Summary

This study, having been motivated by my personal work experiences in the students’ registry service at Makerere university, was conducted within the theme of widening access and participation under the larger banner of lifelong learning. It is premised on the perception that participation is more than just opening/widening access, especially for students who prior to liberalisation of higher education had been excluded (diploma holders) or underrepresented (mature age) in university education. In comparison to students who gain admission to university through mainstream direct entry route, both diploma holders and mature age students in Uganda join university through unpopular alternative entry routes of diploma and mature age. As such, in this study both categories of students are given an identity name Non-Traditional Students (NTS).

The main argument of the thesis is that in this day and age when higher education has been transformed from the monopoly of the elite to the right of the masses, it is important that higher education institutions such as universities rethink both the way they serve the changed/diversified student populations and their position and purpose in development, as well as in relation to other forms of education. Working with university actors such as students, lecturers, administrators and managers and other relevant stakeholders outside the university such as employers and education sector policy makers, I tried to examine what it means to talk of participation in university education for non-conventional university students. Accordingly, the study focused, on the one hand, on understanding the experiences and participation needs of NTS, i.e. the response of universities to meet their needs, and on the other hand, on enabling such students achieve meaningful participation, i.e. promoting their agency to cause social change in the way they participate in university education.

The research question that guided this study is: What are the experiences and participation needs of non-traditional students in university education and how can they be supported to attain meaningful participation? To answer this question, the following specific objectives were set to guide the study:

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

The first five objectives above provide an interpretation of the meaning of participation for university non-traditional students in developing contexts such as Uganda, and together answer the first part of the research question: *What are the experiences and participation needs of non-traditional students in university education?* These objectives were met through five sub-studies presented in the thesis in form of academic papers, either published (chapters 3, 4, and 6) or submitted under review (chapters 5 and 7), with a connected rhythm to the notion of meaningful participation but also with flexibility to be read as standalone papers. The rest of the chapters are written and presented in the format of conventional book chapters. Chapter 1 provides a general introduction, chapter 2 provides background information to the study, chapter 8 (aligned to objective 6 and to answer the last part of the research question) provides insights into the research process and its outcomes, and chapter 9 provides the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

Chapter 1 sets the scene on the topical social relevance of the study, the research problem, the conceptual and theoretical orientations, the research question and objectives, the research methodology and the thesis organisation and preview. The chapter provides insights into the position and role of education in development (Harber, 2004; Kanyandago, 2010; Branson, Garlick, Lam & Leibbrandt, 2012; UNESCO, 2014) as well as the pitfalls of the past education frameworks on education (UNESCO, 2005, 2008; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2013) and the hope that sustainable development goal four (SDG4) of the new development agenda holds for education and lifelong learning practice in developing countries (Regmi, 2015; United Nations, 2015, Van der Linden, 2016). An understanding of the concept non-traditional students (NTS) is explored first at international level (Bean & Metnezer, 1985; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Schuetze & Slowey, 2000, 2002) and later at the study context level. Against this understanding the variant meanings of the important concepts for this study – lifelong learning (Van der Kamp, 2004; Banks et al., 2007; Jarvis, 2007) and (widening) access/participation (Boud, 2004; Osborne & Gallacher, 2004; Riddell, Edward, Boeren & Weedon, 2013) – are explored in relation to the challenges facing higher education due to globalisation and its policies such as liberalisation of higher
education. The debates around these concepts and how higher education institutions should respond to the new challenges lead to a discussion on suitable theoretical approaches (Schultz, 1963; Becker, 1964; Sen, 1997, 2000, 2001; Robeyns, 2006; Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008; Walker, 2010; Barros, 2012) for understanding the different purposes of education and elucidating the participation realities of NTS in developing contexts. Also, in this chapter a justification of the research approach used in the study and its sub-studies is made, as well as highlights of the research process through which interventions for improving lifelong learning opportunities for NTS are suggested.

As the title Contextualisation of the Study suggests, chapter 2 provides background information on the organisation and state of the art of education provision in two important contexts – Uganda and Makerere University – where the study was conducted. For the Uganda context, focus is on two areas: the general education system including the position and status of university education; and the state of the art of higher education in general (NCHE, 2014; MoES, 2015). For the Makerere University context, description is made of both the historical developments and the current dynamics at the country’s oldest and largest university (Musaazi, 1986; Mayanja, 1998; Court, 1999; Musisi & Muwanga, 2003; Mamdani, 2007). As a further means of putting the study into context, the chapter also discusses some reflections on the changing roles/purposes of higher education as a result of changes at the global level (Bok, 2003; Altbach, 2004; Jarvis, 2007; Mamdani, 2007; Castells, 2009; Zeelen, 2012). Gaining insights into these contexts provides the lenses through which the reader can make meaning of the findings in the succeeding chapters, including the systemic problems of the education system in Uganda which I come back to in the last chapter of the thesis.

Chapter 3 – Conceptualisation of Meaningful Participation – is included in the thesis through a published article. Its underlying argument, which also feeds into the core argument of the thesis mentioned earlier, is that to be able to do justice (understand and enable attainment of meaningful participation) to the participation question of NTS in university education, there is need to first understand and (re)construct the meaning of the concept participation. This sub-study therefore addresses the question “Is participation a phenomenon or a process?” However, to be able to successfully answer this question it is important to first understand the socio-cultural context within which the participation decisions are made (see objective 1). Consequently, we draw from, and critique, the participation model of Schuetze and Slowey (SSM), which was developed to guide the participation discourse of non-traditional students in developed countries (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000), to provide
directions on both the conceptual model and theoretical approach that most suit the participation needs of NTS in a developing context (Tumuheki, Zeelen & Openjuru, 2016a). By doing so, the sub-study provides justification for expanding the conceptual understanding of participation beyond gaining access and improving conditions within educational institutions to include also the students’ motivations, the social aspects of the environments where students live and work, and the labour market perspectives and experiences of non-traditional graduates. These aspects constitute the important ingredients for meaningful participation.

Subsequently, chapter 4 – Motivations for Participation – which is also presented as a published article, explains one of the identified ingredients considered important for inclusion within the meaning of participation, i.e. the motivations for which non-traditional students seek to participate in university education (see objective 2). The thesis here is that there are always underlying reasons for undertaking any life project (Giddens, 1991; Touraine, 2000) and unless those reasons are well understood it is difficult to judge the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of that undertaking. The African context regarding motivations for higher education (Mbiti, 1975, 1989, 1990; Lekoko & Modise, 2011; Preece, 2013) and its purpose (Sawyerr, 2004; Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Preece, Ntseane, Modise & Osborne, 2012) provides the conceptual analysis for this sub-study. The rest of the discussions are made in consideration of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Swain & Hammond, 2011) that make up the life world with which NTS confront their participation in university education (Tumuheki, Zeelen & Openjuru, 2016b).

Having explored the nature of the motivations for which participation in university education is sought, chapter 5 explores the seemingly obvious ingredient for meaningful participation – the policy and practice environment available for non-traditional students at university (see objective 3). This chapter – Participation and the Inside-of-Institution Environment – is presented through a sub-study which addresses the question “How have the traditionally organised universities such as Makerere University responded to meeting the diverse needs of their changing student populations?” The conceptual analysis draws from the feminist approaches to equality and difference (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; Fraser, 2000) to discuss three discourses of integration and exclusion in relation to social policy provision for NTS. Since the sub-study seeks to understand the policy and practice provisions of the university in response to the diverse needs of the changing student population, the presentation of the findings is organised along three major themes which emerge from the analysis of the data on the inside-of-institution environment: provision of and
access to services and facilities, interaction with staff, and interaction with fellow students.

However, given the multiple identities and obligations NTS have to meet in addition to study, it is not enough to only understand or improve the inside-of-the-institution environment without understanding the participation needs that emanate from the environments where non-traditional students live and work and how these impact on their positioning and functioning within institutions of learning (see objective 4). Accordingly, chapter 6 – Participation and the Out-of-Institution Environments – is discussed in detail through a sub-study. This sub-study draws from Donaldson and Graham’s model of college outcomes for adults (Donaldson & Graham, 1999), to discuss the out-of-institution experiences of NTS participating in university education in Uganda. The paper mainly focuses on the social settings of work, family and community, including the roles NTS play in these settings and individual relationships NTS have with important people around them (Tumuheki, Zeelen & Openjuru, 2016c).

Chapter 7 – Participation and Post-Institution Environments – presents the last of the sub-studies constituting the ingredients of meaningful participation. Since students’ motivations to undertake a higher qualification are connected to a range of anticipated rewards or benefits (Kember, Hong & Ho, 2008; Swain & Hammond, 2011; Tumuheki, Zeelen & Openjuru, 2016a, 2016b), it is important that the concept of participation is expanded to also include their labour market experiences and benefits of obtaining a university degree (see objective 5). The two constitute the end-ingredients on the continuum of meaningful participation for this study. This chapter is presented through a sub-study that draws on Bourdieu’s notion of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Swain & Hammond, 2011) and the discourses underlying the contemporary graduate labour market (Meijers & Wijers, 1998; Nafukho, 1998; Walters, 2004; Minnis, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Jarvis, 2007; Olaniyi & Okemakinde, 2008; Nuwagaba, 2012; UNESCO, 2012; Ponge, 2013) to investigate the benefits of obtaining a university degree and the labour market experiences of non-traditional graduates.

Having gained insights into the experiences and participation needs of non-traditional students in these five chapters (3, 4, 5, 6, and 7), the focus of the thesis shifts to answering the last part of the research question: and how can they be supported to attain meaningful participation? (see objective 6). This is explored in chapter 8 – The Action Research Process and its Outcomes – which in addition to meeting objective 6 of the study, also elaborates the research process that guided the
conduct of the sub-studies of the previous empirical chapters. The pragmatic aspect provides for the practical outcomes associated with the participatory action research approach (PAR) (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008; Boog, Slagter and Zeelen, 2008). The research process is presented in form of three interconnected cycles of action and reflection through which different actors engage to achieve the research objectives. From the perspectives of both the practice and research systems, this chapter also presents the learning experiences and reflections of both the academic researcher(s) and the participating researchers, and the lessons from which to contribute to further development of action research.

Chapter 9 – Conclusions, Discussion and Recommendations – brings together the study story and its harvests. It provides reflections on the research question and study objectives while highlighting the major findings of the empirical chapters. In addition to presenting the way forward, including areas for further research and reflections on the systemic problems of the education system in Uganda, it makes general recommendations for improving lifelong learning opportunities of students who combine work and study, subsequently also contributing to the realisation of the enabling aspect of the study. These recommendations are arrived at from reflections made on those findings of the study that seem to provide a specific perspective on the challenges of lifelong learning practice in higher education in Uganda. This forms the basis of the main title of the study – Lifelong Learning in Practice.