, it should be related to the fact that the higher the students educational abilities and performance the higher is the chance for them to transfer to better academic institutions. This assertion is based on the quantitative findings that the non-persister students had significantly higher high school grades than their persister counterparts.
10.5 Conclusion of the discussion chapter

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the findings of the current study as perceived by the persister and non-persister students who participated in the research and the analysis from the three instruments of the qualitative phase and confirmed by the statistical analysis of the quantitative phase in the light of the student retention literature of the local and international higher education contexts. The discussion was presented through three different steps by summarising the findings of each phase of the study, integrating the findings of both phases of the study and answering the research questions.

The conclusion of the study findings, based on the qualitative and quantitative data integration and the answers of the research questions, was that the factors that might affect the student retention in the sample college have two major sources; student related factors and college related factors. However, based on the above discussion it can be concluded that most of the reported student attrition factors in the sample college, as perceived by members of all participants’ groups and confirmed by the statistical analysis, were college related factors particularly in regard to the students’ poor institutional experience and satisfaction with the college administrative system, policy and service. Moreover, even for a few student related factors, it might be argued were influential only when they interact with the students’ poor institutional experience.

The factor that might play an important role in the students’ decisions to leave the sample college, before completing their study programs, was the availability of other study or job opportunities. Most of the participants in the qualitative phase of the study (three out of the four non-persister students, 13 out of the 15 persister students and
eight out of the 10 academic and administrative staff) said that students would leave the sample college at the first opportunity. This view is supported by the quantitative findings. The fact that the non-persister students had significantly higher high school grades gives an indication that it might be easier for them to get admission in other academic institutions of higher level than the sample college, especially in the second semester where there are usually more study opportunities in most of the Saudi government universities and less strict admission rules.

On the other hand, it can be concluded that, based on the analysis of all of the study instruments and based on the responses of all of the students who participated in the study, there was no relationship between the students’ academic abilities and performance particularly their academic abilities in English language and the student attrition phenomenon in the sample college. In fact the data suggested that students with higher academic abilities and performance, including English language, who have higher levels of educational goals might be closer to withdraw from the sample college than the others.

Finally, based on the findings of this study one may characterize a non-persister student who might withdraw from the sample college before completing his study program as the student who has high school grades and educational goals higher than the level of the sample college, high level of external commitments, low level of institutional commitments and low level of institutional integration.
Chapter Eleven: Implications, Recommendations and Conclusion

11.1 Introduction

This is the final chapter of the thesis that concludes the whole study. At this point all of the study data has been presented, analysed and discussed and all of the research questions have been answered. It is now the time to present the final conclusion of the study that highlights its strengths, explains its limitations and suggests the implications and recommendations. Accordingly, this chapter consists of the following sections; overview of the study, strengths of the study, limitations of the study, implications for policy and practice, recommendations for theory and future research and final conclusion of the study.

11.2 Overview of the study

This study is an exploration of the student attrition phenomenon in an English language centre of a tertiary institution in Saudi Arabia. The adopted research design was sequential exploratory mixed methods with greater emphasis on the qualitative phase. The study consisted of an initial qualitative phase and a subsequent quantitative phase. The aim of the study was to investigate the factors that affected student retention and the factors that non-persister students responded to when making the decision to leave the sample college. Moreover, the study aimed to investigate the role
of the institutional experience and if there was a relation to the students’ academic ability in English language. This was done through the investigation of four qualitative questions and a subsequent quantitative question that aimed to look for differences between the persister and non-persister students of the larger population of the sample college, in regard to the qualitative findings.

The student data were collected during the academic year of 2012-2013 through interviews, focus groups, surveys and questionnaires for the quantitative data. The participants of the qualitative phase were four non-persister students (interviews), 15 persister students (focus groups), 10 academic and administrative staff (surveys) and 163 students who participated in the quantitative study questionnaires. The college records indicated that 53 of the sample students withdrew by the end of the first year of the program.

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the main sources of student attrition were the students’ poor institutional experience, particularly with the college administrative system, the poor level of their institutional commitment and the high level of their educational and employment goals. These findings were tested quantitatively through a modified version of the Institutional Integration Scales (IIS) designed by Pascarella and Terenzini, (1980) to check if the qualitative data could be generalized to the larger population of the sample college. The statistical analyses of the questionnaires, on the other hand, confirmed that the non-persister students were significantly different from their persister counterparts in regard to many of the tested variables. The non-persister had significantly higher high school grades, higher levels of life and work commitment, lower levels of institutional commitment and lower levels of
institutional integration according to their overall scores in the Institutional Integration Scales.

The integration of the study findings and the discussion of the answers of the research questions categorised the student attrition factors in the sample college into two main categories; student related attrition factors and college related attrition factors. However, as concluded by the discussion of the study findings, most of the reported student attrition factors in the sample college were college related factors, particularly in regard to the students’ poor institutional experience and satisfaction with the college administrative system, policy and service. Moreover, the conclusion of the study findings suggested that the main motivator, that made the non-persister students respond to such factors by withdrawing from the sample college, was the availability of another study or job opportunity. Finally, there was no evidence that associates the student attrition phenomenon, in the sample college, with the low academic ability, especially in English language.

11.3 Strengths of the study

Referring to its aims, purpose and findings, the current study contributes to the field of student retention in higher education, particularly in the Saudi higher education context, in regard to the following. First, it sheds light on one of the critical and under-researched topics of the Saudi higher education that not only affects students but also educational institutions and authorities as well as economic, work force and future plans of the country. Secondly, it provided the local higher education authorities and institutions, particularly the sample college, with some implications and recommendations for policy and practice that are built on the findings of the current
study and associated with the findings of other local and international studies. Third, based on the literature of student retention in higher education of the local context, the current study can claim to be the first study that presents and reviews all of the available Saudi student retention studies, and other studies from similar Arabic contexts, in one place. Therefore this research presents a better and more comprehensive understanding of the student attrition phenomenon in this particular context. Fourth, the comprehensive exploratory qualitative investigation that utilised three different instruments and techniques and included participants from all of the involved parties, such as the persister and non-persister students and the academic and administrative staff, gave the current study the power to build and infer from the stories, perspectives and the actual institutional experiences of these people who were directly involved in the researched phenomenon to better present findings and conclusions. Fifth, based on the findings and recommendations of the current study, the higher education authorities and the administration of academic institutions, particularly the administration of the sample college, can focus on the most critical issues, such as the institutional experience, that might affect student persistence and suitable practices to address the issue.

11.4 Limitations of the study

Like any other research project, the current study has some limitations in regard to the scope, place, time and type of data collected and analysed. For the current study there were some types of information, important for student retention studies, but were not addressed in the current study, such as, information about the gender and age. The gender information was not applicable because of the education system in Saudi Arabia where all of the academic institutions are sex-segregated institutions and the sample
college was a male college. The student age information, on the other hand, was a variable that was not used because of the admission policy and regulations of the sample college that required recent high school qualifications, not older than three years, which made most of the students in the sample college fall in one age group.

Another limitation of the current study was some other missing information that might add to the current study if included such as the reasons of withdrawals for the non-persister students of the larger population of the sample college and information about their future destinations after they left the sample college. This later information could have included whether they transferred to other academic institutions, the types and levels of these institutions, or withdrew completely from the higher education system. Such information was difficult to collect because of the lack of time and information to trace all of the non-persister students after they left the sample college.

Moreover, as suggested by the literature of student retention in higher education there are some demographic and characteristics information that were not included in the current study, such as, whether the non-persister student belonged to a specific ethnic, or minority, group or was the first undergraduate student in his family. The information about the students’ ethnic group was difficult to collect as it is among the topics that were not recommended for discussion in the community of the study context. Other information about student characteristics was included in the withdrawal forms, which were completed by the non-persister students when they left the sample college, but these forms were not accessible at the time of the data collection due to administrative considerations.
11.5 Implications for policy and practice

Based on the findings of the current study, including the discussions of these findings and the answers of the research questions, and in the light of the relevant local and international literature of student retention in higher education, the following are implications for policy and practice for higher education authorities in Saudi Arabia and to all Saudi tertiary institutions especially the sample college and all two-year academic institutions of similar systems.

1. Review the admission rules and policies to target the type of students who are suitable for the institution system, type and level such as the students with certain high school grades and educational and job goals. It was clear from the study findings and the local literature that some students of the two-year institutions (diplomas) with high pre-entry academic performance might enrol in these institutions only because they couldn’t get admission in the four-year universities. Such students might keep looking for opportunities in other academic institutions of higher levels (four-year institutions) and will probably leave when they find these opportunities. It might be recommended that the admission procedures in all government tertiary academic institutions of all levels are done in coordination to ensure that students, where possible, are admitted in the institution of their first preference and minimise the risk of student attrition. An alternative to this is the next recommendation that suggests some amendments to the tertiary two-year study programs.

Moreover, there are some other issues that are related to the admission policy of the sample college and might be related to students’ dissatisfaction that could be reformed, such as, the rules that prevent students from transferring between the study
majors, even during the ESL program before they start the academic programs, and those rules that require students to enrol in the ESL program and to start from the first level of the ESL program regardless of their academic abilities and qualifications. Although these issues were not critical to the research problem, as found by the study data, they were associated by some participants of the current study and some other local student retention studies with student dissatisfaction that might affect their institutional experience and consequently their persistence. Thus it is recommended that the administrations of the academic institutions and particularly the administration of the sample college, consider reforming their admission rules and policy to address these issues.

2. **Modify the structures of the tertiary two-year programs** to offer upgrade opportunities for the two-year students with high educational goals, as well as “exit points” for four-year students, who decide to quit (dropout) in the middle of their study programs for any reason. For the two-year programs, the findings of the current study and other studies from the local context that were conducted in two-year academic institutions, suggested that transferring to four-year institutions was one of the most frequent attrition factors in Saudi Arabia. One of the problems that made this factor more significant is the fact that most of the Saudi four-year academic institutions (universities) do not recognize the qualifications and study credits of the two-year institutions. Thus, when the two-year students realise that they need to start from the beginning, if they want to transfer to a four-year institution, regardless of their current progress, they do not wait until they complete their study programs but withdraw once they get the admission in the four-year institutions.
Based on this argument it might be recommended that the two-year institutions adjust the structures and syllabus of their courses and study programs in coordination with the four-year institutions. The four-year institutions, on the other hand, are recommended to implement and provide bridging programs to accommodate the diploma (two-year) students who have the desire to pursue higher education. These steps might facilitate better student transferring and upgrading procedures where the students can be assured that they can pursue their studies in the academic institution of their first preference (four-year institutions) after they complete their current study programs, without the need to withdraw, and consequently help to minimize the student attrition rates in the two-year institutions.

For the four-year students, there might be some students who are not able to complete their study programs for any reasons such as family and financial concerns, job commitments and other personal issues. Some other students might realize after some semesters that the university programs are not suitable for their educational and job goals thus they look to transfer (downgrade) to two-year diplomas and training programs. To accommodate the needs of such students it might be recommended that the four-year universities offer what is called “exit points” where such students can graduate with a degree, single course, certificate or diploma, that satisfy their educational and job needs without “dropping out” from their academic institutions or the whole higher education system. Such a process might be offered through the community colleges and institutes that belong to the four-year-institutions.

3. Implement data collection tools to gather the type of information that helps in identifying at risk students and to facilitate future research for the designing and
implementation of student retention plans. The review of the local literature on student retention in higher education revealed the lack of the research tools and surveys, especially at the national level, that collect information about student experience and satisfaction in higher education programs in Saudi Arabia. These research tools would help the researcher, educators and educational authorities to have a better understanding of the student experience and the obstacles and challenges that confront them during their higher education journey. In addition, national surveys would help in identifying and tracing the history, progress and future plans of the students who left certain institutions in order to know the type of institutions they transferred to, or whether they left the higher education system completely.

For the sample college in particular there are some types of information that might help to draw an image about the students' abilities and intentions to persist in their study programs. These would include their pre-entry academic performance, educational and occupational goals, institutional commitment and external life commitment. Such information should not be collected to exclude or discriminate against some types of students. Rather it would help in identifying those students “at risk” who would then be targeted with the support actions and plans.

4. Establish student consultation and support programs to support the students who were already labelled as “at risk” students or have some challenges that might affect their persistence in their study programs. These support programs could work as “early intervention” actions to deal with and try to solve the students’ problems before they lead them to leave their study programs before completion. The findings of the current study and other studies from the local context, indicate that there is a lack of
student advisory and consultation services, especially social consultation, in most of the Saudi higher education institutions. The students also talked about the lack of communication with the administration of their academic institution. These students, particularly the participants of the current study, expressed their need of such services to discuss the problems they faced during their study and to negotiate about some of the rules and policies which caused dissatisfaction. For the sample college, the findings of the current study have characterized the potential of non-persister student. A student of such characteristics, especially those students with a high level of external commitment, might benefit from such advisory and consultation services.

5. Improve the social and academic environments of the academic institutions to provide a better and inviting atmosphere for the students to attract them to persist in their study programs toward completion and to compete with other local tertiary institutions. The quality of the student institutional experience in the social and academic systems of their institution was the main focus of the student retention research. For the sample college the students’ poor institutional experience, especially with the administrative system, was a main factor that might lead to low institutional commitment and integration which consequently led students to either withdraw or transfer to other academic institutions. These findings were also reported by some of the studies conducted in the local context, especially in the two-year institutions. Such improvements might differ from one academic institution to another. Hence reforms should be tailored for the students’ needs within that particular institution, based on the level of the institution, the type of the student and the findings of the institutional research and surveys.
6. **Design and implement student retention plans** to provide a framework for the steps and actions that should be taken by the administrations of the academic institutions, including the above recommendations, to increase the student retention. Student retentions plans and programs become essential practice in higher education institutions in order to facilitate for the students supporting programs, such as orientation programs, first-year support actions, extracurricular activities and student services and consultation programs. These plans and activities have a wider goal which is to help students to remain in and graduate from their study programs successfully. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is no evidence of the existence of such plans and activities in most Saudi higher education institutions and more particularly in the sample college.

7. **Reform the timetabling system** to minimize the gaps and the waiting periods between classes. In the sample college the poor distribution of the teaching hours was a main source of the students’ dissatisfaction with the college administrative system, especially for those students who have high level of external commitments. The current situation in the sample college is that the teaching hours in the English language centre are randomly distributed over the whole academic day, according to the availability of the classes and teachers. This is due to two main reasons. First, the sample college offers short trainings courses that occupy some classes for certain weeks which require some alterations to the teaching hours of the ESL programs and other academic programs. Second, the sample college usually admits more students than the capacity of the college classes to solve the problem of having fewer numbers of students in the advanced levels, because of the academic dismissal policy and early withdrawals.
Despite the academic disadvantages of distributing the five language subjects randomly (grammar, writing, reading, listening and speaking) where the students might take the whole teaching hours for a particular subject in one day and for another subject in five days, the main argument here is the students’ dissatisfaction with unnecessary long waiting times between classes. Some students reported that this conflicts with their family and job commitments. Moreover, this issue might be worse with the lack of transportation, student facilities and extracurricular activities. It is recommended that the higher education institutions that have adult students, who might have some life and work commitment other than their studies, redesign the timetables of their study programs to fit their students’ needs. For the ESL program of the sample college particularly, the students might benefit from a two shift system where they have fixed timetables, either in the morning or the afternoon, with regular breaks. This would allow some time for the other life and work commitments and the students would have the ability to arrange for these commitments in advance.

8. Offer pre-admission orientation sessions to inform the prospective students about the college system, qualification levels and the type of the expected jobs offered to future graduates. Many of the Saudi student retention studies, including the current study, found that some students realize that their academic institution, especially two-year institutions, are not suitable for their educational and job goals, thus they withdraw during the first year. This might be due to the lack of information and academic advice during the initial enrolment and during the high school. Moreover, most of the orientation activities in Saudi academic institutions are conducted in the first week of the academic semester after the students were already enrolled and had started their classes. In addition, these activities are mostly about the institution rules and the
services rather than academic programs. In the sample college the only orientation activity offered to the new students was a one and half hour meeting on the first day of the academic year with the college administration where the students were informed about the college, discipline rules and the academic dismissal policy. Thus the Saudi higher education authorities and the administrations of the academic institutions are recommended to provide more information about the differences between types of tertiary institutions, academic majors and programs and the type of the future jobs these study programs prepare students for.

9. **Establish and implement training programs for the staff of the registration and student service departments** to train them in the best ways to cater for student needs, especially the new and the “at risk” students. As discussed in the literature and found by the current study, and other Saudi Studies, the relationships of the institutions’ staff with the students is an important indicator of the quality of the institutional experience. In the sample college most of the students who participated in the study, and some academic and administrative staff, reported issues in regard to the way the students are treated by the administrative staff. According to the findings of the current study negative student-staff relationships might affect the students’ social integration and institutional commitment and consequently their persistence.

In most of the Saudi tertiary institutions and more particular the sample college, the administrative staff, such as the staff of the student services and registration departments, were not trained for such duties. Moreover, the data of the current study indicates that the staff of the tertiary institutions, both academic, administrative and even some researchers, do not differentiate between academic dismissal, when the
student is asked to leave for academic or behaviour issues and voluntary withdrawal which is the focus of student retention studies. It is important to distinguish between these two different concepts before any claims or assumption can be made or any retention plans set. Thus, it is recommended that the academic institutions offer some training programs to inform their staff about the ways of dealing with students, especially at this age, and to give the administrative staff some background and overview about the student retention causes and treatments.

11.6 Recommendations for theory and future research

Based on the analysis of the current study data and the discussion of findings in association with the relevant local and international literature, the following are recommendations for theory and future research.

1. Conduct more exploratory studies. Although student retention phenomenon is among the topics that were heavily researched and student retention studies and practices are well-known for the academic tertiary institutions around the world, this area is still under-researched in the local Saudi higher education context. Due to this it is recommended to adopt and utilize more exploratory techniques to gain a best understanding of the research problem. It was noticed in the analysis of the local literature that some studies adopted and tested the predetermined constructs and hypotheses of some of the distinguished student retention theoretical models which might limit the investigation to some prejudged findings and conclusions. The constructs and conclusions of these distinguished student retention studies and theoretical models might be utilised as theoretical lenses to guide the initial investigation. However, the
experience of the local students and the researchers’ observations should not be ignored.

2. **Conduct more qualitative studies** to gain a better understanding of the students’ issues that might affect their retention. As discussed in the literature, one of the limitations and shortcomings of the student retention studies and theoretical models was a lack of qualitative investigations. Many of the student retention studies, particularly in the local Saudi context, relied heavily on statistical quantitative techniques which provide insufficient detail to understand the quality of the students’ experiences which was approved by many studies to be one of the most critical factors in the student attrition phenomenon.

3. **Conduct more retention studies on female and co-educational campuses**, including comparative studies, to fill the research gap in this under-researched community. As discussed in the limitations section of the local student retention literature and the limitations of the current study, due to the sex-segregation system in Saudi higher education institutions there is a paucity of studies that include both genders at the same time. Moreover, among the ten available Saudi student retention studies, that were reviewed in the literature chapter of the current study, there was only one study that investigated the student attrition phenomenon on a female campus. Thus it is recommended for researchers to focus on such campuses and also on the few permitted co-educational programs, such as some of the medical programs, to get a more comprehensive view of retention issues.

4. **Conduct further studies on the most frequent student retention factors found by the local studies.** The analysis of the local student retention literature suggested
some common student attrition factors, found in many Saudi institutions, were the impact of institutions’ rules and policies, the type and the level of the academic institution, family commitments and other frequent attrition factors. Focusing on these factors might add to the local student retention research by either approving or refuting their impact. Such re-investigation of the frequent student attrition factors might help in the characterising of the potential non-persister student in a Saudi academic institution of a certain type.

11.7 Final Conclusion of the study

At the end of this study it can be concluded that this thesis started with a set of objectives to achieve a wider aim of identifying the most frequent factors affecting student retention in the sample college which was achieved by the analysis of the study data and the discussion of the study findings in the light of the local and international literature. The findings of this study will add to the research in the field of student retention in higher education, particularly in the local context of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it will provide a framework for Saudi educational authorities and academic institutions, particularly the sample college, to design and conduct the best student retention research, action and plans that help to identify issues that affect student experience and persistence and suggest best practice techniques to deal with them in order to create the best college environment through which the students can successfully persist toward graduation.
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Appendix A: RMIT Ethics Approval

RMIT University
Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee
Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor
Phone: 9925-2974
Email:

20 March 2012

Mr Othman Aljohani

Dear Othman,

Re: Human Research Ethics Application – Register Number CHEAN-A—2000649-02-12

The Deputy Chair of the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN), Prof Joseph Siracusa, reviewed your amended ethics application titled:

Investigating Student Attrition Factors at the ESL Program of [Redacted] in Jeddah

I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved at a Low Risk classification by the committee. This approval will be reported to the University Human Research Ethics Committee for noting.

Your ethics approval expires on 19 March 2015.

Please note that all research data should be stored on University Network systems. These systems provide high levels of manageable security and data integrity, can provide secure remote access, are backed on a regular basis and can provide Disaster Recover processes should a large scale incident occur. The use of portable devices such as CDs and memory sticks is valid for archiving, data transport where necessary and some works in progress. The authoritative copy of all current data should reside on appropriate network systems, and the Principal Investigator is responsible for the retention and storage of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

You are reminded that an Annual/Final report is mandatory and should be forwarded to the College Ethics Officer by mid-December 2012. This report is available at http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse.ID-6sqqx?sd0wpk or can be located by following the link under Policy at http://www.rmit.edu.au/dsp/chek.

Should you have any queries regarding your application please seek advice from the Deputy Chair of the College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN) Prof Joseph Siracusa on (03) 9925 1744, or contact Lisa Mann on (03) 9925 2974.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network I wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa Mann
Ethics Officer
DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN)

Co. Dr Berenice Nyland
Appendix B: Sample College Permission Letter\textsuperscript{4}

To: RMIT University, Australia

This is to certify that we the [College name] of [Country], Saudi Arabia hereby give the permission to Mr. Othman Ahmad Aljohani the PhD student at the School of Education at RMIT University to conduct his PhD study at our campuses. This includes conducting interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and surveys with both students and faculty.

Moreover, Mr Aljohani will be provided with any information related to his study from our student database.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further information.

Sincerely yours,

Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

\textsuperscript{4} College name was removed for privacy and ethical considerations
Appendix C: Participants’ Invitation and Information Sheet

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Project Title: Student Attrition Factors in Higher Education; An exploratory study of student attrition factors at a tertiary English language centre

Investigators:
Berenice Nyland – PhD. Senior supervisor
Email: Office: 99252510
Othman Aljohani – MA. PhD candidate
Email: Office: 99257708

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

Who is involved in this research project? Why is it being conducted?

- This research project is a PhD project conducted by Othman Aljohani who is a PhD student at the School of Education at RMIT University, Australia. The supervisor of the project is Dr Berenice Nyland.
- This project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee and the sample college.

Why have you been approached?

You have been invited to participate in this study because the project sample includes all new students in the ESL program of the sample college for the academic year 2012 – 2013.

What is the project about? What are the questions being addressed?

This study is an attempt to investigate the factors leading to student attrition in the ESL program of the sample college by studying the relationship between the level of students’ academic and social integration in the college and their decision of dropout. This will be done by collecting the data from students by interviews focus groups and questionnaires. The expected number of the participants is 200 students which is the expected number of the new admitted students in the ESL program for the academic year 2012 – 2013. The following is the main question of the study:

1. What are the main factors affecting student’ retention at the ESL program of the sample college?
2. What factors did the non-persisters students respond to when making the decision to leave the sample college?
3. What is the role of institutional experience in student attrition?
4. In relation to the ESL program how did student attrition appear to be influenced by the students’ level of academic ability in English language subjects?
If I agree to participate, what will be required to do?

If you agree to participate you will be required to complete two questionnaires, one in the first week of the program and the other in the last week. Each questionnaire will take approximately ten minutes. And you might be chosen to participate in a group discussion or interview that takes about half an hour. The following statement is an example taken from one of the questionnaires:

- It is likely that I will register to this college next semester

You will be asked to choose the best number from 1 to 5 that represents the level of your agreement with the provided statements.

The possible risks or disadvantages: There is risk associated with participation in this study. However, if you are unduly concerned about your responses to any of the questionnaire items or if you find participation in the project distressing, you should contact Othman Aljohani as soon as convenient. If needed, you will discuss your concerns with you confidentially and suggest appropriate follow-up, if necessary.

Benefits associated with participation: By studying student attrition factors, this study aims to minimise the risk of leaving the study program before completion. The result of the study will hopefully benefit both the students and the college.

What will happen to the information I provide: If you choose to participate, you will not be identified at any stage of the research. The information you provide will be presented collectively without identifying any names only in the PhD thesis and it will be kept securely at RMIT for 5 years after publication, before being destroyed.

Your rights as a participant:

- You have the right to withdraw from participation at any time.
- You have the right to request that any recording cease.
- You have the right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed, provided it can be reliably identified, and provided that doing so does not increase the risk for the participant.
- You have the right to have any questions answered at any time.

Whom should I contact if I have any questions?

You can contact Othman Aljohani email:

Yours sincerely

Berenice Nyland – PhD, Senior supervisor
Othman Aljohani – MA, PhD candidate

If you have any complaints about your participation in this project please see the complaints procedure on the [Complaints with respect to participation in research at RMIT page]
Appendix D: Participants’ Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

1. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the information sheet.
2. I agree to participate in the research project as described.
3. I agree:
   - To be interviewed and/or complete a questionnaire
   - That my voice will be audio recorded
4. I acknowledge that:
   (a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied (unless follow-up is needed for safety).
   (b) The project is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
   (c) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
   (d) The security of the research data will be protected during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes will be provided to RMIT University. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant’s Consent

[Signature]
Date: 09/2012
### Appendix E: Non-persister Students Interviews’ Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-persister students’ Interview Questions</th>
<th>أسئلة مقابلات الطلاب المنسحبين</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you married? Do you have a job?</td>
<td>هل أنت مزوج؟ موظف؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your parent’s highest qualifications?</td>
<td>ما هو مستوى تعليم والديك؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you describe your family economic statue?</td>
<td>كيف ترى وضع عائلتك الاقتصادي؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your secondary certificate GPA?</td>
<td>ماهو معدلك في الشهادة الثانوية العامة؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you take the General Aptitude Test GAT? What is your score?</td>
<td>هل أدبت امتحانات القدرات العامة والتحصيلي؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do your family and friends think about your enrolment in the college?</td>
<td>ماهو رأي عائلتك وأصدقائك في دراستك في الكلية؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there any job / family responsibilities that might have affected your attendance / performance in the college?</td>
<td>هل كان لديك أي مسؤوليات عائلية أو وظيفية من الممكن أن تكون أثرت على حضورك وداناك الأكاديمي في الكلية؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your highest desired qualification when you enrolled in the college?</td>
<td>ما هي أعلى شهادة كنت ترغب في الحصول عليها وقت دخولك في الكلية؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did you apply in the college?</td>
<td>لماذا قدمت للدراسة في الكلية؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you been accepted in your desired major?</td>
<td>هل قلت في التخصص الذي كنت ترغب؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you applied to any other higher education institution before you got accepted in the college? Have you been accepted?</td>
<td>هل قمت للدراسة في أي مكان آخر قبل أن تقبل في الكلية؟ هل قمت؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While you were enrolled, would you stay in the college if got accepted in other college/university? Or found a job?</td>
<td>أثناء دراستك في الكلية، هل كنت ستبقى لو قلت في مكان آخر؟ أو أوقفت مناسباً؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the college is suitable for your educational and occupational goals?</td>
<td>هل تعتقد أن الكلية مناسبة لطموحاتك العلمية والوظيفية؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think (summary of pre-entry attributes) have influenced your decision of applying to the college / leavening the college?</td>
<td>هل تعتقد أن الظروف والمستوى الأكاديمي لها تأثير على قرارك بدخول الكلية أو الإنسحاب منها؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you see your relationship with your teachers inside and outside the class?</td>
<td>كيف ترى علاقاتك بالتدريس داخل وخارج الفصل؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you see your relationship with the college’s administrative staff?</td>
<td>كيف ترى علاقاتك بموظفي الكلية؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think your teachers care about your education?</td>
<td>هل تعتقد أن المدرسين يهتمون بالطالب؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the administrative staff care about your education?</td>
<td>هل تعتقد أن موظفي الكلية يهتمون بالطالب؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the college has a student friendly environment?</td>
<td>هل تعتقد أن بيئة الكلية مناسبة للطالب؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you describe student rights in the college?</td>
<td>كيف تصف حقوق الطالب في الكلية؟</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Did you attend the orientation day? How do you describe it?

What type of information you learnt during the orientation?

Is there anything missing in the ordination?

Do you usually participate in the extracurricular activities?

Describe your relationship with other students?

Do you think they are different than you? In what aspect?

How do you describe you experience in the college?

Do you think that your experience in the college has changed your initial goals and commitments?

While you were enrolled, did you regret your decision of enrolling in the college?

What are the main factors that make you leave the college?

Do you regret this decision?

Do you think that your experience in the college has led to this decision?

If you have the chance will you reenrol in the college?

Do you recommend the college to other students?

Would you like to add anything?
### Appendix F: Persister students Focus groups’ Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persister students Focus groups’ Topics</th>
<th>مواضيع حلفات النقاش مع الطلاب المستمرين</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>الحالة الاجتماعية والوظيفية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s levels of qualifications</td>
<td>مستوى تعليم الوالدين</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family economic statue</td>
<td>وضع العائلة الاقتصادي</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary certificate GPA</td>
<td>معدل شهادة الثانوية العامة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Aptitude Test GAT scores</td>
<td>درجات اختبارات القدرات العامة والتحصيلي</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends opinions of the college</td>
<td>رأي العائلة والأصدقاء في الكلية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and job responsibilities</td>
<td>الإلتزامات العائلية والوظيفية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest desired qualification</td>
<td>على مهل تعليمي ترغب في الحصول عليه</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for applying to the college</td>
<td>سبب الالتحاق في الكلية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired study major</td>
<td>التخصص الدراسي</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other education and job opportunities</td>
<td>الفرص التعليمية والوظيفية الأخرى</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college Level and the educational and occupational goals</td>
<td>مناسبة مستوى الكلية للطموحات التعليمية والوظيفية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pre-entry attributes and the decision of applying for the college / leavening the college</td>
<td>تأثير الظروف والمستوى الأكاديمي على قرار الالتحاق بالكلية أو الإنسحاب منها</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students-teachers relationships inside/outside the class</td>
<td>علاقة الطالب بالمدرسين داخل وخارج الفصل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students-administrative staff relationships</td>
<td>علاقة الطالب بموظفي الكلية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College staff care about students’ education</td>
<td>إهتمام الكادر الأكاديمي والإداري بالطالب</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic system, curriculum and teaching methods</td>
<td>النظام الأكاديمي للكلية والمناهج وطرق التدريس</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative system, polices, procedures and process</td>
<td>النظام الإداري للكلية والأنظمة والإجراءات</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College environment</td>
<td>مناسبة بيئة الكلية للطالب</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student rights in the college</td>
<td>حقوق الطالب في الكلية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation day</td>
<td>اليوم التدريبي</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
<td>النشاطات الالصافية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ relationship with other students</td>
<td>علاقة الطلاب بالطلاب الآخرين</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ experience in the college</td>
<td>التجربة في الكلية وأثرها</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main factors that make you leave the college</td>
<td>أهم أسباب إنسحاب الطلاب من الكلية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ experience and withdrawal decisions</td>
<td>علاقة التجربة في الكلية بقرار بالإنسحاب</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open discussion</td>
<td>نقاش مفتوح</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: Academic and Administrative Staff Survey

Dear Staff member,

This survey aims to explore the student attrition factors in the ESL program. Your opinion and comments will hopefully enrich the research data and help the students and the college to achieve their goals and objectives.

Can you please send your response to the e-mail

Best regards,

Othman Aljohani
PhD candidate, School of Education - RMIT University

Q1 Do you see student attrition in the sample college as a phenomenon or a problem?

Q2 What, in your opinion, are the main factors of student attrition in the ESL program?

Q3 Do you think that the students of the sample college have enough skills and ability to pursue studies after secondary schooling?

Q4 Do you think that attrition is related to the students’ academic performance, especially in English, of the secondary school language subject?

Q5 Do you think that the students will stay in the sample college if they find a job or get admitted in another institution? Why?
Q6 Do you think that attrition is related to the academic system of the college (teaching methods, curriculum, exams and attitudes with academic staff)?

Q7 Do you think that attrition is related to the administrative system of the college (admission policy, hours and timetabling, student service, dismissal policy and attitudes if administrative staff)?

Q8 What do you think is the accepted level of relationship between the students and the college academic and administrative staff?

Q9 Do you think that extracurricular activities enhance the student relationship with the college and help in limiting the attrition problem? Talk in details please.

Q10 How do you see the quality of the services provided to the students? Is it related to the attrition phenomenon?

Q11 Do you think that students are satisfied with the college? If no, why?

Q12 Do you think that the college takes enough actions to limit the attrition problem? Are there any other actions that are needed to be taken?

Q13 Do you want to add any this in relation to the problem or the solutions?
Appendix H: Students’ Questionnaire English Version

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student ID:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Part One: Please choose the answer that best describe you (choose only one)**

1. **What is your marital status?**
   - 1. Single
   - 2. Married

2. **Where do you live?**
   - 1. off-campus
   - 2. In-campus

3. **What is your father’s Highest qualification?**
   - 1. Elementary or lower
   - 2. Intermediate
   - 3. Secondary
   - 4. Undergraduate
   - 5. Postgraduate

4. **What is your mother’s Highest qualification?**
   - 1. Elementary or lower
   - 2. Intermediate
   - 3. Secondary
   - 4. Undergraduate
   - 5. Postgraduate

5. **How do you rank your family income with regards to family members and daily expenses?**
   - 1. Low
   - 2. Acceptable
   - 3. Average
   - 4. Good
   - 5. Excellent

6. **What is your secondary certificate GPA?**
   - 1. 50% - 59%
   - 2. 60% - 69%
   - 3. 70% - 79%
   - 4. 80% - 89%
   - 5. 90% - 100%

7. **What is your score in the General Aptitude Test GAT? (choose the highest)**
   - 1. 50% or lower
   - 2. 51% - 60%
   - 3. 61% - 70%
   - 4. 70% - 80%
   - 5. 80% - 100%

**Part Two: Please choose the number that best describe your agreement with the following statements where number (1) means strongly disagree and number (5) means strongly agree**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My family thinks that there are other places to study better than my current college</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>My friends from outside the college think that my decision to enrol in the college was a wrong one</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>My family or work commitments have negative impact on my attendance and performance in the college</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Since coming to this college I have developed close personal relationships with other students</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The student friendships I have developed at this college have been personally satisfying</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>My interpersonal relationships with other students have had a positive influence on my personal growth, attitudes, and values</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>My interpersonal relationships with other students have had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>It has been difficult for me to meet and make friends with other students</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Few of the students I know would be willing to listen to me and help me if I had a personal problem</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Most students at this college have values and attitudes different</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my personal growth, values and attitudes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>My non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>My non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my career goals and aspirations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Since coming to this college I have developed a close, personal relationship with at least one faculty member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I am satisfied with the opportunities to meet and interact informally with faculty members</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Few of the faculty members I have had contact with are generally interested in students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Few of the faculty members I have had contact with are generally outstanding or superior teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Few of the faculty members I have had contact with are willing to spend time outside of class to discuss issues of interest and importance to students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Most of the faculty members I have had contact with are interested in helping students grow in more than just academic areas</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Most faculty members I have had contact with are genuinely interested in teaching</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>I am satisfied with the extent of my intellectual development since enrolling in this college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>My academic experience has had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>I am satisfied with my academic experience at this college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Few of my courses this year have been intellectually stimulating</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>My interest in ideas and intellectual matters has increased since coming to this college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>I am more likely to attend a cultural event (i.e., concert, lecture, art show) now than I was before coming to this college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>I have performed academically as well as I anticipated I would</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>It is important to me to graduate from college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>I am confident that I made the right decision in choosing to attend this college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>It is likely that I will register at this college next fall</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>It is not important to me to graduate from this college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>I have no idea at all what I want to major in</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Getting good grades is not important to me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix I: Students’ Questionnaire Arabic Version

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>رقم الطالب:</th>
<th>الجزء الأول: الراجوا وضع دائرة حول الجواب المناسب وعدم اختيار أكثر من إجابة لكل سؤال</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>اختر العبارة التي تعبر عن حالتك الاجتماعية من العبارات التالية:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. مزوج</td>
<td>2. مطلق</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| 2 | اختر العبارة التي تعبير عن مقر سكنتك من العبارات التالية: |
| 1. سكن الكلية | 2. خارج الكلية |

| 3 | ما هو معدل دراسي حصل عليه الوالد؟ |
| 1. إبتدائي أو أقل | 2. متوسط | 3. ثانوي | 4. بكاليريوس | 5. ماجستير أو أعلى |

| 4 | ما هو معدل دراسي حصلت عليه اللامدة؟ |
| 1. إبتدائي أو أقل | 2. متوسط | 3. ثانوي | 4. بكاليريوس | 5. ماجستير أو أعلى |

| 5 | بشكل عام، كيف تقيم وضع أسرتك المالي مقارنة بعدد أفراد الأسرة والمصاريف اليومية؟ |
| 1. منخفض | 2. مقبول | 3. متوسط | 4. جيد | 5. ممتاز |

| 6 | ما هو معدلك في شهادة الثانوية العامة؟ |
| 1. 50% أو أقل | 2. 60% - 69% | 3. 70% - 79% | 4. 80% - 89% | 5. 90% - 100% |

| 7 | ما هي درجتك في اختبار القدرات العامة أو التحصيلي؟ (اختير الأعلى) |
| 1. 50% أو أقل | 2. 60% - 69% | 3. 70% - 79% | 4. 80% - 89% | 5. 90% - 100% |

### الجزء الثاني: الراجوا وضع دائرة حول الرقم الذي تعتقد أنه يبرز عن مدى اختلافك أو اتفاقك مع العبارات التالية، حيث أن الرقم (1) يعبر عن اقتسام النتائج مع العبارة بينما الرقم (5) يعبر عن اتفاقك النتائج معها

<table>
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<tr>
<th>الابتعاد تاماً</th>
<th>اتفق تماماً</th>
<th>تاماً</th>
<th>أتفق</th>
<th>محايد</th>
<th>أختلف</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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**العبارة**

8. عائلتي تعتقد أن هناك إمكان أخر للدراسة أفضل من الكلية

9. أصدقائي من خارج الكلية يعتقدون أن التحافز بالكلية كان قرار خاطئ

10. التزاماتي العائلية أو الوظيفية توتر سبلنا على حضوري واجباني في الكلية

11. منذ بداية دراستي في الكلية، كونت صداقات قوية مع الطلاب الآخرين

12. أنا راضي شخصيا بمستوى الصداقات التي كونتها مع الطلاب منذ التحافز بالكلية

13. علاقاتي الشخصية مع الطلاب الآخرين كان لها أثر إيجابي على نمو شخصيتي وتوجهاتي وقيمتي

14. علاقاتي الشخصية مع الطلاب الآخرين كان لها أثر إيجابي على نمو الفكري و自救ي بالCAF | متى أثبتت المواقف المطروحة

15. أجد صعوبة في الالتفاف بالطلاب الآخرين وتكوين صداقات معهم
<p>| | | | | |</p>
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<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>غالبًا الطالب في هذه الكلية لديه قيم ووجهات مختلفة عن قيمتي ووجهائي</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>تعامل مع مدرس وموقف الكلية خارج الفصل أن يشعر إيجابي على نحو شخصي وموقفي ووجهائي</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>نقطة خارج الفصل مع مدرس وموقف الكلية كان له إيجابي على أهدافي وطموحاتي الوضعيية</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>نقطة خارج أوقات المحاضرات لمناقشة المواضيع التي نتم في الفصل كم من تعاملت معه من مدرس وموضوعي الكلية مهمين بمساعدة الطالب على التطور في جميع الجوانب وليس فقط في الجانب الدراسي</td>
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<td>أن رأيي بتجربتي الدراسية في الكلية</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

الحصول على درجة جيدة ليس مهم بالنسبة لي.
Appendix J: Institutional Integration Scales (IIS)

Subscale 1: Peer Group Interactions
1. Since coming to this college, I have developed close personal relationships with other students
2. The student friendships I have developed at the college have been personally satisfying
3. My interpersonal relationships with other students have had a positive influence on my personal growth, attitudes, and values
4. My interpersonal relationships with other students have had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas
5. It has been difficult for me to meet and make friends with other students
6. Few of the students I know would be willing to listen to me and help me if I had a personal problem
7. Most students at this college have values and attitudes different from my own

Subscale 2: Interactions with Faculty
8. My non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my personal growth, values, and attitudes
9. My non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas
10. My non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my career goals and aspirations
11. Since coming to this college, I have developed a close, personal relationship with at least one faculty member
12. I am satisfied with the opportunities to meet and interact informally with faculty members

Subscale 3: Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching
13. Few of the faculty members I have had contact with are generally interested in students
14. Few of the faculty members I have had contact with are generally outstanding or superior teachers
15. Few of the faculty Members I have had contact with are willing to spend time outside of class to discuss issues of interest and importance to students
16. Most of the faculty I have had contact with are interested in helping students grow in more than just academic areas
17. Most faculty members I have had contact with are genuinely interested in teaching
Subscale 4: Academic and Intellectual Development

18. I am satisfied with the extent of my intellectual development since enrolling in this college
19. My academic experience has had a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas
20. I am satisfied with my academic experience at this college
21. Few of my courses this year have been intellectually stimulating
22. My interest in ideas and intellectual matters has increased since coming to this college
23. I am more likely to attend a cultural event (for example, a concert, lecture, or art show) now than I was before coming to this college
24. I have performed academically as well as I anticipated I would

Subscale 5: Institutional and Goal Commitment

25. It is important for me to graduate from college
26. I am confident that I made the right decision in choosing to attend this college
27. It is likely that I will register at this college next fall
28. It is not important to me to graduate from this college
29. I have no idea at all what I want to major in
30. Getting good grades is not important to me
## Appendix K: Skewness and kurtosis values and normality of distribution histograms for all parametric items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
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<tr>
<td>General aptitude test grade</td>
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