Lifelong learning in practice
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Chapter 1

General Introduction
Chapter 1 – General Introduction

1. Introduction

Underlying many gaps in the current global education framework is the fact that it fails to address education in a holistic and integrated manner. More achievable goals are privileged, and others, such as adult literacy, are relegated to a lower priority. The goals are also not adequately targeted to reach the poor and marginalized, thus underserving those who are hard to reach. Implementation of the current framework specifically tends to privilege access to primary schooling relative to other levels of education. It focuses on access at the expense of quality, and ignores inequality. Further, the framework is not perceived as advancing access to education that offers children, youth and adults the knowledge, skills and values they need to become informed, responsible and active citizens; to find decent work; and to contribute to sustainable growth and peaceful societies (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013 p.7-8).

Education is a fundamental human right, and its important role in development need not be emphasised. In the recently formulated post-2015 development agenda, education is perceived as one of the main drivers of development and an important tool in achieving the other sustainable development goals — SDGs (UNESCO, 2014).

However, if not well implemented, education can also have negative outcomes such as causing harm to individuals and society (Harber, 2004), endangering local values and norms (Kanyandago, 2010) and becoming a source of inequality, as it tends to privilege those who get access to it over those who do not (Branson, Garlick, Lam & Leibbrandt, 2012). Accordingly, a number of pitfalls have been associated with the education development framework of the last decade that mainly focused on access expansion (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013) without taking into consideration other important ingredients of a good education — quality, equality and equity (UNESCO, 2005, 2008; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013).

We draw from the opening quotation above, to postulate five pitfalls of the education framework provided in the Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education which relate to the present study: first, primary education has been privileged over other levels and forms of education such as higher education and lifelong learning; second, increasing access and enrolment have been emphasised at the expense of the students' diverse needs thereby affecting retention, progression and completion; third, the measuring parameters for success...
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have been focused on quantity rather than quality of the educational experiences and outcomes; fourth, failure to recognise diversity within the learner population has created inequalities between the ‘learning rich’ and the (non) ‘learning poor’; and lastly, the economic (instrumental) roles of education have been emphasised over non-economic roles, which are equally important in achieving holistic education and preparing learners for life. These gaps are more pronounced in developing countries such as Uganda where the present study was conducted (UNESCO, 2012; Southern Voice, 2013; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013; UNESCO, 2014). For instance, although enrolment rates under EFA have improved, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the completion rates remain low and the quality of provision highly questionable (Southern Voice, 2013). Promotion of lifelong learning is among the sustainable development goals constituting the post-2015 education agenda (Regmi, 2015; United Nations, 2015, Van der Linden, 2016) with a hope of making a difference.

Related to the quality of education provision are concerns of lack of functionality of the education system and the growing skills gap between what people can offer and what the labour market requires — what we can call the mismatch between the education system and the reality of the informal economy (Minnis, 2006). Due to the soaring population growth rates and in particular a youth bulge in (Sub-Saharan) Africa, inclusion of young people in education, training and work has become one of the key development issues in the region (UNESCO, 2012). The region is not only grappling with a high population of illiterate youth but also high unemployment rates, even among those who have obtained some level of education (AfDB, 2011). In Uganda, youth unemployment, which is estimated at 83% (AfDB, 2013) is largely attributed to the slow growth of jobs in the economy, as well as a poor education system that has been criticised for not only being overly academic, examination oriented and elitist but also for being irrelevant and disconnected from the needs of the learners and society, thus not providing the much needed skills for the labour market and the economy in general (Kanyandago, 2010; Openjuru, 2010; Rwendeire, 2012; Tukundane, 2014).

The present study is situated in the new vision for education contained under Sustainable Development Goal number four (SDG4) of the recently formulated post-2015 development agenda which states: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all* (United Nations, 2015). This goal comes at a time when higher education in Uganda is grappling with meeting the education needs of a changing student population (Kasozi, 2002; Openjuru, 2011). Our concern is especially with the previously excluded (diploma holders) and underrepresented (mature age) students in university education — the non-traditional
students (NTS) whose participation needs remain largely marginalised despite efforts to open the gates of university education to them. Accordingly, this group of students is interesting to study not only for its own sake, but also for what we can learn from their participation experiences in order to contribute to the transformation of the education system in Uganda.

The central argument of this thesis is that opening/increasing access alone is not good enough an effort in achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Consequently, we use the construct participation in a broader sense to mean going beyond physical access and enrolment to also include the decision making processes leading to that access, the realities of the environments in which the learner is located (both within and outside the institutions of learning) and the (post-institution) outcomes of that participation. This approach to participation is important because it takes into consideration the diversified needs and experiences of the learners.

2. Background to the study

In the past, higher education was highly selective and for the privileged few in society (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Mamdani, 2007; Mohamedbhai, 2008). For instance, university education was for students who were young, dependants, joined immediately after high school and studied full time (Gallacher, Crossan, Field & Merrill, 2002; Kasozi 2002; Moore, 2006; Kasworm, 2010; Openjuru 2011). Education provision and funding in developing countries, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa, was fundamentally the role of the state with development assistance from donor countries in form of bilateral aid (Sawyerr, 2004). However, the economic distress at the global level in the 1970s and 1980s (Banya & Elu, 2001) resulted in changes in ideology on the role of the state and the market in development (Samoff & Carrol, 2004). By the end of 1980s society was ruled by globalisation elements of hegemony of capitalism and neoliberalism, which for higher education meant reduction of funding by the state and opening its provision, funding and access to the forces of the market (Samoff & Carrol, 2004; Sawyerr, 2004). This marked the shift from elite to mass higher education systems and the subsequent changes that have come to characterise our contemporary higher education systems (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000; Boud, 2004; Mohamedbhai, 2008). These changes constitute the challenges that higher education has to deal with.

One of the major changes is in the composition of the students’ body pursuing higher education. Within the context of developing countries, in addition to the massive enrolments, there are an increasing number of students enrolling to pursue university education who previously either had no chance to enrol at universities or
had had restricted access due to its elitist nature at the time, including the limitedness of access through state scholarships (Sawyerr, 2004); generally students who did not have the chance to take the traditional route to university. Some of these students are older, with prior qualifications such as certificates and diplomas, work experience and other life experiences and commitments. These unique life experiences not only add an exciting dimension to the classroom and the university experience in general but also imply that their needs, motives, barriers and opportunities differ from those of the conventional/traditional university students (Hussey & Smith, 2010) and require specialised policies, services, learning delivery structures and supports (Kasworm, 2003).

However, whereas a number of studies in Uganda have been conducted on the consequences of liberalisation of its higher education system (e.g. Kwesiga, 1993; Mayanja, 1998; Court, 1999; Musisi & Muwanga, 2003; Kasozi, 2009a, 2009b; Mamdani, 2007; Bisaso, 2010, Mugisha Baine, 2010), little attention has been given to understanding the experiences and participation needs of the ‘new’ types of students (non-traditional students) in the diversified student population, and consequently, the response of higher education institutions (HEIs) also remains unknown, yet is an important ingredient in the post-2015 development agenda debates, specifically meeting target 3 of SDG4 which states: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university (United Nations, 2015).

**Who are the non-traditional students?**

Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of the term non-traditional students, within international literature it is generally used to denote students who were traditionally excluded from or underrepresented in higher education. Schuetze & Slowey (2002) argue that in the elite higher education system it was much easier to define the group of non-traditionals because in most cases they were the minority and underrepresented groups in the student population. However, they note that this is no longer so because of the shift from elite to mass higher education systems in which non-traditional students constitute a large proportion of the student body, at times out-weighing the traditional students in some study programmes and arrangements.

Age is one of the variables that have been used to define NTS (e.g. Stewart & Rue, 1983 cited in Bean & Metnezer, 1985). The Organisation for Economic Corporation and Development (OECD) report of the 1987 study carried out in 10 countries in Europe, North America, Australia, Japan and New Zealand pointed out that in many
countries the concept of ‘non-traditional’ students was specially defined to mean ‘adults’ (students aged 25 or above on entry) in higher education (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000, 2002). However, equating non-traditional students to adults is problematic since the term adults can mean different things in different societies and cultures (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Accordingly, although age is a convenient way of focusing on one of the indispensable topographies of ‘non-traditional’ students, it cannot provide a precise definition since it does not give a more inclusive understanding of what types of learners are included (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Horn & Carroll (1996), in their study on non-traditional students in the USA, defined a non-traditional student drawing on three parameters: enrolment criteria, financial and family status, and high school graduation status, which relayed seven characteristics: delayed enrolment into postsecondary education; attended part time; was financially independent; worked full time while enrolled; had dependants other than a spouse; was a single parent; or did not obtain a standard high school diploma. Out of this analysis, Horn & Carroll (1996) put the definition of a non-traditional student on a continuum scale based on the number of characteristics they featured – minimally non-traditional if they had only one non-traditional characteristic, moderately non-traditional if they had two or three, and highly non-traditional if they had four or more characteristics. This shows that non-traditional students are not a homogenous group so, whichever definition is used, there will always be differences depending on the extent to which different individuals experience restraints. It also implies that different contexts may necessitate using different definitions.

**Defining NTS in the study context**

The definition of NTS used in the present study was based on the alternative modes of entry because for a long time access to university education in Uganda was almost exclusively through the direct entry scheme that admits only high school leavers (Mamdani, 2007; Government of Uganda, 2008). The diploma scheme only came into existence with the liberalisation of higher education in the 1990s (Makerere University, 1991). Although the mature age scheme was in place prior to liberalisation of higher education, it was a very insignificant mode of entry constituting only about 5% of the total admission (Makerere University, 1970). Moreover, there were no alternative modes of study such as evening and distance learning modes. These only came into existence in the 1990s to bring on board non-traditional university students. However, since the liberalisation of higher education, its provision to older and working students has been more associated with postgraduate than undergraduate studies, thereby undermining the needs of undergraduate students in similar situations.
Accordingly, in this present study, we defined non-traditional students as the undergraduate degree students enrolled on both full-time day and ‘part-time’ evening study programmes who:

a) either did not obtain the standard high school certificate or obtained it but did not have continuous transition from upper secondary (high school) education to university education; and

b) gained access to university education through either diploma or mature age entry schemes — the alternative entry routes.

In consideration of a) and b) above, some of these students have, in addition to study, other major life obligations such as work, family and other social life commitments, which constrain the time they have at their disposal for study. As such, these students were likely to be entangled in a web of the self, family, university, workplace and the communities in which they work and live.

![Figure 1 The multi-task and multi-identity environment of NTS](image-url)
**Why Makerere University as the study field?**

Makerere University was chosen to be the ‘field’ of study because it provides a ‘fertile ground’ for the research problem. First, it was the only university in Uganda, which for a long time exclusively ran an elite higher education system featuring mainly resident government sponsored students enrolled after high school on full-time study programmes (Kasozi, 2002; Openjuru, 2011). Although a very small number of students could be admitted through mature age entry (Makerere University, 1970), by default, these students also had to fit into policy and practice arrangements meant for the majority mainstream students, because university education at the time was perceived more of a privilege (Mamdani, 2007) than a right.

Second, prior to liberalisation of higher education in Uganda, Makerere University’s funding depended fully on government subvention (Mayanja, 1998; Mamdani, 2007). Opening access to different types of students and study provisions was against the wind of a funding crisis due to the shifting of education funding priorities from higher education to primary education (Mamdani, 2007). Against this background, we envisaged that Makerere would be a ‘good’ ground to test how the universities in Uganda are responding to the liberalisation reform. Third, we envisaged that the findings of a study conducted at the oldest, largest and leading (public) university in Uganda might be applicable to other universities in the country and possibly in the region, thereby creating a multiplier effect in the long run of the suggested ways of improvement.

**3. The research problem**

The neoliberal policies of global capitalism have led to diversification of higher education systems, programmes and courses of study; and changes in the nature of the student body (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000; Kasozi, 2002; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Openjuru 2011). Not only have the student numbers in higher education dramatically increased but their composition has changed too. ‘New’ types of students, who for various reasons had been excluded and underrepresented in higher education, are joining. However, although enrolment for these students has increased, their experiences, needs, opportunities, barriers and motivations remain not well understood affecting both the academic and administrative provisions they receive from education providers.

Moreover, there are still limitations with their access especially into the traditional elitist institutions, in which the traditional academic values, institutional structures and processes have continued to be preserved (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). There is what
Sawyerr (2004) calls “enrolment expansion without broadening” (p. 31). Burke (2005) attributes underachievement of a socially inclusive higher education to persistent inequalities deeply entrenched in academic cultures and practices of institutions. More so, beyond the institutional barriers, NTS are also faced with barriers in the environments in which they live and work (Kasworm, 1997; Donaldson & Graham 1999; O’Brien & Ó Fathaigh, 2007). This is because unlike the conventional university students, the majority of non-traditional students are older in age and therefore tend to have other life commitments which strain the time they have available for study resulting in other barriers of a situational, dispositional, psychosocial and informational nature (Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). O’Brien & Ó Fathaigh (2007) conclude that “we live more in an era of lifelong learning for some” (p.74).

The above challenges notwithstanding, globalisation has also affected the relationship between education and work and this has implications not only for higher education but for the education system as a whole. The constant changes in technology and scientific progress have created an unstable job environment that necessitates individuals to become flexible lifelong learners (Jarvis 2007) i.e. individuals have to organise and give themselves a personal career identity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Kuijpers, 2016). To do so, individuals have to develop their self-concepts and biographies with which they can find and shape their roles in society (Meijers & Wijers, 1998; Sennett, 2008; Zeelen, 2015). Consequently, academic qualifications such as degrees have become a major currency on the labour market with anticipation that those individuals with more education and better qualifications stand better chances of getting jobs (Jarvis, 2007). Unfortunately, academic credentials are no longer a guarantee of finding employment as they were in the past. Nowadays, there is an increasing mismatch between formal education credentials and the needs of the labour market, resulting in high levels of unemployment (Walters, 2004; Nuwagaba, 2012; Ponge, 2013). This is especially so in contexts like Uganda that are characterised by huge informal economies (Minnis, 2006; Blaak, Openjuru & Zeelen, 2013), and yet still perceive university as the ‘only’ place to go while other forms of education continue to be despised (Openjuru, 2010; Elsdijk, 2013; Tukundane, 2014) with no dedicated structures for encouraging personal motivations and talent.

In consideration of such issues, the present study is timely to contribute to the current debates on how to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote (meaningful) lifelong opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). To achieve this, it is important that education evaluation spaces be arranged in such a manner that education access connects in a meaningful way to education outcomes. To
be able to make such a connection, which will enhance participation and inclusion of all those who gain access and enable recommendation and designation of appropriate interventions for a holistic education, it is important to take into consideration:

- the socio-cultural context and other dynamics and circumstances surrounding the learner who is seeking access;
- the motivations for seeking access;
- the existing policy and practice provisions of the academy in which access is granted;
- other learning environments external to the academy which also impact on the participation efforts of the learner;
- the nature of the outcomes of that participation and labour market experiences of the learner; and
- the perspectives and contributions of those who are living the problem or are part of the problem for which new ways of improvement are required.

4. Conceptual and theoretical orientations of the study

The explicit inclusion of lifelong learning in the post-2015 education agenda is good news for all those who wish to learn. Whether it is possible for all to benefit or not (see Regmi, 2015) is one of the concerns of the present study. The recently concluded study of Van der Linden (2016) shows that lifelong learning opportunities for ‘groups at risk’ are constrained because these groups suffer educational exclusion, with a high risk of also experiencing social exclusion. In the context of the present study, non-traditional students could be added to the groups at risk.

According to Van der Kamp (2004), lifelong learning is different from traditional learning through acknowledging two interrelated idioms: 1) that learning is life-long (not confined to a particular period in life); and 2) that learning is life-wide (not confined to school or schooling) (italics in original text). In the recent years, learning has also been given another descriptor, that of life-deep (Openjuru, 2011), which can be understood as values education. Banks and others define life-deep learning as learning that “embraces religious, moral, ethical, and social values that guide what people believe, how they act, and how they judge themselves and others” (Banks et al., 2007 p. 12). The emphasis here is that learning addresses the whole person and offers individuals a whole breadth of personality and personal skills in their preparation for life.

According to Jarvis (2007), lifelong learning can be seen in two ways: “one which is private, lifelong, non-vocational and often non-formal and even individual, while the
other is social/public, work-life long, vocational, often formal” (p.188). What we draw from these definitions is that lifelong learning is a framework of education beyond formal systems to include also the informal and non-formal modes of learning (Regmi, 2015) and therefore a way of obtaining education throughout life, by people of all ages. Accordingly, it combines both individual learning and institutionalised learning (Jarvis, 2004). As an education discourse therefore, it challenges the ethos of initial education that has previously dominated the organisation of learning.

Widening access is one of the themes that have been promoted under the larger banner of lifelong learning (Osborne & Gallacher, 2004). It implies a shift in the perception of participation so that participation in higher education changes from being a privilege to being a right, consequently resulting into a shift from elite to mass higher education systems (Boud, 2004). Sometimes referred to as widening participation (Riddell, Edward, Boeren & Weedon, 2013), its objectives are 1) to increase the numbers of young people entering higher education, and 2) to open access and increase the proportions of previously excluded and underrepresented groups in higher education based on social constructs of class, ethnicity, gender and age, among others. The present study is concerned with how to promote the latter objective. Nevertheless, within the inclusion agenda, there is a tendency of understanding and using the notion of participation to mean gaining of access to educational institutions without necessarily giving due attention to other deserving aspects such as the institutional processes and learning arrangements that take into consideration the students’ background diversity.

From the liberal perspective, widening access is understood to comprise two notions: the increasing of numbers and the inclusion in terms of student diversity and the implication this has on higher education institutions and the sector in general. Despite some existing gaps, the increasing notion has to a large extent been achieved, as illustrated by mass higher education systems in developed (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) and developing countries (Mohamedbhai, 2008) alike. However, achieving the inclusion notion in real terms remains a challenge. The metaphor of ‘widening’ in itself is a challenge to the inclusion agenda as it limits the varied angles through which its intended objectives could be achieved (Boud, 2004). In practice, the focus of measurement of its success or failure has been more in terms of quantity and not quality. As a result, widening access has been critiqued for being concerned more with the point of access (the increasing notion) and not with what occurs after access (the inclusion notion), and yet this is equally important.
Boud (2004) thus argues that an important contribution to achieving the inclusion agenda for previously excluded and underrepresented groups such as the non-traditional students in this study, would be to rethink the notion of access. A key way of rethinking the notion of access is to “find ways in which higher education can be more responsive to the diversity of needs, not just of individuals and social groups but of different purposes and roles of higher education” (Boud, 2004 p.53). Accordingly, this expands the notion of access to that of responsiveness, which opens space for assessing the quality of educational experiences and outcomes for the entrants. Responsiveness also means asking such questions as getting access to what, for whom, for how long, for what purpose and success (Du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014). One way through which such questions could be answered, which also provides a foundation for the present study, is to change the way the discourse of participation in (higher) education is perceived — is participation a phenomenon or a process?

The latter perception – process – was adopted for the present study as it provides a wider lens through which a range of strategies could be made to counteract barriers at individual level, within the institution, and beyond the institution including both pre-university encumbrances and post-graduation experiences, so that the higher education experience becomes an enjoyable and meaningful one amidst diversity. Based on this conceptualisation, the word ‘meaningful’ is included so that when we talk of participation we mean meaningful participation. This way of looking at participation aims to challenge higher education institutions to rethink their place within the communities where they are located. Discussing the role of universities in the widening access agenda, Milburn (2012) suggests and presents four career themes of the student life cycle: getting ready – reaching out to potential applicants; getting in – university admission processes; staying in – student retention; and getting on – student outcomes. In this sense, widening access is seen not from the resource angle but from the role that higher education plays in contributing to economic, social and cultural development, given the fundamental role of education in enhancing the quality of human life and ensuring economic and social prosperity (O’Brien & Ó Fathaigh, 2007). While recognising the contribution of the human capital theory in education and development, the present study criticises its shortfalls and promotes the capability approach as the most suitable to understand the (different) purposes of education and therefore for elucidating and understanding the participation realities of NTS in university education (for a detailed discussion see chapter 3 of this thesis) in developing contexts such as Uganda.

According to the proponents of the human capital theory led by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz (Schultz, 1963) education or training raises the productivity of
workers by imparting useful knowledge and skills, hence raising their future income by increasing their lifetime earnings (Becker, 1964). This theory therefore contends that the skills of the graduates are their productive capability (Rosenbaum, Kariya, Settersten & Maier, 1990) and human beings are the most important production factor in economic development efforts (Robeyns, 2006). Accordingly, it focuses on the instrumental and economic importance of education for employability and economic growth (Barros, 2012). As a result, this approach has been criticised for being overly economistic – blocking out intrinsic motivations and other dimensions of life such as cultural and social norms – and being entirely instrumental thereby leaving out the non-instrumental values of education. It cannot account for such choices as studying to obtain knowledge for its own sake, or choosing to go to university just to meet society’s expectations, or for social purposes such as that of having a well-educated population and active citizenry (Walker, 2010), unless there are economic prospects to this (Robeyns, 2006). Moreover it has also failed to account for the growing gap between people’s increasing learning efforts and knowledge base and the diminishing number of commensurate jobs, especially in developing nations (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008).

The capability approach, which fills the above gap, was advanced by Amartya Sen in the 1980s as an additional and cumulative approach to the human capital theory (Sen, 1997) that had dominated in the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas education in the human capital approach is important as a means to developing human resources and agency for economic ends, in the capability approach emphasis is extended to the value of intrinsic ends, such that “the benefits of education thus exceed its role as human capital in commodity production” (Sen, 2001 p. 294). Through recognising that there is more to education than human capital, Sen broadened the conceptualisation of the purpose of education as going beyond the economic values of life to also include the social norms and values of human beings such as their social capital. From the capability approach perspective, therefore, the purpose of education is for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons (Drèze & Sen, 2002; Unterhalter, 2003).

The capability approach also acknowledges human diversity by focusing on plurality of functionings and capabilities as important evaluative spaces, and stressing personal and socio-environmental conversion factors that either make or don’t make possible the conversion of commodities into functionings (Robeyns, 2005). Functionings are the ‘beings and doings’ of a person (Sen, 2000 p. 75). Capabilities, on the other hand, are the real opportunities people have to achieve those functionings (Robeyns, 2006) or the substantive freedoms an individual enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value (Sen, 2001). In the context of the present study this is
helpful because it enables tackling of both the formal and epistemological access (Morrow, 2007) constraints or barriers of non-traditional students in higher education as well as the prevailing institutions (North, 1990) embedded within the complex socio-cultural context of Ugandan society. Accordingly, the capability approach provides “a framework or instrument for conceptualizing inequality (the absence or deprivation of capability) and well-being (the presence of valued capabilities)” (Walker, 2010 p. 905).

Sen’s understanding of capabilities encompasses agency freedom. In this sense, the capability approach promotes human beings as beings with freedom to be and do what they value (Sen, 2001). In this effort, the autonomy and freedom of learners becomes the basis of educational processes so that their critical and reflective capabilities are developed to enable them to “critically understand, interpret and give meaning to key issues in their lives and in society” (Lozano, Boni, Peris & Hueso, 2012 p.143). This implies that evaluation of higher education would be done in terms of how it has enabled graduates to develop life projects and careers that they have reason to value. Consequently, intervention programmes in higher education would be those that empower and build the capabilities of students so that their capacity to function is seen not only in their economic and professional life but in other spheres of their lives. The role of higher education in this case is seen to go beyond training for instrumental reasons to preparing learners (holistically) for life.

5. Research question and objectives

The research question that guided this study was: What are the experiences and participation needs of non-traditional students in university education and how can they be supported to attain meaningful participation? As reflected in the sub-title of this thesis – Understanding and enabling meaningful participation of non-traditional students in university education in Uganda, the aim of the study was, on the one hand, to understand the experiences and participation needs of non-traditional students and, on the other hand, to contribute towards enabling their meaningful participation in university education, ultimately making recommendations for re-thinking and transforming the roles and purposes of (higher) education in development. Subsequently, six objectives that created a chronological order of the realities associated with the perceived definition of (meaningful) participation were set to guide the study:

1. To establish the meaning of participation and the (socio-cultural) context within which NTS make decisions to participate in university education;
2. To establish the NTS’ motivations to participate in university education;
3. To explore the policy and practice provisions available to NTS within the institution environment;
4. To explore how the out-of-institution environments of NTS impact on their participation experience in university education;
5. To explore the participation outcomes and labour market experiences of NTS after graduating from university; and
6. To develop action scripts and strategies towards enabling meaningful participation of NTS in university education.

6. Research methodology

The need for collaboration between the academic researchers and participating researchers (Boog, 2007) to contribute suggestions for improvement of the NTS participation experience, led the present study to adopt a participatory research design blending in some pragmatic action research orientations (Boog, 2003). The selection of interpretivism as the underlying paradigm of this study was based on its ability to give space to the insider or *emic* perspective allowing for understanding of phenomena from subjective meanings people attach to their experiences and construction of their social reality based on broader contexts within which they live and interact (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Participatory action research was considered appropriate since it also aims at addressing social problems that constrain and repress the lives of students in an educational setting (Creswell, 2012). The pragmatic aspect of action research was particularly included to enable a participatory democracy and knowledge generation (Levin & Greenwood, 2001). This resulted in several action scripts (see chapter 8) towards improving the lifelong learning opportunities of non-traditional students.

We mainly used qualitative methods of data collection in various forms such as interviews, workshops, project newsletters and personal learning journals, and supplemented these with a few quantitative methods (a survey). The purpose of the survey was to enable us gain an understanding of the magnitude of the different aspects of the research problem within the academy such as interactions with staff and students, good practices, services and facilities. The insights gained later provided input into the conversations we had with the participants during interviews that provided data for the different sub-studies (chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).

Analysis of the survey data was done using descriptive statistics in SPSS (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010). The results of the survey are included in chapter 5 that focuses on
the experiences of NTS within the academy. The larger share of the results are reported in a master sub-study of this thesis (see Van Brink, 2015). The qualitative data used in different sub-studies were first transcribed and later analysed by means of a continuous meaning-making process involving coding and development of themes with the help of qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (Flick, 2009). This became helpful in developing further the theory behind the study. Figure 2 is an illustration of the coding process. Data used in all the substudies were validated by the research participants during workshops (for details see chapter 8).

Our participatory action research project was conducted in a period of four years (September 2012 to September 2016), through a process of three interconnected cycles or phases of action and reflection: the initial/preparatory phase; the implementation/execution phase; and the harvest/way forward phase. The first cycle aimed at opening conversational space and creating safe spaces for engagement to understand the research problem; the second cycle aimed at gaining both deeper and wider insights into the problem; and the third cycle aimed at empowering the research subjects to deal with the problem practically. The cycles achieved these aims through utilising the different structures of the project (e.g. the feedback committee, the validation workshops, the newsletter) that often brought together both the academic
researchers and the participating researchers (Boog, 2003, 2007) to deliberate and put into action the different agreed upon project activities. Accordingly, the different sub-studies (academic papers) contained in chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis are an integral part of this participatory process – they especially derive from the activities and processes of cycle two of the research process. Details of how this participatory research process was conducted are in chapter 8 of the thesis.

7. **Thesis organisation and preview**

The thesis is made up of nine chapters. The next chapter (chapter 2) provides background information on the organisation of education in the two contexts considered important to the present study; Uganda and Makerere University where the study was conducted. Through gaining insights into these contexts we hope that the reader will find it easier to make meaning of the contents of the succeeding chapters. As already mentioned, chapters 3 to 7 are presented as academic papers and these together provide an interpretation of the meaning of participation for non-traditional students at university in developing contexts such as Uganda. These chapters respectively allude to the first five objectives of the study. Chapters 8 (aligned to objective 6) and 9, on the other hand, are written and presented in the format of traditional chapters.

The starting point for the reader, which forms the core argument of this thesis is that to be able to do justice (understand and enable attainment of meaningful participation) to the participation question/ agenda of non-traditional students in university education, there is need to first understand and (re)construct the meaning of the concept ‘participation’. To be able to do this successfully it becomes important to understand the socio-cultural context within which the participation decisions are made (see objective 1). The thesis attends to both issues in chapter 3 – *Conceptualisation of Meaningful Participation* – through a publication titled *Towards a conceptual framework for developing capabilities of ‘new’ types of students participating in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. The second important issue is to understand why participation decisions are being made (see objective 2). The thesis attends to this concern in chapter 4 – *Motivations for Participation* – through a publication titled *Motivations for participation in higher education: narratives of non-traditional students at Makerere University in Uganda*.

After understanding the motivations as to why non-traditional students enrol for university education, it becomes important to understand the provision environment available at university for such students (see objective 3). The thesis attends to this
issue in chapter 5 – Participation and the Inside-of-Institution Environment – through a paper titled Sustaining educational development at Makerere University in Uganda – Is equality of access provision alone sufficient? However, to understand the inside-of-the-institution environment is not enough because it does not include the participation needs that emanate from the environments where non-traditional students live and work (see objective 4). As such, the thesis adds another important aspect to the meaning of participation, which is elaborated in chapter 6 – Participation and the Out-of-Institution Environments – through a publication titled The influence of out-of-institution environments on the university schooling project of non-traditional students in Uganda. Lastly, (meaningful) participation is conceptualised to be that participation that connects motivations to participation outcomes (see objective 5). The thesis attends to this in chapter 7 – Participation and the Post-Institution Environments – through a paper titled Higher education benefits and labour market experiences of non-traditional graduates in Uganda.

These five chapters together give an answer to the first part of the research question: what are the experiences and participation needs of non-traditional students in university education. The second part of the research question: and how can they be supported to attain meaningful participation, is answered in chapter 8 – The Action Research Process and its Outcomes, which on the one hand elaborates the research process that guided the conduct of the sub-studies in chapters 3 to 7, and on the other hand, highlights the outcomes related to the enabling aspect (see objective 6) that forms part of the thesis subtitle Understanding and enabling meaningful participation of non-traditional students in university education in Uganda. In addition to presenting the way forward, including further areas for research and reflections on the systemic problems of the education system in Uganda, chapter 9 – Conclusions, Discussion and Recommendations – makes recommendations that also aim to contribute to the realisation of the enabling aspect of the study. These recommendations are arrived at from reflections made on those findings of the study that seem to have provided a specific perspective on the challenges of lifelong learning practice in higher education. This forms the basis of the main title of the study – Lifelong Learning in Practice.

Notes to the reader

The chapters that are presented as academic papers – published (3, 4 and 6) or submitted for publication (5 and 7) – have been written in such a way that they can be read independently. Accordingly, they have some overlaps in text. Also, in these ‘paper’ chapters, the word paper or article (and not chapter) is maintained in the thesis. Important to note also is that although these papers are part of the participatory action
research process described in chapter 8, for purposes of meeting the academic requirements of different academic journals, each of them contains both conceptual/theoretical and methodological orientations on which their contributions are based. This explains why the thesis does not have ‘independent’ chapters on theoretical framework and methodology as usually is the case in many (traditional) PhD theses.