Lastly, we wish to highlight some interesting links from the findings that establish limitations of this study and point to further research. First, this study is focused on the experiences of an NTG group, but some of the experiences presented are general in nature and may cut across for their counterparts – the traditional graduates. A comparative study to go deeper into the experiences of also the traditional graduates would be an interesting one in contributing to the debates on strengthening the design and implementation of inclusive policies in higher education. Second, all the graduates interviewed in this study mentioned self-employment as an important aspect for development of personal career identities and biographies. However, for many it remained speculative and a hoped-for benefit. Another study to ascertain the actual achievement of the graduates’ aspirations to establish own enterprises would suffice.

Chapter 8
The Action Research Process and its Outcomes
Chapter 8 – The Action Research Process and its Outcomes

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the research process used to arrive at the findings presented earlier on in the empirical chapters of this thesis (3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), as well as the practical outcomes of our participatory action research project on understanding and enabling meaningful participation of non-traditional students in university education in Uganda. This process is presented in form of three interconnected cycles of action and reflection through which different actors engaged to achieve the research objectives. From the perspectives of both the practice and research systems, I also present the learning experiences and reflections of both the academic researcher(s) and the participating researchers, from which I draw lessons to contribute to the further development of action research by focusing on three key issues: participation of the intended beneficiaries including the power relations between and among different stakeholders and the role of co-researchers; ownership and sustainability of the proposed solutions; and academic output in terms of knowledge production and its applicability in wider contexts. But first, I present some insights into the action research approach.

2. The ethos of action research

Action research has in the recent past gained a lot of recognition in education and social sciences as an appropriate approach to researching social problems including those related to practices in professions and various fields of work in society. Action research has epistemologically been linked to different world views and scholarly schools of thought such as participatory, emancipatory and liberalist practice, in the end constituting a family of approaches (Boog, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) characterised by different perspectives which include: action learning, participatory action research, cooperative inquiry, dialogue conferences, appreciative inquiry or feminist action research (Boog, Slagter and Zeelen, 2008; Wicks & Reason, 2009).

While situating action research as research in one's own practice, Reason & Bradbury (2001; 2008) and Reason (2006) emphasise participation as the defining characteristic of action research (see also Boog, 2008) since it is the mechanism through which those affected by the practice are involved, as Reason (2006, p. 189) resonates:
Chapter 8 – The Action Research Process and its Outcomes

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While situating action research as research in one’s own practice, Reason & Bradbury (2001; 2008) and Reason (2006) emphasise participation as the defining characteristic of action research (see also Boog, 2008) since it is the mechanism through which those affected by the practice are involved, as Reason (2006, p. 189) resonates:
…participation is important because self-evidently one cannot study and improve practice without deep involvement of those engaged in that practice, for the necessary perspective and information is simply not available.

A strong justification associated with action research therefore is its (potential) ability to give space to the voices of those who are living the problem or are part of the problem that is being researched so that together with the researcher(s) they co-create new knowledge and solutions towards improving the problematic situation. In this way, action research is perceived as an inquiry that is done with the subjects and not on the subjects (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Boog, 2007; Reason & Bradbury 2008). Accordingly, researchers shift from holding the ‘subjects’ as their object of focus to building a relationship with them as co-researchers. In this way action research is seen to integrate both the insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives to researching the problem or what Kemmis (2008) refers to as the subjective and objective perspectives. More so, many action research projects, if not all, have the empowerment imperative embedded within them because the focus “is on providing the means to improve people’s self determination - to empower them in their roles as professional practitioners or citizens in the diverse social domains in which they live and work” (Zeelen, Slagter, Boog & Preece 2008, p. 1-2). This very nature of action research underscores its participatory ethos, democratic ethos and epistemological grounding in human action that are core characteristics of all researches worth the name action research.

Despite all these and many more niceties attributed to action research, its projects ought to be planned, implemented and evaluated with caution to acknowledge the challenges inherent to it or that come with it, lest we portray only positive impressions that may induce grounds for its criticism as an ‘unscientific’ research approach. For instance, it has been argued that in practice it is very difficult to complete the action research cycle including implementation of the proposed solutions, their evaluation with relevant stakeholders and making necessary improvements (Boog et al., 2008; Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008; Angucia, Zeelen & De Jong, 2010). As such, the validity and credibility of an action research project ought to be treated as equally important as the motivation for its initiation and intended impact, especially within the context of developing countries where participation has become a buzz word and a ‘window dressing’ in and for many development projects. Drawing from research cases done in some countries in Africa, Van der Linden & Zeelen (2008 p. 196) raise some areas of concern for reflection by action researchers: “consultation of the beneficiaries, the power relations at stake, and academic output” (see also Boog, 2007; Boog et al., 2008; Kemmis, 2008; Wilmsen, 2008; Angucia et al., 2010).
When we promote participation as an important aspect of participatory research, we need to be conscious about its potential to be abused or to obscure empowerment it ideally aims to promote, subsequently leading to extraction of knowledge from the intended beneficiaries without benefiting them. It has thus been argued that rather than focus on participation, focus should be on the quality of the relationship between the co-researchers, i.e. the academic researchers and the participating researchers (Boog, 2007; Wilmsen, 2008). Wilmsen (2008) presents this relationship as a dynamic one with different elements: participation, reciprocity, mutual learning and action, which are all equally important:

Participation without reciprocity, mutual learning and other elements of healthy partnerships is an empty promise leading ultimately to extractive research, frustration, and continued marginalization on the part of the community members (p. 143).

Arnstein (1969) classified citizen participation as an arrangement of rungs on a ladder or a continuum with manipulation and therapy as the lowest rungs/degrees of participation and partnership, delegated power and citizen control as the highest respectively. Wilmsen (2008 p. 137) argues that in practice “numerous combinations of high, intermediate and low levels” of the different elements of the relationship are possible. Focusing on the quality of the relationship therefore allows deeper analysis of the different forms, degrees and abuses of participation, different roles of the co-researchers and asking such questions as who decides what? (Boog et al., 2008; Wilmsen, 2008). This is important because in PAR projects participation is connected to the concept of power, in the sense that those who have power are the ones more likely to influence decisions pertaining to such questions as who participates, how and in what activities/ways.

Van der Linden & Zeelen (2008) maintain that if the issue of power relations is not well handled there are chances that not all voices will be heard – with those of the ‘powerful’ more likely to be prioritised leading to an unequal learning process or co-control of the research process by the co-researchers (Boog 2008). Yet successful collaborative projects are built on what Boog (2007) terms reciprocal adequacy where the partners involved practice continuous open communication, mutual trust and respect and get satisfied with the communication of facts (Angucia et al., 2010). Accordingly, reciprocal adequacy serves as a measure of validity and reliability since it allows information to be cross-checked and agreed upon by the actors in research. This democratic ethos is enthused by the work of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin and is founded on “the notion of a shared ontology of progressive human development as
social learning, emancipation and empowerment towards a socially just and sustainable world community” (Boog et al., 2008, p. 16). Reason (2006, p.189) thus concludes:

Action research is a participative and democratic process that seeks to do research with, for, and by people; to redress the balance of power in knowledge creation; and to do this in an educative manner that increases participants’ capacity to engage in inquiring lives.

In addition to scrutinising participation, it is important to look into the role of the researcher in securing proper follow-up for implementation and sustainability of the proposed solutions beyond the project. This becomes important especially in situations where the full cycle of action research was never completed resulting in post-project activities. Last but not least, it is also important to reflect on the role of theory or the new theoretical insights and their contribution to the action research methodology. This means sharing both the successful and challenging experiences and the new knowledge gained during the course of the project for possible application in other action research projects. Therefore, as I conclude this section I draw from our project and set three questions which I come back to in the last section of this chapter to contribute to further development of action research.

1. In consideration of the eminent role of power relations in PAR, what was the role of co-researchers in the learning process and in what ways and forms did participation take place?
2. What is the extent of ownership and sustainability of the proposed solutions and the role of the researcher in this process?
3. What can we learn from the research project in terms of new knowledge and its applicability in wider contexts?

3. **Cycles of participatory action research**

As already mentioned in chapter 1, our participatory action research project was conducted in a period of four years (September 2012 to September 2016), in three cycles or phases of action and reflection: the initial/preparatory phase; the implementation/execution phase; and the harvest/way forward phase. It should be noted however that, in practice, these cycles are not sequential as ordered above – they overlap, i.e. they happen co-currently and sometimes are so interconnected that it becomes difficult to make clear demarcations of where one action cycle and its activities stop and the other begins. Some of the actions/activities may cut across different cycles, e.g. in our project the newsletter was used in opening communicative space in cycle one, as a tool for data collection and collective learning in cycle two,
and as an action script for change in cycle three; the feedback committee served as a tool for implementation of proposed solutions and for guiding collective learning throughout the research process; and opening communicative space or building rapport could not be confined to only the initial cycle because communication, which is an important tool in PAR, is facilitated and sustained by constantly opening up spaces for communication.

Table 7 Summary of cycles of action and reflection in our PAR project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Main focus</th>
<th>Major activities</th>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycle 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Initial/ preparatory phase</strong></td>
<td>Preparing and opening (safe) communicative space</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding research context</td>
<td>Sept 2012 to February 2013</td>
<td>Academic researchers</td>
<td>Approved research problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying participants and stakeholder grouping</td>
<td></td>
<td>Potential participating researchers</td>
<td>Safe spaces created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on power structures</td>
<td></td>
<td>Phone calls and invitation letters</td>
<td>Conversation space opened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections on insider position</td>
<td></td>
<td>Informal consultation meetings</td>
<td>Approved research (PAR) approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conducting ground-breaking stakeholders workshops (2)</td>
<td>March 9, 2013</td>
<td>One-on-one consent meetings</td>
<td>Collective/ social learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing the feedback committee</td>
<td>March 23, 2013</td>
<td>Participating researchers from different stakeholder groups</td>
<td>Workshops reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publishing the research newsletter</td>
<td>July 2013</td>
<td>Participant volunteers</td>
<td>Feedback committee/sub-committees and reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Newsletter articles</td>
<td>Newsletter Issues 1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycle 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Implementation/execution phase</strong></td>
<td>‘Doing’ and validating research</td>
<td>March to July 2013 (1)</td>
<td>Unstructured and semi-structured interview guides</td>
<td>Interview transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conducting individual interviews</td>
<td>July 2015 (2)</td>
<td>The survey guide/ pilot Preliminary findings</td>
<td>Survey of NTS at CIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conducting the survey</td>
<td>February 2016 (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Workshop reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conducting validation workshops (3)</td>
<td>May 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identified gaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>May 24 2014 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Innovation drafts 1, 2 &amp; 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>July 25 2015 (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>July 30 2016 (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycle 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Harvest/ way forward phase</strong></td>
<td>Action research empowerment and social change</td>
<td>March 2014 to September 2015</td>
<td>Association committee Feedback committee Facebook page</td>
<td>University Learning and work students association (ULWSA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students association</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cycle 1: The initial/ preparatory phase – Opening up (to) research

The first cycle of the research process was basically about making appropriate preparations for field work so as to bring together the different stakeholder groups to talk about the perceived research idea – what Sandberg & Wallo (2013) call ‘testing the water’. Such preparations included analysis of the power relations among different stakeholder groups. It was also about the originating researcher(s) ‘opening up’ the research idea to the perceived or potential participating researchers in the field for purposes of establishing if they: 1) also found the perceived idea a social problem worthy to be researched; 2) were interested and willing to partner with the originating researcher(s) to generate new knowledge towards improving the(ir) situation. This ‘opening up’ is what different studies have come to refer to as opening conversation space (Zeelen, 2004) or communicative space (Kemmis, 2001, 2008; Bodorkos & Pataki, 2009; Wicks & Reason, 2009; Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Sandberg & Wallo 2013). This is an important aspect for the success of any inquiry – especially a participatory action research venture like ours. Wicks & Reason (2009, p.243) reverberate:

The success or failure of an action research venture often depends on what happens at the beginning of the inquiry process: in the way access is established, and on how participants and co-researchers are engaged early on. ‘Opening communicative space’ is important because, however we base our theory and practice of action research, the first steps are fateful.
The ground-breaking stakeholders’ workshops

Accordingly, and also, following an injunction “If you want something to happen, make a space for it” (Wicks & Reason, 2009), I (the originating researcher) together with my master student undertaking a sub-study of this research project (Van Brink, 2015) planned and organised two ground-breaking stakeholders workshops as spaces for opening dialogue between the academic researchers and the participating researchers (Boog, 2003, 2007).

We categorised the participating researchers into three groups: the primary participating researchers – those whose problematic social situation was the initial reason for setting up the research project, and in our case, the non-traditional students group consisting of the currently enrolled students, the graduates and drop-outs; other participating researchers – those who directly interact with the primary participating researchers in the latter’s situation and in our case, the academic staff, administrative staff, policy makers in the university, traditional students and employers; and other stakeholders – other actors not directly involved with the primary participating researchers but whose mandates impact on the latter’s situation and in our case, the National Council for Higher Education – the regulatory body for higher education in Uganda; and the Ministry of Education and Sports specifically the department of higher education for its crucial role in the planning and development of higher education in the country.

Table 8 Stakeholders of the project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Academic researchers</th>
<th>Originating researcher (PhD student)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master student (till July 2013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research assistants (chairperson of the feedback committee/editor project newsletter; videographer/photographer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Participating researchers</td>
<td>Primary participating researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-traditional students (currently enrolled, graduates, drop-outs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other participating researchers</td>
<td>Academic staff, administrative staff, university policy makers, traditional students, employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other stakeholders</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Sports, National Council for Higher Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two workshops were held on the March 9 and March 23, 2013 respectively. Both workshops acted as our official entry point to opening up the research, creating communicative space, and building rapport with the participating researchers in the field. During the planning for the workshops we were conscious about the existing power relations between and within the different stakeholder groups. We therefore
intentionally organised two separate workshops to create a safe conversation space (Owens, 2006) that would allow all the participating researchers the opportunity to bring “their experiences, competencies and views into the open” (Zeelen, 2004 p. 22) and exercise freedom of articulating “issues of practical and pressing importance in their lives” (Wicks & Reason, 2009 p. 244) without the fear that their views might jeopardise their relationship with those they interact with at university. In the context of participatory research, Bergold & Thomas (2012 n.p, paragraph 13) advise that:

In order to facilitate sufficient openness, a "safe space" is needed, in which the participants can be confident that their utterances will not be used against them, and that they will not suffer any disadvantages if they express critical or dissenting opinions.

At both workshops our role as academic researchers was to support and steer (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013) the process of reaching a mutual understanding of the research problem with the participating researchers – what Giddens (1976) cited in Boog (2007) calls a double hermeneutic process. Accordingly, we made sure that from the onset of things we created an atmosphere that portrayed the tenets of a participatory action research project – actions that explicitly invited the researched subjects to become co-researchers. Whereas as academic researchers we took a lead role in organising the workshops and explaining the basics and logical meaning of our proposed approach to research, we let our research partners/co-researchers take actionable roles that matched what we explained theoretically. For example, both the workshops facilitators and the chairpersons for the group work and discussion sessions were participating researchers. More so, consent as to how the workshops were to be conducted including issues of time management and in-house rules, such as the need for mutual respect of each participant’s views, or handling of telephone calls during the workshops, was sought and endorsed by all the participants, at the beginning of each workshop.

As part of our obligation to research ethics, we made it clear both prior to and during the workshops that participation in the project was voluntary. Accordingly, during the planning stage of the workshops we underscored the importance of voluntary participation and informed consent (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011) when we made phone calls or had a one-on-one meeting with the potential participants. This was also aimed at letting and leaving in only those participants who would be committed for the long-term period of the project. In our effort of building a mutually trusting relationship yet “without going native and losing the researcher’s critical edge” (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013 p.207) we emphasised at the beginning of the
workshops that both the academic researchers and the participating researchers were equals but different (unique human beings) participants “because their expertise lies in different domains and aspects” (Boog, 2003 p. 435). Boog contends that whereas the expertise of the researched subjects lies within the matters of their everyday life, that of the academic researchers lies in their ability and responsibility to propose suitable methods and techniques for researching the problem. I add, even more – knowledge from other practices and experiences. For instance, we brought in knowledge on theories of lifelong learning and other experiences obtained from Youth, Education and Work seminars, externally facilitated meetings and taking part in PAR workshops of my peers.

At the end of both workshops and in line with the set objectives, the participants agreed that the participation of non-traditional groups of students in university education was indeed a social problem originating from factors within the university and outside the university as well as those at individual level. They further agreed to establish a feedback committee using a democratic process of voluntary participation, and to annually hold meetings that would bring together all the actors of the commissioned research to receive and discuss progress of the project as well as give feedback to the researcher(s).

The feedback committee
At the end of the first workshop a 15-member committee with representatives from all the research partners was put in place. The purpose of the feedback committee was two-fold: 1) to enable a participatory democratic function in determining the direction of the research, and therefore be an advisory committee through which the academic researchers would account to the other research partners during the research process; 2) to enable a function of collective learning and ownership of the research process and outcomes by all the stakeholders.

For purposes of streamlining the conduct of its business, the committee through a democratic process constituted ‘official office bearers’ under the positions of chairperson and vice-chairperson/secretary. These were endorsed by the committee to become the ‘quick consultative arm’ of the researchers (on their behalf) in all matters pertaining to the conduct of the project activities. In addition, the feedback committee also established three sub-committees (the newsletter, the non-traditional students’ association, and the social change) to handle major action areas that came up during deliberations on matters falling under its mandate. We worked closely with these structures but also with individual members of the committee on matters under their jurisdiction.
The project newsletter
From the primary analyses and discussions it was established that there was general lack of awareness about the changing student population at universities and the existence of non-traditional students within the university student population, and subsequently their needs, plight and opportunities. Accordingly, the feedback committee established a four-member sub-committee and charged it with the production of an annual newsletter titled ‘Lifelong Learning and Higher Education’ which, in addition to being a channel for creating awareness and opening communicative space, was also used for disseminating the research findings to different stakeholders. We also had envisaged that it would be sustained beyond the project as a communication script for keeping the project and its outcomes alive. Unfortunately, by the end of the project it was clear that this would not be possible. Three issues of the newsletter were produced during the research period, as follows:

- Issue 1 – July 2013 titled ‘Non-traditional Students at Makerere University – Who are they?’
- Issue 2 – May 2014 titled ‘Perceptions and experiences of different stakeholders on NTS’.

My insider position vs. establishing dialogue
Prior to initiating this research project, I served as Faculty Registrar at the School of Computing and Informatics Technology (CIT) situated in the College of Computing and Information Sciences (COCIS), and as College Registrar at the College of
Engineering, Design, Art and Technology (CEDAT), Makerere University. At the start of the project, this *insider position* became a hindrance to my efforts of establishing dialogue with some of the research actors. Many a time, some students and staff in CIT expected me to render them administrative support on matters related to the registry and often questioned my persistent presence in COCIS’ physical space, yet I had been transferred to CEDAT. This means they were still perceiving me more from the practice and not the research perspective. Without having my *researcher status* officially claimed and clarified, communication and interaction with the participants would have been difficult.

Accordingly, beyond the sake of fulfilling the general ethical guidelines of research, I intentionally sought to gain acceptance as a researcher through opening communicative space and building rapport with different actors both in their individual and work-group spaces because of the implications my insider position would have on the conduct of the research. I held *one-on-one meetings* with the top management of COCIS and *informal group meetings* with different administrative, academic and support staff groups in CIT. Also, under the commissioning of the feedback committee, I sought permission from CIT management and attended the 24th meeting of the *School Board* where I interacted and shared with the academic staff about ‘my’ research project. After these meetings, communicative space was seen opened e.g. some staff began to address me by the ‘names’ researcher and non-traditional student. Also many voluntarily visited me in my research office in the faculty or stopped me in the corridors or at tea and lunch breaks to engage in conversations related to the research problem. In this process, I, among other things, tapped into their perceptions about our research approach and own experiences with the non-traditional students.

*Cycle 2: The implementation/execution phase – ‘Doing’ and validating research*

If the first cycle was about ‘testing the water’ (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013), the second cycle was about *diving into the water* to understand what actually happens there, i.e. getting both the deeper and wider insights of the research problem. These insights were got from our three categories of participating researchers. At this moment in time we sought to take the *opened communicative space* to the next level. The *deeper* dimension involved conducting of in-depth individual interviews with all the three categories of participating researchers, and meaning-making of all data collected from other qualitative sources such as the workshops, the newsletter, the feedback committee and the informal interactions with staff, among others. The *wider* dimension, on the other hand, involved conducting a survey to establish the magnitude of the problem among the primary participating researchers. The outcomes of the
meaning-making process of these two-angle insights is what constitutes the analyses of the findings presented in the previous chapters (3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).

Whilst in the first cycle we supported and steered up the process of reaching a mutual understanding of the research problem with the participating researchers, in our second cycle of action and reflection, our role as academic researchers was to support and stir up the discussions through critical engagement while ensuring that we do not become captive to the practice system nor impose our own interests on the research system. This balancing role created the need on our part as researchers to “alternate between on-stage performance and backstage reflection (Eikeland 2006 as cited in Sandberg & Wallo, 2013 p. 204, emphasis mine) while ensuring that we made and shared with the co-researchers objective analyses that would trigger getting to more appropriate sources of data and opening up actions for the next steps. In other words, our role was to move between being researchers and facilitators of the joint learning processes. Accordingly, in this phase we executed activities of data collection, transcription, analysis and validation while inducing critical engagement with the participating researchers.

The survey
In May 2013, we conducted a survey (see Van Brink, 2015) of all the enrolled non-traditional students (with exception of 17 who participated in piloting the survey) of four undergraduate degree programmes in CIT in the academic year 2012/2013. The final survey was distributed with the help of volunteer non-traditional students who were present at the second ground-breaking stakeholder workshop. We used this approach because many students in the college do not read their emails regularly which would make it difficult to distribute the survey online, but also, due to stigmatisation and lowliness attached to the NTS identity, many NTS would not want to openly identify themselves as non-traditional students when we made an open announcement in class. This left us with one viable option for distributing the survey – working with NTS who attended the workshop and volunteered to distribute the survey to their colleagues in their respective classes.

The findings from the survey were fed back into the research process through a validation workshop conducted in May 2014. The findings expanded our insights into different perspectives on which we could categorise and differentiate non-traditional students, and understanding of the needs and challenges that stood out for them. These different perspectives enriched our analyses and reporting of the findings presented in chapter 5 of this thesis.
Individual interviews
The personal profiles shared at the ground-breaking workshops enabled selection of information-rich participants for individual interviews. In total, we held 15 unstructured in-depth individual interviews with the primary participating researchers as follows – five currently enrolled students (finalists), seven graduates and three drop-outs; 18 semi-structured individual interviews with other participating researchers as follows – three staff involved in policy development, five in academia, four in administration, two representing employer organisations and four traditional students; and two semi-structured interviews each conducted with a representative of the two other stakeholder institutions. We administered both unstructured and semi-structured interviews because the generated data aimed at serving different purposes; the latter corroborated the former. The first batch of interviews were conducted between May and July 2013, the second batch in July 2015 and the last in February 2016. These interviews were fed back into the participatory research process through reporting and validation meetings, and analysed to give the findings in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Table 9 The structure for the interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interview</th>
<th>Interviewee categories</th>
<th>Specific categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured interviews</td>
<td>Primary participating researchers (non-traditional students)</td>
<td>Finalists 2012/2013 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Graduates (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dropouts (3)</td>
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Validation workshops
In addition to the initial workshop(s) conducted in the first year of the research, we also organised and conducted three validation workshops in the subsequent years of the project as follows: May 2014, July 2015 and July 2016. Whereas the initial workshop(s) aimed at opening communicative space and building rapport with the research participants, these other workshops aimed at growing these further and enabling efforts for joint ownership and continuous collective learning towards meeting the research objectives.
Accordingly, integration of both the insider and outsider perspectives in a joint analysis did not only create the foundation for new knowledge but also the possibility for discovering gaps of emerging and pressing issues and new areas for engagement previously excluded in the process of data collection and analysis. For instance, originally I had not thought of including the traditional students in the research but during the May 2014 workshop, among the identified gaps was the need to engage at a deeper level with the traditional students to get a balanced picture of the experiences shared by non-traditional students. Subsequently, four purposively selected ‘traditional’ students were interviewed and their perceptions and experiences of interacting with NTS at university included in data analysis and reporting (see chapter 5 of this thesis).

**Cycle 3: The harvest/way forward phase – Action research, empowerment and social change**

In our last cycle of action and reflection, which we term the harvest/way forward phase, I present the *fruits of and from diving into the water*, i.e. the empowerment process and the impact of engaging in a participatory action research project from the perspectives of both the practice and research systems (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013). In this phase our role as the academic researchers was to *facilitate* the personal critical self-reflection of the (primary) participating researchers and to *ensure* and *guide* mutual critical reflective action towards creating realistic and sustainable possibilities for solving the social problem. Boog (2007) warns that in coming up with the new alternative scripts for action, care should be taken “not to fall into the trap of fantasies” (p. 71). Cognisant of this, we intentionally acted and engaged with the primary participating researchers in different ways of joint knowledge production and collective learning with the ultimate aim of giving them the *real feel and power* of researching and contributing to solving their own problem thus enabling them to propose and engage in scripts that were considered to be within their means in terms of both creation and implementation.

This process of critical engagement and reflection took place between December 2014 and July 2015. Nevertheless, the activities that constitute it are connected to the previous two cycles described above. In the said period, we engaged in a series of meetings with the primary participating researchers and deployed different methods of learning, e.g. personal learning journals, role-play and inviting external ‘experts’ to facilitate at some meetings, resulting in four connected scripts for action towards strengthening ownership and sustainability of the research outcomes and influencing social change: establishing the University Learning and Work Students Association...
The students association
During the second cycle of action and reflection in our project, the feedback committee commissioned a six-member sub-committee to ensure establishing of an association of non-traditional students at Makerere University starting with those of the School of Computing and IT where the research was based. The aim of establishing the association was to provide a platform for creating awareness about the situation of NTS and giving them a voice and possible opportunity for inclusion in the students’ administrative structures and recognition within the university. They also envisaged it as a platform that would enable further ownership and sustainability of the research outcomes through uniting and enabling them as a group to share personal life and learning experiences and to encourage and support each other in achieving better lives after university. By the end of project the association had taken off and was in the process of being registered within the university structures. Its Facebook page is available at: https://www.facebook.com/University-Learning-and-work-students-Association-419372478235837/.

Orienting newly admitted learning and work students into the university
The discussions of this script centred on how the primary participating researchers could work with both the research and practice systems to organise orientation meetings for LWS freshers beginning with those admitted in 2015/2016 academic year with a possible extension to the subsequent years. The preparation and implementation activities of this script were spearheaded by a seven-member steering committee comprised of LWS and supported by different structures in the university which included among others the office of the academic registrar (undergraduate admissions office), college registries and administration at COCIS.

On the one hand, this script was perceived as a means of strengthening the activities and functioning of the students association and, on the other, as a way of giving back to community and ‘testing’ their own research abilities in the ‘absence’ of the originating researcher. Consequently, many of the process requirements and implementation were done in the period when I was either away for my study visits in the Netherlands or was around but then my role got restricted to that of an inside-outside observer, mainly to provide technical support. Two orientations were held during the course of the project: September 16, 2015 for 2015/2016, and September
30, 2016 for the 2016/2017 academic year. While giving remarks, the chief guest at the first orientation commended the organisers for their efforts towards improving opportunities of LWS at university:

In a University like Makerere, to raise an awareness and concern to the managers and administrative management on some of the pertinent issues, it has to be done by an organised group and done in an organised manner and [then] administration, management will…adjust and implement favourable policies.

Changing identity: From NTS to LWS
Three underlying reasons were fronted as justifications for this change. First, they argued that the prefix *non* in the identity name non-traditional students, on the one hand, implies what they are not, as substantiated by participant two at the fifth meeting who said “[we need to] change it, it does not say what we are”, and on the other hand, gives a negative connotation that catalyses feelings of exclusion and victimisation, as participant six shared her *after feelings* in the peer learning journal she wrote at meeting six held on June 24, 2015.

When we were being called NTS it felt like we were not part of university students, we felt more like being pushed away and not part of the real thing, but now LWS really makes us feel different; it boosts our self-esteem.

Second, they argued that due to the changing terrain of higher education the usage of the word *tradition* in university students’ identities was confusing and out of context as one participant noted:

The word tradition should not be used anymore because that’s becoming too complicated, the word tradition, non-traditional or traditional, those words are complicated in communication because things are changing (Participant 19, May 25, 2015)

Third, they argued that basing the definition of NTS on only the *entry schemes* was in itself problematic, lacking and confusing given the new realities in higher education following its liberalisation. Moreover the mature age entry scheme at Makerere was as old as the direct entry scheme. Participant one queried “we are not involving students who came under direct that are married or working and they are there”. Participant 15 corroborated:

NTS are not only diploma and mature...There are also students who came through direct entry and they are married, they have families, are working and raising their
Based on these arguments, the primary participating researchers resolved that it was not appropriate any longer to continue being referred to as non-traditional students. After quite long deliberations, we (co-researchers) agreed that the most appropriate name that was realistic to their identity needs and the realities in the changed higher education terrain was learning and work students (LWS). They pinned this new identity name with the following elaboration:

- Learning represents the study obligations component, and work, all other obligations at the student’s disposal other than study. These could be a job whether full time, part time or casual; self-employment; or family and society related obligations, anything that reduces the student’s time for study.
- The learning part of the term was expressed in a continuous present tense form to illustrate that learning is a continuous process that is neither confined to a particular period in life nor to a school setting and as such includes all forms of learning: formal, non-formal and informal.
- Work on the other hand was elaborated to mean other responsibilities that strain the student from putting all his/her time to studying and that is why it was expressed in a to-do/activity form. Work was also explained to mean not only paid work but any activity that constrains the student’s time that would be dedicated to studies. They argued too that work should not be seen from only the economic perspective where someone is doing something to earn something but for the fact that what he or she is doing is taking them away from their full obligations as students.

Developing the innovation for social change
The initial idea was perceived at the first validation workshop held in May 2014 when the participants tasked the academic researchers to engage at depth with the primary participating researchers to discuss how their situation could be improved from their perspective as people who were living the problem being researched. The idea was later commissioned by the feedback committee during its fourth meeting held in July 2014.

The process – We engaged in nine formal meetings deploying different methods of learning which kept the participants motivated, while at the same time enabling them to achieve the set objectives on the research agenda, i.e. the engagement process of peer learning satisfied both the practice and research systems’ needs. These methods included: open space technology, role play, peer learning journals, sharing testimonies
related to participating in the research, telling own story as LWS, involving them in organising and co-chairing meetings and inviting external experts to facilitate topics of common interest among the participating researchers. The final product of this process is an innovation in form of an information booklet for guiding different actors who interact with the learning and work students before and during their schooling project at university.

**The validation** – At the end of the nine rigorous meetings I, on behalf of the 20 content developers, compiled and presented the first draft of the innovation to the primary participating researchers’ stakeholder group and members of the feedback committee during the second workshop held in July 2015. The aim was to elicit deeper analysis of the content under each theme and to construct and create together key take-home messages for each stakeholders/actor group. The solicited inputs were incorporated into the second draft and presented to a wider audience at the third validation workshop held in July 2016. At the end of the workshop the participants agreed that further consultations be made with key relevant offices and individuals to improve the quality of the content of the final version. They further agreed that the feedback from the consultation be discussed further and approved by the authors at a meeting yet to be determined, and also be shared through email with the rest of the stakeholders.

**Implementation and evaluation** – Unlike the other scripts for action which were co-currently developed and implemented during the project period, this action script was developed as a spin-off of our research project. Consequently, its implementation and impact evaluation are situated outside the timeframe of the project.

4. **Learning experiences and reflections**

The aim of this project was to contribute towards understanding the experiences of non-traditional students and enabling their meaningful participation in university education. To be able to do this we had to establish a relationship with different stakeholders to understand the problem both in depth and magnitude and then come up with plausible solutions towards solving the problem. This relationship was established through both individual and group engagements. It is the benefits of these engagements in, and of, our participatory action research project that we document in this section. The **learning experiences** are drawn from the impact of the research project on both the practice and research systems. The **reflections** are my personal experiences of and lessons learnt from the research process. Both are validated by the voices of the participating researchers.
**Transformative learning experiences**

*Change in perceptions, attitudes and practice*

One of the concerns of this project was to empower its different stakeholders to enable them to act positively towards changing the unfair situation of non-traditional students participating in university education. The project created awareness about the multiple identities of NTS thereby bringing to the knowledge of different stakeholders the participation needs, motives, challenges and opportunities of these students. This awareness was created through open discussions about the changing student population at universities emanating from liberalisation of higher education reform, and sharing of experiences by the non-traditional students and other stakeholders who interact with them both within and outside the university. These exchanges and discussions brought the different stakeholders to terms with the realities of NTS resulting in change in perceptions and attitudes and subsequently, practices. At the final workshop, one of the university administrative staff commented:

> When I joined this research my perception changed towards the traditional students and I kind of started, I don’t want to use the term favouring but, I walk an extra mile for this other category – working and studying students, simply because when I joined this team I shared their experiences, I got to know more about them; when I find him with a retake I sympathise and I actually advise…I know what he goes through. (Participant 26, July 30, 2016).

An academic staff member who also heads a department supplemented with sharing an experience of improved administrative knowledge and skills, enabling better service provision to these students:

> When [name of researcher] started her work we used to share an office, we shared a lot of experiences and, there has been an influence of her work on the way I handle some of the administration issues for what we have been calling non-traditional students or learning and work students which I think is a more compassing definition….the interaction I have had with [name of researcher] has helped me to know how to handle such cases (Participant 16, July 30, 2016).

The discussions and exchanges during the project did not only impact on perceptions, attitudes and practices of university staff but also of the core subjects – the non-traditional students. As already pointed out in the previous chapters, students in Uganda who do not join university after high school are generally perceived as losers and failures in education (Openjuru, 2010) and within university, as intruders (see chapter 5). Consequently, at the beginning of the project many of them held negative perceptions about their participation in university education as entrants through the
less popular entry schemes of diploma and mature age. They lacked confidence, had low esteem, self-pity, and consequently, often hid their identity from fellow students and staff at the university who yet, are a great resource in their schooling project. By the end of the project however, some participants shared testimonies of change in attitudes and elevated feelings of pride about their identity status as non-traditional students:

Before I joined this research, my life was full of grumbling and lamenting because of being a non-traditional student having joined through the diploma entry scheme. I never wanted to mention this to anyone. I also did not like the course I was offering at the University and always thought joining university was a loss. But after joining this research, I count joining university as a gain because this research has really empowered me, my self-esteem has been boosted and now I can talk and share with friends about being an NTS and can also encourage those who have enrolled under the less popular entry schemes to feel proud about it because of the strengths we have from our varied life experiences. (Extract from the story “No more lamentations”, Innovation booklet)

Another NTS participant asserted:

I learnt from the process to reflect and appreciate my entire background as a non-traditional or learning and work student which actually made me proud, eventually I felt proud about myself. As much as there were challenges I learnt actually that it was for a purpose, probably I wouldn’t be where I am if I had not had that kind of trend. (Participant 2, July 30, 2016)

Many of the participants talked about becoming proud students as a result of participating in the project. Appreciating their identity has enabled them to promote combining studies and work as a good strategy for tapping into the needed experience for future job opportunities. One of the participants remarked:

I am now one of the people who encourage students not to spend the three years or the four or five doing only education…get something to do as you study because at the end of the three years you will apply for a job and people will be like experience. There is no school where the experience will be taught but you get experience through the different kinds of work you do, so I really encourage people to study as they also work (Participant 6, July 30, 2016)

The changes in attitudes and practice also extended to other actors and environments of interaction outside the university. During the project, one of the major challenges reported by non-traditional students who combined work and study was lack of
supportive policy environments at their workplaces, often forcing many of them to study ‘under cover’ (see chapters 3 and 6). However, by the end of the project some participants testified how the project had empowered them to act differently, i.e. to be change agents at their workplaces by opening up to their bosses about their studentship at university. Many of them attributed this courage to the inspirational stories of other participants of the project. One of the participants narrated:

Before the project:

I joined university when my employers did not know that I had actually enrolled…And I had no motive to tell them because I was really worried that if I told them that I am studying that would be the end of my job yet it was the one facilitating my tuition, so I kept quiet...

Speaking out:

When people gave their experiences and were telling us how they are coping up with their bosses to me it came direct that I should also inform my employers. I approached one of the bosses and told him…So when they discussed, they realised that they are actually sitting on many potentials. So at a later stage I was called and asked about it and I thought that maybe I was going to be sacked but they instead encouraged me so so much that in one of the meetings they brought it out and said ‘now we have discovered that some people are actually studying but you should inform us. And we have realised that actually you can do it even a little much better if you tell us and we understood your problems’…

The results:

After telling them that I am studying, they gave me that opportunity; ‘if you want to go for tests or exams just inform us’. And also it has helped me and others – they reduced the time for work; was actually 5:30 they had to reduce it to four o’clock so that the young people at the workplace could get the opportunity to enrol at university, so it helped me very much and I even got promoted at work! (Participant 13, July 30, 2016)

For some participants however, it was not easy to directly approach their bosses but the project, through its newsletter, provided an alternative means by which they could put their message across. For instance, one of the participants testified in the article she wrote for the newsletter under the title “Opening up about being a NTS: Nothing to lose, everything to gain”: 
I am so proud that my manager at work now knows who I am. It had never been easy for me to tell my bosses that I was studying. It only became possible when my manager found on my desk and read the first Issue of this newsletter. Wow! I am so happy he saw it for he got to know that quite a number of other students shared my plight and we needed support. He now appreciates that I am both his employee but also a student and is providing me the necessary support. This has made balancing work and study much easier. (Project Newsletter, Issue 2, May 2014).

From the employing organisations’ perspective there was also appreciation that the project had brought to light the need for them to recognise that combining work and study was the way to go and ought to be supported. Referring to the testimony of participant 13 above, one of the participants representing employing organisations corroborated:

Where I am working now we are encouraging our staff members…the (organisation) is aware that you are undertaking studies and you have to do it as part of your work…but because nobody was coming out to talk about it, even the students were always shy to talk about it, when he talked about it you see the results that came out. I think this gospel needs to come out even more loudly than it is currently because they need to know; this is the future, there has been a paradigm shift, we are not going back. (Employer, July 30, 2016)

**Guidance and counselling**

Sharing own story and experiences and listening to those of other participants during the project had a double effect i.e. both to the one telling the story and the one to whom the story was told, but also acted as a guidance and counselling tool towards changing the attitudes of the participants, thereby empowering them to move beyond looking at their situation as a problem to working around it for better results. A participant who was at the verge of dropping out because of taking a course that was imposed on her by the guardian testified:

In the December meeting we talked about many things but the counselling I got, more so from Sharon (one of the participants), because when we were discussing Sharon came up and was like ‘people stop lamenting, stop complaining, whether you entered in which way you have to push on’, so I got the courage to push on…So I was inspired by the stories of other people, what they have been going through, their testimonies are what encouraged me to push on, to fall in love with IT [Information Technology]. (Participant 1, March 14, 2015)
Another participant who had self-pity and reproach towards herself for being in possession of a ‘useless’ qualification testified how the guidance she received from the project changed her attitude and turned her employment search woes to history:

So in my wisdom, I thought my diploma papers were the ones causing me problems and as a measure I stopped including them on my job applications. But thanks to my participation in this research, my attitude changed and the results are great. Through the advice and guidance of the research participants, I have been able to obtain a job – a good paying job at that! Wherever I would come here these people would tell me ‘[name of participant] what you have is something nice...’ The first time I put back the [diploma] papers they called me. (Participant 13, April 25, 2015)

**Improved self-determination and empowerment**

Many other participants shared experiences where the project had provided them with guidance that benefited their decision making processes pertaining to different spheres of their lives. In addition, other participants shared acts of improved self-determination and empowerment as a result of participating in the project. This means that the project generated actionable knowledge that the participants could draw on to act differently to improve their lives and lay better strategies for the future. One of the participants shared in one of the submitted stories for the innovation booklet:

> I have heard from my fellow learning and work students’ stories, and have come to appreciate that some of us have really made it out of so many hardships. I feel empowered in the sense that I am able to think about my future, I feel that everything is possible once one focuses on what s/he wants; time has come when I feel I can do something greater within me, there is that driving force in me especially when I listened to the stories of Esther, Naome and Fidel; they relieved me of fear of facing the future. (Extract from the story “I feel empowered”, Innovation booklet)

Sometimes the acts of improved self-determination and empowerment culminated in tangible results to tell back home, as one of the drop-out participants testified in a submission made through an e-mail dated July 28, 2016:

> During my participation…various colleagues shared testimonies of what they actually went through and at the end of the day achieved greatness, this pushed me to desire for more…I had already tried going back to the university to pursue my degree program but I kept falling short every now and then, so I told myself if they have made it this far, I’ll surely make it as well…I had to re-apply for an undergraduate program to pursue this year and with God’s grace I managed to get government sponsorship. To be honest I had given up on going back to school, just to focus on my work, but because of this research I have been energised to seek greater horizons (Virtual participant, July 30, 2016).
Appreciation of participatory action research approach

For majority of the participants it was their first time to hear about action research and for all, to be engaged as participants in a collaborative research process. In evaluating the project they explicitly shared experiences that showed their appreciation of the PAR approach including indicative expressions on ownership of the research process and outcomes:

I think most of us have said it...we’ve owned it and [name of researcher] let us own it. So let’s own the research even if she is going away, we shouldn’t say it’s the end of it but let’s move on with it, let’s live it...Someone may really think you have a lot with you but in the actual sense you have that driving force; someone will not even know that you are not working, but the driving attitude that you have will make you move on. (Participant 1, July 25, 2015)

Another participant corroborated:

I think action research is the best or one of the best ways of doing research because it brings out the reality, not thinking for people what they may be thinking; because sometimes someone does a research which you can benefit from...just thinks about certain things and writes them down, when you read them they are saying you are a beneficiary of the research but you cannot connect to the outcomes so it brings out the reality of how you see people, how they understand what you want to do, how they can modify their needs and they also get motivated; they also know it is their thing it’s not someone’s thing. (Participant 5, July 30, 2016).

Other participants expressed it as ‘an excluded research approach’ at the university, yet the most appropriate for researching social problems in developing countries as it evokes innovativeness and creativeness towards solving the problem at hand by those living it:

For me it was my first time to hear about action research although we did a course unit research methodology, they never talked about action research. For me I think it’s the best research method, why? Because it brings out people’s ideas. I normally tell people that the problem with us here in the developing world is we are always looking for solutions from outside yet solutions can be obtained from within us. Very many people have good ideas, they are the ones who are experiencing the problems you want to solve but then you find people looking for solutions elsewhere. Action research exploits that area of problem solving; the stakeholders are the ones who bring the solutions, it forces the stakeholders to be innovative and creative (Participant 17, July 25, 2015).
**Personal reflections of and lessons learnt from the project**

*Insider position vs. opening communicative space*

This PAR project brought together different people who directly or indirectly have a stake in the schooling project of non-traditional students participating in university education. The project opened space for them to communicate and engage in conversations about their varied experiences of the social problem, enabling them to gain new experiences and knowledge to use in suggesting plausible ways and solutions towards solving it. However, the process of creating this communicative/conversational space was not as smooth as it tends to sound or appear in writing especially because of my insider position. At the start of the project, I sometimes felt conflicting tension in balancing my research and professional obligations and perspectives. Many of the participants perceived me more from my registry work position than the position of researcher. As already shared in cycle 1, it took me an extra dedicated effort and skill to overcome these challenges. Nevertheless, holding an insider position was sometimes helpful. For instance, because I understood the power structures within the university I could easily know when institutional politics were at play and when to ‘withdraw’ from antagonising situations and act objectively within the research ethical guidelines as an engaged outsider.

From the experiences gained out of this research, it is evident that the very nature of PAR research can easily facilitate tension and unwelcome perceptions, since it involves an empowering effect on the researched subjects and other participants (Boog, 2003). Those in power may feel threatened by the constant presence of the researcher and the reciprocal relationship that develops between the researcher and the research participants. In our case this was aggravated by the fact that generally PAR was not well known to the research constituency. It was new and perceived as a unique research approach to many. This necessitated us to rigorously open communicative spaces so that in-depth understandings of the approach could be gained. And indeed, once it became understood it was appreciated, resulting in great support to the project and its vast activities.

*High/conflicting expectations of co-researchers*

Just as the researcher and the researched subjects both have different interests concerning action research (Wilmsen, 2008) so are their expectations. These expectations are sometimes “overstretched expectations” (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008 p. 191). During the initial stages of the project I constantly had to deal with the question ‘what is in there for me?’ from some of the participants. To such participants, the project was perceived as a ‘saviour’ to their personal needs and challenges they had at the time. For instance, one of the dropout interviewees openly mentioned that he
expected the project to get him a scholarship to resume his studies. At some point during our conversation he expressed it as a pre-condition to his participation. Through applying the principles of informed consent and voluntary participation (Hennink et al., 2011), I had to vehemently explain the goals of the project and its ‘unfortunate’ inability to meet his expectation, so that there was nothing like forced participation. Accordingly, I asked to postpone the interview to allow him time to decide whether he was still willing to participate given that his expectation had not and would not be met. I did this because the success of a PAR project is dependent on the quality of the relationship and the mutual trust and commitment of those involved in the project (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Boog, 2007, 2008). The next day I received a call from the participant and we re-scheduled the interview. Accordingly, providing an understanding attitude (Angucia, et al., 2010) helped to build trust and thus a secure space for communication and participation.

In most cases the issue of ‘overstretched’ expectations is portrayed as a problem of only the participating researchers. However in my experience, I faced, especially in the first two years of the project, quite a lot of frustrations from my ‘unmet’ overstretched expectations of the researching participants. For instance, whenever we agreed on deadlines for submission of articles for the newsletter I often took it as fixed, and yet, for various reasons, many of the participants could hardly meet the set deadlines. It was only when I learnt to be patient and to develop an understanding and empathetic attitude towards their ‘already burdened lives’ that I appreciated their commitment and stopped being frustrated and worried about the ‘empty promises’. Instead of being frustrated I brought the issue to the table and together we discussed and agreed on possible supports that could aid improvement of the situation.

**Balancing the needs of research and practice systems**

Conducting a PAR project can be fun but at the same time challenging. In the course of the project there were both the high moments and the low moments. Such moments would be gaged from, e.g. the turn-up numbers and time of arrival for meetings, the moods of engagement during meetings, the level of activity on WhatsApp group, the response to writing articles for the newsletter or personal learning journals at the meetings, and e-mails. As a facilitator of the social learning process I was keen to reflect on the causes, especially of the low moments but also to observe how we came back to the high moments. For instance, during the third year of the project I observed that whenever I engaged the participants in ‘new’ activities or used ‘new’ approaches of engagement, there was renewed energy and enthusiasm. Accordingly, I concluded that to not take the participants for granted and keep things going, it was important for the project to give to both the research and practice systems, i.e. to be able to keep the
participants enthusiastic about working towards achieving the project goals it is important to balance the benefits of the project to both the research and practice systems so that there is ‘something in it’ for them as well. At the last workshop, participant two commented about his participation “...it was a two way; so besides [researcher] getting information I also learnt from the process.”

The ‘new’ activities involved, first, taking stock of the areas of interest of the participants which often featured in their narratives during sharing of experiences, and then, inviting external facilitators to engage with them more deeply to enable them to better understand the raised issues while also enriching the research system with new knowledge. I intentionally did this to allow the project to give back to its participants. The most common areas were: self-identity, education and career choices; self-employment/entrepreneurship. Through this process the participants were kept motivated and committed to the project’s goals, as one of the participants remarked: “[name of researcher] gave us a very big opportunity to meet up with people to motivate us...” At one of the meetings, the participants were challenged to consciously reflect on their identities and past choices and the decision making process towards those choices. At the next meeting one of the participants wrote in their journal:

…when you reflect about yourself and know what you are and who you are, you come to know your weaknesses and you come to know what your strengths are so that you know how to go forward…I realised that I didn’t have to keep sympathising with myself because of the burden you are carrying, I knew from that meeting that I need to work hard to take a step from where I am and move ahead; when you are getting weak you feel motivated and inspired to push on (Participant 5, March 14, 2015)

Using external facilitators also gave me an opportunity as a researcher to observe critically from a distance as an engaged outsider and at the same time as an insider-subject. We also used role play and personal learning journals as ‘new’ approaches to learning. At the evaluation of the role-play approach, the participants portrayed it as one that brought them closer to their realities: “I didn’t feel I was acting; it was a real way of getting out the experience that I have gone through”, consequently keeping them alive and interested in the project: “I should say, awakened and refreshed...I feel refreshed and it was really fun”. (Participants 13 and 15 respectively, June 24, 2015).

In addition to involving the participants in ‘new’ activities and ‘new’ approaches of learning, we also established that involving them in the various activities of the project also boosted their participation interest (see also Tukundane & Zeelen, 2015). For example, allowing them to chair group sessions at workshops, co-chair meetings
or contribute articles for the newsletter brought them closer to the research but at the same time enriched them at a personal level as one of the participants remarked:

I have been with [name of researcher] from the time she started coming to the field and I have learnt a lot from this project. I had trouble really understanding who I am…and when I rarely looked at who I am, I never documented anything. So when I started working with [name of researcher], and [researcher] said ‘[name of participant] can you write an article for our newsletter?’ It helped me to learn to put experiences on paper and it has been such a rich experience. This is something we rarely do because of the way we were brought up in Africa…I now know how to document experiences so it’s been really a good learning experience. (Participant 24, July 30, 2016)

The ‘new’ approaches and activities were very helpful, but when I reflect on the bigger picture of the project, there are things that I would do differently or improve if I had another chance. For instance, we concentrated more on the formal meetings and workshops and did not give much attention to the informal aspects that would probably bring in more fun and learning in a different way. We could, for example, have done a leisure activity together or visited some (action research) projects including those that bring to life the African perspectives on education and work. My co-researchers seemed to agree, as one of the participants highlighted:

Very many things went well [but] I think you only concentrated on research you forgot about how people get together; the university does it, that’s why they have tournaments, when freshers come they organise for freshers party, all that is to create solidarity. So what probably action research didn’t do is to create solidarity among the participants. When people are talking of networking, yes we have known each other but there was not that time of creating solidarity; may be organising for a boot camp for example. (Participant 9, July 30, 2016)

**Dealing with power relations**

This research project involved a range of stakeholders. In PAR projects, participants in powerful positions sometimes assume a high level of importance during discussions and when not well managed may end up dominating the discussions, frustrating and antagonising the real spirit of participation (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008), where participants should enter and engage as ‘equals’ in the established relationship (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Boog, 2007). Indeed, during the formal interactions with research participants, we observed some situations where some participants who perceived themselves ‘powerful’ did not only try to dominate the discussions but sometimes became defensive, leading to inflated emotions also among other
participants. It often took the efforts of good facilitation to amicably and appropriately handle those situations as corroborated by a participant at one of the validation workshops:

To [name of facilitator], thank you for being a good facilitator; I think you have done a good job because this thing, the topic sometimes became very sensitive but you were able to accommodate each one of us and also moderated us in the most appropriate way (Participant 1, May 24, 2014).

As a Ugandan citizen and an employee of the university where the research was conducted, I was aware of the socio-cultural power structures and the likely (imbalanced) power relations among different stakeholder groups and between actors. Being aware of these contextual dynamics also helped us to successfully manage the complicated situations of power ‘pulls’, because in the preparatory stage of the project we had carried out a methodical stakeholder analysis of the power relations between the different stakeholder groups and the socio-cultural context within which the research was situated. As Van der Linden & Zeelen (2008) recommend, we found this a good way of demystifying the power problem inherent in action research. This analysis is what prompted us to specifically arrange safe spaces for the ‘less’ powerful whenever we suspected a likely foul hand. This was especially so in the earlier stages of the project but with time the ‘powerful’ came to appreciate the ‘less’ powerful who in the due course had also understood their position, role and importance in the project.

**Half/full action research cycle**

As already pointed out above, conducting an action research can be fun but sometimes a hell of a job. From my experiences of this project, it proved difficult to conduct a complete action project where all the developed or proposed solutions get implemented and evaluated within the set project time frame. This experience is shared by other researchers (e.g. Boog et al., 2008; Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008; Angucia, 2010; Angucia et al., 2010). Reflecting on our project experience, one of the participants with expertise in action research commented:

> It was a very good example of an action research but of course it has also brought out the dilemma of action research as a methodology for a PhD qualification because, for a PhD qualification you must terminate it at some point, yet for action research, by the time you are going towards the end there are so many new exciting options that we need to follow and that is where we are… (Participant 21, July 30, 2016)

Some of the proposed solutions in our project were implemented and others also evaluated, with exception of the innovation booklet, which was neither implemented
nor evaluated. Although we are happy that a plausible solution has been developed, sometimes when I reflect (probably this also applies to my co-researchers) on the tedious process of its development yet without ‘concrete’ results at the end of the project, I get feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, I get comforted by knowing that the pending lot can be developed into opportunities for further research where I could contribute to building research capacity through working with ‘my’ research participants as lead researchers, which itself satisfies the cyclical nature of action research. I made the following reflex commentary at the final workshop:

I think somewhere you find yourself caught in between; very many interesting things are coming out but I must somehow close in and submit this work, but there are opportunities for further research, those of you who would want to take it on further, why not? Let’s work together.

I am also comforted by knowing that the project instituted mechanisms for follow up and also has in place clear-cut planned post-project activities. For instance, after the public defence of the research thesis, I shall convene a conference to disseminate the findings of the whole project to the community of Makerere University, including the innovation booklet. We shall also deliberate on issues of what other universities can make out of the project and how they can make the project outcomes relevant in their context if need be.

The role of the feedback committee
The feedback committee, which comprised of volunteer representatives of different stakeholder groups, played a crucial role in the planning and implementation of the project. It played three major roles: thinking and planning with the academic researchers in setting the agenda for the research; receiving and discussing reports of different activities of the project, giving feedback and determining the next steps of the project; and identifying gaps and prioritising more pressing and deserving issues for appropriate action, including, overseeing implementation of proposed solutions. From these roles, it is evident that the committee was an important element in all the cycles of the project.

Through these roles, it did not only keep the project accountable to both the research and practice systems but also kept our (academic researchers) ‘power’ to influence the direction of the research under check, since important decisions of the project were also “influenced by the ideas of the participants” (Angucia et al., 2010 p. 224). As academic researchers we were obligated to present plans of our intended actions and reports of our executed activities to the committee for further deliberation, guidance (dis)approval, reflection and re-planning for the next steps. Through its sub-
committees, it also played a key role in the implementation of the project innovations (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008) and remains crucial in supporting follow up and sustainability activities beyond the project.

5. **Further development of action research**

In this section I draw from the knowledge and experiences obtained from our project to contribute to the methodology of action research. At the end of section 2 of this chapter we set three questions to which we now return:

1. In consideration of the eminent role of power relations in PAR, what was the role of co-researchers in the learning process and in what ways and forms did participation take place?
2. What is the extent of ownership and sustainability of the proposed solutions and the role of the researcher in this process?
3. What can we learn from the research project in terms of new knowledge and its applicability in wider contexts?

As a way of enriching the discussions, I supplement the original questions with several relevant sub-questions to trigger profound thinking among action researchers at different stages of research.

**Participation, power and the role of co-researchers**

Van der Linden & Zeelen (2008, p. 195) concluded: “Real involvement of the people who are supposed to benefit means investing in the creation of conversation space and in the invention of strategies relating to power issues”. Creating communicative space in the initial stages of the research project is indeed very important. On the one hand, it provides a foundation for the joint learning cycles in the subsequent stages of the project, and on the other hand, “creates the potential for greater commitment and participation on the part of all actors involved” (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013 p. 203). Brydon-Miller (1997, p. 661) argues that “the success of any PAR depends on the mutual trust and commitment held by all participants” and this relationship can only be nurtured through a joint effort where all co-researchers “together take responsibility for the design of the research, data collection, data analysis, and the development and implementation of change plans”. This makes it necessary to establish feedback mechanisms to not only enable accountability but also foster interface and social learning between the research and practice systems to avoid situations where many researchers come and disappear, leaving behind empty promises (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008 p.189) or what Bergold & Thomas (2012) term pseudo participation or manipulation and token participation (Wilmsen, 2008; see also Arnstein, 1969).
Subjectively judging ourselves, we might have succeeded in establishing a ‘good’ relationship with our participating researchers which is “crucial for the success of action research as an emancipating and empowering activity” (Boog, 2003 p.426), but this is not enough. We ought to go beyond the surface of opening of communicative space to understanding the dynamics (e.g. the power relations) involved in establishing a sensible dialogue with and among the different actors of the project and how to translate this dialogue into meaningful participation. In other words, how validly or reliably can we judge the quality of the established relationship in relation to the espoused goals of the project? Accordingly, it becomes important to ask such questions as: when we talk of participation of the beneficiaries what do we actually mean? Is it, for instance, just about inviting people for workshops? How do we ensure that they get practically, actively and actionably involved in the process of knowledge production and making important decisions for the project? Or are the participants only ‘co-researchers’ in responding to interviews and surveys and attending meetings? What is there to show that the academic researchers and the participating researchers worked together as partners of ‘equal’ importance in the research process?

In our project, participating researchers were involved in making important decisions of the project. This was possible through the influence of established mechanisms such as the feedback committee and its sub-committees and workshops where the participants took actionable roles throughout the project. To substantiate on how we fulfilled the participating researchers’ role of co-researcher, we involved them in methods of data collection, e.g. piloting, distributing, collecting, and in other stages of the research process, such as data validation and gaps identification for further research, thereby enriching the analyses of the findings. We also gave them other roles such as facilitating workshops and co-chairing meetings. These engagements, structures and processes controlled our ‘power’ as academic researchers to influence the direction of the research. This means that the participants did not stop at just being invited for workshops as though they were ‘a blank slate’ but were actively engaged participants who brought in great experiences and expertise prior to, during and after meetings and generally in the project as a whole.

Also, some of the learning approaches used in the project, e.g. role play, sharing of personal stories, writing personal learning journals and articles for the newsletter, led to the development of such skills as team work, reporting and writing and built the confidence of the participants. Subsequently, they gained control over both the research process and outcomes, creating potential for improving their situation in the future. In multi-stakeholder action research projects it might be necessary to engage
different stakeholder groups in different ways and degrees of participation. In our case, the nature and objectives of the project necessitated that we let the primary participating researchers gain a higher degree of participation, reciprocity, mutual learning and action involvement than the participants in other stakeholder categories. But, on the whole, participation in our project was neither manipulation nor tokenism (Wilmsen, 2008) but lay between or shared features of the rungs of partnership, delegated power and citizen control (Arnstein, 1969).

The issue of participation is closely related to the issue of power (Boog et al., 2008; Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008; Wilmsen, 2008) and as such it is important for researchers to understand the terrain of power relations between the different actors involved and how this might affect participation. In our project we did a methodical stakeholder analysis in the earlier stages of the project. We found this helpful in the later stages. My knowledge of the socio-cultural context of the Ugandan society and the power structures in Makerere also helped us in managing precarious situations. Because of this knowledge we were also able to secure the much needed safe spaces for the ‘less’ power privileged participants, thereby enabling them to also gain meaningful participation since they were accorded an opportunity to articulate issues without fear of jeopardising their relationships in the university. Important to note also is that, in some situations, participation may be hampered by the perceptions participants hold against the researcher. In our case my insider position presented itself as a potential challenge to participation at the beginning of the project. More so, it presented some ethical dilemmas in the selection and recruitment process of the participants. In both cases I had to intentionally invest in skills and strategies of change in attitudes so as to avoid scenarios of coerced participation.

Ownership, sustainability and the role of the academic researcher

Just like participation, action is deniably an important aspect of PAR and many such research projects, like ours, generate practical and actionable knowledge towards creating plausible solutions for social problems. Some of the proposed solutions may not be implemented in the course of the project, while others may be implemented quite successfully and bear great potential for success even beyond the project (e.g. in our case, the students orientation and association). For others, implementation may be difficult from the onset with little or no hope of sustainability in the long run (e.g. the project newsletter). This puts the envisaged social change at risk, prompting one to ask: Where does the problem lie? Does it lie in (inappropriateness of) the proposed solutions themselves or in the failure to appreciate the context needs, the power structures and the existing power relations between the parties that proposed the
solutions and other important actors involved in the implementation process? Accordingly, it may be interesting to also reflect on who in the first place initiates the proposed solutions and how the process of development and enactment of the same is done, i.e. the issue of ownership of the research process and subsequently of the research outcomes and their possible sustainability beyond the project. The how question challenges us to also reflect on the role of the academic researcher(s) in the research process including “securing of a proper follow up” (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008 p.189). Is the facilitator role sufficient or does it need supplementing, with what and by whom?

In our project we found the issue of ownership to be very important for not only the impact it has on sustainability of the research outcomes but also for the potential influence it holds for the participants’ motivation to ‘keep going’ for the project, i.e. for the social learning process. When scripts for action are initiated by the beneficiaries or seen as relevant to their needs they partake in development, implementation and evaluation of those scripts with great interest and enthusiasm giving hope for sustainability, and vice-versa. For instance, I judge our ‘failure’ to sustain the project newsletter on two fronts: at the initiation stage, it was more oriented to the research system needs but also the requirement to write articles did not seem to rhyme with the participants needs and attitudes towards writing. I also underscore the importance of ownership of the research process especially in situations where a full cycle of action research is not completed within the project period. We did not complete the full cycle for some of the proposed solutions, but because there was satisfactory involvement of the participating researchers in the development process of the proposed solutions, there is already indication of success for the already implemented solutions and great potential for sustaining the ‘pending’ solutions into the future. It is the empowerment derived from the mutual learning process that ignited the participants’ self-determination (Boog, 2007) to make a difference not only in their lives but also in the lives of other learning and work students. The take-over/ownership of the orientation activity by the beneficiaries is testimony of this relationship. But what ought to be the role of the academic researchers in this process?

Van der Linden and Zeelen (2008) advise action researchers to progressively switch to appropriate roles during the research process and to create communities of practice involving different stakeholders of the project. We established that sharing the facilitator role with the research participants and experts from outside the researching participants groups enriches both the research and practice systems. In our facilitator role we worked with different stakeholder groups to come up with scripts for action.
However, most of the action scripts were largely developed by the primary participating researchers. This normally would have a great potential to affect implementation negatively. What has neutralised this effect is the involvement of the participating researchers in the other stages, i.e. the initiation, validation, implementation and evaluation and in the planning, and the implementation structures of the project. In our project, representation of different groups of the participating researchers on the feedback committee and their involvement in other project activities kept the ownership spirit alive.

Establishing of the feedback committee with representatives from all stakeholder groups including policy makers from the start and throughout the research process thus promises a secure environment and potential opportunity to safeguard the implementation of the research outcomes. Moreover, some of the members on the feedback committee became our allies in manoeuvring the power structures when the need arose, thereby enabling us switch to the change agent role. It is this role that we are backing for follow-up activities such as the registration of the students association in the university and operationalisation of the innovation booklet into practice. At the dissemination conference, the innovation booklet and the policy briefs will be launched and distributed to different stakeholders including other universities where the research findings are most likely applicable.

*New knowledge and its applicability in wider contexts*

In this section I address the position and role of theory in action research, i.e. what kind of new knowledge did the research produce and what are the possibilities for its application in other contexts or what Boog (2008 p. 227) terms “exemplarian generalization” by other actors in different but similar situations? This aspect turns the role of the researcher from that of facilitator and change agent to that of an academic (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008) in which he or she ought to do a scientific validation of the new knowledge and share it with the academic fraternity for improvement of research practice.

This project produced both practical and actionable knowledge which the beneficiaries have already used and will continue to use to improve the participation situation of learning and work students in universities in Uganda and other developing contexts. From the preceding section there are indications that we managed to achieve certain levels of sustainability and there is also potential for the research results and outcomes to be relevant in other settings such as universities and employing organisations. However, when I reflect on the learning process through which this
knowledge was produced, I fathom that there are things we could have done better. For instance, although we used expressive tools such as role play to aid learning, it was not done on a large scale. We ought to have explored more provocative ways of doing things together so as to give room to self-discovery and mind-set change.

Second, to a large extent the learning process was influenced by the formal setting with less importance assigned to the role of the informal. Although sharing of experiences was good, there was ‘too much’ talking and this made us miss out on the fun and solidarity that builds through informal settings. We ought to have given considerable time to the informal ways of learning, e.g. visiting other (action research) projects that portray inspiring learning trajectories or engaging in some leisure activities such as football, jogging etcetera. But as they say and we know, learning is continuous so we hope that other researchers join us in taking these shortcomings as learning experiences to do better in the next projects.

Third, the project demonstrated the importance of social/collective learning as a supporting tool for social change. Yet the capability approach which has provided the theoretical foundations for the present study, tends to promote individual agency relatively more than collective/social agency (Sen, 2001). Accordingly, for the collective-oriented cultures, such as Uganda where the present study was conducted (see chapter 3), it becomes important that, in future researches, there are efforts to also consider social theories that strongly connect individual agency and social learning e.g. the works of Freire (1970/1996). In lieu of this, Dean (2009) calls the capability approach “a liberal-individualist approach [whose] priority is individual liberty, not social solidarity; the freedom to choose, not the need to belong” (p. 267). His argument is that “a social being cannot wholly be free from others because the terms on which she belongs within a family, a community or a society will matter as much as her freedom to do or to be” (p. 268). Deneulin & McGregor (2010) add that the capability approach as advanced by Sen ought to go beyond “the telos of ‘living well’ to the telos of ‘living well together’” (p. 503). For further insights into the scholarly debates on this and other pitfalls of the capability approach see Nussbaum, 2000; Gasper, 2002; Clark, 2005; Deneulin, 2008; Dean, 2009; Deneulin & McGregor, 2010.