University of Southern Queensland

Faculty of Arts
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University Journeys:
Alternative Entry Students and their Construction of a Means of Succeeding in an Unfamiliar University Culture

A Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

This research study takes a multi-disciplinary perspective, using critical discourse theory, transactional communication theory and cross-cultural theory to contribute insight into the experiences of alternative entry students as they strive to access and participate in higher education. The study seeks to determine how these students learn to persevere: how they construct their means of succeeding in the university culture. The methodological structure of the research comprises a collective case study design, encompassing critical ethnography, action research and reflexive approaches to guide a deeper understanding of the experiences of studying at a regional Australian university. The reflexive nature of the research facilitated the development of an original theoretical construct, the 'deficit-discourse' shift, which challenges higher education policy and practice, in particular, in relation to academics' roles in making their discourses explicit and in collaborating with students to facilitate students' perseverance and success. The research has also generated two models: the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success at University*. The *Framework* re-conceptualises the university as a dynamic culture made up of a multiplicity of sub-cultures, each with its own literacy or discourse. The *Framework* recasts the first year experience as a journey, with students' transition re-conceptualised as the processes of gaining familiarity with and negotiating these new literacies and discourses whereas perseverance is viewed as the processes of mastering and demonstrating them. The M*odel* provides a three step practical strategy (incorporating reflective practice, socio-cultural practice and critical practice) for achieving this engagement: for empowering students to negotiate, master and demonstrate their mastery of the university culture's multiple discourses. Together, the two models provide students with a means of succeeding in the new university culture.

Certification of Thesis

I certify that the ideas, work, results, analyses, interpretations and conclusions reported in this thesis are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been submitted for any other awards, except where otherwise acknowledged.

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Signature of Candidate   Date

Endorsement

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Signature of Supervisor   Date

Acknowledgements

My journey into the postgraduate research culture paralleled that of the participants. I too navigated a landscape filled with unfamiliar literacies and discourses that I needed to master and demonstrate if I was to persevere and succeed. These literacies and discourses included research approaches, methods and techniques; communication technologies; library and information literacies; literature review discourses; article and conference paper literacies; and conference networking and presentation discourses. I too experienced culture shocks and life/work/study/family collisions. Seven years of part-time study/full-time work is a long time – children grow to become adolescents and work conditions change as the economic rationalist imperatives bite hard, eating, at times, into workplace, government and community tolerances and generosity.

I, too, as my own journey progressed, employed the success practices. In fact, if I had not employed these practices I would not now be writing these acknowledgements. I reflected, for example, on my practices as teacher, counselor, researcher, student, parent, partner, friend, and daughter. I also reflected as I walked with our dog (first Bear and then Hendrix) each evening, balancing study, work and stress.

I too sought help and information. My heart-felt thank you is extended to:

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This thesis represents my post-graduate journey. I would not have been able to persevere without the help and support of everyone acknowledged here.

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Introduction: Changes and Challenges

1.1 Background to the Study

1.1.1 Changes in the Global Contexts of Higher Education

Since the 1980s Higher Education (HE) has been challenged by significant and continuing change. The literature mapping these changes and specifying the ensuing challenges is growing worldwide. Taking a global stance, Professor Denis Ralph (2002), from the Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development at The University of Adelaide, argues that these changes emanate from a number of sources: (a) from the emergent knowledge economy, with its continuous production, application, dispersion and management of explicit and tacit knowledge; (b) from the forces of globalisation; (c) from the deregulation of financial and commodity markets; (d) from the information and communications revolution; and (e) from the increasing pace of technological change. Ralph maintains that the growing economic, social, ecological, spiritual, educational and political challenges facing 'the citizens of the world wherever they might live, require a range of profound responses from us all' (p.1). These responses, Ralph suggests, stem from the cultural changes relating to new developments in lifelong and life-wide learning, which he views as constituting clear imperatives for the new century.

Schuetze and Slowey (2000), similarly taking a global perspective, also analyse the dramatic social and cultural changes taking place in HE. In contrast to Ralph, Schuetze and Slowey (2000) argue that the changes emanate from the increasing demand for HE and are based on two elements. The first element stems from the structural and informational changes taking place in economic and social systems; changes which are increasingly grounded in scientific and technological knowledge and which are widely perceived as requiring a better-qualified workforce (p.3). The second element is the growing acceptance of the principle that education, especially HE, should no longer be confined to the young but needs to be spread over the lifetime of individuals. The demands for HE are further fuelled by a continuing focus on issues of access to and equity within HE, both from a policy perspective and as a response to pressure from social movements. Schuetze and Slowey (2000) propose that, as a consequence, two key concepts, lifelong learning and non-traditional students, emerge to dominate the academic, policy and popular debates on HE internationally.

The changing social, structural, economic, informational and cultural contexts are affecting the learning and literacy practices of modern HE institutions. A special issue of the *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics Journal* (*ARAL*) reviews the consequences of the 'extensive changes to the face of tertiary education in the western world' (Baldauf & Golebiowski 2002, p.1). These changes include the massification of HE, the complex mix of technological advances, multiculturalism and commercialism. Absalom and Golebiowski (2002, p.5) nominate the three most important agents of HE change as economic rationalism, multiculturalism and computerisation. Baldauf and Golebiowski (2002, p.1), meanwhile, connect the transformations in the contexts of tertiary literacy to the socio-cultural and organisational changes within universities as well as 'new workplace' requirements. The challenges the journal's editors regard as critical include a diversified intake of students, the move towards a culture of lifelong learning, the introduction of new electronic forms of discourse, and the escalation of new knowledges and changing disciplinary boundaries (Baldauf & Golebiowski 2002, p.2). Baldauf and Golebiowski (2002, p.1) argue that the globalisation of tertiary education needs to be 'pedagogically acknowledged through a negotiated cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogue, reflecting new complexities and allowing space for new diversities, including those related to literacy'.

1.1.2 Changes in the Australian University Sector

In Australia the operating environments of HE[1] have also been subject to considerable changes over the past two decades. According to the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Professor William Lovegrove (2003), the impetus for these changes includes a number of incentives: the expanded goals and expectations for HE; the drive for autonomy with accountability; the increased influence of stakeholders; internationalisation and globalisation; the increased relevance of and demand for HE and decreases in government funding leading to the need for increased diversity of funding; increased competition, both local and global; changing markets; and new technologies shaping education. Lovegrove (2003) also identifies a range of contributing factors, including: (a) increasing student diversity; (b) a student body with a widening range of educational aims and expectations; (c) changing student enrolment patterns, (d) increasing financial pressures on students; (e) changes in the nature and mix of courses; (f) dramatic increases in knowledge

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[1] In Australia, 'higher education' pertains to both universities and Institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). In this study, however, the term 'higher education' is construed as being both analogous to and synonymous with the university sector.

generation; (g) radical changes in the nature of work; and (h) a changed social and cultural climate in Australian society. The Nelson reforms (2003) add further pressure for change in Australian universities with (a) their potential for exacerbating funding difficulties (due to the lack of indexation on government investment), (b) their threats to autonomy (such as discipline mixes being set centrally and an Institutional Assessment Framework) and (c) moves that may be counterproductive to diversity (increasing course costs for students).

The changes are epitomised by the two major shifts that occurred in the latter decades of the twentieth century – the 'elite-mass' and the 'investment-cost' paradigm shifts. Both shifts irrevocably changed the nature and purposes of HE. The first shift widened the participation and diversity of the student body. The second redefined the parameters of responsibility for educational participation. The 'elite-mass' shift represents the dramatic increases in university participation rates, commencing in the 1980s, whereas the 'investment-cost' shift depicts the changes in Federal government policies and funding arrangements since the late 1980s. These funding changes have, in particular, stemmed from the increasingly economic-rationalist policy platform of the federal Coalition government; changes that have progressively shifted the responsibility for HE expenditure from public to private funding (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs [DETYA] 1999).

Australian universities, their staff and students, located at the convergence of these economic, political, cultural, social and information changes, are exhibiting symptoms of stress. The stress is palatable, for example, in the discourses and rhetoric of the major stakeholders. It is manifested at the federal government level (for instance, the Government Review of Higher Education (2003) and a series of Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) reform discussion papers)[2], in the media (see the weekly 'Higher Education Supplement' in the *Australian* newspaper) and in the academic community (Cain & Hewitt 2004; Coady 2000; Reid 1996). Of concern are issues related to the ideals and values embodied in universities and the purposes universities are seen to have served, are currently pressured to serve, and, as it is theorised by many, should serve. Horsfield (1998, p.84) maintains that the university can be understood to be 'continually reorienting itself to perceived new

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[2]These discussion papers include:
Imperatives and Principles for Policy Reform in Australian Higher Education, 2000, Group of Eight Discussion Paper, Canberra, <http://www.go8.edu.au/papers/2000.08.30.html>
Backing Australia's Ability: An Innovation Action Plan For The Future, 2001 Commonwealth Government, <http://backingaus.innovation.gov.au>

environments and discourses, while attempting to control or influence the discursive languages that are used to determine its identity and future directions'.

The elite-mass and investment-cost shifts have merged to impact on university policies and practices. Questions about completion, retention and attrition rates of the student population and about the consequences of these rates in the context of decreasing university funding have become pivotal. The shifts' significance for university endeavour is being reflected both in the literature (for example Kantanis 2001 and 2002; Krause 2001; Martinez & Munday 1998; McInnis, James & Hartley 2000; Pargetter 2000) and in a series of conferences (in particular the annual Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conferences held since 1995). This research has promoted the profile of the first year experience (FYE) and the role of transition.

The shifts have also affected academics. There has been a decrease in staffing levels, with the proportion of full-time university teaching staff in Australia declining from 83.6% in 1988 to 76.3% in 1998, and a corresponding increase in the casualisation of academic staff, particularly for staff undertaking teaching only (DETYA 1999). These developments signal the move away from the more traditional mix of research and teaching, reflecting the changes in academics' roles. There are also the tensions between traditional scholarly ideals and corporate, business practices, which affect academics' pedagogical decisions (Cain & Hewitt 2004; Coady 2000). McInnis (2000), in a national study conducted over five years from 1995, documented academics' growing tensions. McInnis identifies a contributing factor to the growing tension as the increases in workload, both in class-contact hours and in teaching-related activities such as academic support. McInnis (2000) concludes that academics believed that the calibre of students had declined and that 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' presented problems. Anderson, Johnson and Saha (2002), in a report commissioned by DEST, confirm this research. Finding that many Australian academics are feeling frustrated and disillusioned, Anderson, Johnson and Saha (2002) attribute these feelings to stress, low wages, and falling standards, as well as to academics' perceived needs to deal with a lowered community prestige and an 'often hostile management' (cited in Myton 2003, p.8).

The increased participation and the funding constraints do not affect the university and the academics in isolation; they also affect students. The wider participation rates have seen corresponding increases in the diversity of the student body signifying 'the expansion in

participation of the critical mass of identifiable subgroups that were formally significantly under-represented in universities' (McInnis & James 1995). By the latter decades of the twentieth century, the impact of this widening participation was the subject of much research on HE, the majority focussing on students' academic and financial difficulties (Krause 2003; McInnis 2000 and 2003; McLean 2002). The research suggests that not only are students experiencing the impact of the shifts on universities as teaching institutions, they are also directly experiencing the effects of the economic rationalist platform driving HE policy and economic policy generally. McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) report that the most striking differences between their 1994 and 1999 snapshots of the first year at university were the increased proportion of students who are enrolled full-time and engaged in part-time work and the increase in the average number of hours worked by students who are employed. More recently, McInnis (2003, p.8) testifies that some 40% of undergraduate students assert that paid work gets in the way of study, 34% are distracted from study by money worries and two-thirds are 'often' overwhelmed by all they have to do. These differences have implications for student retention – always an important consideration in terms of university funding – and negatively affect the students' capacities to persist in their studies. McInnis, James and Hartley's (2000) second snapshot study of the first year found, for example, that one-third of the students in the 1999 cohort seriously considered deferring or withdrawing during their first semester of study.

An emerging issue in relation to the pressures on students, one that radiates from the changing fabric of their lives, is students' increasing disengagement with university life generally and with study in particular (Kuh 2003; McInnis 2003). Universities have become more flexible, partly as a consequence of market competition, partly because new technologies make it possible, but more commonly because flexibility in course delivery has become an institutional performance measure in its own right (McInnis 2003, p.3). McInnis (2003) declares that, as a result, students have many more choices about when, where and what they will study, and how much commitment they need to make to university life. This has led to a general disengagement with university which not only reflects changes to the priority students now give to their time at university, but also reflects the perception that students increasingly expect universities to fit their lives rather than vice-versa (McInnis 2003, p.3). Developing the term 'negotiated engagement' to characterise this phenomenon, McInnis claims that it influences students' behaviours in a number of significant areas: to be generally clear about

what they want from the university and what it can do for them but to remain unclear about their obligations to the university; to find it more difficult to motivate themselves to study and to spend less time on tasks that would improve their learning; to choose a pragmatic cycle of low expectations and low demands; to engage in part-time work as the sole or main source of independent income; to be less likely to study on weekends but more likely to borrow course materials to meet deadlines or catch up on classes; and to increasingly use information and computer-based technologies but not necessarily in ways that enhance their engagement with the learning experience or the learning community.

The escalating trends of student disengagement provide implications for both universities and students. Research from the United States (Kuh 2003) and the United Kingdom (Benn 2000; Yorke 1999) asserts that the most important determinants of student success at university are the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and university life and that studying with other students adds considerable value to learning outcomes. However, whereas time, effort and peer support represent facets of engagement, McInnis (2003, p.9) suggests that engagement also occurs:

> … where students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning, where learning outside the classroom is considered as important as the timetabled and structured experience, and where students actively connect to the subject matter.

According to McInnis (2003), overturning the trends towards student disengagement in Australia not only involves re-asserting the value of student engagement, it also requires that universities recognise and address the competing pressures that influence student priorities and reaffirm their own roles and obligations as learning communities. Justice Michael Kirby of the High Court of Australia for example argues:

> …universities must be strong enough to be very demanding of their students. To demand a real participation in the interactive exchange of knowledge and values that is the hallmark of the university experience…Isolation is intellectually and emotionally limiting (Kirby 2002 cited in McInnis 2003, p.12)

The student disengagement radiating from the changing student contexts as well as the call for universities to reignite their leadership in relation to teaching/learning contexts, constitute important challenges for Australian universities.

1.1.3 Changes in the Local Contexts of the Regional University

Although all Australian universities are affected by the shifts in HE policies and practices, regional universities have not been given precedence in the debates. Yet the regional

university[3] provides a particularly powerful example of the trends and issues impacting on HE. Because regional universities have an above-average proportion of first year and distance education students (McInnis, James & Hartley 2000, p.5), they epitomise the recent shifts in HE – the rapid expansion, increasing student diversity and tightening economic constraints. The tightening economic constraints are exacerbated by the funding differentiation between the more traditional 'elite' universities and the newer regional universities (see discussion in Government Review of Higher Education 2002). At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ)[4] these trends are pronounced. Expansion is evident in the increase in student enrolments from 12,406 students in 1992 to 22,332 students in 2003 (Lovegrove 2003), student diversity is a dominant characteristic, and funding constraints are increasingly apparent, especially as USQ has also responded to these constraints with the integration of new technologies and increased flexibility in course delivery.

Alternative Entry Students

Regional universities also have higher-than-average proportions of non-traditional or non-school leaver students (McInnis et al. 2000). One of the consequences of the elite-mass shift has been the dramatic increase in the numbers of these students, a trend that is ongoing. For instance, McInnis (2003) reports that in Australia the proportion of students entering university on the basis of their completion of Year 12 has declined to less than half of the student population, with the remainder of the student population now comprising special admissions and mature-age students.

In Queensland non-traditional students enter universities via the Tertiary Admissions Centre Form B and, for the purposes of this research, are identified as **alternative entry students (AES).**[5] According to Postle et al. (1996) AES' pathways to university include:

- Bridging, enabling or tertiary preparation programs – these applicants have successfully completed any number of programs designed to upgrade skills and knowledge to a level considered appropriate for entry to tertiary education;

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[3] The regional university is characterised as a small to medium sized university in a rural area (McInnis, James & Hartley 2000, p.5).
[4] USQ offers its courses on-campus, off-campus and online.
[5] AES do not include international students, who, at the University of Southern Queensland, enter university through the administrative systems of the International Office.

- Mature-age, or direct entry – these applicants have demonstrated aptitude on the Special Tertiary Admissions Test Version C (STAT instrument) or have appropriate work or other experience as well as applicants being recognised for their prior learning and skills (RPL);
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants[6]; and
- Applicants who have completed units of study through the Open Learning Agency of Australia (OLAA).

Whereas in Australia generally the proportion of AES is significant, at USQ, AES comprise the majority of students – with 40% of all undergraduate commencers aged 30 years or older in 1995 (Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and over 50% of the USQ intake comprising AES in 1999 (DEST 2001). By 2001, the AES component at USQ was even more pronounced:

> The majority of USQ's students may be considered as 'non-traditional' with three-quarters of students studying externally, and the median age of students being 27 years amongst the highest in the sector (USQ Equity Report 2001, p.1).

The high proportion of AES at USQ is compounded by the fact that USQ also has a high proportion of equity[7] students and, further, that there is considerable overlap between these groups. According to the USQ Equity Report (1999, p.1), for example, USQ is ranked third in the sector for students with low socio-economic backgrounds (SES); fourth for students with disability; and fifth for rural students. In 2000, 63% of USQ students were over 25, 28% were low SES and 53% were from a rural and isolated background (USQ Equity Report 2000, p.1). In 2002, according to the USQ Equity Home Page, over 30% of undergraduate students were classified as socio-economically disadvantaged, 55% from rural and geographically isolated areas, 75% studying externally and a high proportion above 27 years of age.

Research seeking to build an understanding of AES has not been prioritised in the Australian context (see commentary in Beasley 1997; McInnis & James 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley 2000; Postle et al. 1996). Nor has research focussed on AES accessing regional universities in particular. For regional universities like USQ, however, where diversity is central, this type of research would have great significance.

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[6] The sample of students in this study did not include Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students.
[7] In 1990 *A Fair Chance for All* identified six disadvantaged or equity groupings (see section 2.2.5.2).

1.2 The Research Rationale

1.2.1 The Research Aim

This research study contributes to scholarly understanding by investigating the experiences of undergraduate AES accessing and participating at a regional university. Post-structural and critical perspectives are applied to re-conceptualise students' experiences in negotiating the transition to the new university culture. In doing so the research endeavours to develop an alternative to those theoretical approaches to educational disadvantage (the deficit approaches) that view language development and literacy acquisition as key factors in differential student achievement – approaches which conceptualise disadvantage in terms of scholastic deficits and a lack of academic literacy, therefore equating 'difference' with 'deficit'. The research seeks to change the perception that succeeding at university is solely a consequence of the students' intellectual capabilities.

The post-structural and critical perspectives are employed to investigate and develop interpretations about the ways in which knowledge, identity, power, and social relations are constructed through the written and spoken texts of the regional university. It is theorised that such an analysis would allow the regional university to be identified as a dynamic culture, subject to ongoing and rapid change and encompassing a multiplicity of additional cultures and sub-cultures – each with its own discourses and literacies. The students' transition can then be re-positioned as one of gaining familiarity with these new cultures and their discourses, supplementing the more-traditional view that transition depends on the students' use of their intellectual capacities.

In more specific terms, the study seeks to contribute understandings about the capabilities that facilitate the academic success of AES. The study aims to uncover how the students construct their means of succeeding in the university culture. In exploring the characteristics of the students themselves that are linked to the ability to succeed academically, the research explores the proposition that a 'successful student' (defined as one who persists with study to the completion of the chosen degree) is one who possesses/demonstrates a range of capabilities.[8]

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[8] The study takes, as its definition of individual capability, Elliot Jacques (1976) four-component model, which includes (a) cognitive capability, (b) the capability of valuing the work of the role, (c) skills and knowledge (including experience, qualifications, technical knowledge and the ability to do the job), and (d) emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995).

1.2.2 Primary Research Questions

The core of the study seeks to identify what these capabilities are. The primary research question posed by this study is therefore:

> **What are the capabilities that assist first year, alternative entry students to negotiate a successful transition[9] to, and to display perseverance in, the university culture?**

The study also investigates whether or not the specific socio-cultural competencies introduced in Mak, Westwood, Barker and Ishiyama's (1998) *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (*ExcelL*) constitute these capabilities for AES and whether imparting these socio-cultural competencies can enable students to negotiate a successful transition to university. The additional primary research question posed by this study is therefore:

> **Can the use of the specific socio-cultural competencies, introduced in the *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (Mak et al. 1998), comprise these capabilities for first year, alternative entry students as they negotiate their transition to, and display perseverance in, the university culture?**

1.2.3 Research Goals

The primary research questions generate a number of research goals that aim to contribute understandings about whether or not:

- The specific socio-cultural competencies stemming from Mak et al.'s (1998) *ExcelL* program can:

  a) Comprise AES's capabilities for successfully completing the first semester of study;

  b) Constitute the students' means of achieving familiarity with the new culture;

  c) Represent the students' skills or practices of engagement with the new culture's discourses and multiliteracies;

  d) Enable students to access and engage with the new university culture and its multiple tertiary literacies and discourses; and

  e) Facilitate the students' transition, empowering them to participate in, to master, and to demonstrate the literacies and discourses intrinsic to perseverance and ultimate success at university.

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[9] The term, 'a successful transition' is variable, particular to the individual participants. Embedded in the notion are feelings of comfort, of ease, of having adjusted positively to the new culture and its ways of knowing, thinking and behaving. This may translate to a willingness, or a decision, to continue with university study though, equally, it could mean the development of feelings of competence and effectiveness in communicating and dealing with the new culture and its members. This involves an overcoming of any interpersonal anxieties about how to relate to the new culture and its members as well as any feelings of being overwhelmed, and the replacement of these with efficacy beliefs (the development of the belief by the student that they are capable of succeeding in the new culture) (Mak et al. 1999).

- Whether there are other capabilities or competencies, which are not included in the *ExcelL* program, but which assisted students' transition to, and perseverance in, the university culture.

1.2.4 Specific Objectives of the Study

To investigate the primary research questions a number of specific objectives are also addressed in the study. These are:

- First, to identify the characteristics of a selection of seventeen mid-year entry[10] AES studying at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) via collection of profile data obtained using a questionnaire previously administered in an unpublished study conducted by Postle et al. (1996) and, secondly, to compare these characteristics with the data collected in the Postle et al. study;

- To conduct an action research program, the role-based group training program *ExcelL* (Mak et al. 1998) with nine participants (Group A),

- To investigate whether or not the use of the specific socio-cultural competencies targeted by the *Excell* program, facilitates Group A's adjustment to university compared with eight non-intervention participants (Group B) in the results of three quantitative pre- and post-measurements administered during the first semester of undergraduate study at university (the pre-tests in week 3 and the post-tests during weeks 12-15);

- To analyse whether there are any important differences in the end-of-semester academic results of Group A and Group B participants; and

- To analyse whether there are any significant differences in the final academic results of Group A and Group B participants as well as with the results of the 1998 cohort of mid-year entry students at USQ. [11]

As this study is principally concerned with investigating the experiences of participants while they engaged with the university culture, there are additional objectives addressed in the study. These are:

- To build understandings and develop interpretations about the participants' processes of transition as they engage with the new university culture, by analysing data from two interviews conducted with each participant in the first semester of study, with the first

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[10] Mid-year entry refers to those students who commence their studies in semester 2 rather than in semester 1.
[11] The cohort (82 students) comprised all other AES who began their undergraduate programs at USQ in semester 2, 1998.

interview conducted in week 3 and the second conducted during weeks 13-15 (week 15 being the last week of semester prior to exams);

- To ascertain, in an exit interview conducted with each participant at the completion of his or her undergraduate degree, how important the *ExcelL* program's socio-cultural competencies were in terms of the students' transition to university and whether, and in what ways, these competencies influenced their experiences of university, their final results, and their ultimate perseverance and success;

- To ascertain whether there are capabilities or competencies in addition to the *ExcelL* program that assisted students in making the transition to university;

- To determine whether any additional capabilities identified by students are also helpful in enabling them to persevere at university and to complete their degrees;

- To build understandings about the university culture in an effort to develop a framework that can illustrate and/or demonstrate the processes students undergo as they make the transition to, and persevere with, their university study; and

- To determine whether the capabilities identified by students could be incorporated into a success model that would assist future students to participate effectively at university.

1.2.5 Research Design

The research design comprises a collective case study. The case study design permits reflections about the social, cultural and educational practices operating in regional universities, as well as reflections about the processes involved as students negotiate the transition to university. The case study design thereby enables new and better understandings to be developed about these processes (Giddens 1996). Within the over-arching case study design a longitudinal stance is developed using multiple research approaches including ethnographic-inductive techniques (Denzin & Lincoln 1994; Taft 1999) and action research methods (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988). The research strategy also embodies a critical orientation (Carspecken 1996; Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 1997; Young 1998) as well as the spirit of reflexivity (Giddens 1994; Hertz 1997). The ethnographic, critical and reflexive methods are interwoven to frame the experiences of students negotiating the new and unfamiliar culture from the students' perspectives. Together the methods fortify the focus on AES and how they achieve their aims. This approach moves away from research which reiterates policies, procedures, programs, and curricula to ensure that students 'fit the mould' of the environment they are engaging (see commentary in Beasley 1997; Postle et al. 1997;

Reid 1996). By taking the students' perspectives, the study explores the ways in which students might not only seek new understandings about how they are constrained by cultural and social forces but also, by doing so, might empower themselves as they negotiate their transition to the university culture.

1.3 Value of the Research

The value of this research study, with its focus on the early experiences of AES at a regional university, resonates in a number of areas. By positioning the experiences of the students not only within the wider social and economic contexts but also within the relevant theoretical contexts, the study provides valuable insights into transition and perseverance and the nature of the first year experience (FYE).

First, by positioning HE in its wider social, cultural, economic and political contexts, the research study contributes understandings about the ways in which HE is conceptualised. As a consequence the study is able to provide insight into the policies and values that impact on regional universities and the students who access them. These understandings are of primary concern, especially at the beginning of the new millennium, when HE is exhibiting the tensions emanating from the rapid and dramatic changes to which it has been subjected. The tensions are embodied, in particular, in the debates about equity in HE, about the role of 'social justice' and about the nature and meaning of HE in Australia. The analysis of the contexts also helps to assess, from the student perspective, the impact of the return to 'hard times', the return to the liberal-individualist interpretation of equity (Beasley 1997; Coady 2000). Even as the full effects of the investment-cost shift are beginning to make inroads on regional universities (perennially less well-funded than the more 'elite' universities), for example, some commentators (for example, Postle, Sturman & Clarke 2000) have contended that funding strategies to address the educational disadvantage as specified by *A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education That's in Everyone's Reach* (DEET 1990) remain problematic. The analysis of the social, cultural, economic and political contexts helps illuminate these debates.

Secondly, the study investigates, from the student perspective, the FYE at university, reaffirming its key role in the retention and ultimate success of students. Whereas a number of conferences (for example, the annual Pacific Rim First Year Experience Conferences) and the 1994 and 1999 national snapshot studies of the FYE (McInnis & James 1995 and McInnis, James & Hartley 2000) have prioritised the FYE at university, the majority are snapshot

studies examining student progress in a 'post hoc' manner. McInnis and James (1995) and Postle et al. (1996) assert that there were few longitudinal studies on first year students. The value of the current research is therefore enhanced by its capacity to rectify this situation.

Thirdly, the study contributes insights into student retention, an important issue for funding bodies as well as for other stakeholders, including the university itself. As Postle et al. (1996) argue, research in this area has thus far concentrated on the non-success or failure of students, focussing on issues related to barriers, reasons attributed for withdrawal and strategies developed to reduce increasing attrition rates. The research has also investigated these issues from the teachers' or policy makers' perspectives: it has not focussed on the students themselves, or at least has done so only in response to or in tandem with other stakeholders in the environment (see commentary in Beasley 1997). Further, much of the research has approached the issue from a curriculum/pedagogical orientation (see Boud & Walker 1998 and Borland & Pearce 2002). According to Postle et al. (1996) there has been little research into the knowledge and behaviours of the students who have overcome barriers. Consequently, research that focuses on identifying what it is that successful students do 'right' has not been given priority in the Australian context.

There is also a relative dearth of information pertaining to students who were not traditional school-leavers (SL). Whereas many researchers, including McInnis and James (1995), Peel (1996 and 2000) and Kantanis (2000 and 2001), have contributed to the literature on FYE and transition issues, few have turned their attention to AES. Postle et al. (1996) and Beasley (1997), in fact, point out that there have been few studies completed in Australia dealing specifically with the needs of the diverse range of students accessing tertiary education. This study provides an opportunity to redress these imbalances. That the study also has AES as its focus, rather than 'traditional' SL, contributes further value, especially for a regional university whose student body is increasingly diverse and non-traditional.

Fifthly, the study provides a new and different perspective in its capacity to explore the characteristics that rest within the students themselves, characteristics that are linked to the students' capabilities to succeed academically. Thus the study moves away from the focus on policies, programs, systems, and organisational support to consider, primarily, that a successful student is one who is 'expert' at being a student; one who displays the characteristics of 'professionalism' in his or her role as a student. Padilla (1991) contends that

the use of critical reflection enables students to provide heuristic knowledge of the HE culture that would be valuable to both staff and students. The heuristic knowledge that successful students master, then, as they negotiate the transition to university could thus be a first step in building success models for students early in their university careers.

The value of the study finally resides in one of its purposes: that it seeks to assemble a theoretical frame to re-conceptualise the FYE. The study integrates philosophical, sociological, interpersonal and cross-cultural communication theories to establish the potency and applicability of the role of discourses, or multiliteracies, in the university context. The application of these theoretical contexts makes possible, even imperative, the re-theorisation of both the university culture and the first year experience.

1.4 Primary Orientations

The review of the global, Australian and regional HE contexts in section 1.1 reveals one of the major themes of the study – that related to ongoing, unrelenting change: changes in the roles and purposes of HE globally, nationally and regionally; changing technologies, languages and literacies; changing economic circumstances and funding arrangements; and changing student populations. How universities and students deal with these on-going and rapid changes present major challenges for all those involved. The ways the changes and challenges are met and managed, however, also depend on how they are perceived, understood and addressed. Fundamental are questions concerning the philosophical assumptions underlying both the changes and challenges. The post-structural and critical orientations underpinning the study are able to make these assumptions more transparent.

1.4.1. Post-structural Orientations

Change is a wide-ranging notion with global and local manifestations. The site of the inquiry is a regional Queensland university – a local context pressured by global forces of change. The nexus between the global and the local is one of the juxtapositions characteristic of the post-structural perspective or, as Freebody, Muspratt and Dwyer (2001, p.vii) refer to it, the 'anthropological turn', a turn that gained momentum in the last decades of the twentieth century. Freebody, Muspratt and Dwyer (2001, p.vii) maintain:

> …that the force of the 'anthropological turn' on theorising, research, and policy in the social sciences has been to foreground the distinctiveness of local sites of social activity and the multiplicity of social actions on those sites.

This turn, Freebody, Muspratt and Dwyer (2001, p.vii) argue, presents profound challenges to social theorising. Social theorising, they assert, has traditionally sought to develop grand narratives as its principal accounting procedure as well as working within 'apparently general and abstract but actually simply mono-cultural versions of such constructs as 'the truth', 'the language', 'the meaning' and 'the text'. The anthropological turn, alternatively, recognises not only the potency of diversity (in the meaning of a text or language) but also the necessity of defining the meaning understood at each local site.

Prior to this post-structural/anthropological turn, contrasts such as those between the global and the local were considered as polarities or dichotomies. A post-structural orientation recognises that, in the contemporary world, both possess currency and legitimacy, each intersecting and overlapping the other. Fontana (2002, p.161) declares that the modernist belief in the predominance of global systems of thought, in meta-theories and meta-narratives, universally legitimised and understood, has given way to an increasing acknowledgement of the pertinence and applicability of local narratives. No longer awed by meta-theories about the nature of society and the self, we now question and deconstruct them (Fontana 2002). Silverman (1997) proposes that we focus on smaller parcels of knowledge; we study society in its fragments, in its daily details. Kvale (1995, p.20) adds that:

> …particular, heterogeneous and changing language games replace the global horizon of meaning. With a pervasive decentralization, communal interaction and local knowledge become important in their own right.

To ignore the deep-rooted nature of human activity and language in a given social, historical and cultural context, would be to extract people from their local contexts, with researchers becoming trapped between opposing poles of the global and the local (Anderson 1995). Considering one without reference to the other, overlooking the implications provided by the fact that each impacts on the other, would be imprudent and would reduce the integrity, richness, value and resonance of the inquiry.

A post-structural orientation recognises the nexus between dichotomies like the global and the local. These and other post-structural intersections, such as the universal and the particular, the political and the personal, the complex and the unique, society and the individual, and the objective and the subjective, become ways of unveiling the complexity inherent in living and working at the start of the twenty-first century. They are also interwoven in this inquiry. For example, Chapter Two investigates the connections between the global and the local in more depth, as well as the intersections between the political and the personal and society and the

individual. Chapter Four confronts the dichotomy between the objective and the subjective whereas the chapters of primary data analysis, Chapters Five, Six and Seven, develop the nexus between the complex and the unique and the universal and the particular. The post-structural orientation, by illuminating these intersections, is able to further inform the principal themes of change, diversity, culture, discourse, multiliteracies and power (see section 1.5) that are central to, and shifting, throughout the inquiry.

The post-structural orientation also emphasises the 'telling of stories' about equity and literacy, making possible a new signifying space from which to pose and debate several key questions. The questions relate to how the stories of our culture become the 'facts' we learn, how to address inequalities of language opportunities in terms of access, space and power, and how to acknowledge that such access brings with it a new set of difficulties (Muspatt, Freebody & Luke 1997). Muspatt, Freebody and Luke (1997) maintain that these difficulties will, in turn, need to be accompanied by recognition of the limitations of existing language practices in terms of naming experiences in positive and affirming ways. The post-structuralist orientation, by identifying and reinforcing the salience of language and discourse and the role of cultural and symbolic capital,[12] provides a lens through which to view the ways in which people and knowledge systems are constituted and reconstituted through discourse. In doing so, the post-structural orientation is able to acknowledge the complexity inherent in living and studying in the 'new times'[13] of the twenty-first century.

1.4.2 Critical Orientations

The underlying purpose of a critical orientation is to demystify the social world, deconstructing surface appearances to reveal the hidden internal structures. Hatch (1997, p.366), arguing that critical theorists often begin their analyses with deconstruction, contends that critical theorists focus on revealing and overturning the assumptions underlying arguments. 'The rethinking of assumptions opens a space for previously unconsidered alternatives, which themselves are left open to multiple interpretations and uses rather than being shut down again or refrozen' (Hatch 1997, p.366). Used in this way, the critical perspective is a means to overcome domination by one perspective or idea, with the focus

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[12] 'Capital' is a term stemming from Bourdieu (see Bourdieu & Passeron 1977) and is defined in section 2.4.3
[13] Stuart Hall (1996) describes these new times as shifts in the technical organisation of industrial-capitalist production toward information technologies and more decentralised forms of labour process, work organisation, and increased product differentiation.

shifting to one that advocates the use of knowledge to emancipate rather than to control. Critical accounts render consideration of alternative ways of knowing a matter of public discourse (Hatch 1997).

A critical orientation thus challenges education by making transparent the assumptions underpinning the educational practices operating at the local site. A critical orientation also challenges educational sites by highlighting the need to link specific (and local) educational processes with broader societal outcomes. As Luke (1999, p.167) suggests, the critical frame helps to establish the case that detailed analyses of cultural voices and texts in local sites need to be connected, both theoretically and empirically, with an understanding of power and ideology in broader social formations and configurations.

In a critical orientation, differences are never regarded as neutral but always regarded in relations of power. A critical orientation presents an opportunity to theorise and describe the power relationships operating between discourse change and social change, between the world and the material world (Luke 1999). A critical orientation also accepts that apparently normal practice is always politically preferred practice. Freebody, Muspatt and Dwyer (2001, p.viii) argue, for example, that the melding of linguistic and cultural differences always constitutes a production site of contestation and silencing and that, further, education constitutes a very visible site of such contestation and silencing.

The redefinition of education, as a site of contestation and silencing, challenges conventional policy and practice in HE, unveiling the new formulations in which they operate. Fairclough (2001), for example, contends that the new global social order necessarily evokes questions about power and the impact of power on knowledge and skills in HE. According to Fairclough (2001, p.11), educational knowledge and skills:

> …are always provisional and indeterminate, contested, and moreover at issue in social relationships which all teachers and learners are positioned within. In a critical view of education, knowledge and skills are indeed taught and learnt, but they are also questioned – a central concern is what counts as knowledge or skill (and therefore does not), for whom, why, and with what beneficial or problematic consequences.

In Fairclough's (2001) view, discourses are the principal means by which difference is dealt with, accommodated, overridden or embraced. 'A critical awareness of differences in and between discourses, of seeing that discourses are partial and positioned and that social difference is manifest in the diversity of discourses within particular social practices, becomes integral in such an education' (p.5).

A critical orientation is able to make transparent the axioms of power and control operating at the sites of HE, including a regional university like USQ. A critical orientation is fundamental to this study as it possesses the capacities to reveal the discursive practices that operate as power relationships in an educational context; to focus attention on the role of discourses in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society; and to connect local texts and cultures, theoretically and empirically, to power and ideology configurations operating in the broader society (Fairclough 1995). As such, a critical orientation provides a systematic means of linking the students' experiences to the wider external forces that operate on and influence the localised site (the university) and its teachers (their choices and practices) and the students who inhabit the site.

The critical orientation can be traced through the theoretical foundations of the inquiry as well as through its methodological imperatives. For example, Chapter Two employs a critical orientation to theoretically position the contextual issues introduced in Chapter One whereas Chapter Four outlines and validates the critical ethnography, action research and reflexive methodologies chosen for the research design.

1.5 Principal Themes

1.5.1 Introduction

The post-structuralist and critical orientations underpinning the study embody the notions that meanings are now created from a variety of viewpoints and that they reflect a diversity of racial, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Kalantzis & Pandian 2001). The orientations also endorse the necessity of 'unpacking' these meanings; of ensuring that the meanings are clearly delineated, made fully explicit and transparent: their surfaces deconstructed to reveal the assumptions underlying them. The orientations thus substantiate the need to make transparent the study's key themes. Seven principal themes recur in the study; apart from 'change' (introduced in section 1.1) the themes central to the study are culture, discourse, multiliteracies, diversity, power and thematic relationships. This section will clarify these meanings, as they are understood in the study.

1.5.2 Culture

The notion of culture is central, but also problematic, having a wide range of everyday and technical uses and meanings. Lankshear et al. (1997) reason that narrow notions of culture tend to categorise people and societies into those who have culture versus those who do not.

In the revitalised notion of culture these narrow definitions are widened to encompass not only the ideas stemming from the post-structural/anthropological turn but also the understandings intrinsic to critical research. These understandings accept that all human beings have and make culture and that culture is reflected in people's everyday activities, relationships and social processes (Allen 1998, p.354). Shor (1993, p.30) defines culture as 'what ordinary people do every day, how they behave, speak, relate and make things. Everyone has and makes culture...culture is the speech and behaviour of everyday life' (cited in Lankshear et al. 1997). Culture is also seen as being embodied within more specific groups as well as within societies and each of these cultural and sub-cultural groups has its own culture, its own way of life, its own way of knowing and of seeing, its own world-view, its own life force (Ferraro 2002). Ferraro (2002, p.194) suggests that:

> …we operate within a web of cultures and sub-cultures, including school cultures, church cultures, ethnic cultures and corporate cultures. These cultures strongly influence the way we think and behave, and they often are radically different from other cultures. By understanding and appreciating the cultural differences and similarities throughout the world, we will prepare ourselves from operating in a world that is rapidly losing its borders.

Fundamental to this study is the view that we all function within our culture; it is our way of seeing and perceiving, knowing, behaving and thinking. This view recognises that our culture is 'so taken for granted' that we seldom question its pervasiveness in influencing our belief systems, not fully understanding its role in constituting our 'way of knowing'. This view appreciates that we may interpret other's 'ways of knowing' as just that, as 'other' or perhaps deficit ways, both consciously and unconsciously.

The wider view of culture lies at the heart of this study, stretching through Chapter Two, not only in relation to the contexts of HE but also in relation to the study's theoretical assumptions and foundations. This view of culture is also fundamental to the methodological assumptions and the research design outlined in Chapter Four, and underpins the analysis of data in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

1.5.3 Discourses

One of the consequences of the changes sweeping communities both globally and locally resides in the increasing complexity of 'language'. Language has become to refer to much more than just verbal communication in written and spoken texts. The term 'discourse' was conceived to accommodate this complexity (see commentary in Corson 1999; Fairclough 1995; Freebody, Muspatt & Dwyer 2001; Lankshear et al. 1997; Luke 1999; Van Dyjk 1997).

This study adopts the critical interpretation: that discourse,[14] in its most open sense, encompasses all forms of communication; including ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and reading, both verbal and nonverbal. This meaning is much wider than that of language alone (Van Dyjk 1997). Discourses are 'ubiquitous ways of knowing, valuing and experiencing the world' (Luke 1999, p.170). Discourses are also seen as ways of 'being in the world' integrating such things as words, acts, attitudes, beliefs and identities, along with gestures, clothes, body language and facial expressions, and so on (Lankshear et al. 1997). Discourses thus provide different stories through which to read language practice. They make it possible to change both the stories used as educational resources and the stories students might construct to position themselves differently in the culture (Luke 1999).

Discourses are basically about making *meaning;* that is, they are part of creating, giving, receiving and sharing meaning. Lankshear et al. (1997) argue that it is through participation in discourses that individuals are identified or identifiable as members of culturally meaningful groups or networks and as players of meaningful cultural roles. More than this, it is in and through discourses that individual and group identities are constructed and evolve. Individuals and cultural groups, for example, organise their lives around concepts, purposes, values, beliefs, ideals, theories, notions of reality and the like, and these are not innate (Lankshear et al. 1997). They are established, observed and communicated through the processes of education, socialisation, training, apprenticeship and enculturation. According to Lankshear et al. (1997) the initiation into discourses is a social and cultural activity, with discourses themselves being, simultaneously, both the *means and the outcomes* of socio-cultural process. Literacy is the term that is used to encompass this socio-cultural process, a notion also redefined by the critical theorists.

1.5.4 Multiliteracies

The wider definition of culture, together with the replacement of language with discourse, calls for a re-definition of the meaning of literacy itself. Traditionally literacy referred to the ability to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms of the national language

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[14] Gee (1997), among other critical literacy theorists, differentiates between two forms of discourse. Discourse with a capital 'D' comprises a 'way of being together in the world' for humans, their ways of thinking and feeling. It includes being a certain type of person, including being a member of a certain socio-economic class. Discourse with a small 'd' is used for connected stretches of language such as conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays and so forth. This study utilises the capital 'D' definition of discourse.

(Cope & Kalantzis 2000). The traditional view of literacy accepted that there was one cultural and linguistic standard or discourse and that schooling and education enabled students to become literate in this discourse. In the new world of the twenty-first century, however, singular national cultures have less hold than they once did. To accommodate the cultural and linguistic differences that have emerged, as well as the ones that are yet to come, the traditional definitions of literacy and literacies needed to be rejuvenated (Cope & Kalantzis 2000). Whereas the term 'literacy' is seen to concentrate on the specific social practices of reading and writing, on the forms that literate practice actually takes, and the ways print skills are used, the term 'literacies' encompasses the conceptions people have of what literacy involves. This view includes what people *count* as being literate, what they see as 'real' or 'appropriate' uses of reading and writing skills, and the ways people actually read and write in everyday life (Cope & Kalantzis 2000). Pandian (2001, p.12) argues:

> … the term literacy can and should be examined from multiple perspectives that take into account approaches (such as historical, background, mainstream and alternative conceptions and contextual applications and applicability), relevant issues (political, ethical, economic and sociological) methodological considerations (such as functional and critical) and case studies (pertaining to among others, languages, gender, ethnicity, computers and media). Specifically there is a necessity to reassess the tools and processes involved in education to identify current problems, innovations and effective practices in various contexts as well as investigate the factors involved in addressing and interrogating the idea of literacy.

Giroux (1993, p.367) suggests that it is important to perceive literacy as a form of cultural citizenship and politics that provides the conditions for subordinate groups:

> …to learn the knowledge and skills necessary for self and social empowerment, that is to live in a society in which they have the opportunity to govern and shape history rather than be consigned to its margins. Literacy in that sense is not just a skill or knowledge, but an emerging act of consciousness and resistance.

The parallel term, multiliteracies, encompasses the multiplicity of information and multimedia technologies and the salience of cultural and linguistic diversity and difference (Pandian 2001) symbolic of these 'new times'. The New London Group (1996) and Cope and Kalantzis (2000), among others, have advanced a pedagogy of multiliteracies which not only challenges traditional ideas about educational institutions as sites of transmitting knowledge efficiently and effectively but also provides ways to focus on and accommodate the digital economy, knowledge workers and lifelong learning in diverse settings. Chapter Two (in terms of its theoretical implications) and Chapter Three (in terms of its practical implementations) investigate the consequences the notion of multiliteracies provides for HE and for the students participating at university.

1.5.5 Diversity

Intrinsic to the revitalised notions of culture, discourse and literacy is that of diversity, a notion at once critical and problematic. Diversity is a consistent thread in the literature on HE (for example, in research investigating access and equity issues, retention and attrition and the FYE, as well as in more general education and sociological literature). Yet the term is rarely specifically delineated, its meaning accepted as if clear-cut and simple. Inherent in diversity, however, is the notion of difference, a concept that, like the bulk of an iceberg underwater, hides a multiplicity of meanings, symbolising its complexities and its critical nature.

The complexities underpinning difference are articulated, however, in critical literacy and critical discourse research (Fairclough 2001; Freebody, Muspatt & Dwyer 2001; New London Group 1996). Fairclough (2001, p.5), for example, demonstrates the complex and problematic nature of both diversity and difference in the statement that:

> …late modern societies are increasingly socially diverse societies, not only in that migration has led to greater ethnic and cultural diversity, but also because various lines of difference which were until recently relatively covered over have become more salient – differences of gender and sexual orientation, for example. Differences are partially semiotic in nature – different languages, different social dialects, different communicative styles, different voices, different discourses. The predominant ethos….is that differences which in the past have been suppressed should now be recognized. But since people need to work together across difference, differences have to be negotiated. People need to work across differences in work, politics, cultural activities, and everyday life (p.5).

According to Fairclough (2001), people need to attain from education a range of resources for living within socially and culturally diverse societies as well as a critical awareness of how differences operate and are maintained. The university, as a site of education, has a critical role to play in facilitating the delivery of these resources and in engendering an awareness of the role of difference and diversity in contemporary society. Giroux (1993, p.369) suggests that knowledge and power come together not to merely reaffirm experience and difference but also to interrogate it, to open up broader theoretical considerations, to tease out limitations, and to engage a vision of community:

> …in which students define themselves in terms of their distinct historical and social formations and their broader collective hopes. For critical educators this entails speaking to important social, political and cultural issues from a deep sense of politics of their own location and the necessity to engage and often unlearn the habits of institutional privilege that buttress their own power while sometimes preventing others from questioning subjects.

1.5.6 Power

Collins and Blot (2003, p.5), arguing that literacy is shaped by power, contend that power is not just some concentrated force that compels individuals and groups to behave in accordance with the will of an external authority. Instead power has:

> …"microsopic" dimensions, small, intimate, everyday dimensions, and these are constitutive as well as regulative: they are the stuff out of which senses of identity, senses of self as a private individual as well as a social entity in a given time and space, are composed and recomposed.

One way of conceptualising and managing diversity is to characterise difference in terms of power, as deficits or deficiencies. This view assumes that there are mainstream cultures and discourses and that languages and literacies other than those of the mainstream represent a deficit on the part of those who do not possess them or who are unable to demonstrate them. In these ways differences are silenced or become the 'other'. Freebody, Muspatt and Dwyer (2001, p.viii) argue that differences are not necessarily written out of public discourse but rather their recastings provide the definitional and accounting bases for people's self descriptions:

> …what are silenced are other possible categories for accounting that may arise from theorisations of social diversity as well as the situated accounts of everyday life independent of the logic and needs of institutional organisation.

Definitional and accounting bases like these underpin the models of pedagogy often referred to as deficit models (New London Group 1996). Deficit models incorporate 'writing over the existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture' (New London Group 1996, p.72). Deficit models thus deny the implications rising from the existence and potency of multiple linguistic and cultural differences. In contrast, the alternatives accept that differences are never neutral but always exist in relations of power in which apparently normal practice is always the politically, socially and culturally sanctioned or preferred practice (Freebody, Muspatt & Dwyer 2001). Collins and Blot (2003), in their discussion of New Literacy Studies, counterpoise the deficit model of literacy with an ideological model which illustrates that the uses of literacy are seen as the ways in which groups in society might exercise power and dominance over other groups – for example, by withholding or providing access to literacy, for instance to chosen groups. Collins and Blot further contend that, more subtly, the definitional and accounting bases about literacy – the models that individuals hold which underpin their personal uses of literacy – are also sources of power relations:

> If educational institutions could convince others that the only model of literacy was theirs – for instance, that literacy was autonomous, neutral, and a universal set of skills – then the particular cultural values that underpin this surface neutrality could be sustained whilst not appearing to be so (Collins & Blot 2003, p.xiii).

The capacity to address differences as sources of power relations presents a starting point from which it may be possible to illuminate new ways of seeing, responding to and addressing the evolving linguistic and cultural diversity characterising the early twenty-first century regional university.

1.5.7 Thematic Relationships

The themes related to diversity and difference, in their cultural and linguistic forms, as well as the implications arising from the issues of multiliteracies and power for education generally and for literacy and learning specifically, are central to this inquiry investigating AES' experiences as they access the university culture. Figure 1.1 below illustrates the orientations, themes, and relationships outlined in this chapter and fundamental to the study.
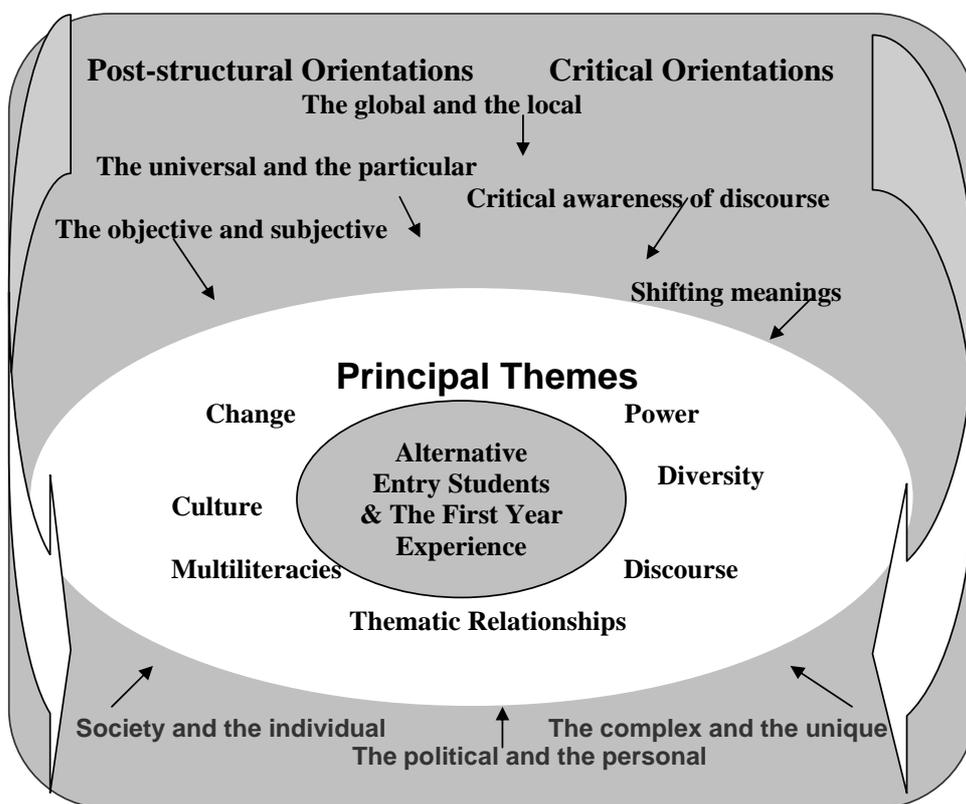
Figure 1.1: Diagrammatic Overview of the Research Orientations and Themes

The study establishes the case that, if they are to persist and succeed at university, AES need to negotiate and address issues stemming from each of the seven themes. The study argues that, for the increasing diversity of students now participating at university, their transition,

perseverance and ultimate success involve the processes of first, becoming familiar with, and secondly, of engaging and mastering the university culture's multiplicity of literacies and discourses. These are ongoing processes, intrinsically involving both lifelong and life-wide learning practices as well as a critical awareness of discourse.

1.6 The Researcher

In a critical inquiry the role of the researcher is not removed or objective. Apple (1996b) argues that as society is characterised by increasing cultural, political, and economic struggles and dislocations, these conditions are best seen through a process of 're-positioning', that is, by seeing the world from below, from the perspectives of those who are not dominant. 'There are multiple axes of power and multiple relations of domination and subordination in which all of us participate' (p.x). For the researcher, this becomes an ever more complex issue since not only does it involve understanding how power circulates and is used and who benefits from the ways society is organised, it also requires some serious reflection on the role of the researcher in the process (Carspecken 1996). Critical research has the capacity to recognise the role of the researcher and the society in which he or she lives, both in constructing the lens through which research is accomplished, and in the social role of the researcher constructing it. A critical orientation is particularly relevant to research in which the researcher and the participants are undergoing a similar process. In this inquiry both the participants and the researcher, as a doctoral student, were navigating a university journey, each reflecting and parallelling the other. Carspecken (1996, p.167) maintains:

> …the researcher must be able to re-construct subjective-referenced claims as her subject of study themselves make them, and the researcher must be cognisant of the fact that her own act of doing research and writing it up will carry references to herself – her intentions, qualities, capacities, and identity.

According to Carspecken (1996, p171) researchers make their work a praxis through which their own ideas about who they are are constantly changing. Fine (1994, p.17) argues that in a critical orientation researchers position themselves as political and interrogative beings, fully explicit about their original positions, about changes in these positions, and about where their research actually took them both as investigators and as political actors (cited in Apple 1996b, p.xi). My own experiences in negotiating the unfamiliar postgraduate culture enabled me to empathise with the students' experiences as the study progressed. Each journey informed the others, enriching and nourishing the other, and each was intrinsic to developing the interpretations and conclusions I reached.

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In a further sense I was neither an objective nor a neutral observer. In my roles as a Faculty staff member and as a Learning Enhancement Counsellor at the Student Services Centre of USQ, I have been closely involved in conversing with students as they have adjusted to the new university culture. I have developed, over a period of ten years, a close personal knowledge of the expectations, hurdles, anxieties, and difficulties that students have encountered and overcome. By consistently asking 'what do these students need to know to succeed', I was able to question and explore whether there was a structure and content to the knowledge, behaviour and capabilities that successful students possessed and demonstrated that enabled them to succeed. Padilla (1991, p.86), for example, puts forward the case for the efficacy of such dialogical research:

> …which attempts to involve researchers and subjects (participants) in a partnership to achieve greater understanding about a given situation. Through structured dialogue, participants are able to exchange views and information about a particular social setting. This permits the researcher to identify the heuristic knowledge valid in that social setting but, at the same time, the participants themselves gain important information about how to act successfully in the social setting that they inhabit.

This type of strategy facilitates the use of action research and critical reflection to involve researchers and subjects in a partnership to achieve greater understanding. Padilla (1994, p.281) used this methodology in a Community College study, which investigated how the achievement rates of minority students could be increased. The findings were later elaborated to develop 'the notion of a successful student as one who is an expert at being a student. Such students typically mastered both formal and heuristic knowledge' (Padilla 1994, p.284). The heuristic knowledge that successful students provide of the culture of HE can thus contribute to developing understandings about the negotiations that students need to make as they engage the unfamiliar university literacies and discourses.

Denzin (1997) advocates a partnership between researcher and subjects, whereas Martin-McDonald (2000) argues that participants are essentially co-researchers. Hertz (1997) states that as interviewers start to realise that they are active participants in the research process, they must become reflexive, acknowledge who they are in the research, what they bring to it, and how the research gets negotiated and constructed in the process. Reflexivity, a term that is widely used with a diverse range of connotations, in this study is used to acknowledge that the methods used to describe the world are, to some degree, constitutive of the realities they describe (Atkinson & Coffey 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). Reflexivity thus also raises the crucial issue of 'voice'. The participants' experiences are told in their own voices.

However, the final product, in terms of presentation, creation and interpretation is in my voice.

In one additional sense I was neither an objective nor a neutral 'participant observer'. In fact, my presense as teacher/co-facilitator[15] in the emancipatory action research program, the *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (see section 4.4) needs to be made transparent as there are consequences provided for the power relationships operating between myself, as both researcher and teacher, and Group A participants, as my students. My capacity to bias responses, particularly as Group A participants received an additional 5%[16] for their participation in the *ExcelL Program*, needs to be acknowledged in particular. The implications of this issue are addressed in section 4.3.3 in relation to the weaknesses of critical ethnography.

1.7 Organisation of Chapters

Following this introductory chapter in which the problems and phenomena of interest are discussed are two chapters of literature review. **Chapter Two** reviews the philosophical and theoretical perspectives provided by critical discourse, transactional communication and cross-cultural communication theories, employing them to position the current state of knowledge about HE, FYE, transition and retention. Woven together the theories suggest that the students' first year experiences can be re-theorised as a journey of engagement with the university culture's multiple discourses and literacies. **Chapter Three** investigates the strategies designed to increase the awareness of or overcome the problems identified in the review of these philosophical and theoretical foundations. The chapter reviews literacy, communication, cross-cultural and reflexive approaches to explore the contention that the students' use of a number of specific capabilities can constitute their means of succeeding in the new university culture. The values, philosophy and beliefs espoused in Chapters Two and Three underpin the research design, approaches and methods discussed in **Chapter Four** which provides an overview of the research design, justifying its use and assessing its validity. The chapter also explains and justifies the thematic concern, the research question and objectives selected for the study.

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[15] The ExcelL Program generally has two facilitators, one leading and the other scribing and coaching. My co-facilitaor for this program was Gary Logan, International Counsellor at the Student Services Centre, USQ.
[16] Participants needed to attend at least 4 of the 6 sessions to receive the 5%.

The next three chapters of the study are concerned with the data analyses. **Chapter Five** describes the quantitative data assembled through the demographic questionnaire, the implementation of the intervention program and the comparison of academic results. **Chapter Six** is the first of two chapters outlining the qualitative data collected through the interviews conducted during the students' university journeys and also through the researcher's role as participant observer. Chapter Six presents the analysis of the students' journeys to university, framing their narratives of transition, whereas **Chapter Seven** identifies the capabilities that empowered students to construct their means of succeeding in the university culture. The chapter also develops the implications for students' long-term perseverance and success as well as for students' future study and professional practice.

In the concluding chapter, **Chapter Eight,** the findings of the study are summarised. The chapter develops the theoretical implications of the study by positioning the students' journeys against the philosophical framework provided by critical discourse, transactional communication and cross-cultural communication theories. Also outlined in the chapter are the empirical implications of the study, including their impact on the perseverance and success of AES students.

Chapter Two
Literature Review: Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Introduction

Chapter Two is the first of two chapters of literature review. Chapter Two reviews the theoretical perspectives that underlie the research study, whereas the next chapter of literature review, Chapter Three, appraises the interventions documented in the literature that stem from these theoretical perspectives.

Chapter Two reviews the theories that illuminate fresh ways of conceptualising and researching higher education (HE), the contemporary regional university and the processes of communication and education that occur within the university. These different ways are possible because, in these 'new times' (Hall 1996), previously unexplored ways of seeing, thinking, understanding and knowing have generated fresh pathways of investigation. In this study, these pathways radiate from its post-structural and critical orientations and are represented by its principal themes – change, culture, discourse, multiliteracies, diversity, power, and thematic relationships (see Figure 1.1). Interwoven, the themes unveil the importance of negotiating cultural and linguistic diversity in a rapidly-changing university sector; make transparent the centrality of language and discourse to educational research and practice; and highlight the impact of unequal power configurations operating at the local educational site of the regional university.

The philosophical orientations and principal themes, introduced in Chapter One, underpin the theoretical perspectives reviewed in this chapter: critical discourse theory (CDT), transactional communication theory (TCT) and cross-cultural communication theory (CCT).

The review of CDT reveals the significant role of discourses in a university context whereas the review of TCT makes transparent the central roles of interpersonal interaction and communication in the teaching/learning process. The review of CCT bridges CDT and TCT. CCT opens up fresh ways of conceptualising students' transition to the new university culture. Together, the three theoretical perspectives contribute to a re-theorisation of the first year experience (FYE). Figure 2.1 provides a diagrammatic overview of the study's philosophical and theoretical foundations and the relationships between them.
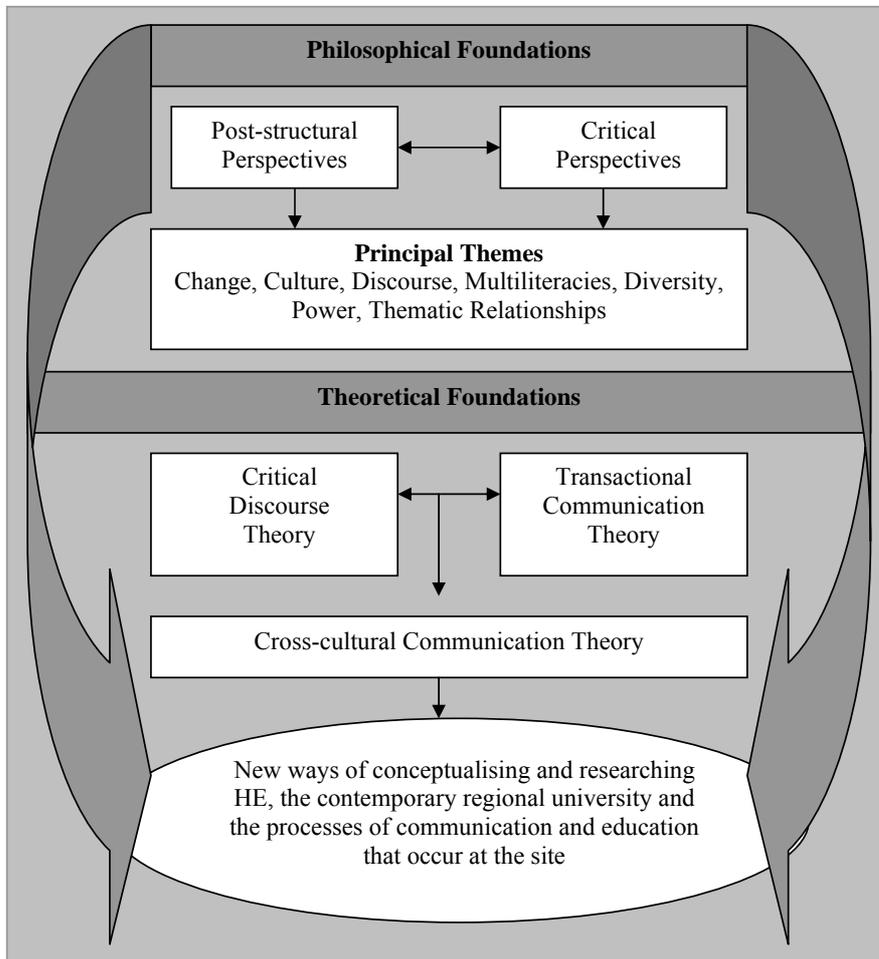
Figure 2.1: Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations and Relationships

In Chapter Two, CDT has a heavier weighting than TCT and CCT, as CDT is the perspective selected to position theoretically the current state of knowledge about the Australian HE, in particular as it relates to the elite-mass and investment-cost shifts, social justice and access and equity concerns, the diversity of the student body, the contemporary university, FYE, and transition.

2.2 Critical Discourse Theory: Perspectives and Contributions

2.2.1 Introduction

Critical Discourse Theory (CDT) is a theoretical approach that allows a space for an investigation of previously unconsidered alternatives in the contexts of HE. CDT utilises the post-structural view of the role and importance of discourses to contribute

understandings about the ways in which knowledge, identity, social relations, and power are constructed and reconstructed in the localised texts of a university, for example, as in the present study. CDT is applicable to the present study for three reasons. First, CDT is able to clarify the ways in which language use, discourse and communication operate in the social, cultural and political contexts of the university. Secondly, CDT is able to illuminate issues about 'power' and about the access to knowledge and power (Corson 1999; Fairclough 1995; Muspratt, Luke & Freebody 1997; Van Dyjk 1995). Thirdly, CDT is applicable in its capacity to identify the discursive practices that constitute barriers for students as they choose whether or not to participate at university.

This section begins by defining CDT. Secondly, the section explores the implications of CDT for educational research (section 2.2.3). The section then applies CDT to Australian HE, analysing the elite-mass and investment-costs paradigm shifts (section 2.2.4). Both shifts have consequences for the Australian university sector, particularly in relation to the issues of social justice, access and equity, academic and linguistic capital and diversity. CDT is next applied to inform these issues (sections 2.2.5 – 2.2.8). The application of CDT to HE also has consequences for the contemporary university, specifically in relation to the issues of FYE and transition, subjects which are addressed in section 2.2.9. Finally, the theoretical perspectives provided by CDT are applied to analyse university responses to the increased participation of the student body (section 2.2.10).

2.2.2 Defining CDT

CDT extends poststructural and critical orientations (see Figure 1.1) by synthesising the notions of linguistics scholars with those of social theorists. Linguistics scholars, for example Halliday (1985), analyse specific language texts, whereas social theorists, for example Van Dijk (1997) and Fairclough (1995), investigate the social functions of language (Knobel 1999). In combining both strands, CDT emerges as a domain of study that unveils, in particular, the role of discourses in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society (exemplifying the study's theme of power). In this capacity, CDT highlights the fact that not only is language socially shaped, but that it is also socially shaping or 'constitutive' (Fairclough 1995, p.132).

In synthesising the notions of linguistic scholars with those of social theorists, CDT analysts are able to bring into focus the unequal relationships among individuals, groups,

social practices, language uses, and access to goods and services. Knobel (1999) argues that, as a consequence, CDT's focus differs from a third group, interaction socio-linguists, in that interaction socio-linguists concentrate on social cohesion brought about through shared, situated presuppositions pertaining to interaction conventions and the mutual recognition of these presuppositions (see Brown & Levinson 1987; Goffman 1967). Knobel contends further that CDT also differs from communicative ethnographers, who generally emphasise cultural relativity of language practices, variation and communicative competence (see Cazden 1988; Hymes 1971, 1996). According to Knobel (1999, p.25) the theoretical differentiations between the three groups of researchers (critical discourse analysts, interaction socio-linguistics and communicative ethnographers) are blurred, fluid and overlapping when put into practice, with many researchers in language use and education working at the intersection of the three (Knobel cites Gee 1992).

This study is also one that works at this intersection, synthesising aspects of the ethnography of communication (see section 4.6.3) and cultural theories (see sections 2.4 and 3.4). The study emphasises the importance of the interrelationships among individuals and social contexts (illustrating the theme of power), identifies what it means to be a member of a particular social group (exemplifying the theme of culture), and prioritises the role of communicative competence in the contexts of HE (indicating the themes of discourse and multiliteracies).

CDT uses the post-structural questioning of intrinsic and absolute 'truths' or canonical status about the phenomenal world to query whether cultural texts can ever be definitively or authoritatively interpreted. In a CDT approach, all texts are seen to comprise a dynamic interplay of difference – which means that multiple and potentially quite idiosyncratic meanings can be generated by readers in particular social contexts (Luke 1999, p.164). Luke suggests that meaning is seen to exist in the difference between relational terms to which current representations defer, and these themselves may shift both contextually or historically. Such deconstruction/reconstruction queries whether authoritative or definitive interpretations of texts are possible, as CDT sees each text's distinctive features and differences as being reconstituted and reconstructed into distinctive readings in local institutional sites (Luke 1999, p.164). Thus alternative entry students' (AES) experiences in negotiating the local texts at the regional site of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) are representative of these reconstructions/reconstitutions. Students bring to the

reading of texts their own meanings and these shift in a multiplicity and complexity of ways. Lecture/tutorial interactions are likewise open to multiple interpretations – with students constructing and reconstructing their own meanings from the discourses present.

CDT challenges the viability of dominant paradigms and theories: the prevailing 'meta-narratives' that encompass assumed 'truths'; or disciplinary or commonsense 'truth claims' that are used to describe theories such as those pertaining to human development, social agency and social structure. In the 19th and 20th centuries such theories were employed to analyse and develop educational interventions (Luke 1999, p.165). Consequently, CDT permits space for new theories to be developed, particularly with regard to accommodating cultural and linguistic diversity.

CDT corroborates the need to hear historically marginalised voices and critiques of dominant discourses as well as the speaking and writing of the 'unspoken' voices and stories that have historically been silenced. These include the voices of AES, who, previously, have been marginalised from university participation.

2.2.3 CDT: Significance for Educational Research

In educational research, CDT looks specifically at the ways in which knowledge and identity are constructed across a range of texts at the site of the educational institution. To do this, CDT proceeds from the assumption that 'systematic asymmetries of power and resources between speakers and listeners, readers, and writers can be linked to their unequal access to linguistic and social resources' (Luke 1999, p.167). Thus it is that educational institutions are seen to act as gatekeepers of discourse resources: the texts, genres, lexical, and grammatical structures of everyday language use. Luke (1999, p.168) contends that the acknowledgement of educational institutions as gatekeepers suggests a reframing of questions about educational equality in terms of how ideological and systematically-distorted communication may set the conditions for differential institutional access to discursive resources: the very educational resources needed for social and economic relations in information-based economies.

CDT therefore has the task of being both deconstructive and constructive (Luke 1999). In its deconstructive guise, CDT has the goal of debunking, or rendering problematic, the themes and power relations of everyday talk. In its constructive guise, CDT contributes to the development of a critical literacy curriculum that aims towards an expansion of

students' capacities to critique both discourse and social relations, and towards a more equitable distribution of discourse resources (Fairclough 1992). CDT can serve then to reveal differential educational practices (for example, practices developed in different university contexts) and demonstrate how they not only constitute selections of practices, but also how these selections are not accidental, random, or idiosyncratic (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997). Rather, the practices are supportive of the organisational needs of each educational institution and the stratified interests within social organisations. Therefore it should 'not be surprising that a good deal of institutional effort' is expended to make materials and activities appear 'natural' and 'essential' characteristics of literacy. Muspratt, Luke and Freebody (1997, p.192) additionally maintain:

> …in that sense at least literacy education and research about it can be viewed as political in that each entails choices among theories and methodologies that afford or reinforce radically different competencies and ways of engaging in social experience, all of which have significant material consequences for learners, communities and institutions. In another sense the materials and interactive practices of education are best seen as key sites where cultural discourses, political ideologies and economic interests are transmitted, transformed and can be contested.

CDT's emergence presents three important and interrelated implications for educational research (Luke 1999). First, CDT allows for an interdisciplinary approach. Gee (1997) maintains that such an interdisciplinary approach facilitates a flexible meta-language which can be used not only for the description of texts and discourses of the regional university, but also for their interpretation, analysis and critique. According to Gee (1997, p.296) the act of juxtaposing texts from different discourses, or juxtaposing texts from different historical stages of the same discourse, provides 'a way of exposing the limitations of meaning that all discourses effect and a way to open out new meanings'. This is because the very act of juxtaposition always requires a 'meta-language, with accompanying meta-practices within an emerging meta-discourse, to enclose different texts in a more encompassing system' (p.297). This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach in that it incorporates and synthesises the theoretical perspectives pertaining to CDT, TCT and CCC.

Secondly, CDT provides the grounds for a re-theorisation of educational participation. CDT recognises that students' experiences prior to and at university can be interpreted as 'constructed' phenomena that are constitutive of educational and intellectual endeavours (Luke 1999). This study adopts this interpretation in that it assumes that students, through

their lived experiences, and whether consciously or unconsciously, construct and negotiate their identities out of the many cultural sources they access, not all of which are helpful. The implications of this assumption are investigated in section 2.2.6 – which addresses the relationships between economic, cultural and social capital and their intersections with the continuing disadvantage of low socio-economic status (SES) students in HE; in section 2.2.7 – which examines the ways in which academic and linguistic capital interact with HE participation; and in section 2.2.8 – which applies CDT to review the issues stemming from the growing diversity of the student body.

Thirdly, CDT establishes the grounds for rethinking pedagogical practices and outcomes as discourse. Luke (1999) contends that if the primacy of discourse is acknowledged, then it is possible to support the argument that mastery of discourse can be seen to constitute a principal educational process and outcome. This contention revitalises educational research by challenging traditional views of the processes of transition and perseverance at university. These challenges are addressed in sections 2.2.9 and 2.2.10. First, however, CDT's capacity to reveal the connections between the global and the local, to make explicit the power configurations operating at the site of the contemporary university, will be explored, in both sections 2.2.4 and 2.2.5.

2.2.4 CDT: Framing the Elite-Mass and Investment-Cost Paradigm Shifts

2.2.4.1 Introduction

CDT has the capacity to reveal the discursive practices that operate as power relationships in an educational context and to connect local texts and cultures, theoretically and empirically, to power and ideology configurations operating in the broader society (Fairclough 1995). For instance, CDT provides a systematic means of linking students' experiences to the wider external forces that operate on both the localised site (USQ) and the students who inhabit it. CDT also presents a means of contextualising the ongoing change that has become characteristic of the HE sector. This section applies CDT to position these power configurations and this change, reviewing the elite-mass and investment-cost paradigm shifts, as well as the consequences each provides for the stakeholders involved. The section thus extends two of the study's seven principal themes described in Figure 2.1: power and change.

2.2.4.2 The Elite-Mass Shift

Barnett (1994), from the realm of social philosophy, argues that not only has HE changed but also that this change is 'reflective of much more fundamental (although much less remarked on) changes in the relationship between HE and society' (p.3). The expansion of, and consequent increasing participation in, HE that has occurred during the last decades of the twentieth century has been characterised by Barnett (1994) and others (Aitkin 1993; Assiter 1995; Marginson 1993; Williams et al. 1993; McInnis & James 1995; Meek 1994) as the 'elite-mass shift'.

Atkins and White (1994, p.46) explain that, up to the time of the Second World War, HE 'served an intellectual and social elite'. However this situation was to change dramatically. Whereas, in 1946, there were just six state universities serving 25,500 students, the sector had grown to 10 universities by 1960, and by 1975 there were 19 universities and numerous Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) with a total of 273,00 students (Meek 1994). In the years 1950 to 1993, while Australia doubled its population, the HE system increased sixteen fold (Aitkin 1993). The decade 1985-95 alone saw enrolments increase from 367,000 to 604,000 (Department of Employment Education Training 1995).

As the HE system expanded, participation rates correspondingly increased. Participation rates grew by 64% in the years from 1982 to 1988, and by an additional 34% in the years from 1988 to 1993 (McInnis & James 1995). In 1993, Aitkin stated that 'more than a third of all young people are at university, and it seems likely that of the current population about a half will have attended university at some stage in their lives…we are approaching an era of 'universal' HE' (p.1). By 1994, HE recruited more than 30% of the school leaver cohort (Atkins & White 1994, p.46). In 1996, DETYA stated that about 25% of all Australians aged 19-21 years participated in HE.

Barnett (1994) describes the increasing participation in HE as a 'social phenomenon requiring explanation', transforming 'the elite view that HE stands for a species of educational experience distinctive from and apart from the rest of the educational system' (p.3). Williams et al. (1993, p.3) assert that, during the 1980s, when participation rates increased more than 50% in eight years, changes in the demographic (cultural, social, economic and academic) composition of the populations of HE entrants changed the

nature and aims of HE. Anderson (1992, p.9) argues that 'there have been two revolutions in public attitudes to education this century'. The first occurred when the majority of the population came to view secondary education as the single best means of advancing their life chances, or at least the life chances of their children. This view was replaced when the second revolution began in the late eighties. This second view perceives that the majority of the young population not only aspire to, but also acknowledge, that they require HE if they are to achieve their life-choices.

The elite-mass shift reflected the increased demand for tertiary places by both school leavers and mature age students. Changing community expectations played a part with the then Education Minister, Dawkins (1988, p.16), acknowledging the expectation that 'there is an increasing recognition of the importance of lifelong education and, in particular, the need for further education and training during working life'. The demands were enhanced by community expectations pointing to a discrepancy in the gender balance of HE students, resulting in higher participation rates for females. The situation was also enhanced by an increase in government-funded places bolstered by the then Hawke Labor government's concerns about social justice and questions of equity. These demands contributed to the development of AE pathways to university. McInnis and James (1995, p.4) suggest that the elite-mass shift, with its rapid growth in student participation, was 'perhaps the most significant change in Australian HE in recent times'. The next subsection applies CDT to explore the investment-cost shift and its consequences for university participation and practice.

2.2.4.3 The Investment-Cost Shift

The investment-cost shift exemplifies the impact of international and national forces on the localised educational site and the students who dwell in it. The shift depicts the economic rationalist constraints that have occurred in HE in Australia since the mid-1980s (Atkins & White 1994; Birrell & Dobson 1997; Bramble 1996; Marginson 1993; Maslen 1997; Moodie 1999; Nicholls 1996; Nightingale et al. 1990; Smith 1997; Stilwell 1993). As early as 1990, Nightingale et al. (1990, p.260) argue that a 'doing more with less' philosophy had emerged:

> It was obvious that academic staff were being called upon to do more with less: teach more students, address equity issues through special admissions schemes for disadvantaged students, maintain research output…. establish stronger links with the community and industry, and so on, but expect no improvements in staff-student ratios, capital expenditure.

Until the early-1990s, HE was envisaged as an important avenue to enhance social justice, as a long-term national 'investment' in the future, evidenced by 1990's *A Fair Chance for All*. By the beginning of the 21st Century, however, HE was being conceived of as a budget to be balanced, a short-term 'cost' to be managed. According to Benn (2000), the rhetoric surrounding HE has shifted away from the concept of 'education', in its construction as the responsibility of the state, and moved towards 'learning', thereby reconstructing it as the responsibility of the student. Such discourse hides, for instance through the introduction and the increase of fees, the move to transfer responsibility for the 'infrastructure of learning' to the individual (Benn 2000), from public to private funding (DETYA 2000) – a 'public-private shift'. There have been changes in government funding to universities, in the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and in Austudy[17] regulations; changes that reinforce the idea that HE had entered 'hard times'.

A deterioration of government funding in HE has occurred since the mid-1990s in Australia. The President of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (2000-1), Professor Ian Chubb (2000, p.40), notes that progressively higher dollar figures in each budget can not obscure the reality that proportionately less of the national income is being spent on education, including HE. 'The average input that universities received from government for educating Australian students had declined steadily per student from the mid-1980s and more precipitately since 1996' (p.40). Direct government grants to public universities constituted less than 52% of university funding (p.41). The base-grant income per student has been maintained since 1996 only by transferring a bigger proportion of the responsibility for financing HE from government to student. This situation, Chubb (2000, p.40) argues:

> …saves the government money, but at what cost to the people of Australia? One cost to the nation is obvious – higher fees deter greater educational investment by individuals. Transferring the burden of funding from governments to individuals will result in the total level of funding declining as more individuals choose to forgo what they perceive to be too great a risk…moreover, in the real world, the scale of this forgoing of risk is inevitably related to one's (or one's parents) capacity to pay.

Another aspect of the investment-cost shift is the increasing managerial emphasis adopted by universities. *Why Universities Matter*, a monograph edited by Coady (2000), explores the implications of the increased corporatisation and managerialisation of universities

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[17] HECS refers to the federal governments' contribution to students' HE fees, whereas Austudy is a federal government payment or 'youth allowance' made to students on the basis of federal government socio-economic indicators.

during the last decade. Incorporating chapters by Peter Karmel, the former Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, and Stuart Macintyre, Raymond Gaita and Simon Marginson, senior academics of the University of Melbourne, the text was originally approved by the publications committee of Melbourne University Press, but subsequently banned by the same university's management committee, thus reflecting the power configurations operating at that university. This situation exemplifies the confrontation between entrepreneurial, corporate, business practice and traditional scholarly ideals. Similarly, Cain & Hewitt (2004, p.1), in a case study of the confrontation of these ideologies at the University of Melbourne, report that:

> …the ideological dominance of economic rationalism means that universities are constantly being asked to fend for themselves, to corporatise and in essence become quasi-privatized institutions…The result is under funding, conflicts of interest, timid academics, poor quality degrees and career-focused students with little notion of social responsibility (cited in Hywood 2004, p.1).

The confrontation between corporate business practice and scholarly ideals has resulted in increased budget constraints, the demands of which are increasingly dictating pedagogical decisions.[18] Outcomes and throughput, in minimum time, are prioritised.[19] Concurrently, quality control measures and strategies designed to uncover the expectations of markers and the 'hidden' curriculum have been eroded.[20] To succeed professionally, for instance, academics need to develop both entrepreneurial capabilities, by securing research grants and industry collaborations, and administrative capabilities, in relation to developing their desktop publishing skills.[21] In addition, the ratio of students to teachers has risen substantially, from 14 to 19 students per teacher in the years 1995-2000, thereby threatening the quality of learning (see Table 2.1) (Schreuder 2002). This situation is compounded by the fact that pressures have increased on those staff who are most in a position to support new students. McInnis (2000) and Kift (2002) both document the casualisation of staff involved in the FYE.

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[18] At USQ some courses are offered to on-campus students in external-mode only to reduce teaching costs. For example, in 2004, foundation theory courses in the Visual Arts Department were offered in external-mode only, to on-campus students in an attempt to reduce staffing costs.

[19] At USQ, the number of program deferrals permitted has been reduced along with the maximum time permitted to complete degree programs.

[20] At USQ, the costs of teaching/marking in first year courses with high enrolment figures have meant a reliance on lectures alone, replacing the more traditional mix of lectures and tutorials, and the replacement of written assignments with multiple-choice examinations.

[21] In 2004, at USQ, academics were asked to assume a greater responsibility in publishing their online and external learning packages, including the requirement that they learn a new software program so that they are able to do so.

Table 2.1: Student Teacher Ratios 1995-2000 (Schreuder 2002, p.2)

Increase in Student to Teacher Ratio compared to Funding Gap due to low indexation
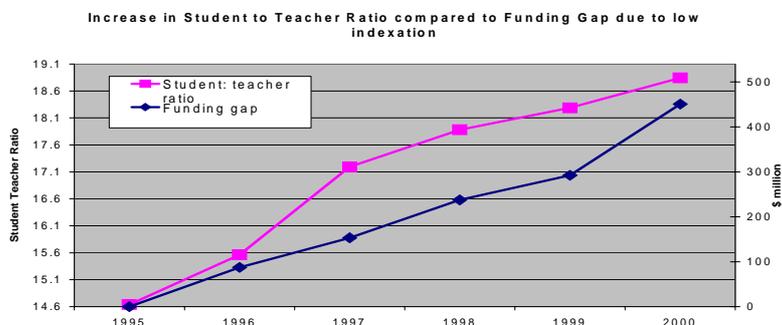
The dominant economic-rationalist political imperatives currently operating in Australia have consequences for universities in further ways. Bourdieu (1988) argues that the notion that universities are removed from immediate social relevance (delineated as 'ivory towers') is what gives them their power. However, this perception of power is increasingly being reversed under the liberal-individualist economic-rationalist ideology. Not only are universities becoming increasingly disadvantaged economically but academics are also increasingly described derogatively, for example as 'the chattering classes' (see Cain & Hewitt 2004; Coady 2002; Smyth 1995). The once privileged positioning of the academic is giving way to more dominant managerial and bureaucratic imperatives. For instance, at USQ, the administrative computer systems are increasingly driving pedagogical decisions in relation to grading scales and assessment. The attempt by the Nelson reforms (2002) to tie $404 million in new funding to measures such as the end to compulsory student unionism and a reduction in staff entitlements are further examples of the economic-rationalist constraints operating on the sector.

Another aspect of the investment-cost shift is its impact on students. As foreshadowed in section 1.1.2, students are increasingly experiencing financial difficulties. Principally, these difficulties affect some groups' participation in HE. Subsection 2.2.6.2 reviews the consequences generated for lower socio-economic students (SES) in particular, linking these students' initial lack of participation in HE as school-leavers (SL) to their subsequent status as AES and positioning these against the understandings generated by CDT.

Low SES students are not the only students affected by the shift, however. Students generally are affected; their financial difficulties extensively documented in the research literature on HE (see Birrell et al. 2000; Long & Hayden 2001; McInnis 2000, 2001 and 2003). Bramble (1996, p.9) notes that 'Austudy amounts to only two-thirds of the dole[22] for those lucky enough to get it' whereas Birrell and Dobson (1997, p.56) contend that 'there is a financial black hole for young people aspiring to university who do not come from well-off families'. Long and Hayden (2001), in a report commissioned by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, *Paying Their Way,* found that 42% of students were in debt, 70% were in paid employment (a 50% increase since 1984) with a mean of 14.5h/week work (300% increase since 1984), 10% missed lectures because of work and 20% experienced academic problems because of work. Further, 20% and 10% of students respectively missed lectures because they could not afford childcare and/or transport and, finally, students' selections of program (11%), university (17.4%) and mode (23.3%) were affected by income. These findings raise questions about choice and access. McInnis (2000) contends that students who worry most about money (full-time students working part-time) have lower than expected marks, less computer access and lower scores on self-report measures of integration/satisfaction/experience. Additionally, these students expected more support than they received and underestimated the pressure of studying.

The lack of government assistance for students who want to study (or who are studying) is also becoming apparent. Birrell et al. (2000) reveal the dilemmas faced by students who are finding it harder to get government assistance in the form of the Youth Allowance (YA). In 1998, only 33% of full-time undergraduates were receiving the YA, and of these, many were receiving only partial payment. These students, as well as most other full-time students, had to either work part-time or rely on their parents for support. The situation is worsening for students. In 2003, using previously unpublished Centrelink figures; the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University reported that only 21% of full-time students under the age of 19 years received the YA in 2001:

> …a Year 12 student contemplating HE who does not come from an affluent family willing to finance his or her living expenses, or who does not come from a very poor family [thus being eligible for the youth allowance], faces a future fraught with financial difficulties (cited in Contractor 2003, p.1).

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[22] The 'dole' is an Australian colloquial language for government unemployment benefits.

Students' financial difficulties are being reported in the media. Green (2004), the Education editor for *The Melbourne Age,* documents students' HECS debt, spiraling rent and the struggle to survive whilst studying. Green's article cites the weekly free breakfasts provided by La Trobe and Monash Universities, and Salvation Army reports of students' growing demands for food parcels and vouchers. Green (2004) also quotes a La Trobe University report which found that almost one third of students could not afford to run heating when required, almost half said that their health was negatively affected by financial hardship, and 39% reported they were eating inadequately. The escalating costs in equipment necessary to persevere at university (for example, computers and study materials) are further aggravating the increases in the costs of living.

However, although students' increasing financial difficulties are documented in research (McInnis 2003; Peel 2000) and in the media (Green 2004), these findings are not being applied to Austudy regulations or, in fact, reflected in the Nelson reforms (2003). Vince Callaghan, spokesperson for the Student Financial Advisors Network and the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association, argues that whereas cost of rental accommodation has 'gone up astronomically, particularly where universities are', the amount of income students can earn before they lose government benefits (i.e. Austudy) has not changed since 1992 (cited in Green 2004, p.4). These difficulties will escalate from the beginning of 2005 when the Nelson Reform's (2003) fee increases are due to come into effect. Many universities have already announced their intentions to increase their fees by 20-30%.[23]

What is becoming clear is that the investment-cost shift is affecting students' capacities to study effectively. For instance, there are the consequences that stem from the students need to effectively balance study and work. Section 1.1.2 foreshadowed one of the most potent of these consequences: students' increasing disengagement with university life generally and with study in particular. The research evidence documenting this phenomenon continues to accumulate. McInnis (2001) argues that too many hours worked *de facto* part-time carries many academic risks: students are more likely to have less time on campus and in class; less likely to work with other students; more likely to study

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[23] USQ fees will increase 20% from 2005 whereas the University of Queensland (UQ) and Queensland University of Technology (QUT) have announced increases of 25-30% from 2005 (30% is the maximum permitted under the legislation).

inconsistently; anticipate getting lower marks; seriously consider deferring and feel burdened by over commitment. The students who choose to work part-time 'only' also experience consequences in that their academic orientation and adaptation are weakened: they are in the workforce for up to 15 hours per week; do a minimal amount of study to get by; are less prepared for classes; study on weekends; find it difficult to get motivated; are less clear about reasons for attending university; and use health, library and other services less than non-working students (McInnis 2001). More recently, Cain and Hewitt (2004) have established that undergraduates attend classes for perhaps as little as 22 weeks a year, many holding down a part-time or casual job for 15 to 25 hours a week just to subsist. Invariably, Cain and Hewitt (2004) conclude, being a student becomes part-time and casual too.

2.2.4.4 Summary

CDT, with its capacity to make transparent power configurations – to reveal the intersections between the global and the local and society and the individual as well as the links between power and ideology configurations and university practice – is able to facilitate a systematic means of linking students' experiences to the wider external forces that operate on both the localised site (USQ) and the students who inhabit it. The lens provided by CDT highlights the repercussions of the elite-mass and investment-cost shifts on the Australian university sector. The analysis of the elite-mass shift, for example, has revealed both positive and negative effects. The positive effects include the increasing participation and diversification of the student body. The negative effects include the progressive devaluation of HE and the increasing differentiation (in terms of access and equity) between the 'elite' and the 'mass' (of universities, programs and discourses). The analysis of the investment-cost shift has disclosed the connections that exist between government funding policies and the difficulties experienced by universities, university staff and students. Table 2.2 illustrates the scope of both shifts by contrasting the 1970's university with that of the early 21st century university.

Table 2.2 summaries the two shifts in terms of the changed assumptions underlying HE: (a) from envisaging HE as an investment in the future to categorising it as a 'cost' to be transferred to the users (the 'user-pays' system); (b) from publicly funded to privately funded education with the infrastructure becoming increasingly the responsibility of the learner; (c) from selectively educating the elite to accommodating the widening

participation of the student body; (d) from a focus on vocational education to a growth in lifelong learning imperatives; and (e) from collegial to corporate management where pedagogical decisions may no longer have the highest priority.

Table 2.2: Contrasting HE Environments: 1970's and 2000's (Clarke 2000)

1970s	The early 21st century
Elite higher education	Mass higher education
Government funded/public investment	Reductions in government 'subsidisation'
Universities as public institutions	Universities as international businesses
'Collegial management'	'Corporate managerialism'
Intensively resourced	'Do more with less' policy
Educate leaders	Improve society's overall education level
Professional education	Lifelong learning
'Ivory towers'	High level of accountability
Openly perpetuates privilege	Subversively perpetuates privilege through 'qualifications creep'
Selective and elite	Increased participation and diversity

The review of CDT, by drawing out the significance of the two shifts for present-day HE, also clarifies challenges which confront university students. First, the investigation of students' financial difficulties divulges repercussions in relation to students' increasing disengagement both with the university culture and with study. This disengagement affects students' capacities to make a successful transition to the university culture as well as their capacities to persevere with their university studies. Secondly, because it may not be feasible or sensible for students to rely exclusively on the support of the university (either in its policy decisions or in terms of academic support), given the increasing financial constraints also affecting the university, students are challenged to find ways to empower themselves. The review reveals that students not only need to find ways to fund their studies, they also need to find ways to assert themselves as they access and navigate the university system. Both these capacities rely on skills or capabilities that lie within the students themselves.

A parallel strand of this argument stems from the notion that as HE becomes increasingly a user-pays system, students may start to 'flex their muscles' by increasingly giving voice to their concerns and demanding more from the system as a consequence of their investment in it. As students pay more for HE, the power configurations may also shift, with universities being forced to concede that students' demands will need to be acknowledged and increasingly addressed. Maintaining the balance between addressing these demands whilst sustaining a learning community and facilitating student

engagement constitute major challenges for HE.

The elite-mass and investment-cost shifts also challenge Australian HE in further ways. These challenges stem from the issues in relation to social justice, access and equity, academic and linguistic capital, and the increasing diversity of the student body. The next sections apply the theoretical perspectives provided by CDT to appraise these issues, with section 2.2.5 focusing on social justice, section 2.2.6 reviewing the issues of access and equity, section 2.2.7 exploring the ramifications of the unequal distributions of academic and linguistic capital, and section 2.2.8 applying CDT to analyse the increasing diversity of the student body.

2.2.5 CDT: Reviewing Social Justice Concerns

2.2.5.1 Introduction

With its capacity to focus attention on the role of discourses in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society, CDT is able to review the ideologies informing the debates about the role of 'social justice' in Australian HE. Specifically, CDT is able to make transparent the meanings allocated to social justice, as they are reflected in Australian government policies. This section will apply CDT to uncover the assumptions underlying Australian HE policies since the 1980s.

2.2.5.2 Government Policies towards Social Justice

The Hawke/Keating Labor governments (1983-1996), perceiving that social justice and educational equity are interconnected, envisaged HE as an 'investment' that could assist in addressing inequity in society. These perceptions existed side-by-side with the view that various sub-populations, defined as such on the basis of demographic characteristics, were disadvantaged in accessing HE (Beasley 1997). Characteristics considered to be disadvantageous included gender and ethnic differences, social and economic imbalances in HE populations and the hurdles of a rural background, all of which were concerns of long standing for Labor governments (Williams et al. 1993).

Social justice became a central pillar in the rhetoric of the Federal Labor government's White Paper Reforms (see Dawkins 1988 and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 1989), which saw the establishment of the United National System of HE institutions (UNS) and a massive growth in university places from the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s (Postle et al. 1997, p.1). In 1990, this process culminated in the

document *A Fair Chance of All: Higher Education That's Within Everyone's Reach* (DEET 1990), which elucidated a national framework aimed at achieving educational equity in Australian HE. The framework reflected the assumptions that educational disadvantage constituted a social/public responsibility and that the links between social positioning and educational disadvantage were pivotal (Postle, Sturman & Clarke 2000, p.16). *A Fair Chance for All* signalled the then Labor government's intent to influence the student profile of HE to more fully and fairly reflect the composition of Australian society as a whole.

As well as identifying the differential between participation rates of specific groups in HE, *A Fair Chance for All* (1990) was significant in that it established that these differences represented inequity and provided strategies to redress the imbalance. The framework involved the availability of seed funding, mandated equity planning, and monitored the access and participation of six identified equity sub-groups in HE: low SES, disability, female, indigenous and Torres Strait Islander, rural and isolated and non-English speaking background students. The original thrust of the framework emphasised increasing access/participation for these equity groups but was extended to include the improved retention, progression and success of these groups within the system. The aim articulated was 'access with success' for the targeted groups, leading to a student profile that would more fully reflect the diversity of Australian society.

The traditional commitment of Labor governments to social justice, however, led to questions about the efficiency of the education system and wastage of talent (Williams et al. 1993). Howard's Liberal-National Coalition government (1996-present) addressed the issues of efficiency and wastage by reimposing a liberal-individualist view of equity. In Howard's government, with the funding arrangements for HE becoming increasingly delineated as a 'cost', there has been a shift in the delineation of social justice (see Beasley 1997, Coady 2000, DETYA 2000b, and Postle, Sturman & Clarke 2000). The Howard government's view of social justice re-conceptualised educational disadvantage as the fault/responsibility of the individual and as unrelated to social positioning. The government's HE policy signifies a return to the 'liberal-individualist tradition', not only in the way equity is defined and prioritised but also in the degree to which the government is willing to support the pursuit of equity. In the liberal-individualist tradition 'the market is regarded as the most basic provider of social justice and the state is seen simply as the

vehicle for promoting the activities of the market which, if left to freely operate, deliver distributive fairness' (Postle, Sturman & Clarke 2000, p.9). Within this mindset, it is very much up to the individual to motivate himself or herself and a failure to realise potential represents a loss to the individual only. Although the difference in the redefinition of equity is subtle, the results may be 'profound for those in society who are most disadvantaged, especially during the FYE when nurturing and concerted support remains critical to retention and ultimate success' (Postle, Sturman & Clarke 2000, p.18).

Social justice concerns are affected in further ways. Habermas (in Connerton 1976) argues that the dominant and the elite continually shift the 'goal posts' to maintain their power. In relation to education, for example, Corson (1999) asserts that school/university qualifications lose their value if too many people gain access to them. The system thus begins to place more value on other factors, especially the cultural capital, such as style, presentation of self and use of high status language, prized and possessed by dominant groups. The Howard government embodies this ideological orientation, with 'mass' HE in Australia losing ground to 'elite' secondary education. For instance, in 2004 and for the first time in Australia, private secondary schools secured more taxpayer dollars from the Howard Coalition government than the publicly funded universities: $4,712 million to non-government schools as against $4,574 million to HE (cited in Maiden 2004, p.1). The concept of mass participation is diluted in one further way: a decreasing access to higher status courses. For example, in 2001 the Howard government raised the HECS fees charged for the more elite courses (for instance medicine/law), courses mainly offered by the older metropolitan universities. Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002) maintain that these conditions combine to reverse the universality of mass tertiary education and set back the issues of social justice. The individualist-liberalist philosophies of social justice currently driving HE policy in Australia are therefore not helpful in ameliorating educational disadvantage. They may, in fact, act to perpetuate it.

2.2.5.3 Summary

By focusing attention on the role of discourses in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society, CDT reveals the ideologies informing the debates about social justice in Australian HE. The review exposed the meanings allocated to social justice as reflected in government policies since the 1980s. The Hawke/Keating Labor governments regarded the connections between social positing and education as fundamental and

initiated policies to address the educational disadvantage that, they believed, stemmed from these connections, for example, *A Fair Chance for All* (1990). In contrast the Howard Liberal Coalition government's view is that educational disadvantage is unrelated to social positioning, thereby reconceptualising educational disadvantage as the responsibility of the individual. The shifts in policy may be subtle, however the effects may be overwhelming for those who are most disadvantaged. The next section will apply CDT to explore these effects in relation to access and equity in HE.

2.2.6 CDT: Debates about Access and Equity

2.2.6.1 Introduction

CDT, with its capacity to analyse the role of discourses in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in society, may contribute insight into the debates about why educational disadvantage continues to exist in Australia. For example, the application of CDT may explain why many of the initiatives set out in the national framework, *A Fair Chance for All*, have not succeeded? Postle et al. (1997, p. xii) in a National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) funded study, *Towards Excellence in Diversity*, found that a clear trend was the lack of progress of some of the designated equity groups, see Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Numbers of Equity Groups in Higher Education (1996-2001)
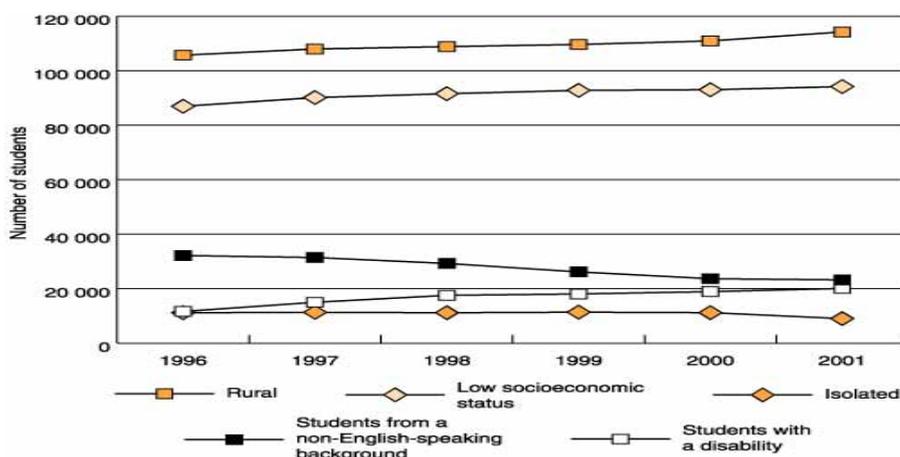
Although Table 2.3 shows an increase in the number of rural students participating in HE, it specifies that, since the introduction of the national framework, the proportional participation of rural groups has actually declined, as has that of isolated groups (p. xii). The number of lower SES participating in HE has shown a similar trend over the same

timeframe (see Table 2.3). Postle et al. (1997) note that, although the causes of educational disadvantage are generally well appreciated, finding strategies to address them remain problematic.

In this section, CDT is applied specifically to the equity issue of low SES, one of the equity groups identified in *A Fair Chance for All*. The equity issue of SES was selected, as it is an issue of primary concern at USQ, with 30% of the student body characterised as low SES (USQ Equity Home Page 2002). The analysis of SES was also selected as it demonstrates the ways in which individuals' memberships in different groups in society can act to enhance, minimise or obstruct these groups' participation in HE. James (2002), for instance, argues that Australians from lower SES backgrounds have roughly half the likelihood of participating in HE as Australians from medium and higher SES backgrounds: a situation which has remained relatively stable for over a decade, despite extensive equity initiatives across the system as a whole.

2.2.6.2 The Equity Issue of Socio-economic Status

Applying CDT to the equity issue of low SES informs the ways in which membership in, or efficacy with, dominant or mainstream groups determines the life choices of different groups within society, thereby marginalising some groups from accessing, or even wanting to access, a university education. CDT proceeds with the assumption that the relationships between education and social positioning are significant for HE participation (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Connell 1994a; Corson 1999; Fairclough 2001). CDT reveals, in particular, the role played by cultural, social, economic, academic and linguistic capital as well as the interactions that occur between them. Further, CDT is able to make explicit the capitals' impact on students' aspirations and choices and the reasons why, despite the overall expansion of HE, imbalances in HE participation of people from lower SES backgrounds remains a problem in Australia.

The term, capital, according to Bourdieu (1992, p.51), refers to 'knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications'; that is, anything of value that can be commoditised within a specific field.[24] Corson (1999, p.20) explains that, in describing the links between education and reproduction, Bourdieu presents 'capital' metaphorically as an economic system. For Bourdieu, such capital

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[24] Bourdieu's concept of field encompasses the institutions, rules, regulations, titles and positions which constitute the so-called objective structures of the culture (Schitaro 1998, p.89)

includes the advantages that people acquire as part of their life and experiences (including their peer group contacts and their family backgrounds) (cultural capital), taste, style, and presentation of self (social capital), financial capabilities, knowledge and contacts (economic capital), such assets as certain kinds of knowledge and abilities (academic capital), and varieties of language and linguistic abilities (linguistic capital).

In relation to Australian HE, both the landmark Martin (1964) and Karmel (1975) Reports explored the relationships between these forms of capital (although they did not explicitly use Bourdieu's language). The Martin Report (1964, p.43), for example, discussed the relationships between power, identity and life choices:

> Although there is a good deal of evidence that a considerably higher proportion of the sons and daughters of professional men have an aptitude for and succeed in school work, and are more likely to show themselves suited for tertiary study, it is highly improbable that less than 2% of sons and less than 1% of daughters of unskilled or semi-skilled fathers have the ability to do university work, as against 36% of sons and 14% of daughters of those engaged in higher administration (Martin 1964, p.43).

The Martin Report (1964) went on to contend:

> …in all modern western societies, the phenomenon of 'social class' is a prime source of 'unnatural' inequalities in education; that is to say, of inequalities which do not rest on differences of [economic] endowment (p.43).

The Karmel Report (1975) discussed the difficulties some groups have in accessing HE. The report nominated these difficulties as a lack of educational opportunities at the school level, a lack of motivation stemming from students' SES, and a slowness to develop or to become conscious of their interests, aspirations and capacities (in Bourdieu's terms, lower socio-cultural[25] and lower academic capital). These students 'tended to come from somewhat lower SES backgrounds than did "typical" university students but could subsequently prove to be 'worthwhile students with their maturity and experience offsetting indifferent school records' (p.11). The Karmel report (1975) asserted that the causes of disadvantage would require not only reform in primary and secondary schooling, but also, more particularly, in society as a whole.

Bourdieu maintains that all socio-cultural groups possess and esteem the various forms of capital, but not always in the same form of capital that is recognised and valued in education, or esteemed in other formal sites (cited in Corson 1999, p.20). Corson (1999)

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[25] From this point forward in the study, the terms social capital and cultural capital are combined to form the term 'socio-cultural capital'. Socio-cultural capital describes the cultural contacts and backgrounds of a particular group (cultural capital), which are embodied in the groups' particular tastes, styles, and presentation of self (social capital).

recounts that, in moving from one socio-cultural field or context to another, power relationships change, and different types of capital become more or less valued. According to Corson (1999) the capital that educational sites value is often quite different from that valued by people in their own contexts. The experiences, beliefs and values of low SES students, for example, may be less in tune with mainstream university cultural and academic capital, and may even 'marginalise' them – exemplifying the consequences of a social positioning which can act to exacerbate educational disadvantage. This capital may include: a socio-cultural aversion to the accumulation of debt, a characteristic which becomes more critical as students become more responsible for funding their tertiary education (a reflection of the students' economic capital); negative experiences of school and poor study habits/facilities (academic capital); and the lack of family/peer reference groups which have knowledge of, and value, HE (socio-cultural capital). Additionally, low SES groups may not value, or may even devalue, education and the benefits of education generally (academic capital). In these ways, low SES students' lower economic/socio-cultural capital inhibits their willingness to access HE as school-leavers (SL), thus perpetuating their standing as citizens with relatively lower academic capital and, for those who access HE at a later date, contributing to their status as AES.

Research continues to reveal the connections between HE, SES, and economic and socio-cultural capital. Anderson and Vervoorn (1983, p.170), for example, assert:

> …HE in general and universities in particular remain socially elite institutions. The overrepresentation of students from high socio-economic status backgrounds has remained constant at least since 1950, as has the under-representation of those of lower socio-economic background.

The Commonwealth Department of Education (1987, p.3) reports that 'young people from families living in the most advantaged localities are twice as likely to complete Year 12 as those who come from families rated lowest in SES terms'. Similarly, Williams (1987, p.54) contends that 'wealth as such affects participation directly', stating that 'relative to persons from the poorest 25% of families, those from the wealthiest 25% of families are about twice as likely…to commit themselves to study for a degree' (p.49). Skuja (1997) confirms that family income, along with cultural factors, comprise the key reasons for the continuing poor access to HE among students from low-income families. In addition:

> …if parents are the main source of a student's living expenses while studying, it follows that the financial resources of their family will be an important factor in their educational decisions…In particular, for young people coming from clerical and blue-collar families in

the $30,000 - $50,000 range, their ability or otherwise to receive the Youth Allowance may be decisive in their decisions about attending university (Birrell et al. 2000, p.23).

The connections between economic capital, the socio-cultural capital embodied by occupational status, and HE participation are also present in the research literature. Illing (2000, p.37) reports that 'when it comes to deciding whether to go to university, a student's family income matters: the greater the family wealth, the higher the participation rate among the managerial/professional classes'. Birrell et al. (2000) used census data to investigate possible interactions between parental incomes, proportion of offspring attending university and five categories of parental occupation and showed that information about dependant children was clearly linked to family resources. Specifically, Birrell et al. (2000) found that within the occupational categories of clerical, professional and managerial groups, the higher the parental income the more likely were offspring to attend university: among the manager-administrator group only 19% of the offspring of those on a weekly income of less than $500 attended university compared to 40% of the offspring of those with a weekly income of more than $2000. By contrast, 13.9% of children from labourers' families on less than $500 went to university. Significantly, when labourers earnt more than $2000 a week, still only 14.1% of their offspring accessed HE, therefore lending support to the argument that cultural factors such as family/peer attitudes also influenced students' decisions not to proceed to HE (Birrell et al. 2000).

The most recent research confirms the links between HE participation, economic capital and socio-cultural capital. James (2002, p.x) confirms an appreciable social stratification is evident in secondary school students' opinions about the relevance/attainability of HE:

> Though the overall attitudes of young people towards secondary school are similar in many ways, their aspirations and intentions regarding higher education are strongly influenced by socio-economic background, gender, and geographical location. Socio-economic background is the major factor in the variation in student perspectives on the value and attainability of higher education.

James (2002, p.x) reports that the main attitudinal difference between various SES groups was that secondary students from lower SES backgrounds were significantly less likely than other secondary students to believe that a university course would offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career. A further difference was that secondary students from lower SES backgrounds were more likely than others to perceive that there were educational achievement barriers, which may impede access to HE. These perceived barriers included students' perceptions that their academic results would not be good

enough for entry to courses of interest (38% low SES versus 25% others) and a belief that they did not possess accreditation in prerequisite subjects for courses of interest to them (24% low SES versus 15% others). James' research in this area clearly demonstrates the connections between economic and academic capital and HE participation.

Additionally, perceptions regarding the cost of HE appear to be a major deterrent for lower SES students; a reflection of the interactions between economic and academic capital. James (2002) found, for example, that lower SES students were more likely than other students to believe the cost of university fees may stop them attending university (39% lower SES compared with 23% higher SES students). Further, 41% of those students within the lower SES group believed that his or her family probably could not afford the costs of supporting them throughout university and well over one-third indicated that they would have to be self-supporting if they went to university. James' research confirms that the educational disadvantage for young people from lower SES backgrounds is created by the cumulative effect of the relative absence of encouraging factors (or capital) and the presence of a stronger set of inhibiting factors (or capital), with the predominant inhibiting factor indicated to be the to be psychological or psycho-social determinants of the perceived relevance and attainability of HE (socio-cultural capital); factors that could not be influenced through short-term policy measures.

There are additional links between economic and academic capital. The research suggests that not only are the low SES group under-represented in the student population but that low SES also appears to influence choice of HE institution and the content and level of study undertaken. Anderson and Veroorn (1983), for example, argue that SES is not only a powerful predictor of who will participate in HE but it also is a determinant of the kind of institution that will be attended, what will be studied and the level at which it will be studied. In Anderson and Veroorn's (1983) study, low SES students, for example, were more likely to attend Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE), rather than universities and were more likely to attend rural, rather than metropolitan institutions. In other words, lower SES students' lower levels of economic/socio-cultural capital also influenced the choice of institution.

Low SES is also a predictor of the courses studied. Postle et al. (1997) differentiate between low prestige professions (teaching and nursing), medium prestige professions

(agriculture, business, engineering, humanities, paramedical services and science) and high prestige professions (architecture, law, medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science). Postle et al. (1997, p.83) note that low SES students became increasingly under-represented in HE as the occupational prestige of the course increased, reflecting the connections between these students' cultural and economic capital. In contrast, Postle et al. (1997) reveal that high SES are more likely to enrol in courses they viewed as being the more prestigious, such as medicine, law and architecture, rather than the courses viewed as less prestigious, such as teaching, engineering and commerce. For example, in the more prestigious areas of medicine, law and dentistry, high SES students outnumbered medium SES students by a factor of three and low SES students by a factor of five. Moreover, high SES students were over-represented in each field of study irrespective of prestige. Middle class students achieved parity with population norms only in the least prestigious courses of teaching and nursing. James' study (1999) confirms these findings, reporting that overall, low SES students were more likely to attend newer, less prestigious universities and were significantly under-represented in the more prestigious professional fields of study (in Moodie 1999). SES also determines the level of study. Low SES students were more likely to dominate in lower degree level studies. In contrast, Postle et al. (1996) and Beasley (1997) found that students entering postgraduate study are far more likely to be the offspring of privileged parents and the graduates of private schools, again reflecting these groups' levels of socio-cultural and economic capital.

Therefore, even when low SES students do access HE they invariably do not attend prestigious universities nor enter prestigious courses. Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002, p.132) explain that this indicates the ways in which socio-cultural capital operates at the site of HE, linking the different functions of the disciplines within universities to their differential relations to authority. The higher prestige accorded to the disciplines of law and medicine is linked to the privileged position which arises because these disciplines act as agents of reproduction for social authorities. Trowe (1984, p.154) comments 'every system of HE is a stratified system of institutions, graded informally in status and prestige, in wealth, power and influence of various kinds'.

In support of the way the various kinds of capital operate in HE sites, Meek and Wood (1998) document the not-unexpected move in 1993 by a group of Australia's older and more prestigious universities to form a cartel described in the local press as 'the Super

Seven' (University of Adelaide, University of Sydney, University of New South Wales, University of Melbourne, Monash University, University of Queensland and the University of Western Australia). By 1996, the 'Super Seven', with the addition of the Australian National University, had become the 'Group of Eight' (GO8). Enhanced cooperation between these universities was seen as a step towards the 'emergence of elite research universities on North American lines' (Meek & Wood 1998, p.15). GO8 universities, for the most part, attract the highest funding for research (an indication of their higher economic capital), and given tertiary entrance rank cut-offs are determined largely by a system of supply and demand, they also attract students with the highest tertiary entrance scores (an indication of their higher academic capital). This situation reflects Bourdieu's notion that GO8 universities are the ones that, because they are imbued with the values that work in the interests of shaping education in particular ways, are valued by the powerful economic and political forces. Therefore, that potential students with higher levels of capital tend to access/attend universities that are likewise higher in these levels of capital perpetuates the plight of those with lower levels of capital. In terms of CDT, the lower levels of capital possessed by low SES students interact with their lower levels of economic capital to primarily determine their participation in HE.

The social/cultural capital of low SES students is disadvantageous in terms of university participation in one additional respect: that it overlaps with other categories of disadvantage in fundamental ways. In 1996 the Higher Education Council (HEC) found that the majority of students categorised as low SES were also categorised as members of indigenous and rural and isolated groups, groups also under-represented in HE. These overlaps, the HEC argued, are primary factors in explaining disadvantage. James (2002) reports that the deterrent effect of costs are considerably heightened for potential students living in rural areas and that overall, HE is seen as less personally relevant by rural or isolated students, particularly those from lower or medium SES backgrounds. James' findings support those of Postle et al. (1997, p.85) who argue 'even if the educational deficits of people from low SES backgrounds could be instantly remedied and aspirations heightened, it is unlikely that the patterns of relative participation would be different'.

2.2.6.3 Summary
The application of CDT to the issue of low SES students' participation in HE has demonstrated how the discourses relating to economic capital operate to lower the

expectations of these students, including expectations of the kind of institutions that might be attended, the course that might be studied and the level of study that could be pursued. The review has demonstrated how students in possession of low economic capital are constrained from accessing not only a university education, but also the more prestigious universities and academic (occupational) disciplines. In particular, the review revealed how economic capital interacts with other forms of capital, for example socio-cultural capital, to perpetuate the educational disadvantage experienced by low SES.

2.2.7 CDT: The Role of Academic and Linguistic Capital and HE Participation

2.2.7.1 Introduction

Whereas the level of economic capital affects access to HE for the socio-economically disadvantaged, two other types of capital, academic capital and linguistic capital, similarly constrain students from accessing HE as school-leavers. This section applies CDT to draw out the links between academic and linguistic capital and HE participation.

2.2.7.2 Academic and Linguistic Capital

Academic capital, according to Bourdieu (1977), is the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school. Part of the cultural transmission by family and school is the transmission of linguistic capital, with linguistic capital the primary determinate of academic capital. Linguistic capital is 'the ability to use appropriate norms for language use and to produce the right expressions at the right time for a particular linguistic market' as well as the competence to produce appropriate grammar and other forms of language (Corson 1999, p.20). Most forms of academic assessment rely on verbal ability to demonstrate degree of leaning and understanding (mastery) of curriculum content. The acquisition of curriculum content is reliant on verbal ability – the ability to comprehend/interpret spoken and written communication.

People who possess appropriate academic/linguistic[26] capital in any context are more favourably placed than others to exploit the system of education. As a result, explains Corson (1999), the distribution of unequal linguistic power facilitates the idea that the most advantage comes from the use of modes of power that are the least equally distributed. Inequitable academic/linguistic capital also facilitates the idea that the

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[26] The concepts of academic capital and linguistic capital, henceforth in this study, are integrated and the term 'academic/linguistic capital' used to reflect the relationships between the two concepts.

readiness of minority-language or nonstandard speakers to stigmatise their own language means that they often condemn themselves to silence in public settings for fear of offending norms that they themselves sanction, linking in with Foucault's (1977) notion of regulatory discourses. Corson (1999) explains that there are many linguistic markets[27] in which rare or high-status forms of language profit the user, and where non-standard or low-status language use has a limited value. Students from marginalised backgrounds, for example AES, are consequently often silent within, or are forced to withdraw from engaging in, these markets.

Carrington (2001, p.277) argues that such marginalisation is exacerbated by the legitimate linguistic habitus[28], which is objectified in the artifacts of school literary instruction. For example reference and textbooks, audiovisual and computer software, instructional texts and the majority of children's literature objectify and represent the legitimacy of the official habitus. These artifacts are self-limiting in that they portray the practices expected of the ideal literate citizen and, furthermore, represent these practices as the *consequence* of literary learning rather than its *pre-condition* (p.278). For mainstream students these artifacts reflect their own culture, and exposure to mainstream culture through the formalised discourses of public schooling may constitute a validation and reinforcement of their existing cultural capital at the expense of the potential to envisage social change or differing social realities. Alternatively, students from socio-cultural backgrounds other than the mainstream may not find themselves positively, if at all, represented in educational texts. 'The official devaluing and de-legitimisation of their linguistic and cultural practices and habits are made self evident' by their absence in the literature of formalised education (Carrington 2001, p.278).

Further, the marginalisation of some groups (for example AES) is compounded by the fact that although the academic/linguistic capital that is valued in educational sites is not equally available to students from different backgrounds, these sites operate as if all students had equal opportunities to acquire it (Corson 1999, p.21). By basing their

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[27] Bourdieu (1991 cited in Schitaro 1998, p.89) defines markets as a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or 'capital'.

[28] Habitus, according to Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus' (1977) is one of the anthropological theories invoked to explain the nature of the relationships between, in the case of this study, the students, their teachers, and the social, cultural and political-economic milieu in which their interactions take place. Thus, education is a product of and a response to power relationships in society.

assessments of educational success or failure and their reward of certificates and qualifications on students' possession of high status academic/linguistic capital, which is unequally available, HE sites act in such a way as to reproduce the social arrangements that are favorable to some social groups but unfavorable to others, thereby confirming the value of the dominant cultural capital that is passed on to the next generation. Bourdieu (1977) refers to this process as the application of 'symbolic power' by dominant social groups who inflict 'symbolic violence' in this way on non-dominant groups. For Bourdieu each person is schooled in language both inside of and outside of formalised education, with the attribute that creates unequal esteem for different types of academic/linguistic capital lying in the gap between the practical mastery of language transmitted by the home and the community, and the symbolic mastery demanded by, for example, the university. One example of this attribute is the significance allotted by formally educated social groups to academic culture or to the social institutions that transmit it, as well as to the vocabulary judged to be necessary for that transmission. This capacity helps some groups to endow their children with the cultural knowledge and discourses more in tune with mainstream university culture, including the shared preferences, beliefs and attitudes which some families transmit to their children and which help define and shape the future of their children. For instance, the belief that academic mastery or capital is essential to success (i.e. the acquisition of academic capital) may be transmitted to offspring by their parents' willingness to invest in their children's education, both financially (funding private schooling) and personally (overtly shepherding students towards HE).

Beasley (1997), in an analysis of whether Australian HE is equitable, calls the phenomenon the 'culture privilege'. Beasley argues that when the culturally privileged are born, they are inserted into a culture which encompasses 'configurations of meanings which establish, for them, the context, values and ideas by which they understand the values and language uses that will privilege or advantage them in terms of equity of access to HE'. The culture privilege determines how they negotiate their social worlds and natural environments, and their future opportunities are, to various degrees, circumscribed by those configurations. Beasley suggests that by virtue of growing up in a particular context, the 'affluent and powerful' develop the particular attitudes, expectations, beliefs, values and language uses which will privilege or advantage them in terms of equity of access to HE. This advantage (see also James 2002) and works 'very strongly against

working class and indigenous people as well as against people from rural and isolated areas' (Beasley 1997, p.27). The culture privilege also explains why AES who do access HE may at first also feel isolated or marginalised in the unfamiliar university culture. Corson (1999) argues that culturally privileged students, defined for the purpose here as those students from high SES backgrounds, find that they are far more comfortable in the school environment than those less privileged (i.e. from low SES background or those who are less culturally privileged). Culturally privileged students:

> …tend to succeed more easily and like most people they come to believe that schools are neutral in way they do all of this. Because of the way hegemony works the members of the marginal groups also accept that this is the way things must be in education. If their children do not succeed in schools, parents come to believe that their students' failure results from their natural inability: that the educational selection process is a fair one that is based on objective educational criteria (p.23).

Corson (1999, p.24) maintains that students from marginalised backgrounds adjust their expectations downward and these lower expectations become part of the way they look at the world. As well, when students from marginalised backgrounds do experience success in schooling, their parents often make choices on their behalf that keep them away from the same kinds of opportunities that similarly endowed students from dominant backgrounds are urged to grasp, therefore automatically limiting the acquisition of academic and linguistic capital by their offspring. Corson also contends that schools recognise those who 'play the game of education' and who acknowledge the legitimacy of schools and universities in offering that recognition, which means that the criteria these sites use to judge success are supported because students and parents agree to submit to those criteria (Corson 1999, p.24). Moodie (1995, p.11) asserts that there exists inter-connection between the experiences of disadvantaged groups in education and some of the values and practices of schools and universities, which help to perpetuate inequity in academic/linguistic capital. This inter-connection may be exacerbated by a private school system, which is more aware of the need to explicitly prepare students so that they are capable of performing well in such an assessment system (cited in Beasley 1997, p.27).

Corson (1999, p.23) argues that central to achieving educational success (i.e. acquisition of academic capital) is possession of high status academic vocabulary of the English language (i.e. possession of high level/status linguistic capital), an argument supported by the gate-keeping measures for entrance to universities controlling access to HE. Beasley (1997) provides the example of the merit principal. Beasley maintains that merit, which is

measured though the use of scaled scores derived from school and public examination performance in selected subjects (which in turn are dependent on linguistic capital), provides access to HE. The level/degree of merit students attain is directly related to the level of mastery of high status vocabulary (linguistic capital) students have attained. The merit principal continues to be biased against people from low SES backgrounds and those from rural and isolated areas because students from these groups possess lower linguistic capital. Thus the educational process is one that precludes people from disadvantaged groups even before formal selection takes place and, at the same time, alleviates any pressure on the university system to remove biases affecting selection. By such means, the power of formal education is socially unjust in ways that are often taken for granted by the professionals who staff the institutions, and by parents and potential students.

2.2.7.3 Summary

The application of CDT to HE has confirmed the ways in which the academic and linguistic capital students possess affect their aspirations to participate in HE. CDT makes explicit, for example, the ways in which the distribution of unequal academic/linguistic capital, exemplified through the operation of legitimate linguistic habitus, the culture privilege and the merit principal, act to perpetuate the marginalisation of some groups from participating in HE. The analysis also demonstrates that, when they do access HE, students bring with them understandings and practices that stem from the academic/linguistic capital they possess, understandings that may or may not be helpful as the students navigate the university culture. This contention challenges both students and university policy and practice (see sections 2.2.9 and 2.2.10).

First, however, there is the appreciation that the HE landscape is complicated by the recognition that the targeted equity groups constitute only some of the diverse groupings changing HE. New groups of students, new flexibilities and new literacies are also influencing the profile of HE.

2.2.8 CDT: Framing Widening Diversity in the Student Profile

2.2.8.1 Introduction

This section applies CDT to investigate the widening connotations of diversity in the contexts of HE, drawing out the consequences for both the student experience and

university practice. The meanings attributed to diversity in the elite era will first be considered. These views will then be contrasted with the meanings attributed to diversity in the 1980s and 1990s and in these 'new times' of the 21st century.

2.2.8.2 The Elite Era

The review of the ways in which non-traditional students were described in the elite era confirms the presence of mainstream discourses operating at that time in relation to the student profile. Before the advent of mass HE, for example, researchers found it relatively easy to characterise non-traditional students. Schuetze and Slowey (2000), in fact, argue that non-traditional students were viewed negatively, encompassing all those who had not entered HE directly from secondary schools, were not from the dominant social groups, or were not studying in a conventional mode:

> Traditional students were primarily male, white and able-bodied and came from the upper SES background, which meant they had sufficient finances to support their studies in full-time mode without having to generate income from working during the non-traditional academic term. All those not fitting these characteristics were non-traditional and although they were not systematically excluded from access to HE, they were and remained outsiders, even if enrolled. Non-traditional students in this old system were clearly a minority: women, members of ethnic minorities, disabled persons, those without standard academic access qualifications from secondary school. Overarching all these characteristics it was clear that social class was the primary determining element across all these groups, including standard-age students (Schuetze & Slowey 2000, p.12).

An implicit assumption of the elite era was that the student cohort had roughly comparable levels of preparedness and 'ability': that, in terms of CDT, HE students possessed consistent and high levels of socio-cultural, economic, academic/linguistic capital.

2.2.8.3 Diversity in the 1980s and 1990s

In Australia the early literature on student diversity focussed on mature age (McInnis & James 1995) and international entry (Ballard & Clanchy 1988 and 1991). These concepts were broadened in the 1980s in response to the access and equity and the social justice debates, reflecting the diversity emanating from the inclusion of students previously marginalised from mainstream university participation. In Australia, these groups included the targeted equity groupings (see sections 2.2.5 and 2.2.6) as well as the students identified as AES and first generation students (see Beasley 1997; James & Beckett 2000).

The initial research on diversity, globally and nationally, tended to concentrate on the problems generated. In the United States, Stuart Hunter (1996, p.33) contended that the diversity of students 'complicates our work and teaching…that universities must seriously

undertake a process to understand students' characteristics, needs, hopes, dreams and fears'. Radcliff (1996), meanwhile, acknowledged that 'the diversity and expansion of entering first year students means that the quality, relevance and recency of their secondary education to the undergraduate education curriculum would be far less uniform and far less ascertainable' (p.20). In Australia, the escalating diversity led to debates about ways to adequately meet the educational needs of the larger number of mature age, international and equity students entering HE (Atkins & White 1994; Marqinson 1993; Nouwens & Thorpe 1996; Skilbeck 1993, Smith 1993). James and Beckett (2000, p.175), for example, maintain that understanding and responding to student diversity presents a major pedagogical challenge that still confronts the Australian academic community.

2.2.8.4 Contemporary Views of Diversity

The 1980s/1990s understandings of diversity have, in their turn, been broadened by the contributions of such disparate research areas as the FYE and transition literatures and by the multiliteracy and critical literacy research areas.

From the FYE research area, for instance, Kantanis (2002, p.3) argues that the focus of diversity could be any one of a multitude of student cohorts created by either a single variable, or any number of a cluster of variables:

- *gender* – male, female;
- *prior school experience* – single-sex, co-educational, government, independent, Catholic;
- *permanent home residence* – metropolitan, regional/rural, overseas;
- *citizen residence status* – local, international;
- *liability status* – Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) liable, HECS exempt, Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme (PELS);
- *equity categories* [as determined by the Australian Government] – disability, non-English speaking background (NESB), low social-economic status (low SES), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ATSI), women in non-traditional areas, rural/isolated
- *equity categories* [as determined by the specific University] – all of the above, *and* for example women in higher degree by research courses, significant period of absence from the education system (between school and university, between undergraduate and postgraduate studies);
- *attendance type* – full-time, part-time, online;
- *attendance mode* – on-campus, off-campus distributed learning, multi-modal, external;
- *course type group* – undergraduate (UG), postgraduate: Other Post Graduate (OPG) i.e., coursework and Higher Degree by Research (HDR); and
- *basis of admission* [for undergraduate students] – school-leavers, mature age.

The concept of diversity has additionally been broadened by the HE sector's drive to become more flexible (and thus be able to recruit more students). McInnis (2003, p.3-4) argues that students have been encouraged in their expectations by the choice and

flexibility offered by universities, partly as a consequence of market competition and because new learning technologies make it possible, but principally because flexibility in course delivery has become an institutional performance indicator in its own right:

> Undergraduate students now have many more choices about when, where, and what they will study, and how much commitment they need to make to university life. For example, course structures in Australian universities have opened up to the point where first year undergraduate students can take third year subjects, and the notion of a major sequence of studies with the cumulative development of skills and knowledge no longer holds true for many students. Note too, the popularity of combined degrees (such as Arts/Law or Arts/Engineering), or the increase in the numbers of students taking two bachelors degrees with a gap between ('serial undergraduates'), and then there are those who manage to mix and match subjects across institutions.

As a consequence, the composition of the student cohort can be seen to encompass diversity in terms of the basis of admission, the age of students, the mix of enrolment mode, degree types and the mode of delivery. The student cohort also varies with students transferring from other institutions and from TAFE into second or third year.

The literature on transition has also widened the concept of diversity with its focus on students' personal situations (McCann 1996; McInnis et al. 2000; McLean 2002). Kelly (2003), citing Barnett (1984), nominates the different levels of students' learning skills and attitudes: variations in academic language skills; study skills; confidence to participate; English language skills and numeracy; motivation to study; and prior knowledge and skills in discipline. Kelly (2003) also notes the importance of personal circumstances and personal skills, degree of adjustment to university and number/level of external commitments, including family responsibility and work, health, and trauma. Kantanis (2002), meanwhile, suggests that the range of individual qualities encompasses:

> …personality type, state of mind, coping strategies, interpersonal skills and communicative competence, and such factors as intelligence, preferred learning style/s, prior academic achievement, maturity, flexibility, motivation, commitment, desire to succeed and perseverance all play a significant role in determining the type of transition experience that students will have and the speed with which adjustment to university will be made.

These understandings of diversity are further extended by the literature documenting students' changing assumptions regarding career and life choices. Wyn and Dwyer (2000) argue that students attending university today have very different assumptions about how to conduct their lives: that they possess an increased awareness of foreclosed options about adult life, which they perceive to be an uncharted territory; that their attitudes reflect their multi-dimensional and overlapping lives which they regard as 'increments to adulthood'; and that they are active agents in their own lives – making pragmatic choices

about their options which include their decisions about university. Wyn and Dwyer (2000) propose that students' identities can no longer be based around the achievement of careers (to the same extent), nor can they be based on the postponement of 'life' while they invest in study. 'Their major life decisions are therefore delayed or jumbled into entirely different patterns' (Paul 2001, p.45). Deferment (of studies) is also becoming a major theme, with 33% considering deferring their studies in first year (McInnis 2003). McInnis (2003) argues that the concept of young full-time students on well-established pathways is no longer valid.

2.2.8.5 Socio-cultural Diversities

The critical literacy and multiliteracy areas, with their focus on socio-cultural diversity, have also widened the scope of diversity. This literature acknowledges the new diversities related to new organisational, technological, professional and multi-modal cultures and discourses (Cope & Kalantiz 2000; New London Group 1996). The New London Group (1996) argue that the rapidly shifting and multiplicity of communications channels and media and the increasing cultural diversity in the world today call for a much broader definition of diversity. There is the recognition that differences in identity and affiliation, for example, in terms of gender, ethnicity, generation and sexual orientation, are challenging the concepts of a collective audience and common culture (New London Group 1996). The new multimedia/hypermedia channels also provide members of sub-cultures with the opportunity to voice their views and develop networks, both through multilingual television and the creation of virtual communities via access to the Internet. The diverse groupings a student may belong to thus add complexity to the student profile.

2.2.8.6 USQ: Diversity in a Regional Context

For regional universities like USQ, increasing student diversity has become an issue of particular relevance: a consequence of its regional location, its historical beginnings and the demographic profile of its student body. Among several factors contributing to the diversity of USQ's student body is the university's role as a one of the main providers of distance education. A consequence is the increased numbers of rural and isolated, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students[29], disabled and international students: students who are lower in economic, cultural, social, academic and linguistic capital. USQ's status as a former Institute (as the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education

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[29] USQ's Kumbari/Ngurpai Higher Education Centre caters specifically for this group of students.

(DDIAE) and as a former College of Advanced Education (CAE) have also contributed to the diversity of the student body. This prior status, for example, facilitated its 'applied' and 'practical' reputation as an educational provider, attracting those students wary of the 'ivory tower' reputations of the more 'elite' universities. Another contributing factor emanates from its geographical position: only 200 kilometres from the state capital of Brisbane. This allows the university to attract students from its rural vicinity. However, USQ also loses students to the Brisbane universities, which offer the more prestigious and professionally orientated courses that attract the more able students (i.e. those higher in academic/linguistic capital) as well as the students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (i.e. those higher in economic and socio-cultural capital). In the 1990s, USQ also introduced multi-modal offerings as well as a plethora of joint or double degree courses, across departments, faculties and universities, both nationally and internationally, in on-campus, external and online modes. As foreshadowed in section 1.1.3 and as shown by a number of indicators, the percentage of students from the equity backgrounds at USQ (i.e. low in either, or in any combination of, economic, socio-cultural and academic/linguistic capital) also continues to be one the highest of any Australian institution.

Attempts have been made to investigate the diversity at USQ, two of which are relevant to the present research. The first attempt, *Student Diversity and Equity: A Case Study* (French & Boyle 1996), investigated the diversity of needs and expectations of the cohort of 1996 commencing students. The investigation concluded that there was a diversity of student needs demonstrated at USQ and, significantly, that access to information presented a major obstacle, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and for first generation students. 'For many of these students, coping with overwhelming and/or unpredictable economic, social and health issues, is a constant battle' (French & Boyle 1996, p.10). The second attempt, an unpublished report entitled *Successful Alternative Entry Students: Overcoming Potential Barriers to Academic Success* (Postle et al. 1996), explored the impact of increasing student diversity by investigating the characteristics of AES in three tertiary institutions; two universities, one of which was the USQ, and one TAFE College. Postle et al. found that the AES identified for the study were not minority students, a finding which concurs with the figures provided in the USQ Equity Reports (1999-2003). According to Postle et al. (1996) the bulk of AES were mature age who

wanted to improve their circumstances (improve their socio-cultural capital) or change career direction (increase their economic and academic/linguistic capital).

The broadening scope of diversity continues to be identified at USQ. Lawrence and Clarke (2003), for example, note the burgeoning diversity emanating from differences in academic capital, for example in learning style and in educational background. There are also the differences which arise from different levels of social, cultural and economic capital, for example, in competing priorities, different entry standards, differences related to age and gender, different study paths, modes and locations of study, and differences in students' abilities, circumstances and aims. Student groups such as offenders in custody (low socio-cultural capital) and high school students undertaking university subjects (high academic/linguistic capital) contribute to the diversity observed in the USQ student body.

Clarke (2000) summarises the changing student profile at USQ by differentiating between the profile of the 'traditional' student – typically attending university in its elite period, and the profile of the 'non-traditional' student – students, including AES, typically attending regional universities since the late 1980s (see Table 2.4). Clarke's characterisation of the student profiles confirms that the interactions between contemporary students and regional universities are far more complex and problematic than those for the more traditional student, studying in the 'elite' era.

Table 2.4: Differences in the Profiles of Traditional and Non-traditional Students (based on Clarke 2000)

The Traditional Student	The Non-Traditional Student
Performance reflects abilities	Performance reflects interplay of abilities and level of disadvantage
Positioned to and sure of own 'abilities' to succeed	Uncertain of ability to succeed in HE and typically not well positioned to succeed at university
Carries no historical baggage	May be educationally disadvantaged
Carries no concurrent responsibilities	Typically carries work and/or family responsibilities
Knows how to navigate the system	Typically unfamiliar with systems and processes
Understands benefits of higher education	May be uncertain of benefits that HE can bring
Has back-up and support services available	Typically 'on their own' financially and often the first generation at university
Consider university a 'great' social occasion	Consider university 'hard work'; typically poor socialisation
Accepted by the 'economic rationalist' agenda	Victims of the current politically driven 'economic rationalist' agenda
Confident; certain; well supported; low risk	Nervous; uncertain; vulnerable; high risk
Thrives in traditional higher education	Requires student-centered, individualised approaches and flexible arrangements

Table 2.4 illustrates the increasing complexity exhibited by the student body. Traditional students studying in the elite era are depicted as generally well-supported students able to focus on their study endeavours, competently navigating the system and confident of succeeding in the relatively familiar university culture. Non-traditional students studying at a regional university are characterised as less confident students juggling multiple responsibilities, coping with financial difficulties and rising costs, and less certain of their ability and desire to succeed.

2.2.8.7 The Challenges posed by Diversity

The broadening understandings of diversity present challenges for university policy and practice. First, there is the challenge that emanates from the recognition that it is no longer possible to define a common 'student' cohort. Kantanis (2002) argues that proceeding with a 'one size fits all' template does not address the needs of specific cohorts of students. The increasing diversity, for example, infers that universities are facing student cohorts with differing levels of each of the capitals (socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital) and with differing combinations of the capitals (for instance some higher in academic but lower in socio-cultural capital or some higher in socio-cultural but lower in academic culture). Implications arise for a plethora of university policies in relation to flexibility, selection procedures, orientation and transition, curriculum and assessment among others.

Secondly, there is the challenge provided by the concept that new students, as they enter university, bring with them a diversity of backgrounds, knowledge, experiences and capital that may or may not be compatible with the accepted and mainstream university discourses. This awareness challenges university policy and practice in relation to the FYE and transition in particular.

Thirdly, there is the challenge provided by the recognition that, due to rapidly expanding cultural and linguistic complexity, universities may no longer be able to provide students with the content knowledge needed to effectively negotiate the daily pragmatics of their future working/professional lives. The challenge for universities lies in the need to rethink, examine and continually amend a plethora of policies in relation to, amongst other things, curriculum and teaching/learning practices, throwing light on the veracity of teaching 'process' rather than 'content'. New understandings of knowledge creation are

emerging as one response. Revitalised views about diversity thus also parallel a new emphasis on lifelong learning, as students appreciate the need to keep learning or refining new skills to navigate transforming and evolving work and organisational contexts. These challenges gain focus and potency, as the full extent of the diversity inherent in the changed student profile is understood.

2.2.8.8 Summary

The application of CDT to analyse the widening meanings of diversity in HE confirms the problematic and complex nature of addressing diversity in a university context. First, there are the ever-widening meanings of diversity encompassing to date: international and mature age students; the equity groups; the multitude of student cohorts created by either a single variable, or any number of a cluster of variables, including the basis of admission, the age of students, the mix of enrolment mode, degree types and the mode of delivery; differences in the students' personal situations; differences in the levels of students' learning skills and attitudes; students' varying assumptions regarding career and life choices; and emerging socio-cultural diversities. Secondly, there are the challenges provided for universities. These include challenges to university policies in relation to flexibility, selection procedures and assessment; challenges to university policy and practice in relation to the FYE and transition; and demands that universities rethink, examine and continually amend a range of policies in relation to, amongst other things, curriculum and teaching/learning practices.

The application of CDT to the issue of student diversity illuminates two further issues. The first lies in the appreciation that the diversity of students now participating in HE may not possess the mainstream socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital needed to automatically succeed in the university culture. These students' lack of familiarity with mainstream university literacies and discourses, in turn, influences the degree of discomfort they experience as they negotiate their transition to university. Section 2.2.9 fleshes out this issue in more detail. The second issue stems from the notion that, whereas the term 'students' is used with the assumption that there exists amongst the university community a common and shared understanding of the meaning of this term; the widening diversity of the student population has meant that this is no longer appropriate. However, many HE stakeholders, embodying the mainstream discourses of

the traditional 'elite' era, continue to proceed as if this were the case. Section 2.2.10 investigates this issue.

2.2.9 CDT: The Contemporary University

2.2.9.1 Introduction

CDT's theoretical framing of the issues in relation to social justice, access and equity, academic and linguistic capital and diversity in the contexts of HE reveals not only the impact of global and national forces on the localised site but also the power configurations operating on the staff and students who inhabit it. One of the most important consequences stemming from the application of CDT to the HE context is the revelation that, for the diversity of students who now access HE, the university and its languages and discourses are not familiar. This issue is analysed in section 2.2.9.2. A second consequence is the increased importance of both the first year and transition, issues further explored in section 2.2.9.3 and 2.2.9.4. Thirdly, the idea that the socio-cultural capital of the diverse groups of students accessing HE may not be in synch with mainstream discourses and practices, has lead to a greater appreciation of the social and personal components of transition, an issue addressed in section 2.2.9.5.

2.2.9.2 An Unfamiliar Culture

First year students' lack of familiarity with the university is clearly evident in the literature on HE (Connell 1994a; Postle et al. 1997). Beasley (1997, p.29) argues 'universities have cultural values and norms to which new students must adjust, and students come with their own unique but varied cultural values'. Students themselves verbalise this notion – it is a society which is totally different from what most of us are used to' (cited in Beasley 1997, p.182). Critical theorists such as Gee corroborate students' lack of familiarity with the university culture. Gee (1996) contends that the ways of communicating within an academic setting are not easily grasped and are often more difficult for students whose backgrounds seem to differ from, or even conflict with, the ways of writing, knowing and valuing favoured within a university context.

The lack of unfamiliarity however varies between students. For some students, the transition to university may be characterised as a 'series of gaps', whereas for others, as McInnis and James (1995, p.11) argue, the experience may be described as a 'series of gulfs' which are 'dysfunctional'. Albert (1998), for example, refers to the 'culture shock'

experienced by first year students, particularly subgroups of students, such as mature-age and rural students. Albert discusses the case of a 28-year-old student juggling family and university commitments who finds it difficult to look after her family and meet academic expectations.

Not only is the university culture unfamiliar for many students, but also the culture may, in itself, constitute a barrier to such students. Bourdieu (1999) maintains that the HE system acts to consecrate social distinctions by cultivating ways of behaving that have the effect of reproducing social inequality. For example, even though more people have the opportunity to attend university, the system as a whole continues to work to reinforce privilege. The reinforcement of privilege is accomplished by making distinctions between 'elite' universities – in Australia, the Group of Eight (G08) universities – and the newer, regional or more technological universities, and by consecrating certain ways of behaving (or cultural practices) within universities. These practices include distancing between academics and students (to maintain the power differentials between them), the use of rituals (as in academic processions), the way knowledge is transmitted (traditional lectures given to large groups of students and lectures taking the form of monologues delivered behind a lectern elevated on a podium), and the use of academic discourses built on centuries of theory and research (reflected in both the high value accorded to referencing conventions and the fury attributed to plagiarism). Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002, p.131) argue:

> …through such ritualised games as the lecture, the university teacher speaks from the position of a distinguished club whose membership the student desires to join. The price of this membership is measured in the cultural capital the students are able to generate through immersing themselves in the scared texts and learned discourse of that academic discipline. They will then reproduce this learned discourse in their essays, aiming for that effortless mastery of language that distinguishes the good student.

Acquiring mastery of the new and unfamiliar discourses is a difficult process for some students. Students are charged with reproducing a discourse that is foreign to them, but which they also understand is important in assisting them to negotiate their way through their university careers. According to Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002), the fact that not all students are able to demonstrate the mastery of the discourses required (which all students have to display to a greater or lesser extent) is evident within the HE system. Web, Schirato and Danaher (2002, p.132) discuss the collection of mistakes, or 'howlers', that academics compile from students' work, suggesting that they are examples of the

ways in which lecturers confirm their superiority, in particular in terms of their control over academic discourses with which students display evident discomfort.

Schirato (1998), also attending to Bourdieu's theories, maintains that the mastery of such institutional discourses is one of the most valuable, but least objectively understood, of the ways in which institutional processes and structural relations perpetuate their privileged position and naturalise social inequality. Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002) call the mastery of discourses 'cultural literacy'. According to Webb, Schirato and Danaher cultural literacy is a 'strategic engagement with the field based upon self-reflexivity, an understanding of the rules, regulations and values of the field, and an ability to negotiate conditions and contexts moment by moment' (p.xi). Cultural literacy in this sense supposes both a familiarity with these structural relations, and more importantly, an understanding of how, in certain circumstances, these structures can be successfully negotiated, deployed, invoked, circumvented, perverted, or ignored. In other words, cultural literacy involves a form of meta-knowledge between the self and the objective structures of a culture (Schirato 1998, p.90). Schitaro (citing Bourdieu 1991) demonstrates how dichotomies can exist between the capital, habitus[30] and subjectivities of one part of the field and those of the professional and corporate imperatives and values of the rest of the field.

The notions of field and capital demonstrate how socio-cultural competency and cultural literacy become useful tools for enabling students to become familiar with the university and to function more effectively across different fields. The importance of becoming literate in and across fields and the ability to negotiate them from a position of literacy and familiarity corroborate the relevance of the sociological models reviewed in this chapter. Bourdieu's sociology is particularly useful for its assumption that actual textual practices and interactions with texts become embodied forms of cultural capital with exchange value in particular social fields but not in others.

Students' lack of familiarity with the university culture is exacerbated in one further way. Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002) argue that in addition to cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication variables, students also need to accommodate cross-disciplinary

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[30] Bourdieu's concept of the habitus refers to the idea that cultural practices may be understood as responses predicated both on the 'moment' and self interest, 'without consciously thinking about them (Schitaro 1998, p.90)

influences in teaching/learning styles. This is because people in different disciplines follow different rules of academic behaviour (p.76). As a consequence, there may be several levels of culture, or disciplinary dialects, operating in any university for any student. Scollen (1996, p.10) prefers to use the terminology 'interdiscoursal' rather than 'intercultural' in referring to the demands of these different communication settings:

> There is no overarching 'cultural' system which defines the whole of one's behaviour or interpretation, thus communication across different discourse systems is not just a matter of communication between different people, but a matter of the individual strategizing his or her own identity within a matrix of these multiple and competing systems of discourse (cited in Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002, p.76).

However the literature also demonstrates that there is not much time for students to become familiar with these new discourses. Kantanis (2001) argues that due to the nature of the course structure in Australia, students do not have the luxury of adjusting to the new culture over an extended period of time, rather they are under pressure to simultaneously adjust to the environment, the teaching and learning styles, and the procedures, practices and disciplines of the university (Kantanis 2001). Mak and Barker (2000) also note the time pressure that students are under to gain, simultaneously and rapidly, the necessary technical, communication, interpersonal and self-presentation skills that are central to success at university.

2.2.9.3 The Importance of The First Year Experience at University

The most consistent research response to the reality of a larger and more diverse student population and to the notion that the university culture is unfamiliar for many students is the identification of the importance of FYE. Stuart Hunter (1996, p.545) provides a rationale for the significance of the first year:

> Student retention is a desirable by-product of a good first year experience. For the most effective of institutional interventions retention is not itself a primary goal. If our institutions sincerely want to increase the rate of student success and persistence, then creating a campus climate and implementing programmatic interventions to intentionally help new students - all students actually - become successful and enhance the quality of the new student experience, doing so will result in increased retention.

Beginning with McInnis and James' (1995) first national snapshot of the first year, which isolated and weighted the different factors involved in successful transition to university, there has been a growing body of research in Australia investigating the FYE. McInnis and James' (1995, p.119) initial assertion that 'the quality of the learning climate at the first year level is probably more important than at any other time' is supported, for

example, by the findings of a number of major reports. These reports include McInnis et al.'s (2000) second snapshot of the first year, *Trends in the First Year Experience: In Australian Universities;* Pargetter et al. (1998) *Transition from Secondary to Tertiary: A Performance Study;* James, Baldwin & McInnis' (1999) *Which University: The Factors Influencing The Choices Of Prospective Undergraduates;* and Asmar et al. (2000) *The First Year Experience Project Report.* The importance of the FYE is further acknowledged by the growing number of conferences that have focussed on the significance of the FYE in Australia, in particular *The Pacific Rim First Year Experience Conferences*, 1995-2004. A number of influential journals have also published special issues on the first year: the *Journal of Institutional Research, Studies in Higher Education, Higher Education Research and Development, Journal of the Institute for Access Studies and the European Access Network* and *The Australian Review of Applied Linguistics.* The articles selected for inclusion in these special issues confirm the need for continued research and systematic inquiry into the early experiences of undergraduate students. McInnis (1996, p.552) argues that research in local contexts is vital:

> One obstacle to the acceptance of the need for change at the first year is the habitual frame of mind in universities that maintains, amongst other things, notions of an ideal student and teacher-student relationship. The profound change in the reality of the student experience currently underway internationally has been incremental and therefore somewhat deceptive in its impact. Raising awareness of these changes can be achieved by providing clear evidence of shifts in student attitudes and behaviours.

2.2.9.4 The Role of Transition

A key finding in research on the first year is that FYE involves a process of transition (Kantanis 2001; Krause 2001; McInnis & James 1995; Peel 1996). McInnis et al. (2000) acknowledge the necessity of an adjustment by students to the demands and requirements of university study. Kantanis (2001) argues that this adjustment includes students' adaptations to different learning environments and assessment systems, different perspectives of discipline-based knowledge, different and multiple literacies and discourses, different cultures and sub-cultures, and different teaching practices. According to Kantanis (2001, p.9) an important responsibility for universities lies in the understanding that the students 'most likely to succeed are those who actively seek to become enculturated into the teaching and learning styles, life, procedures and practices of the new university culture'.

In Australia generally the universities' interpretations of transition, as well as their responses to those interpretations, are inconsistent. Interpretations include Monash University's broad and inclusive definition of transition which states that transition pertains to issues of adjustment experienced by both undergraduate and postgraduate students and that it is cognisant of all students being in a state of constant transition: *to*, *during* and *from* the HE experience (Kantanis 2002, p.2). Other universities accept more perfunctory shorter-term interpretations, correlating transition with orientation.

Responses to the issue of transition include one-off stand-alone seminar/programs focusing on study skills and organisational/time management skills (because undergraduate course structure in Australia does not allow for longer, more intensive programs). These seminars/ programs are also not considered to be the responsibility of the teaching/academic faculty staff, but rather they are perceived as being the responsibility of areas like Student Support Services. These kinds of seminar/programs are similar to those used in the United States.

A recent development in relation to transition is the proliferation of web-based transition sites. These sites attest to the growing importance of transition as well as the realisation that face-to-face programs are too cost-intensive. Examples include the Monash Transition Program as well as those introduced by the University Of Melbourne, the University of Sydney, the University of South Australia and Macquarie University. USQ relies on web links and stand-alone seminar/programs to facilitate students' transition.

2.2.9.5 Transition and AES

Although there are few studies of AES' experiences in transition in the Australian context, studies by Postle et al (1996), Beasley (1997) and Kantanis (2002) have identified the barriers AES face. Postle et al. (1996) found that AES indicated financial problems and job commitments to be the greatest barriers to the completion of their studies whereas Beasley (1997, p.176) divides the barriers into 'fears' and 'hurdles' – the former more perceived, the latter more realistic According to Beasley, the fears experienced by AES related to personal failure, lack of competence, ridicule, and ability to adjust to the demands of university study, in addition to fears related to commitments outside university. The hurdles included fear (fears of changes to identity, about acceptance), lack of formal education (which was viewed as inhibiting the development of student-teacher and peer relationships as well as hampering acquisition of academic and analytical skills),

organisation (of time, existing commitments, commuting, access to library materials and balancing their social, study and family life), family and social group (in relation to their family's lack of support, ostracism, and negative attitudes towards their study), lack of money, language (in terms of socio-cultural backgrounds and communication within the university), and personal qualities (including lack of self-discipline, motivation, or both).

Kantanis (2002, p.5) reports that although some of the barriers faced by AES are similar to those faced by school-leavers (SL), AES experience additional barriers, including:

- lack of programs during Orientation suitably tailored for mature age students;
- immediate necessity for computer literacy;
- attendance on a part-time basis;
- lack of confidence in communicative competence regarding academic writing and oral presentations;
- ambiguous interaction with staff;
- ambivalent interaction and integration with school-leaver students in lectures, tutorials, practicals, etc.;
- heightened awareness of limited time – want every minute of university to 'count';
- fear of humiliation by school-leaver students – especially regarding ostracism due to age, potential difficulty understanding content and nature of assessment tasks;
- partner and/or family response to student's desire to return to study;
- need to convince partner and/or family that study is 'work';
- friends' response to student's desire to return to study;
- employer and work colleague response to student's desire to return to study; and
- increased financial pressures having relinquished full-time, paid employment.

Although this research adds to the understanding of the experiences of AES in transition, it does not increase understanding of what it is that helps these students to persevere with study. The research does however suggest one avenue of further investigation; that relating to the critical nature of the social and personal transitions that AES undergo whilst learning to adapt to the university culture.

2.2.9.6 A Social and Personal Transition

Beasley (1997), Kantanis (2002) and McInnis (2000) refer to the importance of the social and personal components of transition. Kantanis discusses the importance of interacting with the university community and of developing support networks, including networks with fellow students and staff. Beasley similarly recommends participation in learning networks and study groups. This research suggests that students' social and personal transition is as significant as their academic transition.

The literature investigating the social contexts of learning, although recent in Australia, has achieved more sustained emphasis in the American context. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991 and 1998), Burmeister and O'Dwyer (1996), White (1999), and Tinto (1995a, 1997 and 2000) give particular emphasis to the social contexts of learning. Burmeister and O'Dwyer (1996) call for an approach that allows first year students to draw the two worlds of academic and social together, whereas White (1999) reveals students' expressed need for an integration of the social and the academic spheres via interactions with new and senior students as well as academic staff. Tinto (1995) maintains that the social environment is significant for success to be achieved in study as do Austin (1993) and Kuh (1995 and 2003), who discuss the importance of student involvement in the university, arguing that the time, energy, and commitment students direct to on-campus activities positively correlates to increased persistence. Stuart Hunter (1996) agrees that 'joiners are stayers' and emphasises the importance of opportunities, activities, organisations and schemes which enhance the students' feeling of belonging. Terezini (1993) asserts that students learn holistically and that they benefit from both in-class and out-of-class experiences and Tinto (1997) exhorts the value of 'first year learning communities'.

In Australia research on the importance of a social transition is growing (Asmar & Peseta 2001; Beasley & Pearson 1999). Evans and Peel (1999) note the importance of the need for a social as well as an academic transition. McInnis and James' (1995), meanwhile, pay particular attention to the role and significance of the social context of learning. Contending that there are differences in academic performance between those students who interact with other students for study purposes and those who do not, McInnis and James (1995) suggest that innovations aimed at enhancing teaching and learning 'too readily overlook the importance of the social context' (p.118). McInnis and James (1995) also maintain that 'successful learning and the development of a positive view of the university experience did not occur in a social vacuum' (p.119).

McInnis and James (1995) thus contend that 'personal connection with other students and academics was far more important than a lot of people imagine' (cited in Illing 1995, p.47). However McInnis and James (1995) also point to the paucity of research in this area, identifying, in particular, the lack of attention to the social climate of student

learning in universities. The paucity of such research may be due to two elements, according to McInnis and James (1995). First, there is an over-emphasis on research that is based on the assumption that learning is defined by an interaction between the student and the subject matter. Secondly, and at the other end of the spectrum, there is the research, often derived from educational and psychological contexts, aimed at demonstrating the relationship between SES and academic performance. Neither perspective, McInnis and James contend, recognises the significance of the social nature of teaching and learning at university, especially when it is considered that first year students' orientations towards learning are in a formative stage and 'inextricably linked to the pursuit of identity and self-efficacy developed in a peer group context' (p.119).

Dearn (1996, p.94) asserts that there is a growing body of evidence, which suggests that universities need to critically reflect on the widely held assumptions about teaching and learning and 'the type of learning environments created for students, especially in the first year'. Learning, Dearn (1996) argues, should be seen as a deeply social activity involving the active construction of knowledge and a process of enculturation. In an examination of the broader implications of student diversity for university culture and practice, McCann (1996) observes that social isolation plays a significant role in causing difficulties in transition. The factors McCann (1996) views as significantly combating social isolation, and thus fostering student participation and success, include academic support strategies, access programs and social networks. In research at Monash University, Evans and Peel (1999) found that 'motivated and "academically and socially integrated" students generally achieve higher marks, all other things being equal'. Asmar et al. (2000) maintain that students' social and academic interaction with peers is a crucial dimension of the learning environment, and is strongly related to the likelihood of students persisting and succeeding in HE. In support of the focus on the social contexts of learning, McInnis (2003) notes the inclusion of the new 'Learning Community Scale' (LCS) in the national Course Experience Questionnaire administered to all graduates of Australian universities. The LCS was developed in response to concerns that the social nature of learning was being neglected. The scale includes such items as 'I felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning' and 'I was able to explore ideas confidently with other people' (cited in McInnis 2003, p.10). Asmar et al. (2000) argue against the notion that students' problems can largely be dealt with by remedial or add-on study skills/academic

writing programs offered by Student Services Centres. According to Asmar et al. (2000), it is only by mainstreaming study skills/academic writing programs into the everyday life of universities, into teaching and learning environments *as well as* into student support services, that such programs will be effective.

Many of the transition programs acknowledge the role of social transition. For example, the Monash Transition Program (MTP) perceives transition to include: a period of significant adjustment; development and change affecting all spheres of students' lives; progression to an educational institution where the balance of responsibility for achievement rests with students; enculturation into the teaching and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and culture of the university; and engagement with the university, faculty, course, and people at a specific campus (Kantanis 2002, p.3). The MTP also aims to embed transition-enhancing strategies – for example, networked tutorial groups, small group teaching, early feedback, use of criterion-referenced assessment within units of study – in the belief that these strategies constitute sound pedagogy. In the view of the MTP, all students benefit from skill development through discipline-related learning without the imposition and rigidity of undertaking specifically designed skills-based learning removed from the discipline.

The literature on transition therefore reveals that transition involves much more than just classroom learning. Transition involves the whole student and encompasses not only an academic transition but also a social and personal transition. The academic, social and personal transitions that students experience converge to have a significant impact on their perseverance and eventual success at university.

2.2.9.7 Summary

The review of the literature investigating the state of the contemporary university from the perspective of CDT has revealed some prominent themes: that the contemporary university is an unfamiliar culture for many of the students now participating at university; that the FYE is critical in terms of the students' continued perseverance at university; that a successful transition is pivotal in terms of the students' adjustment to the new culture; and that such a transition encompasses a social and personal transition as well as an academic transition.

The literature also demonstrates that the most immediate challenge to HE is presented by the increased diversity of the student population. For example, the question of how to

conceptualise and address the unfamiliarity which diverse student groups (including AES) bring with them as they negotiate their first year is central to understanding how students learn to succeed in the university culture. The theoretical perspective provided by CDT, in its capacity to uncover the power relationships that operate in the HE context, is also useful here. The following section applies CDT to review the universities' and academics' responses to the rapidly evolving diversity in the student profile and to the complexities therefore provided for FYE and transition.

2.2.10 Responses to Diversity

2.2.10.1 Introduction

The section applies CDT to review the universities' and academics' responses to the challenges revealed in the preceding sections of the chapter. Principally, the section focuses on the deficit approaches to diversity.

2.2.10.2 The Deficit Approaches to Diversity

So how is diversity perceived and managed by Australian academics? The most recent study of 2,609 academics in fifteen Australian universities reported that 'high proportions of academics held negative views about the calibre of students, with 69% of respondents considering the provision of academic support a major cause of the increase in staff-hours worked (McInnis 2000, p.24). The fact that there were 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' was delineated as a 'problem'.

Another response is to deny the shifts in the student profile, by conceptualising the differences arising from diversity as 'deficits', effectively blaming students for their lack of 'preparedness'. The literature, both internationally and nationally, confirms the widely held perception that first year students are under-prepared, lacking the skills necessary for achievement in a university context. In the United States, according to Radcliff (1996), there is widespread concern over the academic preparation of students entering HE and a lack of consensus as to the extent and exact nature of the problem. Collins (1993, p.175), also referring to the United States, argues that the elite-mass shift 'provoked an initial discourse of language deficiency, and this discourse quickly settled into a general conception of educational deficiencies needing remediation' (cited in Mulligan and Kirkpatrick 2002, p.73). In Australia, McInnis & James (1995, p.9) observe:

> Two academics from the Victoria University of Technology wrote a leading letter to the Melbourne Age newspaper concerning the problems of teaching first year students from

diverse backgrounds. Their main point, following interviews with their students, was that the problems confronting their colleagues in the large established universities were of a different order to those working in universities which draw on a distinctly under-prepared student population, that is, students with language difficulties and poor study skills. Another dimension to this lack of readiness for university has more to do with identity and integration than specific skills.

Concerns about educational deficiencies are compounded by the recognition that some academics are looking backward to the traditional elite era rather than analysing the abilities/skills of present students. Cartwright and Noone (1996, p.1.) claim that 'academics insist on teaching students they wish they had, rather than those they do have'. Cartwright and Noone (1996) maintain that 'how we conceive of the "problem of transition" shapes how we conceive of, and construct, our pedagogical practices and hence how students will experience and understand the tertiary learning that they engage in with us' (Cartwright & Noone 1996, p.2). Crouch (1996) argues that present circumstances are substantially different from the cultural and economic conditions which have formed the attitudes of today's academics and administrators. The increasing distance between staff and first year students regarding assumptions about the nature of learning and knowledge in 'post-industrial' societies, Crouch (1996) argues, is a complex phenomenon emerging from a range of demographic factors.

Research suggests that some academics are reluctant to become involved in facilitating the learning experiences of 'under-prepared' students'. For example, Asmar et al. (2000) propose that successful transition begins the moment the student first has contact with the university. However, Asmar et al.'s survey of initiatives to enhance the FYE of students (undertaken at the University of Sydney) indicates that this view is not widely accepted. For example, some academics at the university viewed transition as a matter only for the Student Services Department and as quite unrelated to the teaching and other activities that they themselves engage in. The research also suggests that such views are detrimental to students' experiences. McInnis and James (1995), for example, found that the failure to address student diversity left students feeling despondent and unmotivated, with only 24% of respondents believing that academics took an interest in their progress. Asmar et al. (2000) maintain that there is a need to extend academics' ideas of the arenas for action beyond actual teaching and learning experiences. These arenas include orientation, and prior to that, pre-enrolment and enrolment strategies, strategies in which, Asmar et al. suggest, both academic and general staff should be involved.

Other studies have found that, whereas most staff in tertiary institutions acknowledge the benefits of having a diversity of students (including AES) entering courses at their institution (altruism, social justice, student diversity), HE staff demonstrate little knowledge about these students (Beasley 1997; Postle et al. 1996). Postle et al's (1996) study revealed that the staff interviewed believed that the increasing diversity of students should be treated no differently from other students and that existing academic support mechanisms should be resourced to provide any remediation that was deemed necessary. Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002) probe the pervasiveness of these beliefs in their discussion of critical writing requirements in a tertiary context. They cite the example of a lecturer teaching first and third year pharmacy students at Curtin University of Technology. According to Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002, p.90) the lecturer testified that 'students should recognise that they have problems and make their own arrangements to fix them and if she saw any students struggling she would send them away to see someone else'. The lecturer further maintained:

> I don't believe the university is a place to teach basic literacy. If they come in without the skills they have to fix it. They are already squawking about an overloaded curriculum. Also, the course is a tertiary, professional degree and literacy is assumed. We can't teach everything, literacy, numeracy and the content (in Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002, p.90).

McInnis & James (1995, p.9) report that academics believed that:

> …a large body of students is proceeding to university without a clear understanding of tertiary culture. For students faced with a gulf, the problem of alignment tests their values and goals as well as their sense of efficacy with respect to their learning skills.

That staff gave very little support to value-added teaching[31] as an indicator of good teaching involving these students (see Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002; Postle et al. 1996) testifies to the ascendancy of the deficit approaches to diversity.

The negative attitudes academics hold towards the diversity of students now participating at university (for instance, towards students low in socio-cultural, and linguistic/academic capital) exposes the dominance of mainstream academic discourses in the university discourse. Academics' negative attitudes reveal their assumptions that there is a mainstream academic culture, operating within a static and consistent organisational context. Bourdieu (1998) explains these attitudes by arguing that the potential for academics' 'short-sightedness' is a consequence of the unconscious dimension of habitus that influences social agents' tendency not to reflect on the forces that dispose them to act

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[31] Value added teaching refers to the additional strategies academics incorporate to help empower the students they teach (for example the use of sample assignments or exemplars and the inclusion of preliminary assignments or drafting processes).

and behave as they do (cited in Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002, p.137). Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002, p.141) discuss how professors can remain unaware of the failure of their communication to reach students effectively: in fact, as agents within the educational field, they can be unaware of the objective structural relations and institutional processes that speak through them.

Academics' deficit responses are therefore representative of models of pedagogy that emerge from the idea that cultures and languages other than those of the mainstream represent a deficiency, a shortcoming, a deficit. The New London Group (1996, p.72) argues that the deficit responses to diversity involve 'writing over the existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture'. The deficit approaches therefore not only reflect a lack of questioning of the dominant 'elite' or mainstream discourses but also deny the existence of, as well as the potency of, the concept of multiple discourses and literacies, a concept further addressed in section 3.2.3.

2.2.10.3 Summary

Academics' lack of awareness has implications for both HE and the students attempting to access it. The first implication is that academics may be unwilling to examine their attitudes and practices as a first step in initiating changes that could serve to facilitate students' success. The second implication is that students who do not succeed or who have difficulties in accessing and mastering the mainstream academic discourses are labeled as, perhaps 'blamed' for, being 'under-prepared' or 'intellectually deficient' – revealing a 'sink or swim' approach to the issue of diversity. It is accepted that it is the students' responsibility if they fail, with academics perceiving that they have little role in, as well as little responsibility for, students' retention and ultimate success, a view confirmed by the research of Cummings and Ho (1996) and Reid and Parker (2002).

Academics' negative attitudes to diversity are contrary to Bourdieu's 'scholastic point of view': that universities should be characterised by reflexive practice, with academics aware of the disparities in positions occupied by people with evident access to power and capital and those who lack such access (cited in Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002). Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002) argue that, in the context of universal access to HE, the objectifying tendencies and reflexive practice that Bourdieu's ideas promote, theoretically assist students both in reflecting on the structural relations that 'speak' through them and

in interacting in a positive manner within the social world. Thus the scholastic point of view is potentially empowering for those people who are exposed to it. These understandings underpin an alternative to the deficit approaches: the multiliteracy approach (New London Group 1996), which is reviewed in Chapter Three, section 3.2.3.

2.2.11 CDT: Summary and Implications

The review of CDT has clear implications for the processes of education and communication in a university context. First, CDT's capacity to identify prevalent and dominant discourses in the HE context reveals the ways in which these discourses operate to marginalise students from particular economic and socio-cultural groups. By exposing the power relationships and the (often hidden) discourses operating at the educational/organisational site and how these constitute particular barriers for the diversity of students striving to participate at university, CDT is able to re-position students' experiences – first, as they attempt to access HE and, secondly, as they negotiate their transition to the university culture. The review also demonstrates that, when they do access HE, students bring with them understandings and practices that stem from the economic, socio-cultural and academic/linguistic capital they possess. As a consequence, the students enter university with established belief systems and ways of knowing, thinking and behaving, and critically, these may not be in tune with the university culture's mainstream discourses and literacies.

Secondly, the application of CDT to HE enables the university and the FYE to be characterised in a fresh way: as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of subcultures, each imbued with its own discourses, literacies and practices. Students' transition to university culture can then be re-conceptualised as a process of gaining familiarity with, and ultimately mastery of, these discourses, literacies and practices. Lankshear et al. (1997) argue that to feel comfortable in and perform with competence within a culture means becoming literate in that culture – becoming familiar with and engaging with the multiplicity of new discourses within the culture. Bartholomae (1985, p.134) explains the challenges confronted by students as they attempt to gain familiarity with the discourses, literacies and practices of the university culture:

> Every time a student sits down to write for us he or she has to invent the university for the occasion - invent the university, that is, or a branch of it. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating,

reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community.

The application of CDT to HE thus provides a rationale for re-theorising both the FYE and transition as processes; processes which intrinsically involve the familiarisation, negotiation and mastery of the discourses and literacies of the university culture. This understanding encompasses not only the university's academic discourses and literacies but also the social/personal discourses and literacies present in the culture.

Thirdly, the application of CDT to the FYE and transition calls for a shift in academics' attitudes towards the increased diversity of the student body: that the deficit view of dealing with the increased diversity of the student body needs to be replaced by one which acknowledges these students' familiarity, or lack of familiarity, with the culture and its discourses and multiliteracies. This shift challenges a number of university practices. There is the challenge to reverse the 'blame' that academics attribute to students who they consider 'deficient', 'inadequate' or 'under-prepared'. The more positive concept of 'becoming familiar' replaces the negativity of 'blame', simultaneously calling academics' attention to the importance of developing and implementing strategies to facilitate the students' familiarity in the university culture. There is also, as a consequence, the challenge leveled at the academics' roles in helping unfamiliar students develop familiarity with the university culture and its multiple discourses and literacies. Intrinsic are issues to do with academics' responsibilities as educators and as communicators, as well as the level of responsibility academics might assume for students' perseverance and retention at university. This is an important acknowledgement if academics are to assist in raising students' awareness of the power relationships operating in the HE context as well as to alert students to the importance of engaging and mastering university languages/discourses.

However, the approach provided by CDT also has limitations. CDT, in itself, with its emphasis on analysis, is not able to provide a recipe for actively changing either individual or organisational behaviour. Nor does it provide the means for empowering students. CDT does not, for example, have the capacity to develop strategies that students (and academics) can use to assist students to become familiar with, engage and master the unfamiliar discourses of the university. Yet such strategies are critical if students (and academics) are to take responsibility for actively facilitating students' transition. A second

theoretical perspective, transactional communication theory, is reviewed to address these limitations.

2.3 Transactional Communication Theory: Perspectives and Contributions

2.3.1 Introduction

Transactional communication theory (TCT) advances the idea that language and discourses primarily involve processes of communication: that, applied to the HE context, the teaching/learning process is fundamentally a communication process. In this section, TCT is applied to address CDT's limitation – its lack of capacity to implement an action framework. TCT has the capacity to present a means through which the theoretical perspective embodied by CDT can be applied. In addition, TCT presents an avenue through which students and academics might assume more responsibility for students' familiarity with, and perseverance in, the university culture. Most importantly, TCT has the capacity to draw attention to the processes of communication that both students and academics employ as students attempt to engage, master and demonstrate the discourses and literacies of the university culture.

This section begins by defining TCT (section 2.3.2) and exploring TCT's role in facilitating active learning (section 2.3.3). TCT's intersections with constructivist educational theory (CET) are next reviewed (section 2.3.4). The application of TCT to HE has consequences for the concepts of academics as communicators and students as communicators, topics addressed in sections 2.3.5 and 2.3.6.

2.3.2 Framing Transactional Communication Theory

In TCT, communication is depicted as the catalyst by which individuals make sense of the world around them. As Stacks, Hickson and Hill (1991) argue, the notion that reality is created through communication with others is extremely important. 'It is through communication that we create our own social reality and it is through communication that we decide what is and what is not knowledge' (p.3). Sless (1991, p.20) reinforces the importance of communication by maintaining 'no matter what activity we engage in, in order to gain knowledge and understanding, some aspect of communicative activity is implicated and is absolutely essential'. Communication, by its very nature, engages individuals in the mutual sharing and creation of meaning (Tyler, Kossen & Ryan 2000).

Communication is a reciprocal process 'used to create and share perceptions as well as a phenomenon used to store perceptions and generate knowledge' (Stacks, Hickson & Hill 1991, p.4). Adler and Towne (1993, pp.13-14) define communication as a 'continuous, transactional process involving participants who occupy different but overlapping environments and create a relationship by simultaneously sending and receiving messages'.

'Effective communication is based on the development of a relationship between those taking part in the communicative act' (Berko, Wolvin & Curtis 1990, p.12). Kaye (1994, p.16) adds that 'you can't separate communication from the idea of a relationship between two or more people and that a relationship is an extraordinarily complicated thing'. The basic principle of communication is that mutual interpersonal interaction, grounded in a relationship between the individuals involved, is essential to the creation of understanding. Kaye (1994, p.12), for instance, considers that communication is 'the process of co-ordinating the interpretations or meanings construed by interacting people'. Interaction is a vital ingredient in the process, for it is an element by which the multiplicity of perceptions and interpretations is reduced, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of communication. Stacks, Hickson and Hill (1991, p.3) argue that 'perceptions determine our approaches for using communication to build our own reality…this building, what we call "theory", yields knowledge'. According to Stacks, Hickson and Hill (1991, p.4), the sharing (communications) aspects of individuals can be improved dramatically if 'we learn how others perceive themselves, other persons, events, objects, and indeed communication itself, in ways quite different from how we see the same things'.

2.3.3 Communication's Role in Facilitating Active Learning

In the teaching/learning environment of a HE setting, it is important to develop an understanding of the ways in which the different communicators, or protagonists – the students and academics engaged in the processes of teaching/learning – perceive themselves, their roles and their interactions. If, in the HE sector, academics' and students' perceptions are widely divergent, then mutual understanding cannot be ensured, and the effectiveness of the communication between them will be reduced.

The need for communicative effectiveness assumes greater force with the appreciation that communication is the means by which individuals achieve higher levels of learning – that

communication, by its very nature, requires students to more actively engage in learning (Bonwell & Eison 1991; Cryer & Elton 1992; Kuh 1995). Others argue that active learning is critical in the teaching/learning environment (Austin 1993; Cryer & Elton 1992; Kuh 1995; Tinto 1995). Bonwell and Eison (1991) contend that active learning is the process by which students develop and apply skills, explore their attitudes and values, use higher order thinking skills and learn through engagement and reflection. Denicolo, Entwistle and Hounsell (1992) support this contention by arguing that active learning is an approach which promotes a search for meaning and understanding through students assuming greater student involvement in, and responsibility for, their learning in both formal instructional and wider social contexts. Active learning is a process, then, through which learners join with educators and peers to establish interactive learning environments or settings. With this understanding, interaction can be characterised as interpersonal communication. Thus there is evidence to contend that effective interpersonal communication is essential to mutual understanding and to the development of an environment where effective learning can take place.

Whereas TCT remains largely in the domain of the humanities, a parallel strand in education, constructivist educational theory (CET), also highlights the importance of dialogue and meaning making. The next section will examine the connections between TCT and CET.

2.3.4 Intersections of TCT with Constructivist Educational Theory

Although constructivism has been described in many ways, the term basically refers to a group of theories about learning that be applied to guide teaching (Appleton & King 1997). Plourde and Alawiye (2003) contend that constructivism, reduced to its most basic elements, is simply a learning or meaning-making theory. Kinchin (2003) adds that, according to CET, effective dialogue between teacher and student is essential for promoting meaningful learning in the classroom. Effective dialogue, Kinchin argues, enables students and teachers to be active in the construction of shared understanding by making explicit the overlap between the respective perspectives of novice (student) and expert (teacher) (p.3). Effective dialogue starts with the assumptions that teachers want to be active participants in students' conceptual development, and that students are 'intentional learners'. Kinchin (2003) also maintains that teachers' active participation in students' learning requires that effective dialogue be established between teacher and

student, to help guide and support learning. Learning occurs within the constraints provided by students' prior knowledge and the context provided by their personal learning biographies. To be effective, the dialogue must be explicit and recognisable by both student and teacher. Black and William (1998 cited in Kinchin 2003, p.3) describe how:

> …the dialogue between pupils and a teacher should be thoughtful, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas.

Kinchin (2003) argues that to initiate an effective dialogue, the differences between the teacher's understanding (or conceptual framework) and the students' conceptual frameworks needs to be exposed so that teachers and students can appreciate each other's perspective while reflecting upon their own. Thus CET proposes that people create their own meaning and understanding by combining existing knowledge and beliefs with new experiences. CET thus views knowledge as temporary, developmental, social, and cultural and as the primary basis of learning where 'individuals bring past experiences and beliefs, as well as their cultural histories and world views, into the process of learning; all of these influence how we interact with and interpret our encounters with new ideas and events' (Lambert et al. 1995, p. xii in Plourde & Alawiye 2003, p.2). 'Individuals do not acquire knowledge by internalising it directly from the outside but by constructing it from the inside, in interaction with the environment' (Plourde & Alawiye 2003, p.2). Von Glasersfeld (1992) argues that CET can be best described as a process of synthesis where one acknowledges that understanding is personally constructed but modified by the social context in which learning takes place (cited in Plourde & Alawiye 2003).

Plourde and Alawiye (2003) maintain that as the understanding of learning and teaching has grown, constructivism has developed from a Piagetian individual development paradigm to the recognition of a Vygotskian paradigm of cognitive development within a social setting. In fact, Vygotskian forms of construction not only place learning in a social setting, they also promote education for social transformation. Shymansky et al. (1997, p.572 cited in Plourde & Alawiye 2003) refine social contextual learning in terms of interactive-constructive teaching. This refinement is described as:

> …a classroom in which teachers orchestrate experience and discourse opportunities and social context to produce cognitive conflict in students who progressively resolve these problems by integrating new knowledge into prior knowledge structures (p.4).

In other words, the social setting and culture influence the individual cognitive process and thus meaningful learning. In this form, CET evolves into social constructivist educational

theory (SCET) in which the classroom is viewed as a community of learners. According to SCET, learning occurs through peer interactions, student ownership of the curriculum and educational experiences that are authentic for students (Azzarito & Ennis 2003).

Whereas the links between TCT and SCET are palpable, discursive practices operating at the site of pedagogy maintain distance between the two. For example CET/SCET literature contains terms like 'dialogue, relational and meaning-making' yet not the TCT term 'communication'. One possible reason for this linguistic choice is that TCT, a relatively new research area, may be misunderstood or de-valued by educational theorists who view communication as a simple linear process: 'I can talk, therefore I can communicate', encompassing such assumptions as 'people naturally understand what I'm talking about'. To argue that the teaching/learning process is fundamentally a communication process would be to simplify the processes involved, demystifying the 'complexity' of pedagogy. Another reason may lie in communication's association with generic or transferable skills, an association that similarly devalues TCT in educational circles. Fairclough (2001), for example, argues that the Dearing Report's focus on communication skills is detrimental to HE (see section 3.3). If CDT's meta-disciplinary orientation is applied however, a meta-language could be generated with each research area complementing the other: CET/CET substantiating the role of dialogue and meaning making and TCT substantiating the role of communication in the teaching/learning process.

2.3.5 Academics as Communicators

The re-conceptualisation of the teaching/learning process as a transactional communication process redefines university teaching practices, highlighting the importance of academics and students effectively sharing meaning. The re-conceptualisation challenges, for example, academics' reliance on the linear or transmission model of communication. In this model, communication is perceived as a one-way process with the academic proceeding with the assumption that lecture material is accurately conveyed and understood in the intended ways. Asmar et al. (2000) demonstrate, however, that this is not always the case. One student in Asmar et al.'s (2000, p.12) study explains:

> …I found the whole lecture thing weird because I was used to your lecturer writing up notes and you copy it into your exercise book. But in lectures they just spurt out all this stuff and I'm so glad there's the web because if it wasn't on the web, I'd be lost.

Alternatively, in the transactional model of communication, the 'meaning', or understanding, of the message is seen to lie in the perception or field of experience (or in the case of the present study the 'culture', capital or 'way of knowing') of the participants involved in the communicative act, not objectively in the message. In an assignment task at university, for example, both academic and student share a responsibility for ensuring that their respective understandings of the assignment task match.

Perception/fields of experience/culture/ways of knowing/capital

Assignment

Student's
Understanding

Academic's
Understanding
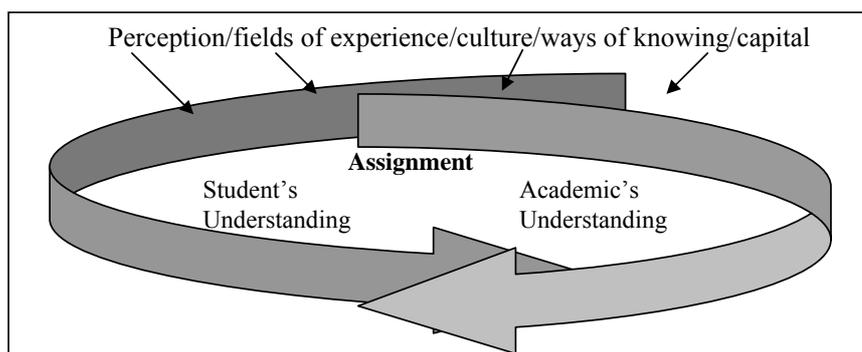
Figure 2.4 Assignment Writing as understood in the Transactional Model of Communication

If academics are to be effective teachers, then a central part of the teaching role is effective communication – ensuring that the 'meaning' of the message (or the discourse) academics are communicating is accurately shared with students. This understanding also involves a challenge for academics: that of accepting their responsibility in the teaching/learning process. Reid & Parker (2002, p.24) maintain:

> For many staff it entails a shift away from practices which involve someone else taking responsibility for students' communication skills, toward a model where each individual lecturer assumes this responsibility within a discipline-specific context.

TCT requires academics to make their discourses explicit: to not only explain and clarify the assignment rules, but also to make explicit the hidden agendas, the covert or hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations as well as the expected (but not stated) behaviours intrinsic to students achieving success in the academics' discipline (Benn 2000). Boud (cited at the *Researching Widening Access: International Perspectives Conference*, held in Glasgow, June 2001) argues that 'academics have expectations, but fail to articulate them and then make judgments about students who fail to demonstrate them'. As Taylor, West and Nightingale (1987 cited in Kirkpatrick and Mulligan 2002, p.91) found in an analysis of 113 history essays collected in an Australian university:

> Students are quite able to use [various parts of speech or sentence constructions] adequately in many contexts of meaning. Helping them to do so in less familiar contexts therefore seems to be the responsibility for those teachers who know these contexts and the relationships of meaning characteristic of them. In short, these aspects of language need to be placed closer to the center of teaching in the discipline itself, both at school and at university.

Students themselves acknowledge the difficulties of accessing and demonstrating new discourses and literacies including uncertainty about the audience – with whom are they are actually communicating? Krause (2001, p.161) includes the following example in an article on the university essay writing experience:

> I wasn't sure what to expect (or what they expected) which I think hindered me.

Yorke (2000, p.38), whose research is on the issue of attrition, provides this example:

> (My) mathematics was not up to the standard required. It was very difficult and the course content was not explained before I embarked on it.

The disparity between academics' and students' knowledge/perception/field of experience /academic capital is also documented in the literature on the FYE. Krause (2001, p.158), in a discussion of university writing, reveals the following disparities in perception:

> Our tutor seems to forget that while she's spent 20 years learning this, we've only had 2 months. It's…intimidating and we all feel pressured.

> There seems to be a huge gulf between how little we know and how much the tutors and lecturers seem to know.

> You can ask your tutor but often…the answer you get from them isn't very clear. Because they are looking at the subject from their perspective…they know everything there is to know about it so their answer is very different from someone else who is doing the subject.

> Markers often write 'elaborate this' without telling you what you could have gotten rid of to make room to elaborate.

Clulow (2000, p.95), in research on supplemental instruction, found that students' communication with academics was also a cause of stress:

> That's one of the biggest problems I've had. Like it's a maths anxiety that I really have. It's hard to feel that the people who are teaching me maths are on any similar wave-length to me and that's why I feel stress all the time.

However, effective communication can make a big difference:

> …because they are still up high and sometimes they talk to you babyish or other times they are way over your head. Whereas Alex [the teacher] goes straight to you…he knows exactly where you are…its like he hits you right where you want it.

The identification of and, ultimately, the implementation of the methods by which discipline discourses can be made explicit, as well as communicated effectively, is imperative, not only with students but also with teaching and marking teams.

It is also vital for academics to acknowledge that the key to teaching-learning is the 'process', rather than the 'content': that students' perseverance relies in part on what the academic does in the classroom, as a professional communicator and educator. Awareness is a crucial first step, involving the identification of the specific literacies and discourses (the requirements, rules, practices, behaviours and expectations) that students need to demonstrate in order to pass each course of study.

Educational theory supports the importance of communication practices. Friere (1972), for example, speaks of the centrality of dialogic education to the purposes of the university, a collegial and egalitarian approach to education in which productive dialogue, sustained critique and participation is maintained between members of the community. This notion of dialogic interaction assumes more prominence if interwoven with Gee's notion of multiple discourses. Gee (1997), from both a cultural and a cognitive perspective, argues for 'a juxtaposition of differences in such a way that a commonness could emerge without obliterating the differences as lived and situated realities'. If each student is viewed as a network of associations formed by his or her socio-cultural experiences, a network from which specific ways of knowing the world emerges, then a classroom should be a network of such networks from which new, ever variable, and 'meta-level' forms of knowing emerge. According to Gee (1997, p.297):

> These forms emerge from and transcend diversity without effacing it in any way, because each student's own continuing experiences contribute to the transformation of that common knowledge. A new Discourse is formed in the classroom.

A classroom with too narrow a spectrum of diversity is impoverished, because the generalisations that emerge are too narrow. A classroom utilising the diversity of its students to make connections, thereby acknowledges and integrates its cognitive, social, cultural, and political complexity.

The notions of dialogic education, multiple discourses and literacies and TCT therefore merge to confirm the impetus for Chapter Seven: that a negotiation of the multiple linguistic and cultural differences of the university is central to students' abilities to persevere and succeed in the often unfamiliar university environment. An important thread can therefore be woven into the philosophy of university teaching. This thread lies in academics recognising, participating in and facilitating the communication processes by which students learn to negotiate and integrate a number of competing discourses and multiliteracies – the university, faculty, department and discipline discourses with which

they are engaging. Mezirow (1990, p.354) asserts that adult education becomes 'the process of assisting those who are fulfilling adult roles to understand the meaning of their experience by participating more fully and freely in rational discourses to validate expressed ideas and to take action upon resulting insights'.

2.3.6 Students as Communicators

Whereas much of the research on the FYE and transition worldwide reveals the importance of students developing effective interpersonal communication and personal connections in the university culture, this research often does not explicitly identify the role of communication. Rather the disadvantages caused by lack of effective communication or, alternatively, the products of effective communication are discussed. For instance, student isolation is nominated in the literature as one of the key factors determining student withdrawal (Benn 2000; Yorke 2001). However, in the literature, explicit connections between isolation and the lack of communicative effectiveness remain tenuous. Similarly, whilst McInnis's (2003) research on student disengagement highlights students' lack of connection with university, the idea that such connection is premised on effective communication is overlooked.

Similarly, whereas the products of effective communication are evident in the research literature on FYE – the establishment of personal relationships, the development of learning communities, and the development of feelings of connection and community – the fact that they too are based on communicative effectiveness is ignored. This situation continues to be the case, despite the increasing importance of these products in the literature. Benn (2000), for instance, maintains that the 'presence of a significant other' is the most significant variable facilitating continued perseverance at university. In the American context, literature identifies the importance of establishing personal relationships as the primary determinant of perseverance (Austin 1993; Kuh 1995; Terezini 1993; Tinto 1995). Tinto's (1995) emphasis on the value of developing learning communities has proliferated across America (see *Proceedings: The International First Year Experience Conference* 2001). Australian research documents the importance of developing feelings of connection and community in facilitating perseverance (Clulow & Brennan 1996; Dearn 1996; Stevens & Walker 1996; Yan 1996; Zorn & Weller 1996). McInnis (1995) points out that 'personal connection with other students and academics is far more important than a lot of people imagine' (cited in Illing 1995, p.65). Clulow and

Brennan (1996) discuss the importance of friendship groups whilst McInnis (2003) reveals that studying with other students adds considerable value to learning outcomes:

> Engagement occurs where students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning, where learning outside the classroom is considered as important as the timetabled and structured experience.

Although much of this research is largely practitioner or demographic in nature and lacks a theoretical framework, it nevertheless corroborates the importance of investigating students' communicative effectiveness in the context of the FYE. Positioning such investigations in the theoretical perspective provided by TCT would also lead to a deeper understanding of the nexus between the teaching/learning process and transactional communication.

2.3.7 TCT: Summary and Implications

The review of TCT confirms its applicability to HE. TCT highlights the importance of students' development of communicative effectiveness. TCT confirms the connections between the students' communicative capabilities – of building for themselves strong interpersonal relationships and networks with a variety of people in the university context – and their perseverance at university. These relationships and connections include academics, mentors, counsellors, advisors, peer groups, learning circles, friends and family; that is people who are pivotal in assisting students to participate in, master and demonstrate the university's discourses and multiliteracies. The review of TCT verifies that effective communication is essential in building a strong foundation of interpersonal interaction, interpersonal relationships, interconnectedness and community that constitute the means by which students can facilitate a successful transition to the university culture.

The review of TCT also corroborates the importance of the academics' communicative capabilities in assisting students to persevere in the university culture. TCT's stance, that both parties involved in the processes of transactional communication share the responsibility for its effectiveness, challenges academics to accept their responsibilities in terms of students' perseverance. TCT also challenges academics to actively collaborate with their students in the teaching/learning/communication process and to assist students in achieving familiarity with the discourses of the university.

TCT substantiates the significance of effective communication for both students and academics, highlighting both their responsibilities in effectively sharing understanding.

TCT also accepts that this is a difficult and often-complex process; not the simple, linear process that it is sometimes perceived to be by others in HE. The role of what is variously known as 'perception or field of experience' (from TCT), 'culture, worldview or way of knowing' (from CDT) or 'dialogue, relational and meaning-making' (from CET) can obstruct the accurate sharing of understanding. However, both CDT and CET avoid referring to the term 'communication': perhaps reflecting the discursive practices operating at the site of pedagogy. TCT' contributions may also be de-valued as a consequence of its relationship, however tenuous, with the debates about transferable/generic skills (see also section 3.3.3). CDT and CET' acknowledgement of the role and value of transactional communication to the teaching/learning process would, however, enhance the applicability of TCT to HE as well as fortifying the credibility of both CDT and CET.

The role of culture (perception/field of experience/way of knowing/meaning making/capital etc) introduces one further element to be considered in the review of the theoretical foundations underlying the current study. If the role of culture (see section 1.5.2) is acknowledged, then it can be theorised that the teaching/learning/communication process is essentially a cross-cultural process. The final section of the chapter reviews cross-cultural communication theory (CCT) to investigate CCT' relevance to students' perseverance in the university culture: to the discussion of how AES can learn to be successful at university.

2.4 Cross-cultural Communication Theory: Perspectives and Contributions

2.4.1 Introduction

Some commentators argue that becoming familiar with the new university culture constitutes a cross-cultural process (Asmar et al. 2000; Dearn 1996; Eijkman 2002). Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002, p.75), for example, contend that:

> …tertiary educators are increasingly coming to recognise that, even for local students and regardless of ethnic background, the transition from high school to tertiary education is still a 'cross-cultural experience', with the potential for substantial problems.

The proposition that the teaching/learning/communication process is a cross-cultural process, together with the contention that the university is an unfamiliar culture (see section 2.2.9.2), establish the case for the application of a third theoretical perspective to

the investigate the capabilities that assist AES to negotiate a successful transition university: cross-cultural communication theory (CCT).

CCT is usually applied, in a university context, to international or English-as-a-second language students adjusting to an unfamiliar host culture (Badley 2000; Baker et al. 1991; Biggs 1999; Mak et al. 1999; Mak & Barker 2000; Volet & Tan-Quigley 1999). CCT contends that, in order to reap maximum benefits from an unfamiliar educational system, international students need to establish interpersonal relations with and communicate effectively with mainstream students and academics: an adjustment similar to that demanded of the diversity of local students entering an unfamiliar university culture. Boekaerts (1993) sees that adjustment incorporates learning processes: the processes by which an individual acquires knowledge and skills, essentially enlarging their personal resources to cope in the university context. Integral to these learning processes is an individual's self-efficacy, the belief that he or she can successfully perform social behaviours in academic and everyday situations (Bandura 1986).

This section will review CCT, specifically Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory (CAT) (1995) and assess CAT' applicability to the FYE at university.

2.4.2 Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory

Young Yun Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (CAT) (1995) confirms the view that adaptation to an unfamiliar culture involves a process of acculturation. Kim (1995) theory is based on three basic assumptions: (a) that newcomers must have a primary socialisation in one culture (or sub-culture) and move into a different and unfamiliar culture (or sub-culture); (b) that newcomers are at least minimally dependent on the host environment for meeting their personal and social needs; and (c) that newcomers are engaged in continuous, first-hand communication experiences with that environment. Kim's theory is applicable, in many ways, to the diversity of first year students as they learn to acculturate to the new university culture.

Kim (1995) explores the concept of 'host culture information'. According to Kim, host culture information explains the subtleties of the language, customs, mores, values, habits, discourses, and day-to-day living patterns of the host culture, which are understood interpersonally and through mass media channels by newcomers. Newcomers, according to Kim (1995), include such people as immigrants, resettlers, vacationers, sojoiners,

refugees, exchange students and new employees: people who begin the cultural adaptation process as outsiders. The concept of 'newcomer' can be applied to the AES in a number of ways. Beasley (1997), for example, testifies to the unfamiliarity and marginalisation experienced by AES, highlighting the need for these students to 'acclimatise' to the unfamiliar university environment.

CAT bridges cross-cultural and transactional communication theories. Kim contends that a multi-layered communication process is necessary for the newcomer to acculturate successfully. According to Kim, the multi-layered communication process begins with the newcomer's internal belief systems and values. Kim refers to these belief systems as an intrapersonal communication dynamic, however, in CDT these belief systems are understood as 'culture', 'capital' and 'ways of knowing' and in TCT as 'perception' or 'fields of experience'. Whatever the nomenclature, according to Kim, these internal belief systems represent a first step in the multi-layered process of acculturating to a new host culture. Kim refers to this process as the 'stress-adaptation-growth dynamic' (p.176). Stress results from confronting the new and unfamiliar culture, adaptation involves acquiring the new culture's customs, and growth occurs from the learning of a new idea. Kim's research shows that acculturation is not a linear process: the newcomer is engaged in a constant dialectic with the new culture.

Of particular interest to the present study is Kim's notion of host culture communication competency, incorporating the concepts of *cognitive competency*, *cognitive complexity* and *affective competency*. *Cognitive competency* is knowledge of the host culture, including history, worldviews, beliefs, and mores, and the language endemic to the culture. Boud and Lee (1999) refer to cognitive competency as 'know-how' in an analysis of how new postgraduate students learn to move within an unfamiliar academic research culture. Know-how, Boud and Lee argue, encompasses the cultural practices, the how, who, what, and why of the postgraduate world, knowledge that is often secret, or at least implicit. Know-how includes specific knowledge about how to use conferences strategically, the identification and analysis of key journals and practices of submission, positioning in relation to 'rejection letters' and time management strategies (Boud & Lee 1999, p.5).

In an unfamiliar undergraduate culture some host culture knowledge, or know how, is often explicitly addressed, for example in Study Skills or Learning Enhancement

textbooks as well as in course Introductory Booklets. Other knowledge, particularly for AES, is much more implicit. Waller et al. (1999, p.5) refer to this knowledge as 'the rules of the game', encompassing such areas as the university's institutions, rules, titles, and conventions, for instance the need to participate in tutorials, and how to get an assignment extension. 'Cultural literacy', or the ability to operate successfully in a particular cultural context, includes the knowledge, insight, experience and skills that allow students to function well (also see section 2.2.9.2). For students, this knowledge includes learning how and where to obtain information and make sense of it, how to get needs met, how to achieve what they want, how to respond to requirements, and how to become familiar with, and able to move comfortably within, the milieu of the academic enterprise.

Dearn (1996) recognises the impact that lack of know-how can have on the degree of success. Dearn maintains, for example, that the undergraduate degree can be thought of as a process of enculturation during which students are, ideally, encouraged to become part of the community and are introduced gradually to the language and values of the university, departments and disciplines. To Dearn this process involves the construction of motivation as well as the construction of meaning. Ballard and Clanchy (1988, p.14), assert that becoming literate at university involves 'a gradual socialisation into a distinctive culture of knowledge', yet also acknowledge that the rules of the culture are seldom made explicit and that the socialisation process thus remains largely unconscious.

Cognitive complexity relates to the ability to think, thus process, information in complex ways (Kim 1995). Boud and Lee (1999) explore the concept of 'writing' or the capacity to process information in complex ways. To Boud and Lee, writing involves explicit attention to the complex practices and processes of text production including the development of a language for talking about writing and a focus on such things as 'genre, rhetoric, and the grammar of academic English, as and when it was useful to explicate effective writing strategies'. Though Boud and Lee's discussion is grounded in pos-graduate culture, the analysis is relevant to the processes of acculturation to an unfamiliar undergraduate culture, especially in relation to accessing the academic discourses required in order to be achieve success within that culture. The literature review in section 2.2.9.2, for example, revealed the disquiet experienced by students as they attempted to facilitate their cognitive competency. Noon and Cartwright (1998) maintain that most first year university teachers bear witness to the fact that many students do not adjust easily to the

differing demands of the university learning process. Bartholome (1985) argues that students have to invent the university by processing information regarding the different ways they are asked to write, read and think. According to Bartholome, students have to learn to speak the language, to grapple with the different ways of knowing, evaluating, reporting and arguing that encapsulate the discourses of the academic community. McCann (1996) suggests that undergraduate students must acquire the habit of thinking about the processes of learning that they are engaged in, if they are to succeed in the culture.

Literature from the field of academic literacy supports the applicability of the concept of cognitive complexity to the teaching/learning nexus. Academic literacy focusses on the lack of 'preparedness' that undergraduate students have for the development and consolidation of mainstream academic discourses, revealing the difficulties these students face in negotiating the discourses with which they are required to engage (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002). Reid (1996) examines the degree to which cross-cultural factors may affect the literacy difficulties faced by some tertiary students. Liddicoat (1996), from linguistics, suggests that transition involves an initiation into specialist discourse communities. Each discourse community, Liddicoat asserts, has its own valued texts and norms of communication which are determined both by the communicative needs of the discourse community and by the patterns of communications found in the particular culture of the writers. Native speakers are assumed to have access to the norms of their particular culture and thus, through a process of socialisation with little explicit teaching, are able to enter into the discourse community. In contrast, newcomers engage in a cross-cultural exercise when composing 'text' in which their culture of origin, the target culture and the discourse community may be in conflict, or at least, in tension. Cross-cultural exercises like these confirm the cognitive complexity required by students if they are to succeed in mastering the university's multiple discourses.

Kim (1995) defines *affective competency* as the ability to acquire the new culture's aesthetic and emotional sensibilities. Boud and Lee (1999) discuss the role of 'identity', which involves the recognition that there were many implicit assumptions that newcomers bring to the new culture. According to Boud and Lee (1999, p.5) these assumptions need to be revealed, examined, challenged and perhaps changed:

> …the question of identity was a major issue for many in the group. Members felt they were being asked to make a radical shift from having been adult educators to becoming adult academics. Issues of fear and desire worked together to impact often dramatically on images of personal competence. Loss of old identities and sets of 'core' values as a particular kind of worker-educator needed to be acknowledged and worked through.

As the literature review in section 2.2.9 testifies, the question of identity, of affective competence, is particularly significant to the acculturation of AES entering an unfamiliar university culture. McInnis and James (1995, p.119) argue that teaching first year students has more to do with identity and integration than specific skills whereas McCann (1996) proposes that social isolation can cause difficulties in transition. Mak et al. (1998) designate affective competence as a socio-cultural adjustment encompassing specific skills, the ability to negotiate the host culture, and general behavioural competence.

2.4.3 CCT: Summary and Implications

The review of CAT confirms the importance of effective cross-cultural in a university context. This perspective draws on CCT, which in the He context, is usually applied to international or English-as-a-second language students. However, if, as the review of literature uncovered, the university constitutes an unfamiliar culture, then cross-cultural theory is useful as a starting point for investigating the means by which students can access and negotiate the culture. CAT corroborates the understanding that the processes involved in making the transition to university essentially constitute cross-cultural processes. CAT substantiates the importance of the role of communication and dialogue as well as the notion that the processes of induction into the new or host culture should not be haphazard and arbitrary. Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002, p.76) argue that the induction of students into the particular cultures and discourses in the university context often happens implicitly and randomly, rather than with the explicit and well structured intent that is necessary if the induction is to be successful. The understandings stemming from CCT contribute to a way forward for students as they negotiate these processes of induction.

2.5 Conclusion

The insights provided by CCT, combined with the understandings generated by CDT and TCT, provide a rationale for re-theorising the processes of education and communication taking place at the site of the contemporary university. CDT supplies a foundation for re-thinking pedagogical practices and outcomes as discourse and for arguing that mastery of

discourse constitutes a principal educational process and outcome. TCT develops the notion that effective communication is intrinsic to students' means of succeeding in the unfamiliar university culture: that communication is essential in building the strong foundation of interpersonal interaction, interpersonal relationships, interconnectedness, and community, necessary, it is argued, for accessing, negotiating and mastering the discourses prominent in the university culture. CCT, in particular, CAT, linked these two theories, generating a rational for theorising that the initiation and transition into these discourses and literacies is, ultimately, a cross-cultural process.

Whereas Chapter Two explored the philosophies and theories that illuminate the new ways of re-thinking and researching the processes of communication and education occurring at the site of the regional university, Chapter Three reviews the theoretical interventions which stem from these philosophical and theoretical insights.

Chapter Three
Review of Interventions Recommended and Practised in the Literature

3.1. Introduction

Chapter Two reviewed the philosophies and theories that illuminate new ways of conceptualising and researching the contemporary regional university and the processes of communication and education that occur at the site. Chapter Three evaluates the approaches developed in the literature which stem from these theoretical perspectives: the approaches and strategies designed to shift the theory into practice, to increase the awareness of and/or to overcome or transform the problems/issues identified in Chapter Two. Young (1998, p.4) maintains that the most useful critical theories appreciate that their aim is the capacity to facilitate change:

> Critical theories involve purposes because their point of origin is education as a form of purposeful action and any purposeful activity such as education cannot simply be the subject of understanding alone. However understanding…becomes meaningful if that understanding has a role in changing it in a way that extends the quality and quantity of learning opportunities.

The approaches that stem from the literature review conducted in Chapter Two include, first, the literacy approaches stemming from critical discourse theory (CDT):

- Critical language awareness (Corson 1999; Fairclough 2001);
- The multiliteracy framework (Cope & Kalantis 2000; New London Group 1996);
- The meta-literacy framework (Bright, Schirato & Yell 2000); and
- Tertiary literacies (Baldauf & Golebiowski 2002).

Section 3.3 reviews the approaches that emerge from transactional communication theory (TCT) including communication competencies and their application for HE policy and practice (Dearing 1997; Marginson 1993).

The third group of approaches (section 3.4) emerges from cross-cultural communication theory (CCT), prioritising, in particular:

- Global competencies (Ferraro 2002);
- Academic, operational and socio-cultural competencies (Badley 2000)
- The *ExcelL* program's *s*ocio-cultural competencies (Mak et al. 1998)

Finally, in section 3.5, the reflexive threads, which recur throughout the review in Chapters Two and Three, will be gathered and explored.

The threads include: reflection; reflective practice; reflexivity; critical reflection; critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness. Figure 3.1 illustrates the approaches and threads and the relationships between them.
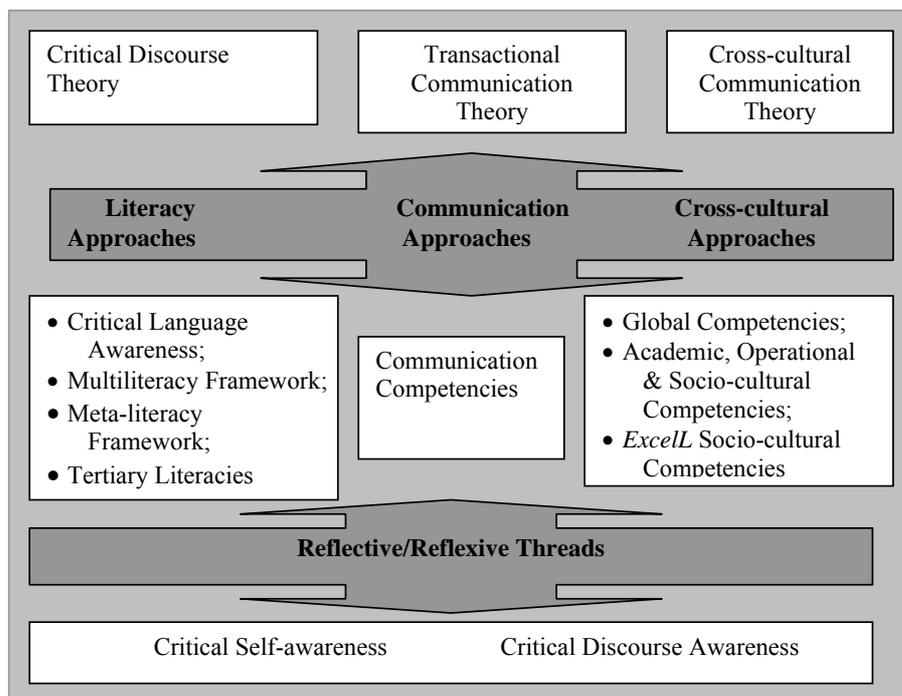
Figure 3.1: Theoretical Approaches, their Applications and Intersections

3.2 Literacy Approaches

3.2.1 Introduction

This section reviews the strengths and weaknesses of literacy approaches stemming from CDT: critical language awareness, the multiliteracy and meta-literacy frameworks, and tertiary literacies.

3.2.2 Critical Language Awareness

Critical Language Awareness (CLA) provides a theoretical frame that enables and encourages social and critical awareness of educational practices, and facilitates and promotes practice for change (Corson 1999; Fairclough 1995; Van Dyjk 1995; Van Lier & Corson 1997; Wodak & Corson 1997). It is an approach emanating directly from CDT and is currently influencing curriculum planning in Britain, America, Australia and South Africa (Fairclough 1995 and 2001).

According to Corson (1999, p.144) CLA has four underlying assumptions: (a) people have the power to shape the conventions that underlie discourse, just as much as any other social discourse; (b) discourses are changing all the time although people tend to accept the way language is as well as the way discourses operate; (c) forms of discourse receive their value according to the positions of their users in systems of power relations; and (d) struggles over the control of discourse are the main ways in which power is obtained and exercised in modern societies. CLA thus assists the development of people's capacities for language critique, including 'their capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself' (Fairclough 1995, p.220). Fairclough contends that not only is education itself a key domain of linguistically mediated power it also mediates other key domains for learners, including the adult world of work:

> It is a site of reflection upon and analysis of the socio-linguistic order and the order of discourse, and in so far as educational institutions equip learners with critical language awareness, they equip them with a resource for intervention in and reshaping of discursive practices and the power relations that ground them, both in the other domains and within education itself (p.218).

CLA thus has the capacity to promote social awareness of discourse, to encourage critical awareness of language variety and to promote practice for change (Corson 1999). CLA is also able to provide a reflexive analysis of 'relations of power, which are implicit in the conventions and practices of academic discourse, and in struggles on the part of learners to contest and transform such practices' (Fairclough 1995, p.217).

CLA points to the need for a critical awareness of language and discourse by students, including AES, as they attempt to navigate the university culture. In the HE context, a critical awareness, given the inconsistent and fragmented nature of the university discourses, would involve specific requirements: the ability to move between one discourse or literacy to another within the university environment; the need to engage and accommodate the multiplicity of sometimes conflicting and abrading literacies/discourses; and the need to develop a critical awareness of how different positions and perspectives within and between discourses are developed and maintained. However, whereas CLA's exponents outline curriculum activities and approaches that facilitate practice for change (see Clark et al. 1990a; Corson 1999; Fairclough 1992 and 1995; Wodak & Corson 1997), these interventions are directed mainly at primary and secondary schooling and are dependent on teacher-led initiatives working in local (English-speaking) educational

contexts. Fairclough (2001), puts forward the case for CLA's applicability for all educational settings, including HE:

> The business of evaluating and changing knowledges and discourses is something which an increasing number of people are involved in as part of the work they do. It is a major concern of educational institutions to teach them how to do this, and part of the current preoccupation with learning to learn, and other thematisations of learning in contemporary education and business – the learning society, businesses as learning organisations, lifelong learning…What I want to argue is that the resources for learning and for working in a knowledge-based economy include a critical awareness of discourse – an awareness of how discourse figures within social practices, an awareness that any knowledge of a domain of social life is constituted as one discourse from among a number of co-existing or conceivable discourses, that different discourses are associated with different perspectives on the domain concerned and different interests, an awareness of how discourses can work ideologically in social relations of power, and so forth. It is on the basis of such understandings of how discourse works within social practices that people can come to question and look beyond existing discourses, or existing relations of dominance and marginalisation between discourses, and so advance knowledge. If on the other hand language and other semiotic modalities are viewed as simply transparent media for reflecting what is, the development of knowledge is likely to be impeded.

Fairclough is a member of the New London Group (1996), which has developed an action framework to disseminate CLA in educational settings, the multiliteracy framework (see section 3.2.3).

There have been attempts to implement CLA in a university context. Eijkman (2002), for example, applies a variation of CLA, Gee's (1999) 'recognition work', to non-mainstream students accessing HE. For Gee (2002) it is a process:

> …wherein people try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing (cited in Eijkman 2002, p.1).

Eijkman argues that recognition work is of minimal consequence for most mainstream students with the fundamental nature of who they are and what they are doing confirmed rather than disputed as they access HE. For many non-mainstream students, however, entering university constitutes an induction into often very different worlds and very different communities of practice:

> For them, the FYE constitutes a fundamental and bewildering challenge to their social identity: to who they are and what they are doing. As such, it is often fraught with debilitating stresses, frustrations and often failure (p.1).

Eijkman (2000, p.1) argues that, at the centre, lies a contest between often fundamentally different 'big D' Discourses, or ways of being in the world, and their language and literacy practices, the 'small 'd' discourses. Essential to a successful transition is the effective negotiation between divergent Discourses. In applying recognition theory to the university context he notes that it is complicated by:

…an environment characterised by severe power imbalances. In these negotiations, students, be they insiders or outsiders, have little if any power, and they operate in an environment where certain Discourses are privileged, and others are disprivileged. Non-mainstream students face the often-overwhelming challenge of having to make far-reaching adjustments to their social identities; who they are and what they are doing.

Although academic literacy presents a major issue, it is 'but one aspect of a much more encompassing issue. It is the language-literacy tip of the academic Discourse iceberg' (Eijkman 2002, p.1). Eijkman cites Gee (1999):

> Making visible and recognisable who we are and what we are doing always involves a great deal more than "just language." It involves acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking – (sometimes writing-reading) in the "appropriate way" with the "appropriate" props at the "appropriate" times in the "appropriate" places (p.1).

Eijkman (2002, p.10) applies Gee's approach to facilitate police cadets' negotiations of divergent Discourses, which he describes as *Low Floor, High Ceiling Designs for Learning*. These include seamless student support (inextricably linking teaching, tutoring and student support activities), situated or authentic assessments (assessment incorporating a critical reflection on professional practice), assessing for learning (a re-submission policy for failing assignments) and equity in flexibility (the preparedness to place teaching and learning before administrative decisions, to 'put the pressure up into the system rather than down onto the student'). Eijkman's approach is representative of those developed by teacher practitioners striving to improve their students' learning. That it is supported by a theoretical foundation differs from other interventions, which are largely practitioner in nature (see *Proceedings: Pacific Rim FYE Conferences*).

CLA and recognition work corroborate the applicability of critical discourse or language awareness for generating practical interventions for educators concerned with the difficulties faced by their students. Another intervention strategy, one also supported by a theoretical frame, the multiliteracy approach, is the multiliteracy framework. Both Fairclough and Gee are involved in the development of this action framework, which has been highly influential and successfully applied – though, again, largely in primary and secondary education settings.

3.2.4 The Multiliteracy Framework

An alternative to the deficit responses to the diversity of the student body (see section 2.2.10.2) is the multiliteracy approach (MLA) (New London Group 1996). The MLA represents an international collaboration between CDT and literacy specialists, including Courtney Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, James Gee, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther

Kress, Alan Luke, Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels and Martin Nakata. Group members have produced both an article, *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures* (New London Group 1996) and a monograph, *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (Cope & Kalantzis 2000). Both publications develop a theory of pedagogy based on three key philosophical assumptions: (a) the human mind is embodied, situated and social; (b) human knowledge is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts; and (c) human knowledge is developed in collaborative interactions with others of diverse skills, backgrounds and perspectives joined together in a particular epistemic community, that is, a community of learners engaged in common practices centered on a specific historically and socially constituted domain of knowledge.

According to the New London Group (1996) the multiplicity of communications channels and the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today demand a much wider view of pedagogy and literacy than that portrayed by the deficit approach (se section 2.2.10.2). Although the Group recognises that real deficits, such as lack of access to social power, wealth, and the symbols of recognition, do exist, they contend that the role of pedagogy is to develop 'an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities' (New London Group 1996, p.72). Consequently, the Group developed the concept of 'multiliteracies', widening the pedagogy of literacy to include the negotiation of a multiplicity of discourses. Such negotiation would include the objective of 'creating the learning conditions for full social participation' and, simultaneously, raise awareness about the issue of difference (p.61).

According to the New London Group, the MLA would ensure that differences of culture, language, and gender do not constitute barriers to educational success. The MLA would also achieve two goals: that of creating access to the evolving language of work, power and community, and that of fostering the critical engagement necessary for students to achieve success. The MLA thus 'overcomes the limitations of traditional approaches by emphasising how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to the pragmatics of the working, civic, and private lives of students' (New London Group 1996, p.60).

The multiliteracy framework (MLF) stems from the MLA. The MLF constitutes a constructive intervention framework geared to teaching critical language awareness and

critical literacy to students. According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000), the framework is a complex integration of four factors:

> …*Situated Practice* based on the world of learners' Designed and Designing experiences; *Overt Instruction* through which the student's shape for themselves an explicit meta-language of Design; *Critical Framing*, which relates meanings to their social contexts and purposes; and *Transformed Practice* in which students transfer and re-create Designs of meaning from one context to another.

The idea of 'design' forms the basis of the MLF: 'designing' used as both a verb, 'restoring human agency and cultural dynamism to the process of meaning-making', and as a noun, as 'available designs' and as the 'redesigned'. Design is thus able to encompass differences in meaning, in different cultural contexts. The New London Group (1996) argue that the meta-language created by the MLF recognises the elements of 'design' not as rules, 'but as an heuristic that accounts for the infinite variability of different forms of meaning making in relation to the cultures, the sub-cultures, or the layers of an individual's identity that these forms serve' (p.12).

MLF has a number of strengths. One of the strengths is that, although the four steps are valid and useful on their own, connecting them adds considerable depth, because they each build on the different teaching traditions or approaches (Cope & Kalantzis 2000, p.237). Other strengths stem from the MLF' ability to encompass the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity occurring in the 21st century. First, there is the recognition, in *Situated Practices*, that not only are differences critical but that teaching and curriculum have to engage with students' own experiences and discourses, which are increasingly defined by cultural and sub-cultural diversity and the different language backgrounds and practices that come with this diversity. Secondly, there is also the MLF' capacity to help students develop a meta-language that accounts for discourse differences (in *Overt Instruction*). Thirdly, *Critical Framing* is able to link these differences to different cultural purposes and, fourthly, in *Transformed Practices*, students are able to transfer meaning strategies from one cultural situation to another. Together the steps are able to accommodate the twin goals of recruiting learners' previous experiences and affective/socio-cultural identities, and of working in shared spaces in a way that produces productive cultural mixing.

One of the goals of the MLF is to develop an ongoing pluralistic educational response to trends in the economic, civic and personal spheres of life which impact on meaning-

making and therefore on literacy worldwide. Termed the 'Multiliteracies Project' (MLP) this response seeks to create a meta-language to unite disparate areas of communication and representation, multi-modally as well as multi-culturally, into a new pedagogy. There have been many applications of the project (Cope & Kalantzis 2000; Kalantzis & Pandian 2001 as well as a number of Literacy and Diversity Conferences, for example *The International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities* held 2001-2004).

The most significant responses have targeted primary and secondary schooling, for example, the *New Basics Project*, now on trial in 59 Queensland schools, and the *Productive Pedagogies Theoretical Framework*. The 'new basics' are clusters of essential practices which students need to engage in order to flourish in these 'new times' and are saturated with new media and print texts. The clusters (or organisers) have an explicit orientation towards researching, understanding, and engaging new economic, cultural and social conditions. The clusters include learning how to understand yourself and how you fit into the world; learning how to communicate; learning your rights and responsibilities; and learning how to describe, analyse and shape the world around you and include such new literacies as problem-solving, individual expression, collective creativity and technological proficiency alongside the 'old basics' of literacy and numeracy. The *Productive Pedagogies Theoretical Framework* emphasises four areas of reflection: intellectual quality, supportive classroom environment, recognition of difference and connectedness.

There is also an emerging literature applying the MLF/MLP to tertiary contexts. Newman (2002) uses the notion of design developed to position undergraduate academic literacy as a multi-modal achievement game. Newman's strategies include the use of retrospective interviews and textual analyses to reveal a series of operations on course content that constitute moves in the game. The goal of the game is to find, move, and display content, including not only facts but also concepts and forms of situated knowledge that would gain the highest points on assessments. Newman (2002) found that better "players" were more aware than their lower-achieving counterparts of the games as specific activities different from learning. The better players also had more nuanced and planned versions of the operations that began with what was expected on assessments and moved backward toward sources. The multiliteracies pedagogy thus supports the efficacy of preparing students for academic success by combining consciousness-raising through overt

instruction with forms of immersion and critical analysis. Kalantzis and Pandian (2001 p.213) recognising that cross-cultural pedagogy is applicable in HE, propose that such pedagogy would be specifically relevant to e-learning, given its capacity to engage with 'the enormous variability of the life worlds of its students in Australia and Asia'.

The MLF and MLP also have limitations. Commentators point to the fact that, although they have global aspirations, the MLF and MLP initially comprised 'only academics from Australia, Britain and the USA, all post-industrial societies with massive resources' (Newfield & Stein 2000, p.292). This limitation is being addressed with the MLP' renewed focus on local projects developed in local contexts (see Cope & Kalantzis 2000; Kalantzis & Pandian 2001 as well as conferences like those above). A more significant limitation is that MLF/MLP' implementation relies on education-based and curriculum-based teaching/learning contexts as well as the need for expert 'teachers' well-versed in the discourses of multiliteracy, if not critical literacy. Newcomers may also find its language (situated practices, etc) inaccessible and difficult to understand and apply. A simpler approach, which could be used by students/learners independently and in contexts other than in curriculum and teaching/learning environments, would be useful.

3.2.5 Meta-literacy Approaches

The meta-literacy approaches (M-LA) encompass similar objectives to the MLA. Both focus on tertiary and professional contexts and draw on the work of critical literacy educators (Kress 1997; Lankshear et al. 1997), as well as post-structuralists like Bourdieu (1991, 1995 and 1998). However the M-LA differ in that they constitute responses to the so-called 'literacy crisis' in graduate literacy and to increasing demands from governments and employers that universities produce graduates with better general transferable skills – particularly communication skills (Bright, Schirato & Yell 2000, p.99).

The research differentiates between meta-literacies and communication meta-literacies. Meta-literacies, according to Bright, Schirato and Yell (2000) and Schirato (1998) are contextual, in the ways that knowledge and skills are understood, as being put into practice within different cultural fields. Communication meta-literacies are also contextual in that they also incorporate the understandings that such practices would be re-contextualised in terms of a reflexivity toward their own social background, and that the information is required for a specific purpose. However, Bright, Schirato and Yell (2000,

p.108) specify that communication meta-literacies are similar to generalist or lifelong learning skills (see Candy, Grebert & O'Leary 1994) whereas meta-literacies constitute an advance on generalist skills. This advance stems from meta-literacies' emphasis on 'contextualising and recontextualising such skills as practices performed by agents operating under the dual constraints of both the rules, values, and imperatives of cultural fields, and their own necessary limiting habitus' (Bright, Schirato & Yell 2000, p.108).

The M-LA uses Bourdieu's conceptual analysis (see section 2.2.7), which identifies how education acts to promote social distinction, operate as an agent of reproduction of the cultural arbitary, and be transformative. Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002, p.144) point out the value of meta-literacies:

> A focus on reflexive practice and the development of meta-literacies can help give students a stake in the game played in the field of education, and some measure of control over its outcomes.

Bright, Schirato and Yell (2000, p.108) add that by taking contexts into account, literacy practices can be performed more appropriately with regard to the task and situations at hand. Meta-literacies, in this sense, constitute literacy about the basic principles of literacy itself. Bright, Schirato and Yell (2000) argue that the M-LA:

- Facilitates more meaningful exchanges and dialogue between different cultural groups and the situations that people will encounter in their professional careers;

- Achieves the objective of accepting and accommodating the rapidly-increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today;

- Accommodates the proliferation of visual and digital forms of communication;

- Contextualises and re-contextualises the skills of analysis, evaluation, interpretation, critical thinking, argumentation and verbal, visual and written communication as cultural practices;

- Corroborates the idea that these literacies need at times to be sought outside oneself, through strategies such as teamwork, partnerships and collaboration; and

- Redefines the notions of university and future workplace literacy as the abilities to understand how literacies work as well as the ability to move into a new culture or context and to work out the literacies needed to operate in that culture.

The M-LA, by clarifying the various meaning attributed to literacy, communication or critical thinking competencies, develops the academic debates in fields such as tertiary learning, critical literacy, and communication studies as well as progressing public and

media debates involving employers and governments (Webb et al. 2002). However, the M-LA also has limitations. Whereas the approach incorporates a theoretical frame, the specifics of 'how' (for example, *how* to accomplish the capacity to move across different perspectives and affect different ways of seeing and appearing, or *how* to move strategically into different positions in one's reading of the situation and the game) are not provided, other than in specific discipline areas and guided by teachers. Schitaro (1998), for instance, developed the pedagogical applications for engineering contexts.

3.2.6 Tertiary Literacies

The tertiary literacies approaches (TLA), like M-LA, also stem from critical literacy literature, are integral to tertiary contexts and prioritise the role of communication and dialogue. According to Baldauf and Golebiowski (2002), tertiary literacies, centring on the development of communicative competence/academic literacy/intellectual integrity in a university context, constitute responses to the changes forced by socio-cultural and organisational changes within academia, as well as new workplace requirements including the challenges of economic rationalism, multiculturalism and computerisation (see section 1.1.1). TLA' emergence intersects with the literature exploring the meanings/roles of academic literacy, meta-literacies and tertiary literacy (Baldauf & Golebiowski 2002, p.1).

Lee (1996) argues that the development and consolidation of academic literacy has been accompanied by research to clarify what might be seen as a 'common knowledge discourse uniting practitioners across a large field of different contexts of work'. Taking a critical perspective, Lee suggests that a number of issues are addressed including: what counts as knowledge; who determines this; how is knowledge of the field produced; what models of research are available for generating new knowledge about academic literacy; what is the relationship between research and teaching, and how can institutional relationships between literacy development practitioners and the universities in which they work be re-thought (Lee 1996). Reid (1996) views academic literacy as involving two sets of complex issues that are intricately interrelated. The first concerns the various ways in which expectations about literate communication are influenced by different disciplinary norms whereas the second looks at the degree to which cross-cultural factors may affect the literacy difficulties faced by some students.

TLA also interconnect with a growing body of research that addresses debates about the

problematic nature of 'standards' in relation to literacy in Australian universities (Cartwright & Noone 1996; Fuller & Chalmers 1996; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002; Krause 2001; Liddicoat 1996; Putnis & Petelin 1996; Reid & Mulligan 1996). The *Aspects of Literacy Report* (ABS 1996) contains a veiled critique of literacy practices in universities, a disquiet which is paralleled by both employers and university academics who question the quality of graduating students' oral and written literacy (Baskin 2000; Bright, Schirato and Yell 2000; Cope & Kalantzis 2000; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan 2002). Baskin (2000), investigating students' writing, argues that current formulations of academic literacy reflect a heavy emphasis by academic and professional communities on the commodity value of 'literacy skills'. 'This happens despite the fact that not much is known about the details and current culture of literacy practices in universities, and how these are inflected by different disciplinary areas and cross-cultural factors' (p.ii). Baskin (2000, p.iv) goes on to argue that literacy has been constructed, implemented and investigated from the perspective of the institution:

> It follows that academic literacy can be better understood as a socially constructed and signifying space, one which includes opportunities for students to create their own powerful identities as writers and as members of professional and faculty communities.

As foreshadowed in section 1.1.1, the *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* (2002) dedicated a special issue (Vol.25, No.2) to 'Literacies: Tertiary Contexts'. The journal addresses the challenges faced by modern universities necessary, Kalantzis and Pandian (2001, p.7) argue, because we are living in a period of worldwide social change in which there is an increasing focus on literacy and the way it is taught:

> There has been a gradual movement away from narrow, conservative methods of thinking and teaching about literacy as an unproblematic concrete concept linked to the ability to read and write towards literacies or multiliteracies linked to new multi-modal vehicles of information. Meanings are created in a variety of viewpoints that reflect the diversity of racial, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Baldauf and Golebiowski (2002, p.1) perceive tertiary literacies to be a set of complex issues that are too frequently considered in isolation from each other, specifying the need for a 'cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogue that is able to both reflect the new complexities and allow space for new diversities, especially those related to literacy'. Cross-cultural dialogue and communication, both major concerns in this study (see Figure 3.1), are thus themes also recurring frequently in the TLA. Reid and Parker (2002) argue that HE needs to take a 'communication in context' approach to incorporate good communication practices into all parts of the teaching/learning transaction and to develop

and disseminate university-wide policy, in order to provide systemically for the development and enhancement of academic communication practices. Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (2002, p.97), in their analysis of critically-literate behaviour across different university disciplines, maintain that the development of reflexive teaching practices at all levels and within all disciplines – as well as the importance of process rather than the transmission of knowledge – is critical in developing tertiary literacy.

Researchers in the tertiary literacy area give prominence to the roles of English language acquisition (linguistic capital) and cultural experience (socio-cultural capital). Golebiowski and Liddicoat (2002) make the point that students are located at the intersection between their cultures and their discourse communities and that this provides implications for tertiary literacy. Borland and Pearce (2002) assert that both linguistic and cultural experiences underpin student preparedness and the capacity to cope with the demands of university study. In a study of Non-English-Speaking-Background students (NESB), Borland and Pearce (2002) refer to cultures of knowledge and to the complex interaction of linguistic and cultural experiences – including the factors related to the individual student which are likely to affect student's success in university study (p.123). Borland and Pearce view cultures of knowledge as comprising cultural values in relation to knowledge and learning; cultural differences in the discourse and pragmatics of written academic communication; and the cross-cultural pragmatics of the classroom (p.111). Borland and Pearce (2002, p.112) maintain that:

> …to be able to perform effectively in university involves the student in understanding the differences in modes of communication that are adopted in discourse communities in differing cultural contexts, as well as understanding the nature of disciplinary communities as they relate to specific disciplines.

However, Borland and Pearce (2002, p.122) also contend that the current early-targeted identification of the students likely to require language and learning support within their university studies relies on too narrow a focus in that it does not specifically address the key dimensions of student life experience that may affect their likely educational experiences and outcomes. Borland and Pearce argue instead that the task of developing a host of inclusive HE initiatives to assist students' needs to recognise both the diverse needs of the student body and its globalising social context. These contextual factors, Borland and Pearce contend, include factors external to the student, such as the characteristics of the institution, the structure and content of the curriculum, and the

expectations, attitudes, values and behaviours of the teaching staff with whom the students come into contact. These factors are also ones, Borland and Pearce assert, over which educators have more control. Kaldor and Rochecouste (2002) likewise propose that improvements in the literacy area would involve systemic policy reform. Kaldor and Rochecouste present a case for an integration of the traditional divides – between research and student writing and between general academic and discipline specific language – into a single instructional format. According to Kaldor and Rochecouste (2002), this format would fit three levels of discourse organisation (the macro-level, content organisation and intersectional relationships) into discipline specific instructional materials.

The TLA point to the salience of the primary thrusts of this research study in that they give emphasis to the roles of communication and cross-cultural dialogue. The TLA also highlight the complexity involved in the relationships between institutions and students, supporting the contention that transformative change demands commitment and initiatives by both. Whereas the approaches help strengthen the theoretical foundation chosen for the research, their applications, like those stemming from the meta-literacy approaches, however depend on the individual or collaborative efforts of practitioners and administrators operating in local contexts.

3.2.7 Literacy Approaches: Summary

The literacy interventions stemming from CDT – CLA, MLA, M-LA and TLA – compass similar concerns. These concerns include:

- The importance of recognising cultural and linguistic differences – of others as well as of one's own – and the need to dialogue across these differences. Whereas some interventions prioritise the need to master and demonstrate others' discourses and literacies (the tertiary literacy area which focuses on how students can succeed in a tertiary context), others (the meta-literacy approaches) highlight the need to communicate and engage with different groups;
- The importance of developing a critical awareness of the discursive practices that may be operating at an educational site, both to empower students as they strive to negotiate the academic culture and to assist teachers to support students more purposefully as the students attempt to do this;
- The importance of highlighting the intersections between the students' own culture and discourses and the discourse communities the students need to negotiate;

- The reliance on the efficacy of communication – either implicitly, in CLA and MLP, or more explicitly, in the meta-literacy or tertiary literacy areas. This focus draws attention to the importance of improving communication in tertiary contexts as well as emphasising the role of communication – for example, as used by undergraduate and postgraduate students and workplace professionals (see Assiter 1995; Marginson 1994; Reid & Parker 2002; Tapper 2000).

The literacy approaches, however, also have limitations. Some of the approaches – for example CLA and MLF – are interventions are directed mainly at primary and secondary schooling and are dependent on teacher-led initiatives working in local educational contexts. Whereas there are researchers implementing CLA/MLF approaches in the tertiary context, for example Eijkman (2002), these are rare. The MLF and TLA also have limitations in that their implementation relies on education-based and curriculum-based teaching/learning contexts and the need for expert 'teachers' well-versed in the discourses of multiliteracy, if not critical literacy. The implementation of TLA similarly depends on the individual or collaborative efforts of practitioners and administrators operating in local contexts. New practitioners may also find the MLF language (situated practices, etc) difficult to understand. Whereas the meta-literacy approach incorporates a theoretical frame, the specifics of 'how' (for example, *how* to accomplish the capacity to move across different perspectives and affect different ways of seeing and appearing, or *how* to move strategically into different positions in one's reading of the situation and the game) are not provided, other than in specific discipline areas and guided by teachers.

These limitations support the proposition that there remains room for the development of an intervention framework or strategy that could be used by students/learners independently and which would be able to operate in contexts other than in curriculum and teaching/learning environments. One area that offers suggestions is that of transactional communication theory (TCT). The following section will review the interventions stemming from TCT.

3.3 Communication Approaches

3.3.1 Introduction

The review of TCT, in section 2.3, proposed several insights that could assist in the development of approaches to increase the awareness of and/or to overcome or transform

the problems/issues identified in Chapter Two. The review proposed that the negotiation and mastery of the university's discourses/literacies and the teaching/learning process are both fundamentally communication processes, involving students' and academics' use of communication competencies. The review also substantiated the contention that interpersonal interaction is essential to mutual understanding and to the development of an environment where effective learning can take place. Most significantly, the review of TCT made more explicit the role that students' (and academics') communicative capabilities can play in assisting students to make a successful transition to the new university culture.

This section will review the rising profile of communication (section 3.3.2) before examining the blurred relationships between communication, generic and transferable skills/competencies, and between communication and discourse (section 3.3.3). In section 3.3.4, the applications of communication policy and research will be reviewed.

3.3.2 The Rising Profile of Communication

The rising profile of communication is beginning to be reflected in HE policy in both Britain and Australia. In Britain, the Dearing Report (Higher Education in the Learning Society 1997) emphasised the importance of communication competencies/skills in its view of HE as the vocationally oriented transmission of given knowledge and skills. The Dearing Report's view of education has as its focus the teaching and learning of 'key skills', which are seen as transferable from one sphere of life to another and form the basis for future success – including successful 'lifelong learning'. One of these key skills is 'communication' (the others identified are numeracy, information technology, and learning to learn).

A similar rise in profile is evident in Australia, for example in the Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA), which aims to test the entry and exit skills of Australian university graduates. The most recent report, the *Graduate Skills Assessment: Stage One Validity Study* (DEST 2003), outlines the GSA test designed to assess a set of valued and widely applicable generic skills that may be developed through the university experience, and which are relevant to university achievement and graduate work. Reid and Parker (2002) argue that it has become customary for universities to declare that their students should acquire certain generic skills by the time they graduate and although there is an international trend to describe these attributes explicitly. However, Reid and Parker also

note little has been done to incorporate them into curricular practices (Cummings 1998 cited in Reid & Parker 2002, p.20).

The rising profile of communication/generic/transferable skills has also been boosted by vocational imperatives (McGregor et al. 2000; Tapper 2000). Marginson (1994, p.8) argues that, although generic skills may be required in academic study as well as in work contexts, the term is nearly always used with reference to the workplace, since 'conceptions of generic skills have become important in defining the attributes required at work, and in talking about the desired outcomes of education' (cited in Tapper 2000, p.112). This view is reflected in both the Dearing (1997) and DEST reports (2003) with both confirming the importance of workplace communication practices for graduates. It is a view also mirrored in the literature giving prime attention to the applicability of communication skills in various discipline areas, for example, for students in Engineering Faculties (McGregor et al. 2000; Schirato 1998) as well as for students and graduates more generally (see the report, *Skills Required of Graduates* (NBEET 1992); Parker 1997; Tapper 2000).

3.3.3 Blurred Boundaries

The view of communication and education reflected in both the Dearing Report and GSA rests upon the notion of discourse as 'communication skills'. This understanding mirrors the narrow view of discourse as opposed to Discourses (see section 1.5.3), and points to the problematic nature of the term 'communication skills', as well as some of the difficulties inherent in distinguishing communication skills from other skills and attributes, for example generic and transferable skills/competencies.

The terminology in Britain, North America and Australian contexts is often confusing – with similar skills referred to as 'competencies', or as 'generic', 'core', 'key' or 'transferable' skills and many skills and attributes given the same names but defined differently. Tapper (2000, p.112) argues that a common denominator is that employers regard the skills as non-discipline-specific and as transferable to the workplace: mainly because they are separated from discipline specific knowledge and skills. Tapper (2000 p.112) however differentiates between communication skills, which are seen as written, oral, small group and teamwork skills, and 'generic' skills, which are perceived to comprise a range of skills including communication skills, but also interpersonal, problem-

solving, analytical thinking, teamwork, leadership and self-organisation skills. This understanding agrees with that of Reid (1996):

> Generic skills are what we require to deal capably with the nexus between cognition and communication. This covers such things as independent critical thinking, an ability to assimilate and analyse diverse kinds of information, and, of course, the complex language-linked capacities that we call literacies (cited in Reid & Parker 2002, p.21).

Fairclough (2001, online) challenges the Dearing Report's view of discourse as communication skills. According to Fairclough (2001), the first problem is that the view of discourse as communication skills assumes that a communication skill, once learnt, can be freely transferred from one context to another:

> …even where such transfers take place, it does not mean that we find the same discursive practice in all contexts, for even the most globally dispersed discursive practice is always locally recontextualized, transformed and appropriated (online).

Secondly, the view of discourse as communication skills assumes that there is a simple relationship between what is actually said (or more generally done) in the course of some social practice, and skills, internalised models of how to say/do it. Thirdly, the view assumes that there is a given and accepted way of using language to do certain things, as if discourse was a simple matter of technique:

> Whereas any way of using language which gets to be given and accepted does so through applications of power which violently exclude other ways, and any way of using language within any social practice is socially contestable and likely to be contested. From this point of view, any reduction of discourse to skills is complicit with efforts on the part of those who have power to impose social practices they favour by getting people to see them as mere techniques (online).

Fairclough also argues that in critiquing the view of discourse as communication skills, he is also critiquing the view of education as a transmission of knowledge and skills:

> For viewing discourse as skills is just one aspect of viewing knowledge and skills in general as determinate, uncontested, and given externally to the learner; and it is only on such assumptions about what is to be taught and learnt that the process can be viewed as 'transmission'. We can broaden out the argument against discourse as skills into a different view of knowledge and skills in education: they are always provisional and indeterminate, contested, and moreover at issue in social relationships which all teachers and learners are positioned within. In a critical view of education, knowledge and 'skills' are indeed taught and learnt, but they are also questioned - a central concern is what counts as knowledge or skill (and therefore what does not), for whom, why, and with what beneficial or problematic consequences (online).

The Dearing Report (Higher Education in the Learning Society 1997) promotes knowledge, skills, and understanding, whereas, according to Fairclough, it should incorporate a questioning of knowledge and skills.

3.3.4 Communication Skills Policy and Research

The rising profile of communication has consequences for HE communication skills policy and research. Tapper (2000) argues that universities need a strong commitment to ensuring that their graduates possess well-developed communication skills. Such a commitment means going further than 'developing descriptors of graduate qualities; it entails careful consideration of a communication skills policy, curriculum and implementation' (p.126). Policy and implementation frameworks have been developed in some universities. For example, McGregor et al. (2000) propose a strategy in the context of engineering education which includes areas of instruction in relation to literacy (in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar), writing and business skills, oral, collaborative and interpersonal skills, cross-cultural communication skills, workplace information, and an awareness of these skills (including the ability to reflect on practice). McGregor et al. (2000) contend that the development of students' communication skills also demands changes in teaching methods. These changes include the integration of communication skills into content subjects; the inclusion of obligatory or elective communication skills and career-focused subjects into degree programs or in add-on postgraduate diplomas; and the inclusion of collaborative projects and work placements, or the development of alternative models of course provision, which balance generic and disciplinary skills more equally (see Bennett, Dunn & Carre 1999 and their model for skills development at Exeter University).

Commentators argue the case for communication skills research is needed. Tapper (2000, p.127), for example, calls for research: of graduates and cohorts of graduates to determine ways in which to meet better the wishes of employers and government bodies; of ways to ensure that universities meet their responsibilities in developing students' communication skills; and of ways of winning over the doubts of undergraduates and graduates about the usefulness of such efforts. In addition, Tapper proposes that research is needed of graduates of universities that have already focussed attention on communication skills development. Reid and Parker (2002), meanwhile, present a case for research about what it is that various stakeholder groups mean by communication skills as well as other generic attributes in the context of tertiary education. Reid and Parker (2002) argue that a narrow focus on competencies is inappropriate with regard to communication skills development, in that it fails to distinguish between literate capacities and literate attitudes:

Merely being able to read and write is nothing unless that potentiality is activated…A prime task for any university teacher must be to insist on the development of competent human beings who will be motivated to continue using throughout their lives the potential skills they require…To be effectively literate is not only to have gained a certain competency in reading and writing, but also to go on exercising the habits, attitudes, know-how and values that equip a person to act on the language rather than just be acted on by it (Reid 1996 cited in Reid & Parker 2002, p.21).

In addition, Reid and Parker (2002), point out that the competency-based approach to generic attributes tends to disconnect skills from disciplinary knowledge, whereas broadly characterised skills are seldom transferable from one context to another.

3.3.5 Communication Approaches: Summary

This section has reviewed the rising profile of communication skills and the blurred understandings ascribed to the terms 'communication', 'generic' and 'transferable' skills/competencies, and to 'communication' and 'discourse'. The section has also outlined the consequences for communication skills policy and research in HE.

The rising profile of communication, reflected in the Dearing report, in Marginson's transferable skills and in the GSA, although positive, has blurred the boundaries between communication, generic and transferable competencies/skills as well as those in relation to discourse (both D and d discourses). The debates stemming from the blurred boundaries between the terms are not able to deny the proposition that students need to develop the appropriate communicative, generic and professional competencies to assist them to make a more seamless transition into HE as well as into their future professional careers. Reid and Parker (2002, p.20) note, though, that the emphasis on communication policy and research in HE is primarily focused on the latter stages of the undergraduate/postgraduate degree and there are few interventions, other than those in core communication subjects, incorporated in the FYE. The discursive practices operating at the site can also act to impede even these attempts. For example, at USQ, discipline-based content subjects have replaced the core communication course, *Communication and Scholarship,* in the majority of Faculties, namely the more-applied Business, Education and Engineering Faculties.

Whereas the communication research area adds credence to the role of communication competencies in the university context, the critical and cross-cultural orientations underpinning the study endorse Fairclough's argument – that communication skills per se are not able, in terms of their lack of an explicit 'contextualising' capacity, to constitute the means for either student or future professional success. It could also be argued,

though, that Fairclough, along with educational pedagogic and constructivist theory (see section 2.3.4), may devalue communication because of its surface superficiality. Just as Fairclough disagrees with the view of discourse as communication, TCT theorists disagree with the view that communication is simple and linear. TCT theorists (see sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3) would argue, conversely, that communication is inherently complex and to be effective, also needs to be fine-tuned, or contextualised, to the individual and context being engaged. Whereas CDT brings into play the terms 'ways of knowing', 'cultures' 'discourses' and capital to encompass these understandings, TCT uses the terms 'perception' and 'fields of experience'.

The communication approaches are further limited by the lack of an explicit critical orientation, reducing students' means to be transformative and to empower themselves as they negotiate the university discourses. Students may not have the means to make transparent the assumptions underpinning thus far taken-for-granted choices made in the educational setting, for example, regarding the efficacy of the transmission model of education. These means, as revealed by the review of the critical literacy approaches, to be most effective, imply that students need to have the capacity to reflect on, reveal and change (if appropriate) their own and others' cultural and literacy practices. That these practices principally involve cross-cultural processes highlights the interventions that emerge from cross-cultural communication theory (CCT).

3.4 Cross-cultural Approaches

3.4.1 Introduction

The review of CCT, in section 2.4, confirmed the importance of effective cross-cultural communication in a university context. For example, Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory (CAT) provided the rationale for the contention that the process of making a successful transition to the university culture is, in essence, a cross-cultural process, which can, further, be accomplished using cross-cultural strategies. Although the cross-cultural approaches like those of Ferraro (2002), from business management, and Badley (2000), from teacher education, are briefly reviewed – essentially because they represent the emerging global salience of developing cross-cultural strategies – this section principally analyses the cross-cultural interventions incorporated in the *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (Mak et al.1998).

3.4.2 Global Competencies

Ferraro's (2002) research is representative of literature that has emerged from the need to be more effective in cross-cultural business and management contexts (also see Dodd 1998; Hofstede 1980 and 1986; Sullivan & Tu 1995). Ferraro (2002) advances a cultural paradigm shift and action framework in relation to the view that people tend to generalize about human nature solely on observations from their own society: people assume that their own ways of thinking and acting are unquestionably rational, natural, and thus, human. 'Before you can understand yourself you must first understand your own culture and how it influences your thoughts and behaviours' (p.159). Ferraro also acknowledges the role of reflexivity in his strategy/action framework for working and living competently, which he calls 'global competencies'. Ferraro argues that a better way of understanding different cultures is to examine the idea or behaviour in terms of 'its original cultural context' (contextual knowledge) and to suspend judgement until more complete information about the culture is developed (Ferraro 2002, p.21).

For Ferraro (2002, p.159), cross-cultural processes involve two components: the acquisition of new knowledge and the mastery of a number of new skills and competencies. The acquisition of knowledge includes the wider concept of culture, a model for understanding comparative cultural values and the varying ways by which people in different parts of the world verbally and nonverbally communicate with one another. The new competencies include the management of a personal 'paradigm shift' which may involve individuals altering their fundamental philosophical principles (or ways of thinking) as well as their ways of behaving. Involved is a degree of reflexive practice, which is imperative if behaviours are to be changed. Also involved is a shift from a traditional mindset to a global mindset.

Table 3.1: Traditional and Global Mindsets (Ferraro 2002, p.160)

Traditional Mindset	Global Mindset
Narrow perspective based on functional area	Broad, cross-cultural perspective
Contradictions to be prioritized	Contradictions to be balanced
Conflicts are to be minimised	Conflicts are seen as opportunities
Problem-solving through hierarchies	Problem-solving through networked processes
Individual mastery/competence	Teamwork is emphasized
Resist change/change seen as a threat	Create change/change seen as an opportunity
Master specific knowledge /skills	Emphasis on life-long learning

Ferraro's (2002, pp.160-189) strategies for operationalising his theoretical framework, global competencies, emanate from the global mindset column. The competencies include developing a broad perspective; balancing contradictions; being curious; building relationships; being perceptively acute; being able to shift paradigms; acting with integrity; becoming emotionally resilient; and being personally autonomous. Ferraro also contends that a better way of understanding different cultures is to examine the idea or behaviour in terms of 'its original cultural context' (contextual knowledge): to suspend judgment until more complete information about the culture is developed. Ferraro cautions that does not require that this new culture is adopted as your own, or that you even like it, but merely that you need to look at their ideas and acts in terms of the total culture, not your own culture. Ferraro (2002, p.194) claims that his ten global competencies are 'very specific and easily quantifiable'. However, whereas some competencies are practically orientated and encompass specific, concrete strategies, others are less practical. How does one become personally autonomous? As such, Ferraro's action framework has limitations.

3.4.3 Academic, Operational and Socio-cultural Competencies

Also stemming from a cross-cultural perspective is the research strand investigating the competencies/literacies needed by globally or internationally skilled professionals (for instance, teachers teaching in cross-cultural situations (see also Bouchner & Wicks 1972; Cushner & Mahon 2002, Olson & Kroeger 2001). Badley (2000) argues that academic, operational and socio-cultural competencies are required.

Academic competence encompasses a clear general understanding of the content area together with a deeper knowledge of some particular specialised aspect of it, including skills in the major research and scholarly methodologies used in that content area Badley 2000). Operational competence encompasses:

> …attending to their own continuing professional development so that what they carry with them is up-to-date and not obsolete…where professional obsolescence in HE is defined as 'the way that changes in the work environment (for example, the need for new knowledge, changed expectations, new working roles) mean that existing competence is no longer sufficient for effective performance…that competence has not deteriorated; demands have moved ahead of it' (p.243).

Badley suggests that operational competence includes 'knowing that' (subject expertise), 'know how' (pedagogical approach) and, in the global context, the operational competence of how to function in different socio-cultural conditions.

Socio-cultural competence includes the adoption of a transformatory and democratic approach to education and the development of what may be termed an ethnographic stance to teaching abroad. A transformatory approach 'sees everyone as proactive learners who can use intellectual and emotional skills to initiate, negotiate, evaluate their experiences and bring about actions for change' (Askew & Carnell 1998, p.167 cited in Badley 2000, p.244). Badley (2000) argues that it is the requirement that 'we must respect diversity in our teaching which takes on an especially crucial significance when we are abroad since there we have to become even more sensitive not only to our own, but also to our students' 'inevitable otherness' (p.245). This view is reflected in both the European Commission's (EC) endorsement of 'active pedagogies' and in a specific advance known as 'border pedagogy' which is defined as 'a strategy for learning about the cultural Other, by looking critically at how images, representations and texts are constructed, and at their hidden messages' (EC 1997, p.19 cited in Badley 2000, p.250). Badley argues that this approach facilitates learning how to identify one's own 'borders', those of others, and the borders of the external social world:

> Learning to appreciate differences as a positive opportunity must become one of the key competencies for Europeans' and for anyone else who is at all concerned to become a globally competent teacher (Badley 2000, p.250).

This view leads Badley to call for an ethnographic/intercultural approach to our own learning about others. The ethnographic approach, Badley maintains, is analogous to the research skills practiced in ethnography or as developed through intercultural education. Badley (2000) defines these ethnographic skills as making the familiar strange and the strange familiar; being able to switch between standpoints and identify positions; and being able to switch between empathy and critical distance.

> Learning from other people means that we become aware of their ways of seeing things, regardless of whether or not we are convinced by, or appropriate, their ways of seeing. We can talk about a *collective consciousness*, an awareness of others' ways of seeing things, as linking individual consciousnesses to each other. From this point of view it is highly relevant for students to learn from each other, as it is for teachers to learn from other teachers. We become aware of our own way of seeing something as a way of seeing only through the contrast with other ways of seeing the same thing (Bowden & Marton 1998, pp.14–15 cited in Badley 2000, p.250)

To support his case Badley (2000, p.453) cites Boyer's Opening Remarks (1994):

> In educating for a global community, three principles must dominate: to help students understand that we are all different, that we are all the same, and that we are all dependent on one another. Our students need to understand that a society sustains itself only to the extent that it celebrates the uniqueness of every individual. And, the last thing we can abide in an increasingly interdependent world is to ignore the diversity that makes us what we are and

who we are. That difference has both cultural and individual components. We must help students understand a diversity that is both local and global.

Badley's concepts of academic, operational and socio-cultural competence underlie the present study's principal themes. First, the concepts support the applicability of cross-cultural theory to intra-cultural (national and regional) contexts, especially given the widening notions of diversity. Secondly, the call for intercultural and ethnographic competence in teaching abroad confirms the applicability of students' (and academics) use of socio-cultural competence in an unfamiliar university culture. However Badley's use of socio-cultural competence differs from the understandings developed by the *ExcelL* cross-cultural program. The next section reviews these differences.

3.4.4 The *ExcelL* Program's Socio-cultural Competencies

3.4.4.1 Introduction

Crucial elements of Ferraro's global competencies and Badley's academic, operational and socio-cultural competencies are evident in the socio-cultural competency approach embraced in the *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (Mak et al. 1998). These elements include the importance of self-awareness, the significance of recognising the impact of one's own cultural value and belief systems and the central roles played by verbal and nonverbal communication in cross-cultural communication.

ExcelL was developed in collaboration between Drs. Marvin Westwood, and Ishu Ishiyama of the University of British Columbia, Canada, Dr. Anita Mak at the University of Canberra and Dr. Michelle Barker at Griffith University in Australia. The collaborators describe *ExcelL* as 'an innovative intercultural social effectiveness training program designed to facilitate the adjustment of newcomers to a culture, thus increasing their chances of academic and occupational success' (Mak & Barker 2000, p.2). Devised specifically to help new international students make a successful transition to the new host culture of the university, *ExcelL's* efficacy has been firmly established and validated by studies conducted in Canada, the UK, and Australia (Mak & Barker 2000; Mak, Barker, Logan & Millman 1999; Shergill 1997).

Westwood et al. (1997) argue that *ExcelL* is different from existing training programs in that it recognises various potential psychosocial barriers that may impede the development of socio-cultural competency in newcomers. The barriers include limited opportunities for

practising new skills, a sense of being overwhelmed by the number of adjustments to make, interpersonal anxiety about how to relate to host nationals, and threats to one's cultural identity. Westwood et al. (1997) also contend that *ExcelL* recognises that newcomers will experience anxiety during the adjustment period. The program therefore aims to replace anxiety with efficacy beliefs, which are reinforced by competence in the key socio-cultural skills and cultural maps. Cultural maps are a step-by-step description of both verbal and nonverbal types of behaviour used within a specific context/situation, and the explanation of the reasons for such preferred behaviour. Furthermore, whereas participants are encouraged to approach cross-cultural interactions such as learning new social roles, they can choose to retain their customary social skills for interacting with co-ethnic inhabitants, thus validating the participant's own culture and social skills.

The significance of the program is twofold. First, the program establishes the grounds for emphasising the role of socio-cultural competencies in assisting students adjust to an unfamiliar university culture. Secondly, the program provides a theoretical frame for giving prominence to particular socio-cultural competencies – specifically those of seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request.

A review of research literature testifies to the potency of the competencies, although the focus of such research is not concentrated on the socio-cultural competencies per se.

3.4.4.2 Seeking Help and Information

The ability to seek help and information is a thread running through the FYE literature, particularly the literature documenting research on transition and perseverance (Kantanis 2003; Krause 2001; McInnis et al. 2000). This literature supports the notion that seeking help is a crucial competency that needs to be consistently demonstrated by students in and across a variety of university cultures and sub-cultures. Students need to be able to canvass a wide range of resources and be able to determine which one will best meet a specific need. Students need to be able to access for themselves, locating, utilising, and assessing, for example, information gleaned from handbooks, booklets and web sites – as well as discipline-specific assistance, such as peer-assisted learning programs, consultation with tutors and lecturers, library and computer support services, and any additional support sessions organised for students. In addition, students need to know how to access learning

support and the personalised coping mechanisms to assist them in negotiating bureaucratic infrastructures and the range of departments and disciplines.

There is also the help and support available from a plethora of counsellors: careers, peer, learning and clinical counsellors. Pearson (1999) argues that accessing these kinds of remedial and crisis-oriented interventions is essential in supporting students in reaching their goals or in repairing the devastation that occurs when failure is experienced as a total loss of confidence in personal and cultural identity. McInnis, James and Hartley (2000, p.19) discuss the 'reality shock' of receiving a lower-than-expected assignment grade, whereas Krause (2001, p.150) argues that having to adjust their expectations and become accustomed to new forms of assessment and grading may present sufficient academic difficulty for students that they consider leaving. Krause (2001) calls for 'academic integration', a concept depending on interaction and communication.

The usefulness of seeking help and information is evident in research on FYE, although the research is not, itself, focused on the topic of seeking help and information. Participants in Krause's study on assignment writing, for example, reveal the support that seeking help and information had provided them:

> I discussed my approach with my tutor and she thought I was on the right track so that made me feel good.

> I need to do checks. Once I get an assignment topic I go through it and if I'm not satisfied I go to the lecturer (cited in Krause 2001, p.156).

Guttridge (2001, p.140), too, provides evidence of the crucial nature of seeking help and information in a British study of the importance of life skills:

> It's fine as long as no one in the family is sick and my support networks all work (mature student with a caring role).

> When I've got a problem, I want someone to help me decide what to do. I don't really want to have to work it out for myself. It takes too long and I might get it wrong. I want someone to share the blame (standard entry year 2 resit student).

Although the socio-cultural competency is considered to be crucial in cross-cultural adjustment (see Mak et al. 1998) it is not as straightforward as it seems. Evidence of the discomfort and difficulties some students feel when using this competency is a thread also running through the research on the FYE – though again the literature does not focus on the role of 'help' per se. Eijkman (2002) in an analysis of the first year experiences of police constables, includes this student's story of the angst of asking for help:

> I do wish to submit my second assignment … and I would like to speak with you about this on the telephone. I freely admit that I have struggled with the CDP course on a whole because I have not experienced this type of self-education before. I left school when I was 16 and have very limited study and essay skills. I found your tutorials a great help but due to my workload over the Olympic period, I found it difficult to complete the 2nd assignment in time. I was given an extension. However my assignment was not received and when I attempted to send a second hardcopy, I discovered my floppy disk had been corrupted. This frustrated me no end and I basically threw my hands up in the air and surrendered to the situation. However I am not happy and I would jump at the chance to not only complete this course but I desperately need help with the others. I have already been given a FW grade in …because when I asked for assistance from the course coordinator, I didn't get it. This may seem hard to believe but I took the wrong attitude, got angry and did nothing, which really hurt only myself in the long run. I need help, I want help and I would like to discuss this with you further. I hope to hear from you.

One of Guttridge's (2001, p.144) participants shares her feelings about the difficulties in asking for help:

> I find it really hard to ask for help. I feel I'm being a nuisance. No one gives me that impression; it's how I feel (Year 1 student with a disability).

Krause's (2001, p.159) participant offers an example of the apprehension felt by students in approaching lecturers:

> I don't feel confident enough to speak to my tutor about the essay question because they might think that I'm stupid or something.

The socio-cultural capital that students embody as they access the university culture can interrupt the process of transition and limit students' use of the competency:

> The information that I was given was quite clear; I just didn't believe it (standard entry Year 1 student, post induction evaluation cited in Gutteridge 2001, p145).

Yorke (2000, p.42) supplies evidence of the importance of seeking help in an analysis of student non-completion in Britain. Yorke's data reveal that staff who were unavailable/ unhelpful contributed significantly to students' decisions to withdraw:

> I completed an access course prior to attending university where the staff were really helpful knew you on a one-to-one basis. At uni this wasn't the case and I couldn't cope with the workload with no tutorial support (Diploma in Higher Education student).

This anecdote points to the crucial nature of assistance in the university context.

The literature also reveals issues related to the under-use of support services by some students. Gutteridge (2001, p.144) argues that 'disturbingly, even with insight or direct advice, students still tend not to access channels of support such as study skills development material'. Gutteridge adds that the students who felt disclosure would be perceived punitively were less likely to disclose or seek help until driven by a crisis. Taylor (2002) notes the percentages of students in a study of first year mathematics

students who felt they had below average or no expertise in a number of academic literacies (25% using the library; 50% talking in tutorials; 35% using electronic discussions; 40% preparing study plans; 25% taking notes; and 12% reading at university level). Taylor (cited in Taylor & Lawrence 2002) also surveyed the students about when and where they would request help (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Percentage of Students Requesting Help (Taylor & Lawrence 2002)

	Day	External
• Tutorial	6%	2%
• Lecture	45%	10%
• Before/after lecture	10%	8%
• Phone	60%	18%
• Consultation times	15%	25%
• Email	15%	15%
• Discussion group	21%	10%
• OUTREACH	-	10%

Taylor's respondents indicated that students ask for help inappropriately (in lectures and by phone) and that students' use of consultation times was comparatively low. Literature is beginning to address these issues (see Coles 2001; Gutteridge 2001). There are also early warning intervention programs being implemented: Shiplee and Wilson, from the University of West Florida, and Dietsche, Flether and Barett, from Humber College, Canada, presented papers addressing this issue to *The Fourteenth International Conference on the First Year Experience* held in Hawaii in July 2001.

The importance of seeking help and information cannot be underestimated, recurring repeatedly in everyday discourses: in public relations and media campaigns, for example 'Kids Help Lines' and 'Cancer Help' groups demonstrate the value of this competency, especially when a person is in the process of understanding or making the transition to a new culture or situation. One piece of research found that in Hospital Emergency Rooms, the most significant variable influencing a patient's recovery was a new doctor's ability to seek help and information from a more experienced doctor (Life Matters 1999). Kids Help Lines are set up to help adolescents deal with the processes of growing up or of their lives changing, whereas Cancer Help groups (Canteen) are established to assist people develop sources of information and support.

3.4.4.3 Participating in a Group

The capability to participate in a group (or team) is another socio-cultural competency whose presence can be detected in the literature. The usefulness of participating in a group is confirmed, for example, by the literature on collaboration in learning: in Johnson and Johnson's (1987) account of the importance of group goals; Weinstein's (1991) research that collaboration enhances the social climate of the class because students spend more time interacting and sharing information with one another; Biggs' (1991) discussion of the benefits gained through the enhancement of positive expectations and fun in group learning; Salomon's (1993) discussion of the positive effects to be gained by 'distributed cognition' giving students access to the learning of others; and Lander et al.'s (1995) discussion of the benefits of collaboration for enhancing effective leaning strategies and critical reflection.

FYE literature demonstrates that group participation generates feelings of confidence and belonging in a diversity of classroom settings, contributing to the critical and questioning engagement essential to academic success (Kantanis 2000 and 2001; Krause 2001; McInnis et al. 2000; Tinto 2000; Yorke 2000). FYE literature also reveals that students acknowledge the importance of this competency in developing feelings of confidence and connection. Asmar et al. (2000, p.12) highlight the value provided by student-student interactions to learning:

> Just getting to know people and if you can work together and get study groups going and organising notes.

The inability to participate, to interact with others, alternatively, caused discomfort:

> I just did X and hated it. There was no help. There were no tutorials at all and that was just horrible. Even though there was a bulletin board, you didn't have people around that you could talk to (cited in Krause 2001, p.160).

> I actually had to do a tutorial presentation with some people out of my tutorial and I didn't even know their names or anything…that's a bit sad, when you don't know the people who you actually have courses with.

Yorke's (2000, p.43) analysis of attrition reveals the relationships between a lack of course participation and student withdrawal:

> I found that I could not cope with being the only female on the course and found the staff was mainly male oriented to the males in the class. I could not cope with being left out especially when having to go into groups. (Architecture student)

> Lack of involvement with other students on the course due to social differences, being of a different class other students seemed to look down on me and refused to associate with me.

> Majority of other students came from southern England and disregarded people from the north of England. (Architecture student)

Krause's (2001, p.154) participants also explain that courses, which did not provide face-to-face interactions, denied students opportunities to participate with tutors and peers. These courses were also perceived to be more difficult than those courses where students did have access to interaction with their peers. For example:

> All of a sudden you find it's not explained to you and you don't have the support of your friends around you to ask little questions…you can't just go off to a teacher and ask questions…you feel so overwhelmed and you feel you can't cope.

> You had no support – just the computer and me. I really did not know anyone that was doing the course and there were no tutorials or anything. You didn't have people around you that you could talk to.

> You don't have a chance to discuss anything – you are on your own. I found that so difficult.

The importance of this socio-cultural competency is also reflected in the efficacy of learning communities, peer collaboration or peer cohorts, all of which are gaining in popularity and credence, particularly in the United States (see *Program and Proceedings: The Fourteenth International Conference on the First Year Experience* (2001) for a range of programs providing evidence of the value of this competency).

3.4.4.4 Making Social Contact

Also important is the ability to make social contact, in socially and culturally appropriate ways, across a diversity of cultural groups. This competency is crucial as its use facilitates the development of study groups, writing groups or learning circles, as well as study partners, mentors and friends, and perhaps, the support of a 'significant other'. The literature surveying student retention argues, for example, that social isolation one of the main reasons for student withdrawal (see section 2.2.9.6). Watson, Teese, Polesel and Golding (2000 cited in Illing 2000) pinpoint isolation as one of the main reasons for dropping out in Australia. Clulow and Brennan (1996, p.33) suggest that there is a positive relationship between personal support and persistence with study and that there is a significant correlation 'between a group of people never spoken to and withdrawal or failure in a subject.' Kantanis (2000) argues that, without friends, students have fewer resources at their disposal to assist them in the process of transition. Kantanis (2001) also contends that social isolation can undermine self-confidence and self-esteem; inhibit development of social skills and communication competence; preclude discussion of big ideas, assigned texts/tasks; prevent collaboration and support; reduce persistence – due to

lack of identification with a group; restrict familiarisation with university services; reduce the enculturalisation process; and reinforce feelings of negativity toward institution, others and self. An example of such feelings appears in Yorke's (2000, p.42) discussion of the reasons why students withdrew from HE:

> I felt that being a middle-class mature student did not help my integration into student life – I felt that my experience and knowledge put me on a different footing to other students. This meant that many seminars were inappropriate for me… as I found it difficult to meet anyone of a similar age and background. I did not enjoy the student way of life.

In the FYE literature, students confirm the importance of the competency with Asmar et al. (2000, p.12) arguing that living in a residential college enhances students' abilities to build supportive networks:

> …everyone helps out if you need notes and stuff, you always…there's seniors and stuff that have done the course before.

Asmar et al.'s (2000, p.13) study highlights the importance of personal interactions and networks and suggests that the engagement of students in such interactions enhances their first year on campus. Asmar et al. also found that the perception staff cared about their progress constituted a major motivating factor for students:

> These people have taken a personal interest in my work. I mean you wouldn't expect that. It's been…yeah it's motivated me, it's also given me the confidence to ask them questions and that's something that has really helped me a lot. (This quote also emphasises the importance of seeking help).

The value of making social contact also appears in Peat, Dalziel and Grant's (2001, p.207) discussion of the role of peer networks facilitated by a transition workshop held at the Faculty of Science (University of Sydney):

> I have remained close friends with a group of people I met at the workshop. Had I not met these people I probably wouldn't have been able to cope with university lifestyle and may have left long ago.

> I was able to spot a few familiar faces at lectures, etc, so I didn't feel so lonely.

> Attendance at the workshop was brilliant because it really did create for me a new network of friends who I still see regularly.

> As we were put into groups according to subject choice and timetable arrangement, we saw (and still see) these people all the time. It made a huge difference, especially in the first couple of weeks, in that we already had a circle of friends…having someone with the same timetable as me has been really great as we get along really well – instant best friend.

> It was like a giant jump-start. Because I was settled with friends so quickly it was a lot easier to organise the work side of things…with other people to help and talk to.

> I met my friends at the workshop and we all thank you for this day. It has helped me adjust amazingly, having friends.

Tinto (1998) would love to hear these voices. Tinto would also appreciate the testimonies in Krause's (2001) discussion of academic assignment writing, which found that friends helped to ameliorate students' difficulties:

> I find my friends give me more practical help because they are the ones doing the research and finding stuff and trying to formulate ideas.

> I would run around and ask my friends to read this and tell me if it was OK. It gives you a bit of confidence. And you can read theirs as well then you can say – oh, this is really good. Have I done that right?

> We push each other to learn from each other and I found that quite useful

Making social contact is a competency that can enhance cultural literacy and other skills. The competency can enable students to develop sources of support and increase potential resources to brainstorm solutions and solve problems. The literature emphasises the importance of this skill in relation to study career, work, and promotion (see Dalziel & Peat 1998; Krause 2001; Peat, Dalziel & Grant 2001; Tinto 1998) confirming the power in the saying 'it is not what you know but who you know'.

3.4.4.5 Seeking and Offering Feedback/Expressing Disagreement/Refusing a Request

The final three competencies originating from the *ExcelL Program* include seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement, and refusing a request. These competencies are, for two reasons, more complex than those already mentioned. First, their use has the potential to cause offense; offering negative feedback to high-status lecturers can be 'risky', for example. Secondly, many people find the competencies personally difficult to implement. Refusing a request to work an extra shift, for example, is difficult for employees who do not want to lose their jobs in difficult economic circumstances. These are also, however, the competencies that enable students to participate actively in and engage with the university culture. Fostering critical engagement with the subject matter constitutes a higher-order skill considerably valued by many academics.

The need to (appropriately) offer and receive feedback is evident in the literature. Kenny (2002), in research on on-line learning, includes this confirmation of the importance of feedback in improving a student's assignment writing skills:

> A great improvement, which would help a great deal, would be more feedback on assignments and tests. I feel I am not learning to the best of my ability in relation to assignments and tests, as there is no feedback. I never know what answers I did get right and those wrong. Knowing would help as then I would know what I can improve on.

The importance of students' capacity to offer constructive feedback[32] is also reflected in the literature, although the evidence in the literature illustrates students' frustration and resentment, rather than investigating the issue per se (i.e. examining students' capacities to offer constructive feedback). Instead, the literature reveals the many opportunities where the capacity to offer constructive feedback would be advantageous in preventing/minimising students' problems. Asmar et al. (2000), for example, maintain that loneliness and confusion in the first weeks are a widespread problem for new students; feelings exacerbated by the presence of unhelpful university staff. Asmar et al. (2000, p.12) cite comments like:

> I remember the first week just being really annoyed with the place because it's big…I just spent ages running around but having no one really do anything about my problem. You'd go and line up in a queue for 3 and a 1/2 hours to get your name, and then you'd realise you've made a mistake. It's hell.

Constructive feedback offered in this situation could assist in providing a better experience for the following year's students. The perception that staff were not helpful and, at times, actively negative, is evident in Yorke's (2000, p.42) research on attrition:

> The course was taught very loosely, the tutors were never around to help and when they were they were very unhelpful. They were critical of your work to the point of being rude, not constructive criticism, if your work was not the best, average, then you were ignored in favor of the best students…the way one tutor spoke to me has put me off higher education and I will take a long time in considering ever going back (Art and Design student).

This anecdote reveals the student's feelings of acute frustration. The anecdot also depicts the important role (both positive and negative) that feedback plays in the teaching/learning process. Yorke 2000, p.42) provides more evidence of both the need to offer constructive feedback and the unhelpful role played by staff:

> As a mature married student with a minimum of two hours travelling time there and back I found the course too inflexible to accommodate my needs. Travelling a total of 4 hours to attend a 1 hour lecture or tutorial only, was not sensible or constructive, yet I was told I must…Leaving the house at 8 am and returning at 7 pm and still having work to do, meant my relationships with family, friends and husband deteriorated to the point of being non-existent. I approached the mature-age counsellor who said that no concession could be made. Not Helpful! (Law student)

> Academic staff had a tendency to project themselves as being very pushed for time, stressed out and could not fit you into their timetable of work. No matter who you turned to, or when you sought someone's aid, they seemed to be busy (science student).

In Gutteridge (2001, p.146) a mature-age student with a disability and new to study testifies that:

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[32] Constructive feedback refers to critical or negative feedback offered by students to lecturers.

> …I got told off for being late for the first three tutorials on the trot. I simply didn't have the courage to explain it was because the car park attendant had forgotten to meet me even though it had been arranged in advance. It annoyed me to think that I was being labeled through no fault of my own, especially as I had invested so much effort in getting there in the first place.

Comments like these reveal students' feelings of emotional intensity and suggest the (perhaps widespread) resentment stemming from students' interactions with university staff. However, there is little indication in the literature that these kinds of views are considered to be a viable research issue. For example, although the disadvantages implicit in the deficit approaches demonstrated by some university staff (see section 2.2.10.2) are present in the literature, the issue is addressed from the university's perspectives – in terms of the academics responses – not from the students' perspectives. Students' comments additionally suggest that some university staff appear to lack insight, or at the very least, do not seek feedback about the consequences of their interactions with students. In this situation, students' capacities to provide constructive feedback – for example in relation to the problems students encounter in their interactions with university staff – become important. First, the students' capacities to give constructive feedback could operate to alert university staff to the ways in which staff can provide better assistance to students as well as assisting staff to be more flexible in their interactions with students. Secondly, students' use of the competency may enable students to take more control of their learning environments.

The capacity to offer constructive feedback remains, however, a difficult competency for students to implement, in particular in relation to offering positive, yet critical, feedback to academics. For example, there is the possibility that such a course of action could offend academics and may lead to students feeling discriminated against. Research examining discursive practices such as these and the ways in which they operate in the university sector (especially in terms of the students' perspectives) may throw light on the power imbalances operating between universities and students. Such research may also reveal the difficulties inherent in students' use of the competency.

The capacity to express disagreement is present in the literature. McInnis (2003) cites e-mail, sent by a student to a lecturer, which illustrates the realities facing students:

> I have a full-time job. Could you possibly let me know of any resources that I should consult before the class next week? I may not be able to attend lectures... except when things are not busy at work. Will all the information I need be in the lecture notes and in the prescribed

textbook? Do the lectures describe anything that I cannot read up on in either of these resources?

The competency assumes greater importance in light of the recent research that suggests that students' are finding it more difficult to juggle the demands of their study, work and family lives (Cain & Hewitt 2004; Green 2004).

The consequences of students' inabilities to refuse a request (say 'no') are evident in research on attrition research – for example, as a reason given for withdrawal. Yorke's (2000, p.4) study includes these comments:

> I started clubbing, took more and more drugs, became increasingly ill, lost weight became paranoid. I messed up in a big way. One minute I was on top, the next rock bottom (Joint Arts and Social Science student).

> I spent all my money too quickly and on the wrong things (going out and drinking instead of paying my Hall fees. This contributed to my work slipping. After missing so many lectures and seminars I was too scared to go any more (Humanities student).

Again, it is a more difficult competency for students to exhibit, reflecting the capacities to incorporate self-discipline and to set boundaries. 'Saying no' (appropriately) is also a thread running through all kinds of public discourses: in relation to drink-driving campaigns, anti-drug and alcohol campaigns and sexual propositions.

The review of the literature supports the importance of the students' use of the competencies (of seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request). The review reveals the difficulties students face in using the competencies and the power configurations underlying the interactions between staff and students, which necessitate students' use of the competencies. The review also supports the value of exploring the competencies' application for enabling students to be more in control of their learning situations.

3.4.4.6 Socio-cultural Competencies: Summary

The review of the literature, from areas as diverse as the FYE, retention, and access and equity, supports the value of research investigating the role that socio-cultural competencies play in assisting students to access, negotiate and master university literacies and discourses. The competencies – seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request – are present in the literature. However the literature's focus is not the competencies per se as the competencies are present courtesy of alternative research foci.

The review suggests, however, that a research focus on specific socio-cultural competencies would have value, in particular in relation to the benefits the competencies may provide in assisting students' transition to and perseverance in a new and unfamiliar university culture.

3.4.5 Cross-cultural Approaches: Summary

The review of the cross-cultural approaches emanating from the business and management areas (for example Ferraro's global competencies) and teacher education (Badley's academic, operational and socio-cultural competences) give credence to the cross-cultural competencies' capabilities in developing and enhancing an individual's workplace and professional effectiveness. The review of the literature, however, revealed the limitations in both Ferraro's and Badley's approaches: that the competencies do not provide the specifics of 'how' – for example, in relation to Ferraro's global competencies, 'how' to become personally autonomous, and, in relation to Badley's socio-cultural competence, 'how' to develop an 'ethnographic stance'. These limitations give rise to a vacuum, it is conjectured, that the *ExcelL* socio-cultural competencies may be able to fill. The socio-cultural competencies (seeking help, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request) may contribute practical and specific practices that enable students to successfully negotiate the university culture.

3.5 Summary: Literacy, Communication and Cross-cultural Approaches

The review of the literacy, communication and cross-cultural approaches reveals key themes recurring in each of the approaches. These themes relate to assumptions about (a) the powerful, yet often overlooked, effects of *culture* and *discourses* on everyday lives, (b) the impact of cultural and linguistic *diversity* – both globally and locally in a world that is rapidly changing, (c) the need for individuals to become more personally, socially and cross-culturally aware, (d) the importance of developing interpersonal connections and *relationships* as well as synergistic collaborations and effective teamwork, (e) the ability to manage *change* and the uncertainty which accompanies it, (f) the importance of empathy – the capacity to understand others in terms of their cultural assumptions rather than only in terms of our own, (g) the importance of lifelong learning, encompassing the recognition that the systematic study of culture is a life-long learning 'work-in-progress',

and (h) the recognition that *power* configurations may impact at the point where differences converge.

The similarities in the assumptions underlying the approaches exist despite the differences in terminology. For example, the literacy approaches encompass the understandings that it is important to contextualise and recontextualise the more generic (or communication skills) given prominence in the communication approaches. The cross-cultural program, *ExcelL*, meanwhile, accommodates the idea of contextualising (and recontextualising) with its recognition of the importance of the 'socio-cultural' aspects of communication. Thus, although, the terminology used by each approach is discrete, there are similarities in the assumptions underpinning each approach. For the purposes of this study, the term, *socio-cultural competencies* – with the capacity to reflect more overly this contextual fine-tuning – will be used rather than the term *communication or generic competencies*.

It cannot be assumed, however, that the use of the same terminology means that the same concepts are being referred to. For example both the *ExcelL* program and Badley (2000) refer to socio-cultural competencies. The *ExcelL* socio-cultural competencies are, however, differentiated from Badley's socio-cultural competencies in that they represent specific and practical actions/behaviours that can be undertaken independently by students (asking for help and saying 'no', for instance) whereas Badley's use of the term, socio-cultural competency, is much more abstract – 'proactive learners who can use intellectual and emotional skills to initiate, negotiate, evaluate their experiences and bring about actions for change'. For the purposes of this study, the term, *socio-cultural competencies* – in the *ExcelL* sense of the specific competencies of *seeking help, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request* – with their capacity to represent specific, practical, and concrete actions/behaviours – will be used.

Another thread recurring in the review of the three approaches is the recognition that the effectiveness of the socio-cultural fine-tuning or contextualising embodied in the socio-cultural competencies is dependent on students' capabilities for observation, reflection, and reflective practice. The review of the literacy, communication and cross-cultural approaches also draws out the need for students to demonstrate both critical discourse and

critical self-awareness. The next section will gather and delineate these shared threads and review their applicability for facilitating student success.

3.6 Reflective/Reflexive Threads

3.6.1 Introduction

This section synthesises a number of related threads woven throughout the two chapters of literature review. The capacities of reflection, reflective practice, reflexivity and critical awareness recur, to varying degrees, in (a) the reviews of CDT, TCT and CCT, (b) in the literacy approaches, for instance CLA and the frameworks emanating from the multiliteracy, meta-literacy and tertiary literacy areas, (c) in the reviews of the communication approaches and (d) in the cross-cultural approaches of Badley (2000), Ferraro (2002), and Mak et al. (1998). The notion of reflexivity was introduced in relation to the research methodology chosen for the study (see section 1.6) and is extended in Chapter Four (see section 4.6).

The meanings allocated to each of these notions are complicated by their presence in a plethora of diverse settings and contexts. The meanings emerge from such disparate research areas as HE, critical and cross-cultural research and from the extensive debates about the most effective ways to understand and improve educational practice (see Lander et al. 1995; Mezirow 1990). The notions are prevalent in literature emanating from health (see Higgs 1995), business (Kegan & Lahey 2001), and psychology areas (Kelly 1955 and 1991), teased out in the media (*The Australian's* Phillip Adams and Ruth Ostrow) as well as being evident in self-help and self-management literature (for example, Covey 1991; Gray 1991; McGraw 2001). The notions also have everyday currency – on the GOOGLE research engine (accessed on May 10, 2004) there were 162,000 links to self-awareness, 3,760,000 to reflection and 424,000 to reflective practice

The review of the literature reveals that the boundaries between these concepts are blurred and often imprecise. There are many varied definitions and views put forward stressing different aspects and purposes, emphasising various contexts and products of reflection and reflecting different discipline foci and imperatives. Skilling (1999), for instance, argues that there are a number of perspectives on what it means to reflect with the variation in views stemming from varying beliefs as to the purpose of reflection. There are many commentators who have traced the intersections between them – particularly in

relation to educational practice and learning. Jolly (1999) traces the emergence of reflection/reflective practice as a research focus in his analysis of their relevance for engineering students, whereas Skilling (1999), from the field of primary education, and Boud and Walker (1998) and Hatton and Smith (1995), in teacher education, explore the intersections between them as well as the implications provided for the teaching/learning process. This section summaries the intersections between these notions and develops their applications for university practice.

3.6.2 Reflection

Most analyses begin with Dewey (1933) who, designating reflection as the 'hallmark of all intelligent action', perceives it to be an active and deliberate cognitive process involving sequences of interconnected ideas which take account of underlying beliefs and knowledge (Hatton & Smith 1995). 'Reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached' (Hatton & Smith 1995, p.2). Skilling (1999) argues that, for Dewey, the construct of reflection emanates from a cognitive perspective, one that focuses on logical reasoning, and involves an active analysis of beliefs and actions in search of meaning. Jolly (1999) describes Dewey's view as similar to taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it as a way to make sense of what has occurred, exploring often disordered and confused events and focusing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them.

Dewey's views of reflection are extended by experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory emphasises the central role that reflection on experience plays in learning, reinforcing the notion that ideas are constructed and reconstructed through experience, rather than existing as fixed and unchallengeable patterns of thought (Jolly 1999). Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), for example, perceive reflection to be a process of turning experience into learning, that is, a way of exploring experience in order to learn new things from it, to lead to new understandings and appreciations. Some theorists have generated models to illustrate these links between reflection and learning; Kolb (1984), who uses the concept of the learning loop, is such a theorist. Kolb (1984, p.21) developed a four-stage experiential learning model which includes 1) experience, 2) reflection, 3) generalising or theorising, and 4) planning. Kolb argues that ideal experiential learners are able to involve themselves in new experiences without bias, reflect upon experiences from

multiple perspectives, integrate their observations into logically sound theories, and use these theories in problem solving.

3.6.3 Reflective Practice

Schön (1983 and 1987) extends the notions of reflection by rejecting the view that theory and practice should be viewed separately. Developing the term the 'reflective practitioner', Schön (1983), like Kolb, contends that the learner is engaging in a process of experience, reflection, restructuring and planning. Schön advances the notion of reflection by distinguishing between *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*, arguing that our knowing is in our action, and that such knowledge is tacit. When reflecting-in-action, 'there is some puzzling phenomenon with which the individual is trying to deal. As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings that have been implicit in his action, understandings which he 'criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action' (Schön 1983, p.5). Jolly (1999) notes that the discussion is of action, and can easily be translated to a problem-focus rather than a self-focus, or self-awareness. Schön's 'reflection-in-action' is also highly dependent on context. Matthews and Jessel (1998, p.1) argue that as a result:

> …'reflection' becomes the process whereby such knowledge can be made more explicit so that it can be applied with some measure of control in the midst of an activity. This form of reflection may be achieved through framing likely contexts within which particular aspects of practice can be problematised and attended to and represented at a more conscious level, or 'named'.

Reflection-on-action enables students to reflect on a critical incident from their own area of practice and identify specific learning that may have occurred as a result of the experience. Reflection-on-action requires students to use what they had learnt from the past situation in their current practice, enabling them to examine practice from a learning perspective. The role and behaviour of the teacher is of prime importance in the success of reflective practice of the learners, and what is important to students is the 'coach's ability to negotiate the ladder of reflection' (Schön 1987, p.168).

Argyris (1993) contributes to the discussion by differentiating between single-loop learning and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning, Argyris argues, occurs when 'an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system' (p.9). It is akin to Schön's notion of reflection-in-action and is largely functional, short-term and technical (Cohen et al. 2000). Double-loop learning is a hermeneutic

activity of understanding and interpreting social situations with a view to their improvement, requiring people to question and challenge given value positions (Cohen et al. 2000). Jolly (1999) argues that, whereas double-loop learning (correcting errors by firstly examining and altering the governing variables and then the actions) is necessary as a first step to a true improvement of practice, rather than just local adjustment (for example, with engineers, their focus on technical skills), it ignores difficulties experienced in establishing group work or an inability to seek help with problems (two of the socio-cultural competencies reviewed in section 3.4.3). Jolly builds on Cowan (1997) who extends Schön's work by embracing a third reflective loop: *reflection-for-action*. Reflection-for-action is anticipative: here the learner 'define[s] their aspirations...[and]...establishes priorities for subsequent learning' a formulation described in Cowan's "loopy diagram" (Jolly 1999).
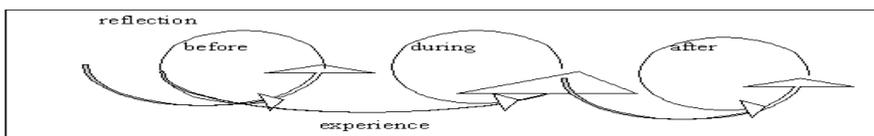
Figure 3.2: Cowan's Loopy Diagram (Cowan 1997 cited in Jolly 1999)

Boud (1992) and Greenwood (1998) identify the importance of reflection-before-action, thinking through what one wants to do and how one intends to do it before one actually does it. 'To fail to reflect before action may lead to error, in addition, and related to this, it allows an important opportunity for feedback to go begging' (Greenwood 1998, p.2).

3.6.4 Reflexivity

Cowen, by making explicit the notion of self-awareness, explicitly links reflective practice to reflexivity – intersections which are also often blurred and problematic. Jolly (1999) argues that Schön tends to use the terms 'reflection' and 'reflexive thinking' interchangeably. The idea of 'reflexive practice', as used by Schön (1987), relates to a tacit form of 'knowledge-in-action' developed by skilled practitioners. Darling (1998) says that this occurs at the time when some kind of introspection occurs to distinguish between the two: reflection occurs after an interaction whereas, like Cowan's model, reflexive processes incorporate introspection within the period of interaction (cited in Jolly 1999). Darling (1998) argues that reflection is related to self and improving future practice, whereas reflexivity is a pro-active tool to improve communication and provide insight, simultaneously, into priorities prior to reaction (cited in Jolly 1999).

Other writers integrate self-awareness into their perspectives of reflexivity by incorporating the Latin-derived dictionary definition: to turn back on oneself (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). They accept that people have to think about their own concepts and what they bring to any situation. In contrast to the view that people can be objective, reflexivity argues that we have a social and intellectual unconscious and consciousness that we bring to any situation (Matthews & Jessel 1998, p.1). Kelly (2003) calls this a continued attention to the place from which you speak. Gee (1999) sees that self-awareness/reflexivity is integral to 'recognition work' and encompasses:

> …a process wherein people try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing. People engage in such work when they try to recognise others for who they are and what they are doing.

Matthews and Jessel, in their analysis of reflexive practice (1998, p.1), contend that:

> …we have to try to be self-aware in order to extend and further our understanding of situations…reflexivity is a resource to help us reveal our assumptions and their power constituents. Reflexivity can enable a better understanding of situations through a better understanding of ourselves, even though those understanding always contain a 'fiction' or 'story'…These understandings include experiences that relate to one's own self, beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions, fears--those experiences that relate more centrally to the self than those which are relatively peripheral and relate to external things.

Jolly (1999, p.3) argues that reflexivity can therefore be seen as the application of the fruits of reflection, and a higher order skill:

> That is, we seek to incorporate reflection into the being of the engineer, to make it the centre of a practice that will allow for life-long responsiveness to real world circumstances, to other people and to change. In comparison with Cowan's loopy diagram our ideal focuses not on experience, as something outside the person, but on the person's attitude to experience.

In response, Jolly develops a model where the area E represents not experience but the practising engineer (or the engineering profession), the core from which reflection emanates and to which it returns in a never-ending loop. Reflection is now a tool in the continuous construction of reflexivity, with reflexivity a way of relating to the world and a basis for understanding and responding to experience.
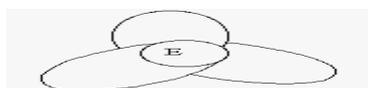
Figure 3.3: Model of Reflexivity (in Jolly 1999, p.3)

3.6.5 Critical Reflection

Hatton and Smith (1995) argue that a key issue in regard to reflection is concerned with how consciously the one reflecting takes account of the wider historic, cultural and political values and beliefs in framing and reframing practical problems to which solutions

are being sought – a process they identify as 'critical reflection'. Critical reflection, however, is also a term that is used loosely. For some, critical reflection can mean no more than constructive self-criticism of one's actions with a view to improvement (see Calderhead 1989). Whereas for others (see McNamara 1990), critical reflection implies considerations involving moral and ethical criteria, making judgments about whether professional activity is equitable, just and respectful of persons or not, as well as locating any analysis of personal action within wider socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts (Hatton & Smith 1995). Boud and Walker's (1998) view, meanwhile, is that critical reflection accepts normal practice as being problematic. Boud and Walker argue that the consideration of the context in which critical reflective action is engaged is a seriously underdeveloped aspect of discussion of reflection. Defining context as the total cultural, social and political environment in which reflection takes place, Boud and Walker propose that this broader context is so all pervasive that it is difficult to recognise its influence:

> …it is mirrored in and is in turn modified by particular local settings within which learning occurs: the classroom, the course and the institution. Context influences teachers and learners in a variety of ways in their everyday interactions as well as in learning outcomes and processes. These include influences on teachers, in terms of what goals they pursue for what ends, their own competence in handling teaching-learning situations and the resources they deploy; on learners in terms of what they aspire to and how their expectations are framed; on learning outcomes in terms of what teachers and learners accept as legitimate goals and what outcomes are valued over others; and on learning activities in terms of what processes are acceptable in any given situation. There is a need to acknowledge these influences if the boundaries, which they set, are to be utilised or challenged as is the case when reflective activities are used (p.6).

Boud and Walker (1998) argue that any view of context in critical reflection must take account of the considerable theoretical contributions of critical social science, post-structuralism and post-modernism which have drawn attention to the ways in which our constructions of what we accept as reality are constituted, revealing features which are taken for granted and are normally invisible on a day-to-day basis. These features have a profound influence over who we are, what and how we think and what we regard as legitimate knowledge:

> …these features include *inter alia* the language we use to name the world (we cannot hold concepts or draw meaning from experiences for which we do not have language); the assumptions we hold about ourselves and others (what we believe we can and can't learn); what is acceptable and not acceptable for us to do and what outcomes it is reasonable for us to seek in any given situation; which social groups are dominant or oppressed (who is heard and who is acted upon); who has resources and what they are; and many other economic, political and cultural considerations. These wider features of the context of learning reach deeply into the ways in which we view ourselves and others. They impinge on our identity and influence the ways in which we relate to others (p.7).

Boud and Walker (1998) also contend that this broader social, political and cultural context influences every aspect of learning, including reflective learning:

> It is not possible to step aside from it, or view it 'objectively', as it permeates our very being. It is reflected in our personal foundation of experience, which although constructed from unique experiences, is also formed by the context in which we have developed (p.6).

Boud and Walker's view is, then, that critical reflection involves both a critical self-awareness and a critical awareness of context (or, in other words, discourse). These are concepts whose meanings are often blurred, intersecting and overlapping.

3.6.6 Critical Self-Awareness

Some researchers, including Skilling (1998), Jolly (1999) and Boud and Walker (1998) assume that reflexivity incorporates critical self-awareness. This understanding generates questions relating to the social and critical contexts involved in the processes of reflection and reflective practice. Matthews and Jessel (1998) argue for a social and intellectual unconscious and consciousness that needs to be examined, whereas Skilling (1998) and Boud and Walker (1998) discuss the need for critical self-reflection and Jolly (1999) identifies the critical component of his reflexive practice.

Others explicitly incorporate the term, critical-self-awareness, in their attempts to underpin the critical dimension, in particular, in relation to one's own value systems and cultural practices. Alfred (2002, p.28) asserts that, before we can create an inclusive environment, we must acknowledge our own socio-cultural histories, identities, biases, assumptions, and recognize how they influence our worldview and our interaction with members of a diverse community. According to Alfred, such awareness results from intense personal reflection and critical analysis of our work as practitioners or scholars, maintaining that linking the personal and the social transformation process begins with critical analysis of self and practice. Alfred (2002, p.89) thus argues that analysis helps us become aware of what we do as practitioners, including being able to see our experience in a fresh way. Continuously seeing our experiences afresh opens space for new ideas, programs, strategies, and perspectives.

Critical self-awareness allows the dominant views within education to be expanded to encompass broader perspectives and differing ways of knowing. As Apps (1985, p.7 cited in Alfred 2002) notes, 'by using analytical tools, we…can become autonomous individuals with the confidence to challenge and question the existing doctrines of the

field and of our agencies and institutions'. Being critical about the doctrines that dominate the field does not mean we reject all existing doctrines. It simply means that we remain open to other perspectives, theories, and concepts (Alfred 2002, p.90). Mak et al. (1998) take this tactic in their *ExcelL Program*, implying that critical self-awareness involves not only an understanding of one's own belief systems but also an understanding about how our assumptions influence our behaviour and practices – particularly when encountering and engaging new and unfamiliar cultures.

For the purposes of this research, the term *critical self-awareness* will be used in relation to the data analysis, rather than that of *reflexivity*. Critical self-awareness requires a 'continued attention to the place from which we speak' (Kelly 2003) – as well as the need to make visible to ourselves who we are and what we are doing (Gee 1999). The use of critical self-awareness explicitly highlights the critical nature of the process, as well as the complexity involved. Such recognition may not be obvious in the term, reflexivity; a consequence of the variability in the meanings attributed to reflexivity. Critical self-awareness also explicitly endorses the critical orientation selected for the study, extending the significance of the role of understanding and revealing the cultural, social, educational and linguistic capital with which new students approach the university culture.

The notion of *reflexivity*, however, maintains its applicability and potency in Chapter Four, which describes the research design chosen for the study. This is because reflexivity, in the context of research methodology, is clearly delineated. In research methodology, the term reflexivity identifies that researchers are inescapably part of the social world they are researching and that this social world is an already interpreted world by the actors: that they are both in the world and of the world (Cohen et al. 2000, p.140). In research methodology, the term reflexivity also suggests that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research:

> …they should hold themselves up to the light, reflecting the understandings that they are acutely aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background and inductive processes and paradigms shape their research as well as their obligations to monitor closely and continually their own interactions with participants, their own reaction, roles and biases (Cohen et al. 2000, p.140).

Reflexive practice also underpins action research approaches (see section 4.3), particularly emancipatory action research, which requires participants to question and challenge given

value systems. Emancipatory action research is construed as reflective practice with a political agenda (Cohen et al. 2000).

3.6.7 Critical Discourse Awareness

Critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness (also see section 3.2) exist in a dynamic relationship with each other, their boundaries overlapping and intersecting. Critical awareness of discourse extends the capacities for social and discourse critique, doing so in ways that emphasise the importance of examining the social and critical domains of the experience being reflected on, both the participants' own and those operating at the site. Fairclough (2001) argues that critical discourse awareness focuses on the capacities of people for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself (see section 3.2) and HE researchers, including Postle et al. (1996) and Padilla (1991) support the need for such critique. Padilla argues that the use of such critical reflection enables students to provide heuristic knowledge of the HE culture that would be valuable to both staff and to the students themselves.

Critical discourse awareness differs from critical self-awareness in that it concentrates on the power configurations operating in the context or setting whereas critical self-awareness concentrates on exposing one's own assumptions, an awareness of one's own cultural belief systems and assumptions and the ways in which they may overwrite others' beliefs systems or cultural practices. This study puts emphasis on the terms, *critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness*, to acknowledge their twin potency and to underpin their separate emphases. *Critical self-awareness* emphasises the importance of analysing one's own belief systems and cultural assumptions and *critical discourse awareness* underscores the role of social/cultural critique of the discourses operating at the educational site.

3.6.8 Reflective Approaches: Summary

Reflection, reflective practice, reflexivity, critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness, in terms of the understandings discussed in this section, are integral to this study and have implications for students' transition to and perseverance in the university culture. Reflection, both in and on practice, and its intersections with reflective practice and reflexivity, provide implications for the students' transition and learning practices, including their lifelong and life-wide learning capacities. Critical self-awareness presents

consequences for students as they confront mainstream university literacies and discourse communities, constituting as it does an awareness of their own belief systems and practices (socio-cultural and academic/linguistic capital) and how these can act to marginalise them or to perpetuate beliefs and practices which may not be helpful to them. In tandem with critical discourse awareness, critical self-awareness embodies the primary themes of change, culture, discourse, diversity, multiliteracies, power and thematic relationships integral to the study. The study contends that, woven together, the capabilities of reflection, reflective practice, critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness may constitute capabilities that students can embody to assist them to successfully engage, master and demonstrate the multiple discourses and literacies of the university.

3.7 Conclusion to the Literature Review

This chapter has reviewed the approaches designed to shift the theoretical insights gained in the previous chapter into practice: to increase the awareness of and/or to minimise or overcome the problems/issues identified in Chapter Two. The strengths and weaknesses of each of the approaches were reviewed to determine its applicability and potency for facilitating students' transition to and perseverance in the university culture. Whereas each of the approaches reviewed is not able, in itself, to constitute the quintessential means that could be used by students, each contributes insights into the practices that students could incorporate to empower themselves as they negotiate the university culture.

The literacy approaches enhance the critical orientation underpinning the study, stressing the significance of developing critical discourse awareness at the local educational site – in this case, the regional university. The communication approaches, like those embedded in Marginson's generic skills and in Britain's Dearing Report, endorse the applicability of developing effective interpersonal communication in the university context. However, Fairclough's concerns, in relation to the lack of transferability of communication, also draw attention to the need to specify and accommodate the inherent socio-cultural nature of the communicative practices. These concerns demand an examination of the cross-cultural approaches and, in particular, the use of the socio-cultural competencies, because of their capacities to enable students to fine-tune their discourses and their own cultural practices and behaviours and to engage the diverse discourses/cultures they encounter at university. The reflective/reflexive threads woven throughout the three approaches affirm

the significance of reflection and reflective practice, along with critical self and discourse awareness – not only for the students' transition and learning practices but also for their lifelong and life-wide learning capabilities.

The review of the literature has established that the interpersonal connections embodied in effective communication, in key socio-cultural competencies and in the dynamic threads of critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness can be combined to contribute to a new signifying space from where it may be possible to flesh out the practices that enable students to succeed at university. The review contends that these capabilities, along with the capabilities for reflection and reflective practice, comprise the capabilities that assist first year AES to negotiate a successful transition to, and perseverance in, the unfamiliar and dynamic university culture. The next chapter, Chapter Four, develops the design and methods selected to investigate this research proposition.

Chapter Four
The Research Design

4.1 Introduction

If research is conceived as a systematic way of contributing to a body of knowledge then the researcher needs to reassure all those involved that the choices made in the process of the inquiry are thoughtful, consistent, coherent and rigorous and that these processes of selection are made transparent. This chapter will outline the choices made and why they were made in relation to the design, sample, setting, and rigour, thereby documenting milestones along the research journey.

4.2 Collective Case Study

The design chosen for this inquiry comprised a collective case study (Sturman 1999). 'A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin 1989, p.23). It was considered that the case study design would be able to embrace the complexity inherent in an inquiry, the goal of which is to derive meaning from participants' experiences as they engaged university culture. Stake (1994, p.236) argues that the case study allows a focus on the complexity, interactions, episodes of nuance, sequences, events, and the wholeness of individuals in context and that the experience in question is patterned within a boundary, with the boundedness and behaviour patterns being key factors in understanding the case. The case study is process-orientated, flexible, and adaptable to changing circumstances and a dynamic context (Anderson & Arsenault 1998, p.152).

As well as encompassing the complexity of human experience, the case study is able to celebrate its uniqueness (Martin-McDonald 2000, p.62). Each participant's journey is individual and unique, meaningful in itself. Woven together the twin threads of complexity and uniqueness lead to the paradox that Simmons (1996) sees as central to the case study. Simmons (1996, p.2) argues that by studying the uniqueness of the particular, researchers come to understand the universal:

> Paradox for me is the point of case study. Living with paradox is crucial to understanding. The tension between the study of the unique and the need to generalise is necessary to reveal both the unique and the universal and the unity of that understanding. To live with ambiguity, to challenge certainty, to creatively encounter, is to arrive, eventually, at 'seeing' anew.

The case study design also allowed for an examination of the ways in which the meaning of experiences is socially constructed (Giddens 1996). The design offered a vehicle to reveal the social, cultural and educational practices operating in the context of the regional university and the processes involved as participants negotiated the transition to the new culture. As a consequence, new and better understandings about these processes could be developed and accumulated.

The case study design contributed to 'seeing anew' participants' journeys of engagement with the university culture. However, in a qualitative study, these insights are not objectively plucked from the data collected. Rather, it is an inquirer, trolling through thick layers of data, who develops these insights. A third thread is thus woven through the fabric of these understandings: that of the inquirer. Martin-McDonald (2000) argues that inquirers become an integral part of the paradox by engaging in the socially constructed knowledge: 'this stimulates our choices in the light of vast possibilities of meaning which have the potential to yield far more than a singular instance' (p.62).

4.3 The Research Approaches

4.3.1 Introduction

Within the over-arching case study research design, critical ethnography and the reflexive approaches incorporated in action research and critical ideology are developed. The ethnographic nature of the research was considered appropriate because the study frames the experiences of students negotiating the new and unfamiliar university culture from their perspectives. Ethnography enables the 'description of a culture and understanding of another way of life from a native point of view' (Neuman 1994, p.332). That the study's primary purpose was develop and uncover 'meaning', rather than to make generalisations that were dependent on the selection of critical variables, was also an important consideration (Neuman 1994). Ethnography also facilitates a 'thick description' – a rich detailed description of specifics – to be developed; is able to capture the sense of what is occurring, consequently permitting multiple interpretations; and places events in a context, thus facilitating the inference of cultural meaning (Geertz 1979). This is essential if the inquiry is to accumulate meaningful insights that acknowledge the complexity involved in the university context as well as the uniqueness of each student's university journey. The reflexive approaches of action research and ideology critique incorporated in the study parallel, as well as operationalise, the critical ethnographic approach. Giddens (1994, p.

90) proposes that the spirit of reflexivity is to encourage reflection. The reflexive approaches encouraged participants, for example, to reflect on, and deconstruct, their experiences as they negotiated the university culture.

Action research was incorporated into the research design as the core of the study stemmed from the problematic nature of a particular educational concern rather than from a hypothesis to be proven or a problem to be solved. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p.7) argue that, in practice, the action research process begins with a general idea that some kind of improvement or change is desirable. Involved is the identification of a cluster of problems of concern and consequence: a thematic concern.

4.3.2 The Thematic Concern

For the purpose of this research study, the thematic concern is to:

> Improve the social and learning capabilities of Alternative Entry Students (AES) (see p.7-8) so that they are able to negotiate a successful transition to university, persevere in their studies and, ultimately, succeed in attaining their tertiary qualifications.

This thematic concern emerged from:

- Ethnomethodological information derived from personal observations and conversations with students, administrators and staff as first year students negotiated their transition to the university culture. This concern stemmed initially from my experiences as a teacher in a number of positions at USQ – in preparatory, undergraduate and postgraduate courses and in a variety of modes including internal, external and on-line. In particular, the concern emerged from my positions as Lecturer in core communication courses and as a Learning Enhancement Counsellor at the Student Services Centre at the same university;

- A comprehensive search of the literature on HE in Australia, including the literature on access and equity and social justice issues (Beasley 1997; DEET 1990; DETYA 1999 and 2000; Marginson 1993; Postle et al. 1997; Williams 1987);

- A comprehensive search of the literature on the FYE at university, including transition and retention issues (Kantanis 2001; Krause 2001; Martinez & Munday 1998; McInnis & James 1995; McInnis et al. 2000; Pargetter 2000; Tinto 2000; Yorke 1999);

- A comprehensive search of the literature on critical literacy, including CDT and CLA (Clark et al. 1990a and b; Corson 1993; Fairclough 1992 and 1995; Lankshear et al. 1997; New London Group 1996);

- A comprehensive search on the literature of cross-cultural communication (Bandura 1986; Gudykunst & Hammer 1988; Hofstede 1980; Kim 1991 and 1995).

4.3.3 Critical Ethnography

The critical ethnographic approach was selected as it facilitates a focus on the cultural context and serves to explain the social processes involved as students make their transition to the university culture. The critical ethnographic approach also enables participants to seek new understandings about the ways that they have been constrained by cultural and social forces and, by so doing, to empower themselves (Giddens 1994). The theoretical basis for critical ethnography lies in critical theory, which, as delineated in Chapters One (section 1.4.2), Two (section 2.2) and Three (section 3.2.2), is concerned with the exposure of inequality in society with a view to empowering individuals and groups, an inherently political enterprise (Carspecken 1996; Van Dyjk 1995).

According to Apple (1996a), critical ethnography tries to account for the recognition that society is propelled by antagonisms and inequalities and characterised by cultural, political, and economic struggles and dislocations. Apple (1996a, p.x) argues:

> …these conditions are best seen through a process of 'repositioning' ourselves, that is, by seeing the world from below, from the perspectives' of those who are not dominant. There are multiple axes of power and multiple relations of domination and subordination in which all of us participate. For the socially committed researcher, this becomes an ever more complex issue, since not only does it involve understanding both how power circulates and is used and who benefits from the ways this society is organised, but it also requires some serious reflection on the role of the researcher in all this.

Cohen et al. (2000, p.153) maintain that what separates critical ethnography from other forms of ethnography is that, in the former, questions of legitimacy, power, social values, and domination and oppression are foregrounded. Thomas (1993), alternatively, defines critical ethnography by differentiating between it and conventional ethnography. As Thomas (1993, p.4) explains:

- Conventional ethnography describes what is whereas critical ethnography asks what could be;
- Critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose;
- Conventional ethnographers generally speak for their subjects, whilst critical ethnographers speak on behalf of their subjects as a means of empowering them;
- Conventional ethnographers study culture for the purpose of describing it, critical ethnographers do so to change it;

- Conventional ethnographers recognise that research is never free of normative or other biases but believe that these are to be repressed whilst critical ethnographers see their normative or political position as a means of invoking social action and societal change; and

- Conventional ethnographers assume the status quo whereas critical ethnographers seek to question it.

Carspecken (1996, p.3) argues that critical researchers share value orientations. Critical researchers are concerned about social inequalities; directed toward positive social change; concerned with social theory, including such basic issues as the nature of social structure, power, culture and human agency; and directed at redefining social theory rather than merely describing social life. Critical researchers also share value orientations that underpin their research. These orientations include the understandings that research be employed in cultural and social 'criticism' and directed towards change; that certain groups in society are privileged above others; that the oppression which characterises contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural or inevitable; that all forms of oppression should be studied and challenged; and that mainstream research practices generally, although most often unwittingly, constitute part of the oppression (Carspecken 1996, p.7).

A critical orientation has additional purposes. Spradley (1980, p.14) contends that the documentation of 'the existence of alternative realities and to describe these realities in terms of the people studied provides a rich and varied landscape of human life. It avoids the limitations related to thinking that one truth and one reality exists'. Spradley (1980, p.15) further proposes:

> …to understand personality, society, individuals, and environments from the perspective of other than professional scientific cultures…will lead to a sense of epistemological humility.

Fetterman (1987, p.103) argues that one of the most important roles of critical ethnography is that, by providing a detailed picture of the culture being studied, it can act as a starting point for change. This is the case in this research study. It is only by acquiring some idea of the cultural knowledge of the group, for example AES studying at university, that a plan for improvement or change can be initiated and implemented, that has, as its objective, the empowerment of the participants engaged in the research.

Epistemological issues also need to be addressed by critical ethnographers. Carspecken (1996, p.7) suggests that critical epistemology should make explicit its:

- Understanding of the relationship between power and thought and power and truth claims. It must be extremely precise when it comes to the 'relationships of power and research claims and power and validity claims as all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically mediated' (p.7);

- Precise understanding of what values are, what facts are, and how they are connected. Critical researchers must make their fact/value distinctions very clear and must have a precise understanding of how the two interact in order to formulate standards by which to avoid or reduce bias in both their own and others' research work as facts can never be isolated from the domain of values; and

- Theory of symbolic representation given that meaning is never stable, fixed or objective.

Strengths of Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography has a range of strengths, according to Cohen et al. (2000, p.29):

- ❖ Critical ethnography is able to question given agendas for research rather than accepting them without question.

- ❖ Critical ethnographers' interests have an ideological function and research knowledge is not neutral. Whereas research emanating from positivist and interpretive paradigms is 'essentially technicist, seeking to understand and render more efficient an existing situation rather than to question and transform it', research by critical theorists is unable to claim neutrality and ideological or political innocence. Habermas (1972) was among the first to suggest that research knowledge serves different interests and that these are socially constructed, are 'knowledge constitutive', as they shape and determine what counts as the objects and types of knowledge.

- ❖ Critical methodology is able to link objects of study and communities of scholars. It acknowledges the notion that what counts as worthwhile knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of the advocates of that knowledge. This recognition echoes Kuhn's notion of paradigms and paradigm shifts where the fields of knowledge or paradigms are seen to be only as good as the evidence and the respect in which 'authorities' hold them.

❖ Critical ethnography is emancipatory. Habermas (1984, p.104 cited in Cohen et al. 2000, p.29) states that its task is to restore 'to consciousness those suppressed, repressed and submerged determinants of un-free behaviour with a view to their dissolution'.

Weaknesses of Critical Ethnography

According to Cohen et al. (2000, p.157) critical ethnography has a number of weaknesses, which include:

❖ *The definition of the situation*, which infers that whilst participants are asked for their views, they may be unaware of the 'real' situation, deliberately falsify information, or are highly selective. The current study's use of triangulated methods assists in overcoming this limitation (see section 4.7.2).

❖ *Reactivity*, whereby the presence of the researcher alters the situation as participants may wish to avoid, direct, deny the influence of the researcher. In this study, the potential for this occurring is exacerbated by the presence of the researcher as co-facilitator of *ExcelL*. This weakness is minimised by the fact that it is a longitudinal study conducted over a period of seven years (with *ExcelL* occurring in their first semester of study only) and the researcher took care to ensure the careful presentation of her role.

❖ *The halo effect*, the research equivalent of the self-fulfilling prophecy. In this study, a triangulated database and peer discussions were employed to reduce the halo effect.

❖ *Difficulties in focussing on the familiar*, with participants being so close to the situation that they neglect certain, often tacit, aspects of it. The task of making 'the familiar strange' constituted one of the study's research objectives and therefore reduced the negative effects of this limitation.

Ethnographic Research Criteria

Spinder and Spindler (1992, pp.72-74) outline a set of criteria for ethnographic research. The study's research design met these criteria in the following ways:

❖ *Observation should have contextual reference, both in the immediate setting in which behaviour is observed and in further contexts beyond.*

This constituted a central concern throughout the research. Prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation were employed in the research design to comply with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) validity checks.

❖ *Hypotheses emerge in situ, as the study goes on in the setting selected for observation.*

Decisions about what to study in-depth were deferred until an orienting phase of the field research had been completed. This occurred over a number of years prior to the research proper as a direct consequence of my roles as a lecturer in first year courses and as counsellor in Student Services Centre. It was also continued in the first phases of the research design (see Figure 4.1). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions to enhance credibility were followed through the use of prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, of methods and sources, and peer debriefing.

❖ *Observation is prolonged and often repetitive to establish the reliability in the observational data.*

This study incorporated a longitudinal stance covering a minimum of three years – for those participants who completed their degrees in minimum time – and longer than three years for other participants involved in the study. This conforms to two of Lincoln and Guba's (1985, p.219) suggestions for validity: prolonged engagement in the field and persistent observation.

❖ *Inferences from observation and various forms of ethnographic inquiry are used to address insiders' views of reality.*

This approach was a focus of the research. Three interviews were conducted with the participants: in Phases 1 (week 3 of their first semester of study), 3 (during weeks 12-15 at the end of their first semester of study) and 4 (at the completion of their undergraduate degrees) (see Figure 4.1). These interviews helped to develop some understandings about the complex nature of the FYE at university. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions to enhance credibility were followed in these phases through the use of prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member checking and peer debriefing.

❖ *A major part of the ethnographic task is to elicit socio-cultural knowledge from participants, rendering social behaviour comprehensible.*

This was the core of the research design and occurred during all 4 phases (see Figure 4.1). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions to enhance credibility were followed and included the use of prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation – of methods and sources, as well as peer debriefing.

❖ *Knowledge from informants/participants is gathered in a systematic fashion. In order to collect as much live data as possible, any technical device can be used.*

Observations were recorded systematically in a journal while interviews were recorded on audiotape (for the first two interviews, in Phases 1 and 3) and via e-mail or in some cases in person (the third exit interview, Phase 4). The interview transcripts were analysed by hand without the aid of a software package. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were ongoing and decisions on how to proceed next were based on these analyses. To enhance validity, care was taken to take the data and analysis back to the informant to check accuracy. To Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.219) this is an important aspect of validity.

❖ *Instruments, codes, questionnaires and agendas for interviews should be generated in situ, as a result of observation and ethnographic inquiry.*

This was done throughout the research. Peer debriefing, persistent observation and prolonged engagement were used as credibility checks.

❖ *A transcultural, comparative perspective is usually present, although often it is an unstated assumption and cultural variation (over space and time) is natural.*

The researcher was careful to gather the participants' observations throughout the research phases (see Figure 4.1) both to take into account the dynamic and complex nature of the culture and the changing nature of the participants' experiences within the culture, particularly as cultural understanding was at the heart of the study. These observations were recorded in a journal. Peer debriefing, persistent observation and prolonged engagement were used as checks to ensure the credibility of the data in this regard.

❖ *Some socio-cultural knowledge that affects behaviour and communication under study is tacit/implicit, and may not be known even to participants or known ambiguously to others. It follows that one task of ethnography is to make explicit to readers what is tacit/implicit to informants.*

Care was taken throughout the research to ensure that this was the case. Member checking and peer debriefing were used to check the veracity of the information.

❖ *The ethnographic interviewer should not frame or predetermine responses by the kinds of questions that are asked, because the informants themselves have the emic, native cultural knowledge.*

Care was always taken to frame questions so as not to frame or predetermine responses. Peer debriefing and prolonged engagement were utilised as validity checks.

❖ *The ethnographer's presence should be declared and his/her personal, social and interactional position in the situation should be described.*

Care was taken to ensure that this was the case throughout the research with peer debriefing employed to help ensure the credibility of the information. The researcher's presence as co-facilitor of *ExcelL* was acknowledged and made transparent to participants.

Critical Ethnographic Research Criteria

Carspecken (1996, pp.41-42) also identifies five stages in critical ethnography, which he recommends, should be followed in loosely cyclical manner. The research design met these stages in the following ways:

Stage 1: Compiling the primary record through the collection of monological data usually by participant observation.

A preliminary stage of the research design was to acquire objective data in a relatively passive and unobtrusive way. This was accomplished through participant observation[33] of the interactions occurring at the social site, in this case, USQ. These observations were made in my roles as both Lecturer and Learning Enhancement Counsellor. A journal was kept of observations and conversations made with new first year students as they negotiated transition to the new university culture. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions for facilitating validity at this stage were observed and involved:

- Ensuring a longitudinal perspective – the observations and conversations were recorded in a journal in the months prior to the implementation of Phase 1;

- Using peer debriefing – in both areas of observation I worked as a member of a professional team which constantly monitored, reflected on and sought feedback about their performances and I constantly utilised these capacities in relation to the efficacy of my own observations. I also made sure to regularly seek feedback from a variety of sources in attempts to ensure the veracity of my observations, for example via presentations to USQ seminars, national and international conferences and in the submission of peer reviewed articles (see p.365);

- Using member checking or respondent validation – feedback was constantly sought about the accuracy of my observations from students as they negotiated their transition to the new university culture; and

- Using low-inference terminology and descriptions – this was considered to be a prerequisite, not only in my role as a researcher but also if I was to be effective in my roles as both lecturer and counsellor.

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[33] See also p.181 for discussion of the role of particiation observation in the study.

Stage 2*: Preliminary reconstructive analysis*

Reconstructive analysis strives to reveal the taken-for-granted meanings – the value systems, norms and key concepts underpinning situations – participants have of a situation. Carspecken (1996, p.42) argues that this involves the employment of a variety of techniques to determine interaction patterns, their meanings, power relations, roles, interactive sequences, evidence of embodied meaning, as well as intersubjective structures. This process is reconstructive as it articulates the cultural themes and social and systems factors, which are not observable and not normally articulated by the participants themselves. Carspecken (1996, p.42) proposes that putting previously unarticulated factors into linguistic representation is 'reconstructive' in that it takes 'conditions of action constructed by people on non-discursive levels of awareness and reconstructs them linguistically'. Reconstructive analysis occurred in all phases of the research design (see Figure 4.1). Specifically it occurred through the use of interviews with the participants themselves (in Phases 1, 3 and 4) where the aim was to facilitate the participant's own reconstructive analysis.

Carspecken's (1996, p.141) suggestions for facilitating validity in Stage 3 were followed in relation to:

- The interviews conducted with the participants (in Phases 1, 3 and 4, see Figure 4.1) where they were asked, in non-leading ways, to reconstruct their experiences in negotiating their transition to university;
- The longitudinal perspective – the reconstructive analysis was conducted over entire period of research in an attempt to assume the insider's perspective;
- The care taken to ensure respondent validation in all phases of data collection;
- The use of peer debriefing.

Stage 3*: Dialogical data generation*

Carspecken (1996, p.155) argues that dialogical data generation 'gives participants a voice in the research process and a chance to challenge material produced by the researcher'. Data is generated from the dialogue conducted between researcher and participants in interviews that are 'rarely naturalistic as the participants are asked to reflect on their own situations, circumstances and lives and begin to theorise about their lives' (p.155). Dialogical data generation occurred in all phases of the research design. Specifically it occurred through the qualitative interviews conducted with all the participants in Phases 1,

3 and 4 of the research design with participants provided with the opportunity to challenge my interpretations of their experiences. Dialogical data generation also occurred Phase 2 for Group A participants with negotiation and challenge a central focus of the experiential learning process. This stage overlapped with Stage 2, preliminary reconstructive analysis, in that both the participants and the researcher had opportunities to not only reconstruct the taken-for-granted meanings participants have of the situation but also to challenge the researcher's interpretations. Carspecken's (1996, p.164) suggestions for facilitating validity were followed, including:

- Consistency checks on the interviews that have been recorded with the participants;
- Repeated interviews with participants;
- Matching observations with what the participants say is happening or has happened;
- Using non-leading interview techniques and questions;
- Seeking feedback in peer debriefs about these questions;
- Respondent validation; and
- Asking participants to use their own terms in describing naturalist contexts, and to explain the terms they employ in naturalist contexts.

Stage 4: *Discovering system relations*

Stage Four investigates and links the specific site to the wider external and conceptual contexts, and specifically to the systems operating in, and on, those contexts. This stage, in particular, exemplifies the cyclic nature of the research process as it sought to explain the empirical findings of the research by linking them to a conceptual and structural framework. This occurred in all phases of the research process but more specifically in Phases 3 and 4 (see Figure 4.1). Carspecken's (1996, p.164) suggestions for facilitating validity in this stage were also followed in relation to:

- Maintaining the validity requirements of earlier stages;
- Seeking matches between the researcher's analysis and the commentaries that are provided by the participants and other researchers;
- Initiating and using peer debriefs; and
- Respondent validation.

Stage 5: *Using system relations to explain findings*

This stage seeks to examine and explain the findings in the light of macro-social theories – to fit the research findings within a social theory. Carspecken (1996, p.202) argues that the

process ranges from describing a situation, to understanding it, to questioning it, and to changing it. This stage involves four steps:

- A description of the existing situation – a hermeneutic exercise;

- A penetration of the reasons that brought the situation to the form it takes;

- An agenda for altering the situation; and

- An evaluation of the achievement of the new situation.

Although these processes were ongoing throughout the research program, they explicitly occurred in Phase 2 (for Group A in relation to the action research program) and during Phases 3 and 4 (for all participants) (see Figure 4.1). This stage, in particular, activates and parallels the reflexive approaches incorporated in action research and critical ideology, approaches that are delineated and addressed in the following two sections.

4.3.4 Emancipatory Action Research

Action research is research that focuses on practice, particularly recognising the significance of contexts for practice, including locational, ideological, historical, managerial or social contexts (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988). The incorporation of action research into the research design presents participants with the opportunity to arm themselves with the knowledge, capabilities and skills with which to transform their practices and their situations, facilitating their means of succeeding in the university culture. There are two main thrusts to the practical methodology of action research: the analysis of current practices and the implementation of change (Streubert & Carpenter 1995, p.256), both of which constitute major focuses in this research design. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p.5) define action research as:

> …a form of collective self-reflexive inquiry undertaken by the participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices and the situations where these practices are carried out…The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that the action research of a group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1992, p.10) argue that to do action research is 'to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life'. Kemmis and McTaggart (1992, p16) further suggest that:

> …action research is concerned equally with changing individuals, on one hand, and, on the other, the culture of the groups, institutions and societies to which they belong. The culture of the group can be defined in terms of the characteristic substance and forms of language and discourses, activities and practices, and social relationships and organisation which constitute the interactions of the group.

Action research includes six key principles (Winter 1996, p.13):

- *Reflexive critique*: becoming aware of one's own perceptual biases;
- *Dialectical critique*: understanding the relationships between the elements that make up the various elements of the phenomena in the context;
- *Collaboration*: accepting that everyone's view is taken as a contribution to understanding the situation;
- *Risking disturbance*: understanding one's own taken-for-granted processes and willingness to submit them for critique;
- *Creating plural structures*: developing various accounts and critiques, rather than a single authoritative interpretation; and
- *Theory and practice internalised*: seeing theory and practice as two interdependent yet complementary phases of the change process.

These principles constitute key principles in the current study's research design. They relate to the primary understandings developed throughout the inquiry, chiefly in relation to the themes of culture, discourse and power and are explicitly encompassed in the research objectives outlined in Chapter One (section 1.2).

Cohen et al. (2000), p.231) distinguish between 'reflective' and 'emancipatory' action research. Reflective, or practical, action research is designed to promote teachers' professionalism by drawing on their informed judgement and involves understanding and interpreting social situations with a view to their improvement. Emancipatory action research, on the other hand, has an explicit agenda, which is as political as it is educational. Grundy (1987) argues that it seeks to develop in participants their understandings of illegitimate structural and interpersonal constraints that are preventing the exercise of their autonomy and freedom (in Cohen et al. 2000, p.231). It aims to empower individuals and social groups to take control over their lives within a framework of promotion, requiring participants to question and challenge given value systems. Kemmis (1999, p.177) sees that whereas reflective research is aimed at improving professional practice at the classroom level within the capacities of individuals and the situations in which they are working, emancipatory research is part of a broader social agenda of changing education, changing schooling and changing society. The research design selected in this study was emancipatory, rather than practical, as it followed Morrison's (1995) requirements for emancipatory research. These requirements included:

- The research be construed as reflective practice with a political agenda;
- All participants be considered to be equal players;
- The research be dialogical and interpersonal, rather than monological;
- Communication comprise an intrinsic element; and
- The research aim for consensus and require collaboration and participation.

Strengths of Action Research

There are several strengths of action research, including the notions that:

❖ The research benefits those who are the subjects of the research (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988; Winter 1989);

❖ The research becomes socially useful as well as theoretically meaningful. In gaining access to knowledge in particular circumstances the researcher is provided with the opportunity to refine existing theories or to generate new theories using knowledge derived from practice (Clark 1972 cited in Streubert & Carpenter 1995, p.255). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p.7) add that action research provides:

> …on one hand a framework for recognising ideals in the reality of the work of the schools' ideas in action, and on the other, a concrete procedure for translating evolving ideas into critically informed action and for increasing the harmony between educational ideas and educational action.

❖ The researcher learns and contributes and helps to change things in that context. Streubert and Carpenter (1995, p.255) argue that a result of action research is that practitioners learn about their system and learn to implement change to improve their own practice.

❖ The researcher gains valid information about how problems can be handled in a particular situation. Streubert and Carpenter (1995, p.255), for example, maintain that the direct result of action research is the generation of practical knowledge that has the potential of helping a particular system improve.

❖ The researcher and participants work in collaboration which is considered important in socially useful research because it provides the opportunity for the participants to learn skills and develop their own competencies (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988).

Weaknesses of Action Research

Researchers also acknowledge that action research may have weaknesses (Kemmis & McTaggart 1992). These include the following considerations:

❖ The research needs to be specific enough to facilitate a small-scale investigation to lead to new insights but large enough to avoid being accused of being too minimal to be valid or too elaborate to be feasible (Zuber-Skerrit 1996, p.17). This is also a concern raised and addressed in many qualitative research approaches. The current research design was mindful of these tensions from the start of the research and discussions with peers verified the decision-making processes in the research design, particularly in relation to sample selection.

❖ The target audience of the research varies. There are four audiences for action research reports – collaborative colleagues, interested colleagues in other institutions, the participants, and the researchers themselves – and these audiences are often incompatible, particularly in terms of written style and structure (Zuber-Skerrit 1996, p.17). Whereas the thesis addresses the second audience, the findings were communicated to participants during Phase 4 of the research design. I would argue, from a communication perspective rather than that of a research perspective, that it is important to be mindful of each audience and the different writing styles required to meet the needs of these separate audiences in terms of reporting the research. Cohen et al. (2000, p.240) point out that action research brings together two professional orientations that may be inherently incompatible: those of the researcher who values precision, control, replication and analysis and those of the teacher who is concerned with action and practice. Again I was mindful of these tensions in this research design.

❖ There are possible concerns regarding participants' negative attitudes to the idea of change as a result of the action research. Hutchinson and Whitehouse (1986) argue that such resistance could affect the success of efforts to have them scrutinise their own individual and social practice, possibly with a view to changing it. As part of the research design in the current study required participants to critically reflect about their practices this problem was met head on in the research design.

Action Research Criteria

The study's action research approach constituted a role-based experiential training program, *ExcelL* (Mak et al. 1998) (see section 3.4.3), conducted with Group A during their first semester of study. The intervention was implemented with the goals of:

1) Raising this group's awareness of the cultural belief systems (capital) underlying the choices they make at university and the differences that may exist between these and those of others in the university context;

2) Raising this group's awareness of their use of the specific socio-cultural competencies targeted in the program;

3) Facilitating this group's capabilities to effectively incorporate these competencies in their negotiation of the university culture's multiple discourses and literacies

4) Facilitating this group's ability to negotiate a successful transition to university and to enable them to adjust more comfortably to the new environment.

The action research program was conducted in Phase 2 of the study (see Figure 4.1) and the findings documented in Chapters Five, in relation to the quantitative data (see section 5.3) and Seven, in relation to the qualitative data (see section 7.2.5).

The next section introduces ideology critique, an approach that complements the purposes and objectives of the action research approach incorporated in the study.

4.3.5 Ideology Critique

Ideology critique is a reflexive approach. Ideology critique was selected for the study as the action research approach, promoted specifically through the intervention program, *ExcelL*, involved Group A participants only. The application of ideology critique was incorporated to provide Group B participants with a vehicle to enable them to develop their capacities to reflect on their experiences and to transform their practices as they confronted the discursive practices operating at the site of the regional university. Ideology critique was implemented with Group B participants during Phases 3 and 4 after the action research program had been conducted with Group A. This occurred to avoid tainting the pre and post-test data collected in Phase 2 of the research design. As the action research program incorporated ideology critique, through its emphasis on raising students' critical awareness and its capacities to transform practices, Group A participants experienced its implementation in Phases 2, 3 and 4.

Ideology refers to the values and practices emanating from the particular dominant groups which constitute the means by which powerful groups promote and legitimate their particular, sectoral, interests at the expense of disempowered groups (Habermas 1972, p.230). Ideology critique, according to Cohen et al. (2000, p.30):

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- Exposes the operation of ideology in many spheres, particularly in education, unpacking vested interests operating under the 'general mantle of the common good';
- Uncovers the vested interests at work which may be occurring unconsciously or subliminally, revealing to participants how they may be acting to perpetuate a system which keeps them either empowered or dis-empowered;
- Reveals the explanations for situations which might be other than those 'natural', taken for granted, explanations that the participants might offer or accept;
- Conceptualises situations as being problematic rather than natural;
- Exposes the outcomes or processes of situations wherein interests and powers are protected and suppressed;
- Uncovers the interests at work; and
- Is premised on reflective practice.

Ideology Critique Criteria

Cohen et al. (2000), Habermas (1972) and Symth (1989) suggest that ideology critique can be addressed in four main stages, which the study incorporated:

❖ **Stage 1: Description** - *what am I doing*? A description and interpretation of the existing situation, involving the hermeneutic exercise of the participants identifying and attempting to make sense of their current situation (see Figure 4.1).

For Group B participants, description featured in Phases 3 and 4 of data collection, specifically in relation to their second and third interviews. For Group A participants this occurred in Phase 2, in relation to the *ExcelL Program*, and in Phases 3 and 4, in relation to their final two interviews.

❖ **Stage 2: Information** - *what does it mean*? A penetration of the reasons, causes and purposes, of the situation, involving an analysis of interests and ideologies at work in a situation, and an evaluation of their power and legitimacy.

Information constituted a strong feature in Phases 3 and 4 for Group B participants, and in Phases 2, 3, and 4 for Group A participants. These phases served to assist participants to explore how their views and practices might be ideological distortions that, in their effects, may be perpetuating a situation that works against their interests.

❖ **Stage 3: Confrontation** - *how did I come to be like this*? An agenda for altering the situation so that it can be improved.

This was a feature that constituted a primary focus of the students' reflections. For Group A participants, confrontation occurred through the action research approach in Phase 2, although the revelations gained in this phase were further consolidated in Phases 3 and 4. For Group B participants, this process occurred in Phases 3 and 4.

❖ **Stage 4: Evaluation** - *an evaluation of the achievement of the situation in practice.*
This was a key objective of the research itself both as a consequence of its reflexive nature and its primary motivations. The participants' second and third interviews (in Phases 3 and 4, see Figure 4.1) provided opportunities for both Group A and B participants to evaluate their achievements.

Symth (1989), from educational research, perceives this fourth stage as being more about reconstruction, *how might I do things differently*, thus introducing a practical imperative. Symth's view was accommodated in the inquiry in that the longitudinal interview process allowed the participants to not only reflect on their achievements but also to reflect on the strategies that they might incorporate to do things differently. This constituted one of the objectives of Phase 3, in particular, as the participants looked back on their first semester of study and reflected about the ways in which they might improve their practice (see Figure 4.1). In this guise, ideology critique assumes reflective, theoretical and practical threads. Cohen et al. (2000, p.30) contend that 'without reflection it is hollow and without practice it is empty'. Callewaert 1999 (in Cohen et al. 2000) argues that as ideology is not mere theory but impacts directly on practice, there is a strong practical methodology implied by critical theory.

4.4 The Design

There were four main phases of data collection. Figure 4.1 illustrates the diagrammatic overview of these phases.

Beginning Semester 2	**Selection of Participants**

Week 3	**Phase 1: Profile Data** – gathered to develop and build interpretations about the knowledge, behaviours, levels of adjustment and socio-cultural competencies of the participants (Groups A and B) as they begin their studies

A Questionnaire: to determine who the participants are, why they have chosen to study, their expectations, and any potential barriers they anticipate	**Pre-tests**: the application of *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, the Interaction Skills Checklist, the Survey of Cross-cultural Interactions* to determine the students' levels of adjustment to university as well as their socio-cultural competencies.	**Semi-structured interviews**: conducted to begin to build understandings of the participants' inner thoughts as they begin to negotiate the new university culture

Weeks 3 - 9	**Phase 2: The Action Research Program** – the participation by Group A in the *ExcelL* cross-cultural program to investigate whether the use of specific socio-cultural competencies facilitates Group A's adjustment to university

End of Semester 2	**Phase 3: Students' Narratives of Transition** – to determine how students' made their transition to university and whether the use of socio-cultural competencies facilitated their transition and ultimate success (Groups A and B)

Post-tests: the re-administration of *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, the Interaction Skills Checklist and the Survey of Cross-cultural Interactions* to determine differences in the students level of adjustment to university as well as in their communication competencies	**A second semi-structured interview**: conducted to reflect on, as well as build interpretations, about the students' transition processes	**Comparison of academic histories**: to determine if there were differences between the performances of Groups A and B

Completion of degree	**Phase 4: Journeys End** – to reflect on the students' transition experiences, to determine how important the socio-cultural competencies were and how both transition and the competencies influenced their final results, their ultimate perseverance and success (Groups A and B)

An exit interview: a semi-structured interview conducted with participants to reflect on the transition process and its impact on students' academic success.	**Comparison of academic results of groups A and B and the cohort of mid-year entry students**: to determine the differences between them

Figure 4.1: Diagrammatic Overview of the Data Collection Phases of the Study

Phase 1: Profile Data

In the first phase of data collection, profile data was gathered from the selected sample of first year alternative entry students (AES)[34] (Groups A and B) when they commenced

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[34] Alternative entry students are those students who enter universities via the Tertiary Admissions Centre Form B, see section 1.1.3

their university courses as mid-year entry students in semester 2, 1998. During this phase interpretations were developed about the demographic background, knowledge and behaviours of the participants as they began their studies. The data was obtained through the application of a largely quantitative questionnaire (Postle et al. 1996) (see Appendix A), the application of three pre-tests (Appendices B, C and D) and a semi-structured interview conducted with each participant.

Using a questionnaire previously administered in an unpublished study of AES conducted by Postle et al. (1996)[35], the characteristics of a sample of 17 alternative entry students (AES) studying at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) were, first, identified. These characteristics were then compared with those of the AES in the Postle et al. study.

The application of three pre-tests[36] in the first phase of data collection was undertaken to identify the participants' levels of socio-cultural competencies. The measures included:

(a) *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)* (Baker & Bohdan 1989*)*, a 67-item checklist that generates an overall score and domain scores (Appendix B);

(b) *The Interaction Skills Checklist* (*ISC*) *(*Ishiyama 1996), a 33-item checklist that generates both an overall score and domain scores (Appendix C);

(c) *The Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions* (*SCSI*) (adapted from Mak & Fan 1998), a 20-item measure of students' self-efficacy in interacting with locals in various academic and general social situations.

Measure (a) was presented in a 9 point Likert-type self-report scale. Both measures (b) and (c) were presented in the format of 7 point Likert-type self-report scales.

Qualitative data was also collected to build understandings about participants' expectations, motivations and experiences as they began their first semester of study. In order to accomplish these objectives, semi-structured conversations, with reflexive intentions, were conducted with the participants and recorded on audiotape.

Phase 2: The Action Research Program

Phase 2 of the study involved nine self-selected participants (Group A) in a role-based group-training program, *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership* (Mak et al. 1998). This phase incorporated action research because of its

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[35] The questionnaire was used with permission from the authors
[36] Pre- and post-tests were used with permission from the authors

capacity to 'involve researchers and subjects in a partnership to achieve greater understanding…the participants themselves gain important information about how to act successfully in the social setting that they inhabit' (Padilla 1991, p.86).

The program was conducted in semester 2, 1998 between weeks 3 and 10 (out of 15 weeks with 2 weeks holiday located in weeks 5 and 6). The program comprised a series of six, three-hour workshops, which were conducted on a weekly basis and timed to begin three weeks after the participants' arrival at university, at the beginning of semester 2. *ExcelL* was chosen as the intervention activity because of its strong theoretical base, utilising both cross-cultural (Hofstede 1980; Kim 1995) and psychological theories, for example, Bandura's social learning model (1986) (see also Gudykunst & Hammer 1988; Mak et al. 1999). *ExcelL* has also been validated as an effective means of helping overseas students adjust to unfamiliar Australian (Mak et al. 1999; Mak & Barker 2000) and Canadian cultures (Shergill 1997).

Phase 3: Students' Narratives of Transition

Phase 3 of the data collection sought to determine how the participants (Groups A and B) made the transition to university study, investigating, in particular, the processes, difficulties, and experiences involved in transition. It also sought to establish how important the socio-cultural competencies were in contributing to the students' transition.

The three questionnaire that were administered as pre-tests [*The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* (*SACQ*) (1989*); The Interaction Skills Checklist* (*ISC*) (*Ishiyama 1996); and *The Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions* (*CSI*) (Mak & Fan 1998] were re-administered as post-tests during weeks 12-15 of semester 2, 1998 (week 15 being the last week of semester prior to exams). The post-tests were administered to investigate whether or not the use of the specific socio-cultural competencies, targeted by the *ExcelL* program, had facilitated Group A's adjustment to university compared with the Group B participants.

Towards the end of their first semester of study, also during weeks 12-15, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. Interpretations about the students' journeys now that they had attempted to negotiate the transition to university were developed. Information was also collected about students' application of key socio-

cultural skills. In particular, whether or not the specific socio-cultural competencies stemming from Mak et al.'s (1998) *ExcelL* program:

(a) Comprised AES's capabilities for successfully completing the first semester of study;

(b) Constituted the students' means of achieving familiarity with the new culture;

(c) Represented the students' skills or practices of engagement with the new culture's discourses and mutiliteracies;

(d) Enabled students to access and engage with the new university culture and its multiple tertiary literacies and discourses;

(e) Facilitated the students' transition, empowering them to participate in, to master, and to demonstrate the literacies and discourses intrinsic to perseverance and ultimate success at university; and

Further, the existence of additional capabilities or competencies, which were not included in the *Excell* program, but which assisted transition to the new university culture, were explored.

At the end of their first semester, the participants' academic records were collected and compared, their permission having first been obtained. The objective was to determine whether or not there were differences in the end-of-semester academic results of Group A and B participants.

Phase 4: Journeys End

In this phase both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to reflect on the data already analysed and to evaluate whether or not Group A and B participants' experiences in negotiating their transition to university had influenced their final results, and therefore contributed to the successful participants' perseverance and ultimate success.

The quantitative data incorporated the collection of data from a third group of students, the cohort of mid-year, alternative entry students. The academic results of this cohort of students were compared with those of Group A and B participants to establish whether or not there were differences in the academic performances of the three groups; the purpose being to provide another, more objective, perspective from which to view the participants' narratives of transition. The comparison presented an alternative perspective from those that depended on the self-reports of the participants, thus helping to triangulate the inquiry's validity.

In this final stage of the research process, an exit interview was conducted with each participant at the completion of his or her undergraduate degree. The participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences at university:

- To ascertain how important the *ExcelL* program's socio-cultural competencies were in terms of the participants' transition to university and whether, and in what ways, these competencies influenced their experiences of university, their final results and their ultimate perseverance and success;

- To ascertain whether there were capabilities or competencies in addition to the *ExcelL* competencies that were useful in assisting participants to make the transition to university;

- To determine whether any additional capabilities identified by participants were also helpful in enabling them to persevere at university and complete their degrees;

- To build understandings about the university culture in an effort to develop a framework that could demonstrate the processes participants underwent as they made the transition to, and persevered with, their university study; and

- To determine whether the capabilities identified by participants could be incorporated into a success model that would assist future students to participate effectively at university.

This phase also included a validation by the participants of their previously collected and transcribed interview data.

4.5 Sample-selection of Participants

The participants selected were AES. They were also mid-year entry students – that is students who commenced university at the beginning of semester 2 rather than at the beginning of semester 1, as is the more common practice. Mid-year entry was chosen because:

1. This is a relatively new phenomenon but one which will continue to operate as universities search for further ways to efficiently manage their resources;

2. Mid-year entry, as a phenomenon, has not been investigated comprehensively, if at all, in the literature;

3. AES comprise the majority of the mid-year intake (DETYA 1999);

4. The first year intake is far smaller than the semester one intake and thus more manageable in terms of the action research project;

5. The programs that are routinely conducted to help the semester one intake adjust to university (for example, orientation programs) do not operate in semester 2;

6. It was theorised that the impact of being in an unfamiliar culture would be magnified if one's first year peers were already more familiar with university. This theory emerged through the consideration of the notions that the mid-year entry comprised a small sample (n = 82) and that most of the other first year peers were now in their second semester of study.

4.6 The Participants

The sample of participants consisted of:

- Seventeen students, all of whom were internal, or day, students enrolled in a first year, foundation communication course, *Communication and Scholarship,* which is offered across faculties within the university, with the exception of the Faculties of Engineering and Education.

- Nine of the participants self-selected as they comprised the AES who volunteered to participate in the cross-cultural program*, ExcelL* (Mak et al. 1998), which was offered in the first week of the semester to all internal students enrolled in the core course *Communication and Scholarship*. All the AES who undertook the *ExcelL* program agreed to participate in the study, becoming what is characterised in the study as the 'intervention group', Group A.

- The additional eight participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The rationale for this approach was that the researcher wished to access alternative entry, mid-year entry students. This goal was accomplished by obtaining referrals from lecturers teaching *Communication and Scholarship* tutorials. The lecturers were asked to identify the mid-year AES in their classes. The additional participants were nominated and selected in this way.

- The relatively small number of participants, comprising seventeen students in total, was chosen because the ethnographic focus, inherent in the case study design, prioritises detail in terms of data collection. This therefore allowed for the development, as well as the accumulation of meaning, in preference to a deduction of meaning arrived at from the selection and survey of critical variables.

4.7 Research Methods

4.7.1 Introduction

The methods selected for the study included both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The quantitative methods, for example the intervention program, and the qualitative methods, a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews along with participant observation, are outlined in this section.

4.7.2 Triangulation

Bailey (1987) argues that research is an activity that involves many people, many pressures and resources beyond one's own possessions, that it is never a 'solo flight':

> ...for that reason research is not some do-it-in a corner activity. It must be aired, laid out, inspected and in nearly every instance approved by others (p.105).

In order to contribute to this 'airing out' process a triangulated methodology was employed to collect the data in this study. Streubert and Carpenter (1995, p.318) define triangulation as the use of different methods of data generation in a single research study for the purpose of generating meaningful data to facilitate 'comprehensive, multifaceted understanding and explanation'. Winter (1989, p.22) argues that researchers should plan for a number of different methods of data generation so that each method can partly transcend its own limitations by functioning as a point of comparison with another. Newman (1994, p.325) advocates the use of triangulation in qualitative studies as it increases the 'sophisticated rigour' of data collection and analysis, helps make the researcher's methods more open to public scrutiny and helps disclose the richness and diversity of social settings. Cohen et al. (2000, p.112) argue that if findings are artefacts of method, then the use of contrasting methods considerably reduces the chances that any consistent findings are attributes to similarities of method. Triangulation can overcome the problem of 'method boundedness'.

4.7.3 Quantitative Methods

Morrison (1995) suggests that critical theory, because it has a practical intent to transform and empower, can – and should – be examined and perhaps tested empirically. For example, in this research study, the goal of the action research stage was to empower students, which constitutes a testable proposition. Fetterman and Pitman (1986, p.122) argue that quantitative and qualitative data collection can be productively combined within a single research framework. Fetterman (1987), meanwhile, supports the use of

experimental findings as they provide insight into ethnography, as was the case in this research design.

Quantitative research demands the consideration of a number of elements. These include the fitness of purpose, applicability of type, appropriateness of the test specifications including the objectives, the content, construction and format appropriateness of the timing, reliability and validity and ethical demands (Anderson & Arsenault 1998; Cohen et al. 2000; Gronlund & Lin 1990).

There are also problems associated with quantitative research. According to Anderson and Arsenault (1998, p.169) weaknesses in a questionnaire survey include:

- People will not respond due to 'questionnaire fatigue' which leads to non-response bias;
- It is dependent on extensive planning and pre-testing of the instrument used;
- There is always the danger of people not understanding the question – leading to response bias; and
- The conversion of questionnaire answers to the computer can cause data entry errors.

The quantitative measures included in the research design comprised:

- Initial profile data, which was collected by the use of a questionnaire (which also included some qualitative measures), previously administered in an unpublished study conducted by Postle et al (1996).
- The application of three pre and post-tests:
  (a) *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* (*SACQ*) (Baker & Bohdan 1989);
  (b) *The Interaction Skills Checklist* (*ISC*) (Ishiyama 1996); and
  (c) *The Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions* (*SCSI*) (Mak & Fan 1998).
- The collection and comparison of the end-of-semester academic results of Group A and Group B participants, together with the final academic results of Group A and B participants as well as the final academic results of the 1998 cohort of mid-year entry AES students at USQ (82 students).

Chapter Five is primarily concerned with the analysis of the quantitative data collected in the study.

4.7.4 Qualitative Methods

Qualitative researchers use multiple methods to collect rich, descriptive, contextually situated data in order to seek understanding of human experience or relationships within a system or culture (Silverman 1999). According to Mann and Stewart (2000), processes of analytical induction from the data might lead, then, to the formulation of simple explanatory hypotheses, or, using systematic approaches such as grounded theory, the development of complex theories. Qualitative methods are used in this research design both as formative and as summative evaluation. Silverman (1999) notes that the epistemology of qualitative research tends to be more constructionist than positivist, with participants more likely to be viewed as meaning makers not passive conduits for retrieving information from an existing vessel of answers. The qualitative measures included in the research design comprised semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation.

❖ Semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews

Kvale (1996, p.14) defines an interview as an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, which both acknowledges the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production and emphasises the social situatedness of research data. Interviews enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees – to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view (Cohen et al. 2000, p.266). The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations: to aim to understand the meaning of respondents' experiences and life worlds (Warren 2002, p.83).

According to Anderson and Arsenault (1998, p.169) weaknesses in a face-to-face interview may include:

- Validity relies on the skill of the interviewer;
- It may be logistically difficult to arrange for efficient interviews;
- It is time-consuming for all parties and perhaps expensive; and
- It is often difficult to analyse in ways that give clear messages.

Throughout the study I was mindful of these weaknesses. One limitation that eventuated was that I was unable to locate some of the participants who had not completed their undergraduate degrees (by semester 2, 2003). I was, therefore, unable to conduct a third interview with these participants.

Another weakness stems from the personal nature of the interview, which may lead people to say things to please rather than truthfully (Anderson & Arsenault 1998, p.169). I was mindful of the possibilities of biased responses, both generally, in relation to my roles as teacher and counsellor, and specifically, in relation to my role as co-facilitator of the action research program, the *ExcelL Program* (see sections 1.6 and 4.3.4). I was also mindful of my capacity to influence participants' responses as a consequence of the unequal power relationships that can operate in the teaching/learning context and as a consequence of the close relationships I developed with the participants. I took care to remain vigilant and to seek peer debriefing and member checking to minimise this potential for bias.

Three interviews were conducted with participants (section 6.1.1 outlined how this data was analysed). Two of the interviews were conducted with each participant during their first semester of university study (the first during week 3 and the second during weeks 12-15) with the third conducted at the completion of the participants' undergraduate degrees.[37] The semi-structured interviewing technique was chosen as a middle ground approach to minimise problems associated with fully structured interviews and unstructured interviews. Fully structured interviews, for example, may restrict and over-determine research and thus prevent participants from telling their own story in their own words, therefore preventing the generation of new insights (Pattern 1990, p.15). Unstructured interviews, alternatively, may lose focus due to loss of structure (Van Manen 1990, p.66). The in-depth interviewing style was selected as it:

- Enabled the identification of people's experience of social reality through their routinely constructed interpretations of it (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p.301);
- Facilitated the building of a trusting relationship between researcher and participant (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p.301);
- Encouraged participants to reflect on their perspectives and interpretations as a means of augmenting depth in the study (Seidman 1991, p.12).

❖ **Participant Observation**

Participant observation was employed as the researcher was known to the participants and participated in a large number of the research activities (section 6.1.1 outlines how this

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[37] The timing of these interviews varied as the participants completed their studies at different times. Interviews were not conducted with those participants who had witdrawn from their studies.

data was analysed). According to several authors, participant observation represents an excellent source of qualitative data (Agar 1980; Bonner & Tolhurst 2002; Morse & Field 1996; Polit & Hungler 1991). Atkinson and Hammersley (1994, p.249) state that 'participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers'. Participant observation consists of gathering impressions of the participants' behaviour and involves looking, listening and asking (Lofland 1971 cited in Bonner & Tolhurst 2002). The researcher, as participant observer, attempts to assume the role of the individuals under study and to understand his or her thoughts, feelings and actions (Wiersma 1991). Agar (1980, pp.51-2) describes the participant observer role as detached involvement and involves being:

> … at the same time, part of and distant from the community. One struggles to understand with involvement in the society; at the same time, one stands back critically to examine what one has learned.

Participant observation was important in the research design as it allowed me to view and interact with the participants as they negotiated the transition to the university culture. It assisted with the 'validation' and interpretation of information provided by participants during interviews (Morse & Field 1996). Participant observation also allowed me to observe the students' actions and interactions, together with their antecedent and consequent conditions. According to Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) the multitude of demands on the investigator includes collecting, coding, and analysing of data as well as maintaining an active and close relationship with the research participants.

Faithorn (1992) argues that despite its centrality as a concept, 'participant observer' remains an ambiguous and paradoxical term, lending itself to endless interpretations of just how much and just what kinds of participation and involvement lead to good research, and just how much of an observer or detached perspective it is necessary to maintain. Faithhorn (1972) maintains that most experienced ethnographers end up working out a position for themselves along the continuum of participant observation that will differ from project to project. This position takes into account the theoretical perspective and goals of the research, the researchers' personal goals and style, and the constraints of the host culture. My positioning in this research study was at the more involved end of the continuum as I was not a 'detached' observer. As the research progressed I found that the roles of participant observer, teacher and facilitator, and researcher and post-graduate student intersected and overlapped. For example, I was immersed in the context of the

research, teaching in core first year courses and conducting conversations with first year students as Learning Enhancement Counsellor at Student Services, both before and during the research study. Although this immersion impacted on my ability to comment dispassionately about the participants, I nevertheless strived to separate myself from the analysis of the data gained through such participation and observation. In a further sense, I could not claim to be a detached observer. In Phase 2 of the research design my role as co-facilitator of the action research program exceeded that of participant observer. However I was ever mindful of the potential for bias in the power relationships that occurred between the participants and myself as co-facilitator, using peer debriefing and member checking to counteract the potential for bias (also see section 4.3.3).

4.8 Conclusion

Chapter Four has outlined on the research design, approaches and methods chosen for the research inquiry. The chapter has also demonstrated the interplay between:

❖ The research approaches, including:

- Critical ethnography, which served as an orientation to the culture of the regional university and to uncover the power relations operating at the site;
- Action research, implemented through the *ExcelL Program*, presented to help empower Group A participants to transform their practices;
- Ideology critique, which served to assist Group B participants to reflect on the power relationships operating in the context of a regional university; and

❖ The research methods, including:

- Quantitative data collection, which served to accumulate a complex pool of profile data; and
- Qualitative data collection, which served to collect the longitudinal interview data and the data collected through participant observation.

The strengths and criticisms of each were analysed in relation to the experiences of students making their transition to the new university culture.

The next three chapters of the study are concerned with the data analysis. The quantitative data is analysed in Chapter Five and the qualitative data collected in the study is analysed in Chapters Six and Seven.

Chapter Five

The Profile of the Participants

5.1 Introduction

Three chapters of the study are concerned with analysis of data. Chapter Five analyses the data assembled through the administration of the descriptive *Student Questionnaire*, the application of the three pre- and post-intervention measures, and the collection of academic results. The quantitative data are drawn on principally to generate a profile of the participants[38] and their characteristics, providing a foundation for the qualitative data (see Chapters Six and Seven) also collected during the students' journeys through university.

5.1.1 Background

This chapter reports the analyses of the quantitative data collected in all phases of the research design (see Figure 5.1)

Phase One: Data Collection (Groups A & B) (Beginning Semester 2)	
Student Questionnaire: demographic and other characteristics	Pre-tests: • *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* • *The Interaction Skills Checklist,* • *The Survey of Cross-cultural Interactions*

Phase Two: The Action Research Program (Weeks 3-9) **Participation by Group A in the *ExcelL Program***

Phase Three: Data Collection (Groups A & B) (End of Semester 2)
Post-tests (Groups A & B): • *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* • *The Interaction Skills Checklist* • *The Survey of Cross-cultural Interactions*

Phase Four: Data Collection (Completion of Studies)
Academic results (Groups A and B and the cohort of mid-year entry students)

Figure 5.1: Diagrammatic Overview of Quantitative Data Analysis

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[38] The participants' real names were replaced with pseudonyms.

The outcomes of the analyses of the three sets of data are documented in the chapter, thereby triangulating the research process. The three sets of data include:

1. A background dataset, the purpose of which is to develop a profile of the participants' demographic characteristics, beliefs and attitudes;

2. A set of (pre- and post-test action research) data collected to assess the efficacy of the *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (Mak, Westwood, Barker & Ishiyama 1998) as an intervention for facilitating adjustment to university culture. Comparison is made between the participants who underwent the *ExcelL* intervention (Group A) and those who did not (Group B) on both baseline and follow-up data gathered via the following three measures:

   ▪ *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* (Baker & Bohdan 1989);

   ▪ *The Interaction Skills Checklist (*Ishiyama 1996); and

   ▪ *The Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions* (Mak & Fan 1998).

3. Data of the academic results collected (first, at the end of the participants' first semester of study, and secondly, at the completion of their undergraduate degrees), to investigate whether or not the implementation of the *ExcelL* program positively influenced Group A's academic results in relation to the group of students who did not undertake the program (Group B). At the conclusion of the overall data collection period the academic results of a third group of students (the cohort of mid-year AES commencing in semester 2, 1998)[39], were also compared with the results of Groups A and B to investigate whether or not there were any differences in the grade-point averages of the three groups of students.

Although the size of the datasets used in the current study may be considered small for the purposes of quantitative statistical analyses, the data gathered from the 17 participants in the study is nevertheless considered to be of value in that it is able to:

(a) Establish a starting point for the study;

(b) Illuminate the characteristics of participants in the study;

(c) Facilitate a comparison with other AES studying in regional settings, thus attesting to the representativeness of the sample of participants selected for the study; and

(d) Augment the soundness and 'goodness' of the qualitative data analysed in Chapters Six and Seven. Denzin (1997) contends that through the use of multiple methods of

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[39] The academic results of the student cohort were obtained from the USQ Registrar in November 2003.

research the weaknesses in each method are compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another.

In section 5.2 the data collected through the administration of the *Student Questionnaire* is analysed, whereas in section 5.3, the action research dataset is investigated. Section 5.4 reports the results of the comparison of academic results.

5.1.2 Intersecting Datasets

The intersections between the three datasets provided additional opportunities for analyses that were compatible with the scope and purposes of the research inquiry. These include not only the intersections between the questionnaire data, the action research data and the students' academic results but also their intersections with two additional demographic measurements: socio-economic status (SES) and geographical location (GL). Correlating the three datasets with each other and with data obtained through the application of socio-economic and geographical measurements augments and enriches the profile of AES participating in the study. These intersections are analysed in section 5.5. The longitudinal nature of the study also provides opportunities for further analyses in relation to the patterns of withdrawal and perseverance demonstrated by the participants involved in the study. This data is analysed in section 5.6.

5.2 Student Questionnaire

5.2.1 Purpose

Specific objectives involved:

- Identification of the demographic characteristics, beliefs and attitudes of the group of seventeen AES who participated in the study; and

- Investigation of the representativeness of the current sample with reference to AES studying at regional Queensland universities, given that larger samples are indicated to be more representative of a population of interest than are smaller samples (Moore & McCabe 2002). This objective will be met by comparing the present dataset with the set obtained by Postle et al. (1996).

Additional objectives included:

- Identification of the reasons why participants chose to undertake a university program;

- Identification of the factors that participants predicted would assist or hinder their continuation and progress at university.

5.2.2 Description and Procedure

The *Student Questionnaire* (SQ) was developed as part of a Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority (TEPA) funded study conducted by Postle et al. (1996). The SQ was distributed by mail and the results analysed in an unpublished report entitled *Successful Alternative Entry Students: Overcoming Potential Barriers to Academic Success* (Postle et al. 1996). Postle's sample comprised 414 first-year AES studying at two regional Queensland universities (n = 360) and one TAFE (n = 54). The fact that USQ was one of the universities targeted in Postle's study enhances the SQ's relevance for the current study.[40] The SQ consisted of 23 items however Postle's report did not present findings for all 23 items in their report.

The SQ was administered in the current study in Phase 1, at the beginning of Semester Two, 1998. The participants (Groups A and B) were invited to complete the SQ (see Appendix A), which was administered during week 3 of their first semester of study.

5.2.3 Analysis of Data
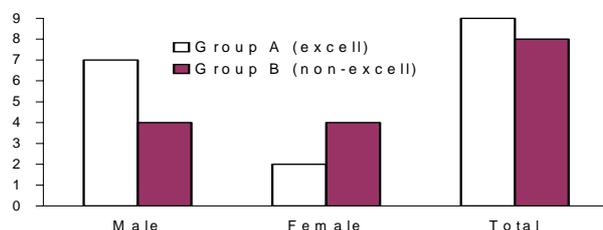
Graph 5.1: Gender Distribution of Participants

Graph 5.1 illustrates that Group A consisted of seven males and two females. Group B consisted of four males and four females. Gender balance was achieved in Group B because the purposive sampling method used to recruit participants for this group allowed the researcher to select equal numbers of males and females. In contrast, the gender imbalance of seven males to two females in Group A can be attributed to the self-selection recruiting method employed to assemble this group of participants. Across both groups the gender breakdown for the total sample is 11 males and six females. In Postle et al.'s survey the total number of male respondents in universities (n = 185) was slightly higher than the total number of female respondents (n = 175).

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[40] The other institutions included the University of Central Queensland and the Ipswich College of TAFE
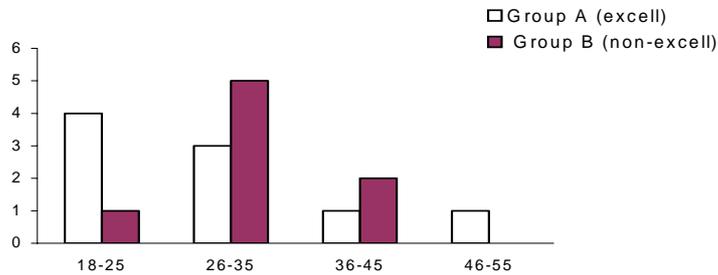
Graph 5.2: Age Distribution of Participants

As Graph 5.2 shows, the age distribution of the participants was primarily under 45 years of age, with only one of the participants over 46 years of age. All except four were under 35 (76%). This distribution aligned with the distribution in Postle's study with the respondents being primarily under 35 years of age in both the universities (n = 252) and TAFE (n = 45). The age distribution of participants in the current study illustrates the diversity present in the sample.
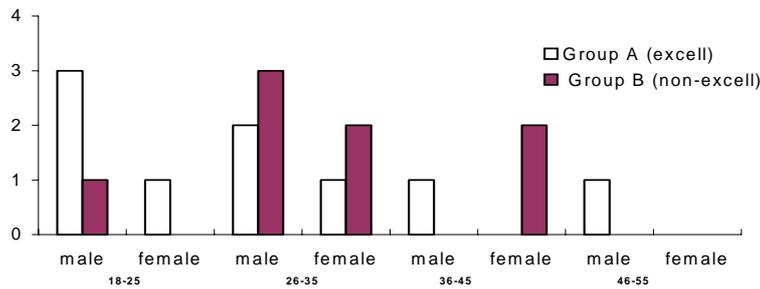
Graph 5.3: Age and Gender Distribution of Participants

Graph 5.3 illustrates the differences between the two groups in terms of age and gender. Whereas three of the male Group A participants and one male Group B participant were aged between 18-25, only one female was aged between 18-25. In the 26-35 age category there were two males and one female in Group B and three males and two females in Group A. In the 36-45 age category, there were one male (Group B) and two female (Group A) respondents. In the 46-55 age category there was one male (Group A). Again the diversity present is evident. In Postle's survey of university students, females outnumbered males in every age category except the 26-35 and 45-55 year age category, with males outnumbering females overall.
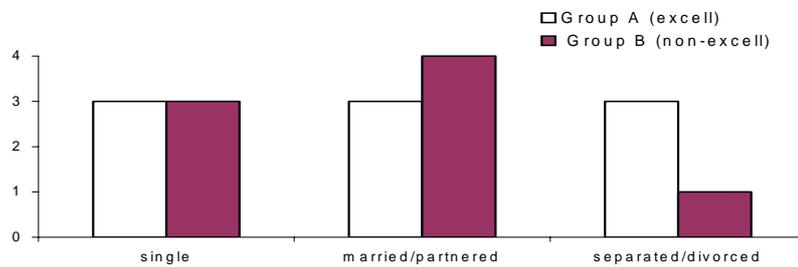
Graph 5.4: Marital Status of Participants

As Graph 5.4 demonstrates, whereas three respondents in each of Groups A and B were single, three of Group A and four of Group B respondents were married. In Group A, three respondents were separated/divorced whilst there was only one respondent in Group B who was separated or divorced. Diversity of experience is again apparent in the graph depicting marital status. This finding aligns with the information in Postle's study in which 54% of the university respondents were married or partnered (n = 193).
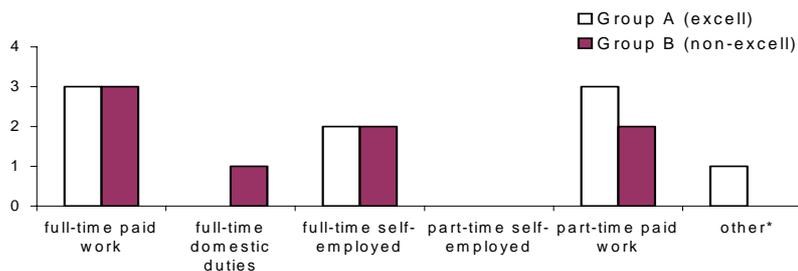
Graph 5.5: Recent Work Experience of Participants

As Graph 5.5 depicts, 89% of all participants in the current study indicated that they had engaged in recent paid work, either full-time or part-time.[41] Ten of the respondents had been working full-time, whereas five respondents had been working part-time. One student had not been engaged in paid work. There were few differences between participants in Groups A and B in terms of their prior work experiences, however one Group B participant was engaged in full-time unpaid domestic duties and one Group A participant was a full-time student. Graph 5.5 illustrates participants' range of work experiences. In Postle's study, 79% of university respondents indicated recent full-time work experience (n = 240)

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[41] One of the respondents ticked the 'other' box, stating that they were a full-time student.

whereas   16%   indicated   recent   part-time   work   experience   (n   =   49).

Graph 5.6: Number of Dependent Children of Participants
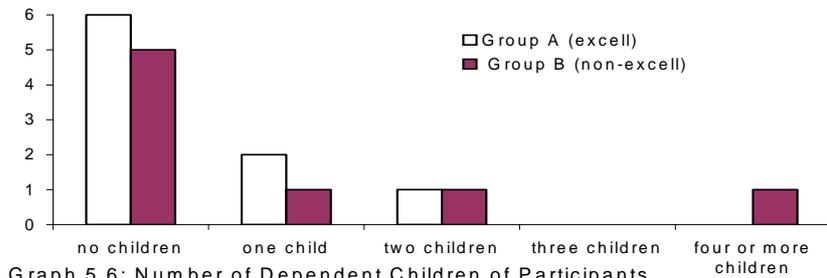
As evidenced in Graph 5.6, the majority (11) of respondents in the current study had no dependent children. In Group A there were six respondents with no dependants, two with two dependants and one with two dependants whereas, in Group B, there were five respondents with no dependants, one with four dependants, one with two dependants and one with one dependant. Again, the participants' range and diversity of experiences is highlighted, a finding further extended in the analyses developed in Chapters Six and Seven. Postle's study did not provide the results for this item in their report.

Graph 5.7: Household Income of Participants for Previous Year
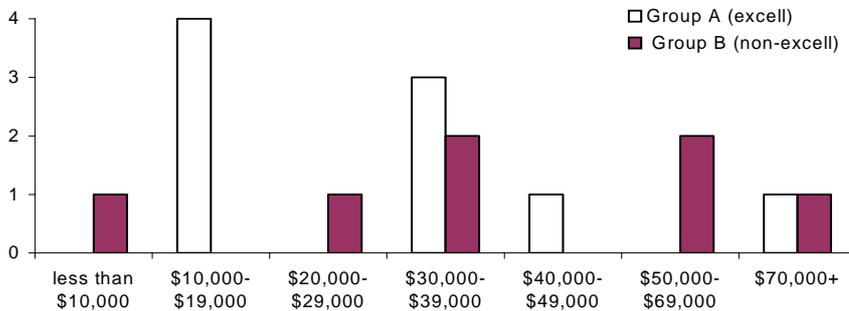
Graph 5.7 illustrates that 41.17 % of the participants had access to an annual household income of less than $30,000 whereas 23.53% of the respondents had access to an annual income above $50,000. Two of these respondents were female and two were male. Forty-four percent of Group A participants and 12.5% of Group B participants earned under $19,000. Thirty-seven and half percent of Group B's participants had a household income of over $50,000 for the same period whereas 11.11% of Group A participants had a household income above $50,000 for the previous year. The range in household income, from $10,000 to $70,000, again testifies to the diversity present in this small sample of

participants. In Postle's study 43% of university respondents had access to an annual household income of less than $30,000. Further, there was a gender difference for household incomes in excess of $30,000: 41% of the female university respondents had access to such an income whereas 61% of male respondents were in a similar position. This gender difference was not so apparent in the current study with four female respondents and four male respondents having access to a household income in excess of $30,000.
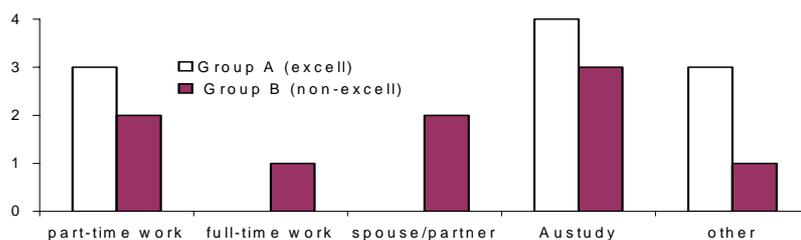
Graph 5.8: Income source of Participants for Year of Study

As depicted in Graph 5.8, a total of seven (41.17%) of the participants indicated Austudy (three females and four males) as their main source of income whereas six participants (35.29%) list full-time/part-time work as their main source of income (four males and two females). One of the participants gave 'business returns' as her main source of income. Two of the participants gave their spouse/partner as their source of income: both were female and both were from Group B. There are no discernable differences between Groups A and B otherwise. Again the diversity evident in the experiences of the participants is clearly demonstrated.

Postle's larger study found that university AES indicated full-time work most frequently as their main source of income with 21% of university respondents indicating work (part-time/full-time) as their main source of income. Fifteen percent of female respondents (n = 15) indicated spouse/partner as the main source of income and 4% of the males (n = 7) mentioned this as their main source of income. Eight percent of university respondents listed Austudy as their main source of income compared with 46% of the TAFE respondents. In the current study, 41% of participants indicated Austudy as their main source of income, perhaps reflecting their full-time, on-campus status.
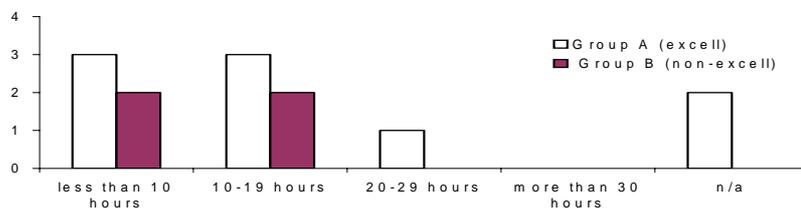
Graph 5.9: Hours Worked Part-time while Studying

As Graph 5.9 illustrates, five participants indicated that they worked less than 10 hours per week part-time whereas six of the participants indicated that they worked more than 10 hours part-time per week, with one of these participants working between 20-29 hours per week. Six participants did not complete the question.

Postle et al. (1996) did not report results for hours worked, an exception that may reflect the relatively recent acknowledgement of the impact that part-time work can have on university study. A number of reports (see McInnis, James & Hartley 2000; Wyn & Dwyer 2000) have revealed the escalating impact of part-time work on university study with McInnis (2003) initiating a major research project on the topic. This research demonstrated that the number of hours students spent in part-time work in a typical university week had risen dramatically since the mid-1990s. Table 5.1, for example, illustrates the differences in hours worked part-time between the 1994 and 1999 student cohorts analysed in McInnis's two national snapshot studies of the first year at university (1995 and 2000). Overall, the most significant variables were the number of students engaged in part-time work and the fact that students were working longer hours.

Table 5.1: Hours Spent In Part-Time Work In A Typical University Week (% of Students) (McInnis 2001)

| Year | Number of Hours Worked | | | | | | |
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31+
1994	22	38	20	12	4	2	2
1999	16	32	25	17	5	2	3

The issue of part-time full-time work is also one that is reflected in the interview data in this study. For instance, the fluctuations of one participant's university journey are interwoven with the fluctuations of her working life. A new job obtained in Cairns in early 2002 has again seen this participant defer her studies until 2004 (also see Chapter Six).
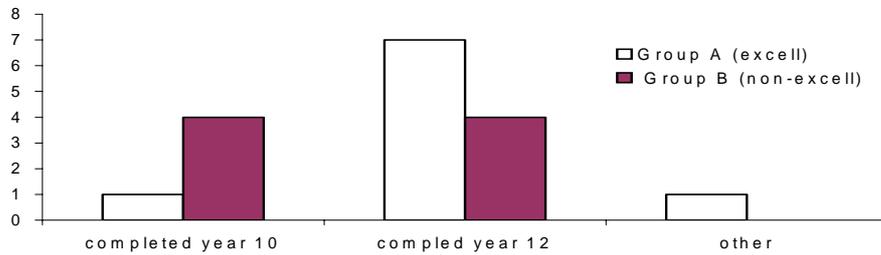
Graph 5.10: Secondary School Qualifications of
Participants

As depicted in Graph 5.10, six of the participants had completed Year 10 (35%) whereas a further 11 respondents (65%) had completed Year 12.[42] There were differences between the two groups with only 50% of Group B participants completing Year 12 in contrast to 89% of Group A participants. Comparatively thirty-six percent of the university respondents in Postle's study had completed Year 10 whereas 52% had completed year 12.
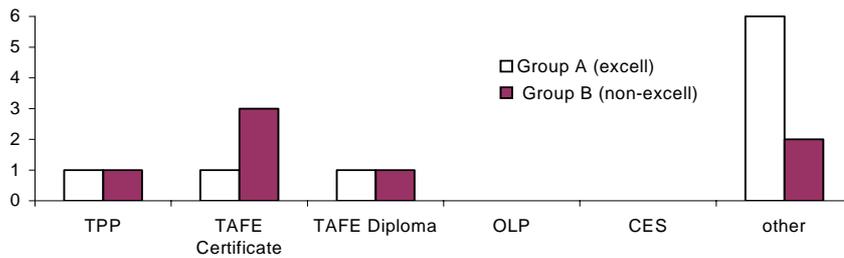
Graph 5.11: Studies Completed since Secondary School

Graph 5.11 illustrates that two of the participants had entered university through the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) and six through TAFE certificates and diplomas. The 7 participants who chose the 'other' category were mostly participants from Group A and indicated that they had, respectively, completed short courses (in welding and diesel fitting), a conservation traineeship, Emerald Pastoral College studies, military studies, a study exchange to Thailand, a certificate at a recording studio and previous university studies. Participants, except one Group A participant, had attempted some additional studies, however, this one participant had devised and run a certificate course at TAFE.

In Postle's study 43 of the respondents had entered university through TPP and 163 had entered through TAFE certificates and diplomas. Postle et al. also noted that although the

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[42] The 'other' qualification was a TAFE certificate completed following a Year 10 qualification.

literature contends that Open Learning Programs have been provided to promote access to tertiary studies this was not found to be the case in Postle's study, with only eight of the respondents in total nominating Open Learning Programs as their means of entry to university (p.31). Based on the findings of the present study, this trend continues as none of the participants selected Open Learning Programs as their means of entry.
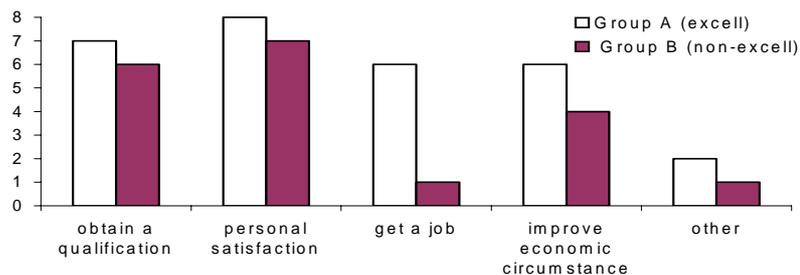
Graph 5.12: Reasons for Enrolling in University Course

Graph 5.12 shows that the most highly ranked reason (from 5 alternatives: *to obtain a qualification; personal satisfaction; to get a job; to improve my economic situation; and other*) for enrolling in a university course, was *personal satisfaction* (n = 15), closely followed by *obtaining a qualification* (n = 13). *Improving economic circumstances* (n = 10) and *getting a job* (n = 7) also ranked highly. The 'other' category included medical reasons, more employment options, and the desire to 'design a life not just make a living', an assertion which suggests a need to be in control of the decisions made in relation to life choices. There were few discernable differences between Groups A and B on this variable, however more Group A participants (n = 12) than group B participants (n = 5) indicated that their reasons for enrolling at university were to obtain employment and to improve their economic circumstances.

Interestingly, the same two reasons for entering university that were ranked most highly by participants in the present study were also ranked most highly by respondents in Postle's study but in reverse order: *obtaining a qualification* took top ranking (n = 294), with *personal satisfaction* (n = 227) placed second. *Improving economic circumstances* (n = 173) and *getting a job* (n = 94) were also highly ranked.
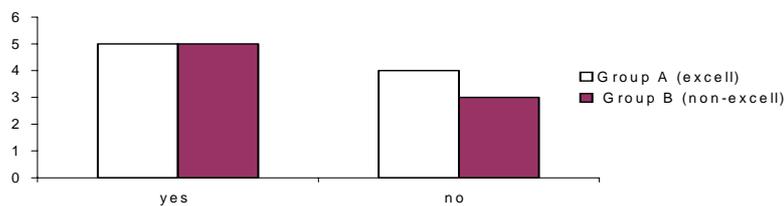
Graph 5.13: Number of Participants who felt Adequately Prepared

Graph 5.13 demonstrates that a slight majority of participants (10) indicated that they felt adequately prepared for university study but the remaining seven participants indicated that they did not feel adequately prepared. There were few differences between the responses of Group A and Group B participants. In Postle et al.'s study, 275 respondents believed they were adequately prepared with 51 students indicating 'no', they didn't feel adequately prepared. Fifty-two did not respond and to Postle et al. this suggested a degree of indecision. Such indecision is not apparent in the current study where it is evident that participants had definite views on the subject, with more anecdotal comments being made on this question than on any other. This may have been a consequence of the subject matter of the course, *Communication and Scholarship* in which this study was embedded, as the course endeavours to increase students' academic and research skills as well as their understanding of communication theory. Alternatively, participants' views may be attributable to the particular sample of participants involved in the study.

Group A comments included: *it will just take a little time to change my way of life and reorganize priorities and commitments* (Brad); *though at times my work isn't as productive as I'd like, the time I am putting is adequate* (Gary); *self confidence/determination/willingness to acquire scholarship and vocational qualifications through time and effort expended* (Gregor); *I feel I would have benefited from a study course before beginning uni* (Mel). All but one of Group B commented: *with my work experience, age and educational expertise, I feel I am prepared* (Dan); *it has been several years since full-on study – readjusting to the study process again* (Shaz); *I didn't do any preparation as such for the course but I feel prepared* (Jon); *working in a family business gives me very flexible work hours and I have seen my brother and sister complete courses* (Andy); *my computer ability before this course was nil...it is fairly hard to adjust to computer usage* (Eric); *a lot more work is required at home than I expected* (Linda); *life and work skills have enabled me to prioritise* (Della).

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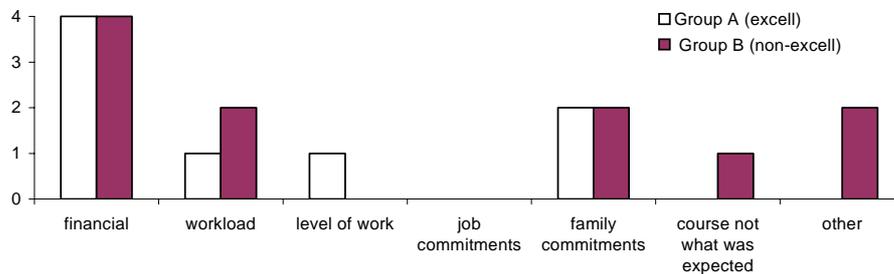
Graph 5.14: Percieved Threats to Completion

As Graph 5.14 suggests, *financial reasons* ranked first and *family commitments* ranked second as the major perceived threats to completion of a degree. Other responses were spread across *workload/ level of work/unforeseen expectations*. Interestingly *job commitments* were not perceived as a threat by any of the participants, yet in Postle's study *job commitments* were perceived as a major threat for university respondents (27%). However, in the interview data collected later in the study (see Chapters Six and Seven) job commitments either prolonged (for example Shaz) or contributed to the withdrawal of some of the participants (Jim and Brad). In Postle's study the data were spread 'fairly evenly' across all categories although the *level of work* in selected courses suggested few concerns in that study. *Financial reasons* also figured prominently for university students (21%) in Postle's study.

Again, there were few differences between Groups A and B, although one of the participants in Group B felt that *the course was not what was expected* and three from Group B ticked the *other* box. Their comments on other perceived threats include: *nothing will get in the way; if I saw an excellent job or business opportunity; sometimes information sought or available not really clear – difference discovered later, often too late to adapt.*
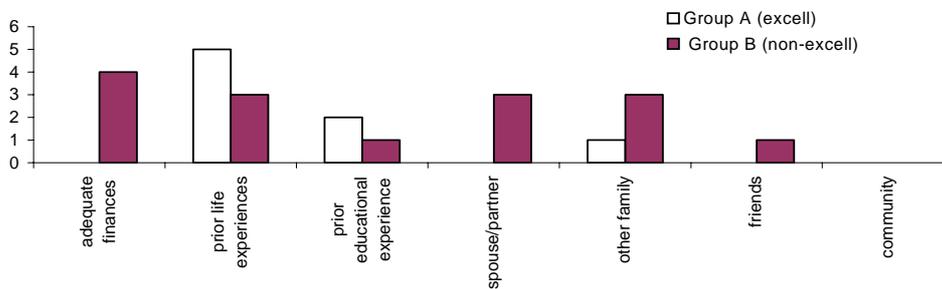
Graph 5.15: Percieved Support for Completion

Graph 5.15 illustrates that responses in relation to perceived support for completion were evenly spread across most of the categories with *prior life experience* and *prior educational experience* ranked most highly. *Adequate finances,* and the perceived support of *spouse/partner, family* and *friends* were also considered to be influential, but predominantly by Group B participants. Curiously, Group B (n = 7 responses) suggested that perceived support of *spouse/partner, family* and *friends* for completion was important yet only one participant from Group A noted this, nominating *family support* as being important for completion. It was interesting that Postle et al. did not report results for this item, perhaps suggesting that Postle et al.'s focus was not concentrated on sources of help and support. Postle et al. did however conclude 'university students indicated *prior life experience* followed by *support from partner and spouse* as the most significant sources of support needed to complete their studies' (p.34)

5.2.4. Observations Stemming from the Analysis of Profile Data

The participants' characteristics included the observations that:

- Males were generally younger (7 < 35 yrs) than the females (7 > 26 yrs).
- Most (11) participants did not have dependent children.

Employment and income:

- All but one participant was engaged in either full-time or part-time work with ten of participants working from between one and 20 hours.
- Only females indicated a spouse or partner as the main source of income.

Prior schooling:

- All of the participants had completed at least a Year Ten education.
- All but one of the participants had engaged in some kind of additional studies.

- The majority of students listed TAFE studies as the focus of any additional studies since leaving school.

Reasons for undertaking study and threats/supports to completing studies:

- The majority of participants commenced university studies to *obtain personal satisfaction* with a slightly smaller frequency count indicating *to obtain a qualification* as their reason for undertaking university studies.

- Slightly more participants felt adequately, rather than inadequately, prepared for the amount and level of work anticipated in their courses.

- Participants indicated *financial problems* as the greatest threat to completion, however *family commitments* and *workload* were also perceived to be threats.

- Participants indicated that *prior life experience* and *prior educational experience* were the most significant supports they needed to complete their studies. *Adequate finances,* and the perceived supports of *spouse/partner, family* and *friends* were also considered influential.

Whilst the analysis of responses from Group A and Group B participants revealed that there was very little divergence between the two groups, some differences were observed. These differences relate to the following characteristics:

- Group A had more males (7 males to 2 females) than Group B, which had equal numbers of males and females.

- Generally Group A participants were older and Group B participants were younger.

- More Group A respondents had completed Year 12 (7) than Group B respondents (4).

- More Group A participants (4) had a household income of less than $19,000 the previous year than Group B participants (1).

- Group A participants entered university with a greater diversity of prior study experiences than Group B participants, however more Group B participants had completed a TAFE certificate or diploma.

- The only participants who gave their spouse/partner as their source of income were from Group B.

- More Group A (12) than Group B (5) participants indicated that their reasons for enrolling in a university course were to get a job and to improve their economic circumstances.

- Group B participants were the only participants to indicate that they considered *adequate finances,* and the presence of *spouse/ partner, family* and *friends* to be influential sources of support for the completion of their respective degrees.

The most significant theme emerging from the analysis of data is that of the diversity present in the participant profile. This diversity confirms the salience of the theme of diversity and the consequences provided for both university policy and practice. The presence of diversity in the participant profile also supports the contention that it is not possible to define a common 'alternative entry' cohort.

Much of the data analysed was consistent with the data obtained in the study by Postle et al. (1966), thus suggesting that participants in the current study were representative of the population of AES attending regional universities.

5.3 The Action Research Program

5.3.1. Objectives and Hypotheses

The objectives were:

- To determine whether the efficacy of the *ExcelL* program in facilitating Group A's (the experimental group) adjustment to university when compared with Group B. The statistical process used to address this objective was comparison of the respective mean difference scores of Group A and group B participants on the three pre-, post-intervention measures:

  - *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)* (Baker & Bohdan 1989*);*
  - *The Interaction Skills Checklist (ISC) (*Ishiyama 1996);
  - *The Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions (SCCSI)* (Mak & Fan 1998)

- To determine whether there were any differences between participants who persevered at university (graduates) and those who did not (non-graduates) on each of the three pre- and post-tests intervention measures. The statistical process used here involved comparison of the mean difference scores of graduates and non-graduates for each respective pre-, post-intervention measure.

These objectives will be met specifically by testing the hypotheses that:

- The mean difference score of Group A will be greater than the mean difference score of Group B on both the *Interaction Skills Checklist* (Ishiyama 1996) and the *Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions* (Mak & Fan 1998) and the mean difference of

Group A will be less than the mean difference score of Group B on the *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* (Baker & Bohdan 1989) (hypothesis 1).

- The mean difference score of Group 1 (graduates) will be greater than the mean difference score of Group 2 (non-graduates) on both the *Interaction Skills Checklist* (Ishiyama 1996) and the *Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions* (Mak & Fan 1998), and the mean difference of Group A will be less than the mean difference score of Group B on the *Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* (Baker & Bohdan 1989), (hypothesis 2)

5.3.2 Measures and Procedure

The action research program, *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (Mak et al. 1998) (see section 3.4.4), a role-based group-training program, comprised Phase 2 of the research design (See Figure 4.1). *ExcelL* was conducted during Semester Two, 1998 (for three hours per week for six weeks, weeks three – twelve, including 2 holiday weeks) with Group A participants only (n = 9). Pre-tests were administered to both Groups A and B prior to this intervention program being conducted in Phase 1 and were re-administered prior to the end of the participants' first semester of study in Phase 3 of the research design.

The three measures were:

1. *The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)* (Baker & Bohdan 1989), a 67-item checklist generating both an overall score and domain scores, although only the overall scores were utilised in the current analyses. Possible total scores ranged from 0 – 603, with lower scores indicating higher levels of adjustment to university.

2. *The Interaction Skills Checklist (ISC) (*Ishiyama 1996), a 33-item checklist that generates an overall score and domain scores. Again only the overall scores were utilised in the current analyses. Possible overall scores ranged from 0 – 231, with higher scores indicating higher levels of adjustment to university.

3. *The Survey of Cross-Cultural Social Interactions (SCCSI)* (adapted from Mak & Fan 1998), a 20-item measure of students' self-efficacy in interacting with locals in various academic and general social situations. Possible total scores ranged from 0 – 140, with higher scores indicating higher self-efficacy in interacting with locals.

The three measures were completed in a group setting during the first and final sessions of the *ExcelL* program (Group A) and individually, during their first and second interviews (Group B). The questionnaires were completed consecutively and together took twenty – thirty minutes to complete.

5.3.3 Analysis of Data

A series of analyses were conducted on the datasets. For each participant the difference between the total score obtained pre-test and the total score obtained post-test on each of the three measures was calculated, with difference scores then used to calculate mean group difference scores for Groups A and B on each measure. Respective mean difference scores were then compared between groups for each of the three measures. Participants were then assigned to either a graduate group (Group 1) or a non-graduate group (Group 2) on the basis of academic completion data and again mean difference scores on each of the three measures were calculated for each group. Additionally mean pre-test scores alone were calculated and compared on the three measures for graduates and non-graduates to investigate the possibility of pre-existing differences between the two groups.

5.3.4 Results

The data was screened to check the assumptions for a t test:

Assumption 1: The data are two simple random samples from two distinct populations.

Section 4.4 outlined how the participants were selected. Given the nature/requirements of the study it was not possible to randomly assign participants to either Group A or Group B. In general, studies that employ university students are rarely simple random sample designs because students usually volunteer to gain course credit. In the present study, Group A participants received an additional 5% in the unit *Communication and Scholarship* upon completion of the *ExcelL* program.

Assumption 2: The samples are independent. This assumption was met.

Assumption 3: The difference scores of both populations are normally distributed with unknown mean $U^{'}$ and unknown standard deviation σ.

It is the population for which the normality is assumed, not the sample. In the absence of prior knowledge of the shape of the distributions of difference scores and reliable evidence of normality given the sample sizes used, normality will be assumed until otherwise established.

Assumption 4: The variance of each population is the same.

The small sample size may be an artifact for the fact that the variances were not equal.

Further investigation on a large scale would be required to satisfy the assumptions of normality and variance. Given, however, that assumptions are not all satisfied, results reported need to be interpreted with caution.

Difference Scores for Groups A and B

- For the *SACQ*, there was no significant difference, t (15) =3.07, p<0.01, between the mean difference score for Group A (5.67 SD=3.24) and the mean difference score for Group B (4.88 SD = 4.01).

- On the *ISC*, there was a significant difference between the mean difference scores for the two groups, t (15 = 3.07, p>0.01). The mean difference score for Group A was 31.44 (SD = 21.37) and for Group B it was 3.375(SD = 14.36),

- For the *SCCSI*, the Group A mean was 10.44 (SD = 9.21) and the Group B mean was 0.65 (SD = 15.23). There was no significance difference between the two groups, t (15) = 1.63, p>0.01.

Difference Scores for Group 1 (graduates) and Group 2 (non-graduates)

- For the *SACQ*, the Group 1 mean was 3.71 (SD = 2.18) and the Group 2 mean 7.29 (SD = 39.6). With t (12) = -2.84, p<.05, there was a significant difference between the mean difference scores for the two groups, with the mean non-graduate score increasing more from pre-test to post-test more than the mean graduate score.

- There was no significant difference between the two groups ($\bar{x}$ ¹= 15.57, SD¹ = 8.46; $\bar{x}$² = 24.86, SD² =18.41) on the mean difference scores for the *ISC*, t (12) =-0.95, p>.05.

- There was also no significant difference between the mean difference scores of the two groups for the *SCCSI*, t (12) =-1.79, p>.05., with the Group 1's mean difference score being 2.71(SD = 1.84) and Group 2's mean difference score being 9.86 (SD = 6.26).

Comparison of mean pre-test scores of Groups 1 (graduates) and 2 (non-graduates)

- Comparison of mean *SACQ* scores for Groups 1 ($\bar{x}$ = 46.57, SD = 34.83) and 2 ($\bar{x}$ = 35.71, SD = 25.5) yielded a significant result, t of 2.91, thus indicating that Group 1 had a significantly higher mean score than Group 2.

- No significant difference was found between the mean scores of Group 1 ($\bar{x}$ = 153.86, SD= 84.65) and Group 2 ($\bar{x}$ = 130.71, SD = 78.24) on the *ISC*.

- Again, no significant difference was found between the mean scores of Group 1 ($\bar{x}$ = 95.29, SD = 39.6) and Group 2 ($\bar{x}$ = 78.43, SD = 34.2) on the *SCCSI* mean scores.

5.3.5 Discussion: Action Research Data

The hypothesis that the mean difference score of Group A would be greater than the mean difference score of Group B on each of the three measures was not supported. However one of the pre-post test scores did show a significant difference, the *Interaction Skills Checklist*. Whereas both the *SACQ* and the *SCCSI* concentrated on cross-cultural skills and adjustment, the *ISC* focussed more on social interaction skills (see Appendix C). That the *ExcelL* program focussed on the development of participants' skills in social interaction, albeit in cross-cultural contexts, may account for the difference on the *ISC*.

The hypothesis that the mean difference score of Group 1 (graduates) would be greater than the mean difference score of Group 2 (non-graduates) on each of the three measures was not supported. However the comparison of the difference scores between graduates and non-graduates revealed a significant difference between the two groups on the *Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)*. The comparison of pre-test scores (*SACQ*) illustrate that the non-graduating students scored lowly on the SACQ at pre-test. This finding may suggest that non-graduating participants' displayed a greater scope for improvement. That graduates scored highly on the *SACQ* suggests they had less scope for improvement, implying the possibility of a ceiling effect. The comparison of pre-test scores between graduates and non-graduates in relation to the *SACQ,* with the graduates showing significantly higher scores, may indicate that these participants were more confident of their adaptation skills and therefore better able to negotiate the university culture.

Taken together, the results indicate that Group A's adjustment to university was not facilitated by undergoing the *ExcelL* program. It is however possible, given the size of the current sample, that the analyses conducted, did not wield the power to detect an effect for the ExcelL program (Howell, 1997). That there are significant differences in the mean difference scores between Groups A and B on the *Interaction Skills Checklist* and between Groups 1 and 2 on the *Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire*, supports the value of

analysing the qualitative data also collected in the study. In particular, an analysis of the qualitative data relating to whether or not participants considered the *ExcelL* program to be positive in facilitating Group A's adjustment to university. This data is the subject of section 7.2.5.

5.4 Comparison of Academic Results

5.4.1 Objectives

The comparison of academic results was conducted with the following objective:

- To investigate whether there were any significant differences in either the graduation rates or the academic results of the action research participants and Group B.

5.4.2. Procedures

To facilitate the comparison of academic results, the semester two, 1998 academic results of both Groups A and B were collected and the results tabulated, including the individual grades obtained and each group's grade point average. As the action research program was embedded in the core subject *Communication and Scholarship*, the results for this subject are also tabulated and compared. In semester one, 2003 the grade point averages of Groups A and B along with the cohort of 1998 mid-year entry students were collected and collated.

5.4.3. Investigation of Data

- **Semester Two Results (June 1998)**

Table 5.2: Academic Results obtained for Semester Two, 1998

Group	Grade					
	High Distinction	Distinction	Credit	Pass	Fail	Grade Point Average
Group A	2	12	8	2	3	5.129
Group B	9	7	7	3	2	5.535

Table 5.2 above illustrates the results obtained for semester two, 1998. Group A comprised a sample of eight and Group B a sample of seven, a consequence of one participant's results from each group being unavailable: the Group A participant withdrew from university before the end of the semester whereas the Group B participant's results were unavailable because the participant had outstanding library fines, a situation that ends in students being removed from the university's administrative databases. Also for the end of semester two 1998, in Group A there were 8 participants doing 27 subjects and, in Group

B, 7 participants doing 28 subjects. Thus, grade point averages (GPA) from different sample sizes and with an unequal number of subjects are being compared.

Table 5.2 indicates that participation in the *ExcelL* program had little effect on the results. When compared to Group B there is no evidence to indicate that *ExcelL* had favorably influenced Group A's academic performance, as measured by the end of semester results. Rather Group A's grade point average was slightly below that of Group B (GPA = 5.535). However, these results might have occurred as Group A (GPA = 5.129) comprised a self-selected group who volunteered for the program because they were less confident of their interaction and adjustment competencies and capabilities whereas Group B were purposively recruited. As a statistical analysis has not been undertaken, this comparison of grade point averages has limited value.

Table 5.3: Academic Results obtained in *Communication and Scholarship*

Group	Grade					
	High Distinction	Distinction	Credit	Pass	Fail	Grade Point Average
Group A	2	6			1	6.25
Group B	3	1	4			6

For the course *Communication and Scholarship*, the grades obtained by Group A were slightly higher than the grades obtained by Group B (see Table 5.3). Participation in the program may have enhanced Group A's academic results, although the sample is small and the results inconclusive. Alternatively Group A's slightly higher results may have been influenced by the fact that Group A participants obtained an additional 5% for undertaking the *ExcelL* program. The higher results may also reflect the relationships between academic staff and students and between the students themselves (an objective of the program) that enabled Group A members to enhance their team work skills, a thread that is explored further in Chapter Seven. Both groups' academic results however were quite strong, perhaps indicating that the objectives of the course *Communication and Scholarship* were being met in terms of increased academic and communicative confidence. As a statistical analysis has not been undertaken, this comparison of academic results has limited value however.

- **Comparison of Grade Point Averages of Mid-year Entry Students**

During semester one, 2003 the grade point averages were again collated and tabulated. Table 5.4 illustrates the Grade Point Average results of Group A, Group B and the cohort of 1998 mid-year entry students at graduation.

Table 5.4: Comparison of Grade Point Averages of 1998 Mid-year Entry Students

Students	Grade Point Average
Group A	4.437778 (SD 1.187863)
Group B	4.635 (SD 1.564472)
Cohort	4.384268 (SD 1.478255)

As evident in Table 5.4 there were few differences between the three groups, although both Groups A and B results were slightly higher than that of the cohort.

- **Comparison of Grade Point Averages of Graduated Students**

Table 5.5 illustrates the results for those students from Groups A and B who had completed their degrees by the end of semester three, 2002.

Table 5.5: Comparison of the Individual and Group Grade Point Averages of Participants who completed their Degrees by Semester Three, 2002

Group	Grade Point Average	
	Individual	Group
Group A	5.19	
	5.07	
	4.96	
	5.10	
		5.08
Group B	5.86	
	6.08	
	6.6	
		6.18

Whereas four students from Group A had successfully graduated, in contrast to three students from Group B, the grade point averages of Group B participants were higher than those of the Group A participants. Again a statistical analysis has not been undertaken therefore this comparison of academic results has limited value.

5.4.4 Summary

The comparison of academic results included:

- The semester two, 1998, academic results of both Groups A and B, including the individual grades obtained and each group's grade point average;

- The academic results of Groups A and B for the core subject *Communication and Scholarship*; and

- The grade point averages of Groups A and B at graduation along with the cohort of 1998 mid-year entry AES, collected during semester 1, 2003.

As statistical analyses have not been undertaken, the comparison of academic results is of little value. However the results indicate that there were few differences between the results of Group A, Group B and the cohort. The academic results of Groups A and B were quite strong, however, in particular in relation to *Communication and Scholarship*.

5.5 Intersecting Datasets

5.5.1 Background

Chapter Two reviewed the access and participation of disadvantaged groups in HE. *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET 1990) for example designated six equity groupings, two of which were relevant to the participants in this study: low socio-economic status (SES), and rural and isolated students (see section 2.4.2). These two groups were also singled out in Richard James's report, *Socio-economic Background and Higher Education Participation: An Analysis of School Student's Aspirations and Expectations* (2002), which argues that SES and geographical location (GL) are major factors in variations in student perspectives on the value and attainability of HE. It was decided to apply the measurements designed by James (2002) to the demographic data obtained through the *Student Questionnaire* to explore participants' rankings on these measurements.

5.5.2 Measurements of Socio-Economic Status and Geographical Location

The definition and measurement of SES and GL are difficult and open to debate. SES, according to James (2002, p.12) is, in particular, a highly abstract concept and its measurement is complex and often controversial. James (2002) draws attention to the fact that at present the Commonwealth calculates aggregate HE participation figures on the basis of the postcode of students' permanent home address, as self-reported for the annual statistical data collection of DETYA.

The thresholds used for defining geographical areas and for establishing socio-economic sub-groupings are somewhat arbitrary. Student geographic status is defined as urban, rural or isolated on the basis of the postcode of permanent home address. In preparation of the index, rurality and isolation are assessed on population density and distance from

provincial centres. Lower SES students are defined as those whose home postcode falls within the lowest quartile of the national population, regions being coded on the value of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Education and Occupation (ABS 1990b cited in James 2002, p.12). However, Western et al. (1998 cited in James 2002) assert that area measures such as postcodes are imperfect measurement tools, not only for estimating aggregate HE participation rates for population subgroups, but particularly for identifying individuals likely to be disadvantaged. Household wealth obviously varies considerably within a single postcode area, and the measurement of educational advantage and disadvantage by location is similarly imperfect. Regional and rural university campuses and TAFE institutions, for instance, provide high access for people who live nearby, yet these people are classified for the purposes of measuring possible educational disadvantage as 'rural', along with people living in, or close to, the distant outback and thus living long distances from tertiary education centres. James (2002, p.13) chose parental educational attainment as a suitable measure of students' SES for analyses, reflecting the robust correlation between education level and occupation, and therefore income. SES was defined as lower, medium, or higher according to the highest level of education attained by the most educated parent:

- *Lower SES* parent(s) did not attend school, attended primary school, or attended some secondary school
- *Medium SES* parent(s) completed secondary school and/or vocational qualification, diploma or associate diploma
- *Higher SES* parent(s) completed a university degree

Table 5.6: Participant Responses According To Two Measures of SES

	Parental Education			Home Postcode		
SES	Lower	Medium	Higher	Low	Medium	Higher
Group A	5	2	2	3	6	–
Group B	6	–	2	–	8	–
Total	11	2	4	3	14	–

Table 5.6 above describes the SES of Groups A and B using James (2002) criteria and compares it with the home postcode measure of SES. As Table 5.6 illustrates, on the parental education measurement of SES, eleven of the participants were ranked as lower SES (64.7%), two as medium (11.76%) and four as higher (23.5%). In contrast, for the

postcode measurement, three of the participants were ranked as lower SES (17.64%) and fourteen participants were ranked as medium SES. The postcode of Toowoomba where USQ is located is 4350 and is thus ranked by the Commonwealth as medium SES. This rank accounts for the high number of medium SES participants in the postcode measurement as all participants were studying on-campus in semester two 1998 (the three participants ranked low SES were studying on-campus but commuting from rural areas with separate postcodes). The variations between the two measurements testify to the difficulties inherent in the identification of SES. Other criteria discussed in relation to the identification of disadvantage in terms of SES include the receipt of Austudy, the occupational status of parents, the type of high school attended, individual income, family income, sole parenting responsibility, their long term unemployment and being a member of the first generation to access HE. These criteria are summarised in the Table 5.7.

Table 5.7: Summary of Alternative Criteria for Identifying Low SES Students

Alternative Criteria	Group A	Group B	Total (17)
Sole parenting responsibility	1	2	3
Long term unemployment (more than 1 year)	2	2	4
Individual income (below $30,000)	2	4	6
Family income (below $50,000)	7	4	11
State school education (rather than private school)	9	6	
No previous experience with higher university education	7	9	16
Non-professional occupational status of parents.	7	7	14
Receipt of Austudy	4	3	7
Alternative Criteria	**Group A**	**Group B**	**Total (17)**

James' (2002) project dataset permitted grouping of respondents' GL according to a combination of their home postcode and their self-reported distance from home to a university campus, in accordance with the focus on university access of the original project brief for the Higher Education Council. James (2002) argues that the use of two location variables allows students to be classified as urban or rural dwelling according to their home postcode, with the rural group further classified into three subgroups using access classifications similar to those proposed by Western et al. (1998):

- *Isolated* home postcode classified as 'distant' (generally more than 300 km to a university campus)
- *Medium university access* 151–300 kilometres to a university campus
- *High university access* fewer than 150 kilometres to a university campus

James (2002) included the notion of community context in the belief that student attitudes towards the relevance, attractiveness and attainability of HE would be related significantly to the socio-economic and cultural differences that exist between urban and rural areas (socio-cultural and economic capital). It was assumed that imbalances in urban and rural HE participation rates were influenced not only by family socio-economic circumstances and physical access to a university campus, but also by the characteristics of the community environment in which prospective students are living. The two location variables allowed the study to delineate the following student subgroups.

• *Isolated* postcode defined as distant

• *Medium access* rural postcode, 151–300 kilometres to a university

• *High access/rural* fewer than 150 kilometres to a university and home postcode classified as rural

• *High access/urban* home postcode classified as urban

The isolated/medium/high banding follows the Western et al. (1998) recommendations. Low and medium access students are necessarily rural students whilst high access students are urban. Student home postcodes provided a convenient means of dividing the large high access subgroup, as defined by distance to the campus nearest home, into two distinct categories, urban and high access/rural. The participants' original postcodes (before they moved to study on-campus at USQ) were used in the following table, given that James was investigating the factors that influenced prospective students' decisions to access HE. Table 5.8 illustrates the participants' ranks in terms of James's (2002) criteria for GL, based on participants' addresses before moving to USQ.

Table 5.8: Participant Responses according to GL prior to University Study

	Isolated	Medium Access	High Access (Rural)	High Access (Urban)
Group A	4	5	-	-
Group B	-	8	-	-
Total	4	13	-	-

Fifty five percent of Group A participants were identified as having medium access and 44.4% as having isolated access to university. All Group B participants were identified as having medium access. No participants in either Groups A or B had high access.

5.5.3   Multiple Disadvantage

One of the themes that emerged in the literature in the late nineties was the notion of multiple disadvantages (see section 2.2.6.2). This is a point also taken up by James (2002) in his report. Table 5.9 shows how present participants were ranked conjointly on SES (using parental education as the measurement) and GL (using James's criteria).

Table 5.9: Cross-tabulation of Previous GL and SES based on previous GL

		Location				
		Isolated	Medium university access	High access rural	High access urban	Total
SES	Lower	2 (A: 2)	9 (A: 3 /B: 6)			11
	Medium	1 (A: 1)	1 (A: 1)			2
	Higher		4 (A: 2 / B: 2)			4
	Total	3	14			17

Table 5.9 illustrates the intersections between the two measurements. Group B participants are largely *lower SES* with *medium access rural* (6) and *higher SES* with *medium access rural* (2). Group A participants demonstrate more variation with representation in 5 intersecting categories.

5.6 Patterns: Withdrawal and Perseverance

5.6.1. Background

Towards the end of the data collection phases, during semester one 2003, the academic results, thus far, for Groups A and B were finalised. Chapter Seven adds richness and depth to these raw statistical results with snapshots of the participants' university journeys and excerpts which retrospectively document the kaleidoscope of experiences which accompanied their decisions to continue, withdraw or defer their studies. However, like Postle et al. (1996), I wanted to ascertain whether any patterns for withdrawal were present in terms of the statistical data obtained. Information was gained from the third interview conducted with the participants at the completion of their studies as well as from the data collected in the original *Student Questionnaire*. The participants' results were also

compared with the data obtained in Postle's study. I also wanted to ascertain whether there were any patterns for perseverance exhibited by those students who successfully completed their undergraduate degrees. As Postle et al.'s [43] study did not progress beyond the first phase, the unpublished report does not analyse the perseverance patterns of the respondents in the study.

5.6.2. Academic Results Thus Far

The results below were collected during semester one, 2003. Of the 17 students who participated in the study, seven had graduated, three were continuing their studies and seven had withdrawn (see Table 5.10).

Table 5.10: Patterns of Withdrawal and Perseverance

	Group A	Group B
Graduated/ Male	2 (Yan and Will)	2 (Jon and Andy)
Graduated/Female	2 (Lucy and Mel)	1 (Sandy)
Continuing/Male	-	1 (Eric)
Continuing/ Female	-	2 (Shaz and Della)
Non-continuing/Male	5 (Brad, Jim, Gary, Darren and Gregor)	1 (Dan)
Non-continuing/ Female	-	1 (Linda)

5.6.3 Patterns of Withdrawal

Any discernable patterns are tentative at best. The conclusions reached, however, include the observations that:

- The rate of withdrawal of participants in the first year of study (11.76%) is lower than that of AES in Postle et al.'s study (15%), which, in turn, had compared favourably with the withdrawal rate for those students who had entered HE along traditional paths (21%). The rate of withdrawal of the participants in the current study during the period 1998-2003 was 41%.

- More male participants (six) withdrew from courses than did their female counterparts whereas in Postle et al.'s study, AES female respondents were more likely to withdraw

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[43] Postle's study did not continue due to a lack of funding. The second phase would have targeted the characteristics exhibited by successful students

from their courses than their male counterparts. In the current study, five Group A participants, who had undergone the *ExcelL* program, and two Group B participants withdrew.

- The only identifying characteristics of the male participants who withdrew were that they were more likely to be under the age of 35 (n = 5) and were more likely to have no children (n = 4).

- Only one female participant withdrew. Postle et al. drew some conclusions about the identifying characteristics of the female AES respondents who had withdrawn from the two universities involved in the Postle study. The conclusions were that they were more likely to be married/partnered; more likely to be young (18-25); and more likely to be involved in part-time work as their main source of income or rely on their spouse or partner for such income. Additionally, they were more likely to be in a financial position where their annual household income is less than $30,000 and/or their annual individual income is less the $30,000 and they were more likely to be involved in more than 10 hours of work per week. Comparatively, the one female participant who withdrew was married/partnered, relied on her spouse or partner for her income, and was in a financial position where both her annual individual and household incomes were less the $30,000.

- The timing of the withdrawals differed: two in the first year (both from Group A); one in the second year (from Group A); none in the third year; and four following the third year of study.

- The rate of withdrawal overall was higher for Group A (55%) than for Group B (25%). However the three students who have yet to complete their studies are all Group B participants. Moreover, four of the Group A participants who withdrew were members of the designated equity groups, of whom there were three from lower SES (as measured on the parental education indicator) and three from isolated locations, two of these participants were both lower SES and from an isolated area, thus with multiple disadvantages. The Group B participants who withdrew were both from a higher SES background (parental education) and high access (rural) location.

5.6.4 Patterns of Perseverance

Any patterns stemming from an analysis of the demographic characteristics of the participants who had successfully completed their undergraduate degrees are again speculative. However the patterns to emerge included the observations that:

- Four of the seven were single;

- Six of the seven had no children;

- The participants had all been engaged in either part-time or full-time work before university;

- Six were working between 1 and 19 hours of work a week while studying;

- Six had completed Year 12 and the 7th Year 10;

- Four had completed their most recent qualification 11 years or more ago;

- All seven had undertaken studies since their original qualification;

- All seven indicated that one of their reasons for beginning the course was to *obtain a qualification* (the other reasons provided varied however);

- Six of the seven indicated that they felt adequately prepared for the amount and level of work which they believed they would encounter in their course (the one participant who indicated *no* took the slowest time of the seven to complete the degree);

- Five of the seven had indicated that the greatest support for them to complete their course was *prior life experiences*; and

- Four of the seven participants who succeeded in completing their undergraduate degrees had completed the *ExcelL* program (Group A) and three had not (Group B).

In terms of SES (as determined by James 2002) and geographical location (as delineated by James 2002) the graduating students included six lower and one higher SES and all were classed as having a high access, rural location.

5.7 Conclusions

The data analysed in this chapter is of value in that it establishes a starting point for the inquiry, augmenting its soundness and 'goodness' and adding potency to the comprehensive qualitative data analysed in the next two chapters. The analysis illuminates the profile of the participants and their characteristics. The analysis also grounds this information in the prevailing contexts of HE in Australia, for example in relation to debates about equity of access, SES and GL.

5.7.1 Student Questionnaire

The *Student Questionnaire* provided information about the profile of the participants and facilitated comparison with the respondents in a previous study conducted by Postle et al. to determine if the sample was representative. The analysis of the *Student Questionnaire* demonstrates that:

1) The participants have the following characteristics:

- Most are engaged in either full-time or part-time work;

- All of the participants have completed at least a Year 10 education;

- All but one of the participants had engaged in additional studies since school with the one participant who had not alternatively devising and teaching a TAFE course;

- Many have undertaken TAFE studies but very few have entered university through the alternative entry path of the university's bridging program with TAFE;

- The majority commenced university studies to *obtain personal satisfaction* with a slightly smaller percentage indicating *to obtain a qualification* as their reason for undertaking university studies;

- Many indicated *financial problems* as the greatest perceived threat to completion, however *family commitments* and *workload* were also perceived to be threats; and

- Many perceive *prior life experience* and *prior educational experience* to be significant supports in completing their studies.

2) As Postle et al. (1996) also note, the participants are not minority students. AES are similar to mainstream students in that they too are school leavers (SL), although this may have occurred some time ago. Whilst they often have major commitments (for example job, family) AES bring with them considerable life experiences as well as the motivation to change their career direction or to be more in control of their lives;

3) The comparison of the participants' profile with Postle et al's larger sample confirms that the two samples are generally consistent; that the present participants are generally representative of AES;

4) The analysis of responses testifies to the diversity present in even this small sample of AES, affirming the conclusion that the AES cohort is neither uniform nor consistent.

5) The analysis of responses from Group A and Group B participants reveals that there are very few differences in the groups' demographics, however there are differences in the following characteristics:

- Generally, Group A participants were older whereas Group B participants were younger;

- More Group A than Group B participants completed Year 12;

- Group A participants entered university with a greater diversity of prior study experiences than Group B participants but more Group B participants had completed a TAFE certificate or diploma;

- The only participants who nominated spouse/partner as their source of income were from Group B;

- More Group A participants indicated that their reasons for enrolling in a university course were to get a job and to improve their economic circumstances; and

- Group B participants were the only participants to indicate that they consider *adequate finances,* and the presence of *spouse/partner, family* and *friends* to be influential sources of support for the completion of their degrees.

5.7.2 The Action Research Program

The action research data were generally unsupportive of the efficacy of the *ExcelL* program in facilitating the transition to university. However some of the results, in particular in relation to the *ISC* and the *SACQ,* indicate that there is scope for further research. These results also confirm the applicability of investigating the qualitative data collected during the study to determine whether the *ExcelL* program had subjectively increased Group A's adjustment to university.

5.7.3 The Academic Results

The analyses of the three sets of academic results [the-end-of-semester-one results in June 1998, the comparison of grade point averages of mid-year AES and the comparison of grade point averages of the graduated participants (2003)] were non-supportive of the efficacy of the *ExcelL* program in facilitating Group A's adjustment to university as reflected by academic performance.

5.7.4 Intersecting Datasets

The analysis of the geographical and socio-economic data revealed that Group B participants are largely *lower SES* with *medium access rural* (6) and *higher SES* with *medium access rural*. Group A participants demonstrate more variation with representation in five intersecting categories.

5.7.5 Patterns of Withdrawal and Perseverance

The patterns of withdrawal revealed:

- The rate of withdrawal of the participants in their first year of study was lower than that of the respondents in Postle's study, which had compared favourably with the withdrawal rate for those students who entered HE along traditional paths. The only identifying characteristics of these participants were that they were more likely to be under the age of 35 years and were more likely to have no children.

- More male (six) than female (one) participants withdrew, the reverse of Postle et al. findings. This finding is investigated further in section 7.2.3

- The rate of withdrawal overall was higher for Group A than for Group B. However the three participants who have yet to complete their studies are all Group B participants. The six Group A participants who withdrew were members of the designated equity groups, thus were from lower SES backgrounds, from isolated locations, or both, signifying the impact of multiple disadvantage. The two Group B participants who withdrew were both from a higher SES background (parental occupation) and high access (rural) location.

The patterns of perseverance revealed that:

- All the successful participants had studied since their original qualification and indicated that one of their reasons for beginning the course was to *obtain a qualification*;

- The successful participants were more likely to be single, have no children, be engaged in either part-time or full-time work before university studies, be working between 1 and 19 hours of work per week while studying and have completed Year 12;

- The successful participants indicated that they felt adequately prepared for the amount and level of work which they believed they would encounter and indicated that the greatest support for them to complete their course was *prior life experiences*;

- In terms of socio-economic background and geographical location (as delineated by James) the participants who graduated included six lower SES and one higher SES. These participants were all classed as having a high access, rural location and, thus, were not subject to multiple disadvantages.

5.7.6 Looking Back/Looking Forward

Overall the profile and action research data has established a starting point for the study, illuminating the participants as well as their characteristics. The analysis supports the contention that the profile of the participants is generally representative of AES and confirms the diversity inherent in the alternative entry cohort. The data also reveal interesting patterns that support the efficacy of investigating the qualitative data also collected during the participants' university journeys. Chapters Six and Seven will explore and analyse this data.

Chapter 6
Reflections: Accessing and Participating at University

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Background

In the previous chapter, the quantitative datasets collected during the participants' university journeys were analysed. Although the sample was small, the data revealed anomalies that point to the value of investigating the qualitative data also collected in the study. This chapter is the first of two chapters analysing the data collected through the interviews conducted with participants and through participant observation. Chapter Six concentrates on the participants' journeys as they strive to access HE and to make a successful transition to the university culture whereas Chapter Seven, *Students Empowering Students*, focuses on participants' means of persevering at university.

In both chapters, the data are analysed using a layered, thick approach (Martin-McDonald 2000). A layered approach is used as it facilitates the process of unpacking meaning, proceeding as it does from description through to detailed analysis and finally to general interpretation. The layered approach also provides a valuable way of systematically sifting out the participants' perspectives, facilitating its revelatory capacity (p.144). Supporting and assisting these analytical and interpretative processes are the use of 'thick descriptions' – the rich detailed descriptions of specifics – which, Geetz (1979) argues, are able to capture a sense of what is occurring, consequently permitting multiple interpretations whilst also helping to guard against the authorial power of any dual positioning – for example my positioning as both researcher and teacher. This process allows the original data to be seen in context whilst simultaneously reinforcing its transparency and accountability (Martin-McDonald 2000).

Layered, thick description, by methodically shifting the observers' perspectives, makes it possible to hear each student's unique and individual voice to see how specific nuances vary between the individuals (Martin-McDonald 2000). This process also allows the individual (unique) voices to be synthesised so that a more comprehensive portrait (more universal) of the student experience can be woven which is able to echo in other wider and more general contexts. In so doing, the approach reveals the social complexity inherent in the portrait, illuminating the post-structural nexus' foreshadowed in Chapter One (see

Figure 1.1) and developed in Chapter Two (see Figure 2.1), in particular those between universal and the unique, society and the individual and the singular and the complex. The themes foreshadowed in Chapter One – change, culture, discourse, literacy, diversity, power and relationships – are also revisited, revitalised by the participants' reflections. Each interview transcript was critically reviewed before the completion of the final interview in order to generate a more comprehensive picture of the data collected from each participant. This process provided the opportunity for clarification, further probing and validation with each participant and against participant observation data, thus contributing to the comprehensiveness of the information collected and collated.

The interview and participant observation data[44] was analysed using thematic analysis. From the transcribed conversations and journal observations, patterns of experiences, which stemmed from direct quotes or paraphrasing common ideas, were listed in Step One of the analysis (Spradley 1979). Step Two involved the identification, combining and cataloguing of all data that related to the already classified patterns (Aronson 1994). These patterns included, for example, the over-arching reference points, themes and sub-themes presented in Tables 6.1, 6.2 and 7.1. According to Leininger (1985, p.60), themes are identified by 'bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone'. In Step Three the patterns that emerged from the participants' stories were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience. The 'coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together' (Leininger 1985, p. 60). As these patterns emerged, I asked participants, in Step Four, to reflect on the analysis generated, reflections that I also incorporated (Aronson 1994). Step Five involved interweaving the literature with the thematic analysis to develop a valid argument. When the literature is interwoven with the findings, 'the story that the interviewer constructs helps the reader to comprehend the process, understanding, and motivation of the interviewer' (Aronson 1994).

6.1.2. Over-arching Reference Points

Chapters Six and Seven embrace, as reference points, the over-arching notions of reflection, reflective practice, the skills of engagement and critical awareness. These

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[44] The transcribed audiotapes and the participant observation data documented in journals was analysed by hand without the aid of a software package. The participants' real names were replaced with pseudonyms.

reference points emerged from the literature review developed in sections 3.2, 3.4 and 3.6. Figure 6.1 illustrates the over-arching reference points in Chapters Six and Seven.

Reflection (as described in section 3.6.2) involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it to make sense of what has occurred (Dewey 1933). Section 3.6 differentiates between two kinds of reflection (Schön 1987). The first, 'reflection in action', which occurs immediately, is the ability to learn and develop continually by creatively applying current and past experiences and reasoning to unfamiliar events while they are occurring. The second, 'reflection on action' which occurs later is a process of thinking back on what happened in a past situation, what may have contributed to the unexpected event, whether the actions taken were appropriate, and how this situation may affect future practice. Through the processes of reflecting both 'in practice' and 'on practice', practitioners continually reshape their approaches and develop 'wisdom' or 'artistry' in their practice.
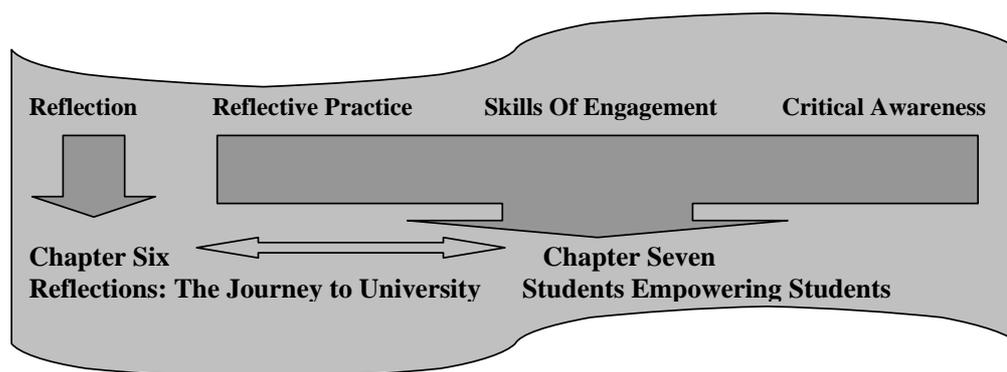
Figure 6.1: Over-arching Reference Points in Chapters Six and Seven

Chapter Six has, as its reference point, reflection(s), which equates broadly with Schön's notion of 'reflection in action', whilst Chapter Seven embraces, as its reference points, reflective practice, the skills of engagement and critical awareness. Reflective practice, paralleling Schön's 'reflection on action' gathers together the students' reflections in relation to their transition and learning practices, including their lifelong and life-wide learning capacities. The skills of engagement are the socio-cultural competencies introduced in the review of literature in section 3.4.4. Critical awareness extends the critical orientations underpinning the study, loosely weaving together the notions of critical discourse awareness (section 3.2) and critical self-awareness (section 3.6.6).

Although the over-arching reference points each occupy a separate space within which common themes are gathered and assembled, they are not conveniently differentiated across the two chapters. The over-arching reference points exist in a dynamic relationship, interacting with and overlapping each other. For example, the theme *A Question of Capital* is positioned under reflection in this chapter as it characterises the participants' journeys to university. However *A Question of Capital* is also relevant to the reference point of critical awareness, in Chapter Seven, as it embodies the participants' awareness of the ways in which they have been influenced and constrained by their cultural belief systems (or capital), both personally (within themselves) and politically (in response to those operating in the wider local, regional and national contexts).

6.1.3. Thematic Organisation

The themes that emerged from the participants' accounts of their journeys are organised within these over-arching reference points. Each theme is illustrated with supporting evidence in the form of the participants' voices (written in font style Bradley Hand ITC, as demonstrated here). In this chapter themes include ***A Long and Winding Road***, ***Rites of Passage*** and ***Transition Journeys***. In **Chapter Seven** the themes include ***Learning Practices***, ***Socio-cultural Practices***, ***Discursive Practices***, ***Dynamic Practices***, and finally ***Evolving Practices***. In this chapter the themes and threads are largely symbolic, reflecting the participants' roads to university, their rites of passage and the metaphors they chose to describe their transition to the university culture. In Chapter Seven, however, the themes are more action-orientated, symbolising the processes or practices participants used to negotiate the university culture and its discourses. Table 6.1 illustrates how the data is broadly grouped into themes in this chapter and in Chapter Seven.

Table 6.1: Diagram of Analysis: Chapters Six and Seven

Layers of Analysis	Over-arching Reference Points	Themes
Chapter Six	**Reflection(s)**	• A Long and Winding Road • Rites of Passage • Transition Journeys
Chapter Seven	**Reflective Practice** **The Skills of Engagement** **Critical Awareness**	• Learning Practices • *ExcelL* Practices • Socio-cultural Practices • Discursive Practices • Dynamic Practices • Evolving Practices

Each theme, like the over-arching reference points, does not constitute a neatly bounded category. It occupies a continuum within which each participant's experiences exist and these are not static, they shift in ways both expected and unexpected, altering with circumstances of time, place, events and person(s). The themes are also dynamic, interrelating with each other in ways both anticipated and unanticipated. Within the continuum the common threads that recur in the participants' stories are also sought out and sorted out and, following analysis, are collected, organised and delineated into threads that are documented under each of the themes.

Whereas the themes appear to be straightforward, the threads attest to the complexity underlying the surface simplicity of the themes (revealing the post-structural nexus between the singular-complex, the global and the local and the political and the personal). The threads also, by probing for and overturning thus far 'taken-for-granted', or at least unchallenged assumptions, fortify the study's critical bearing. Table 6.2 outlines the threads documented in the chapter.

Table 6.2: Diagram of Thematic Analysis in Chapter Six

Reference Points	Themes	Threads
Reflection(s)	A Long and Winding Road	- A Question of Capital - Decision-points - Roadblocks - Preparations - Expectations
	Rites of Passage	- Culture Shocks - Collisions
	Transition Journeys	- An Unfamiliar Culture - New Literacies - Transition Processes - Transition Metaphors

6.2 A Long and Winding Road (to University)

6.2.1 Introduction

In this section of data analysis, the threads include a question of capital, decision-points, roadblocks, preparations, and expectations. Each thread signifies the steps the participants experienced as they made their way along the road to university. Section 6.2.2 analyses the reasons why the participants chose not to enter HE as school-leavers (SL). Section 6.2.3 scrutinises the decision-points that prompted participants to implement plans to study at university and section 6.2.4 canvasses the roadblocks that continued to impede participants'

pathways to university. Sections 6.2.5 and 6.2.6 detail the preparations the participants made and the expectations they had about university study.

6.2.2 A Question of Capital

In this section, the concept of capital (see section 2.2.6.2) is applied to analyse participants' decisions not to access HE as SL. The participants' accounts of their experiences as they left secondary school confirm the role that socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital played in their decisions. In particular, the participants' accounts reveal the capitals' roles in influencing their attitudes towards HE and its accessibility/suitability for them.

Kym, a first year student who was asked to write an assignment for her nursing course, *Psycho-social Foundations of Nursing,* explored the 'factor' which has influenced her 'sense of self'. Kym's reflection demonstrates the role that socio-cultural capital played in her decision not to attend university as a SL:

> My mother and father both left school early and have grown up with the belief that schooling is generally economically 'useless'. My mother would always praise me for doing well at school but was unlikely to take a day off from work to watch me take part in sporting events or school performances whilst my father showed very little interest toward my schooling. My parents encouraged me to secure a job as soon as possible, even if this meant leaving school before my senior schooling was completed. They believed that securing a job was much more important for my future than a high level of education. I realised early on in my high school education that, because of my parents' values and beliefs, I would not be attending university. This idea was simply ridiculous as it was my parent's understanding that university was 'a pure waste of time and money'. I found this lack of support affected my schooling and I eventually left High School half way through year twelve.

Kym's essay concurs with James' (2002) research that maintains that students' decisions about when to leave secondary school and what to do once they have made that decision are not based on their evaluations of their capabilities alone. Kym's reflections also imply that students' decisions about their lives following school, as well as their perceptions regarding these decisions and the choices that are available to them, stem from the capital that each student embodies and brings to the decision.

The levels of socio-cultural, economic, and academic/linguistic capital a group possesses suggests that the group's experiences, beliefs and values may be less in tune with

mainstream university culture and may even act to 'marginalise' the group from HE – exemplifying the consequences of a social positioning which can operate to exacerbate educational disadvantage. For example, the level of capital a group possesses may determine their attitudes about the value and relevance of HE. Some groups, for example, de-value education and the benefits of education. Mel's family articulates this conviction:

> My family says what do you want a job for, you'll just start working and you'll be married with kids. My family thinks you don't need any education.

Eric, too, lacked both a supportive family and a partner who valued his investment in HE:

> Actually my family didn't really support me doing this…and my girlfriend still thinks that I should be out working. She thinks of it as basically being on the dole.

Some groups' economic capital embodies a socio-cultural aversion to the accumulation of debt. Mel provides this example:

> My uncle and aunt say I am mad, 'what are you doing, you will never be able to pay it off?

This aversion becomes critical as the Liberal Coalition government's funding arrangements, culminating in the 2003 deregulation of the HE sector, means that students need to accumulate more debt in order to access HE. Sandy was conscious of the financial burdens involved for students who possessed lower levels of economic capital:

> We've paid ridiculous prices for our books, there's no way in the world they can expect students on Austudy to afford the books… We have something between $800 and $1000 a semester in book fees.

A group's socio-cultural capital can also affect HE participation; for instance in relation to gender-discrimination. Della's father, a farmer on the Darling Downs in QLD, did not consider HE appropriate for girls, although he financed Della's brothers' tertiary education. Della elaborated on the negative effects of this socio-cultural capital in a reflective essay she wrote for *Instructional Psychology: Lifelong Learning*:

> My shyness became more ingrained and my confidence in my abilities weakened by parents who did not believe in educating girls. On completion of high school I entered the 'unskilled' workforce.

Della, from her rural background, also provides insight into the ways that socio-cultural capital continues to impact on potential AES' decisions to access HE:

> I was made aware that there are a lot of people out there who believe that mature age students have no right to be in university, that they are taking the places of young people…I come from a country area and there are some very narrow views out there…For example that tertiary education is for the young coming from high school and to go back at my age is sort of flowing against the stream…I think some people, especially in the country areas, think I'm a fruitcake.

Brad, also from a rural area, substantiates the negative consequences that result from the intersections between mature age entry and a rural location:

> Even friends, in jest more than anything, say 'oh imagine you going to uni'. Lots of people think that it's the most unlikely thing that they could imagine.

The socio-cultural capital associated with adolescence/young adulthood was also threaded through the data. Jon, for example, devoted more time to fitting in and to getting along at school than to his academic learning, with study taking a back seat. This influenced both his university entrance score, which wasn't glowing, and his motivations:

> I concentrated on ways to make friends and on what could I do to get invited to the party.

Gary also felt that he would not have succeeded if he had gone to university as a SL:

> I don't think I could have come to uni straight out of school. I would have played up a bit too much...I don't think I would have been able to apply myself.

Dave, alternatively, became an AES only by virtue of the fact that he had not succeeded in his previous university studies:

> I got terribly disappointed with where physics was heading. My grades were fine but I was a little young at the time to see the light at the end of the tunnel. All I could see was the sheer amount of work: that I was working very hard to get through, and I couldn't keep the focus on what was at the end of it. Then I changed to education. I thought I could handle high-school teaching – until I got to my first practice-teaching block. I just lost all control of the class, and said 'well this is not for me - I don't have the personal strength to separate personal life and work life like that'. Then I changed to a College of Advanced Education where I started a BA with language and literature major. I found that to be very intellectually stimulating and challenging – I enjoyed it a great deal. But I had some bad habits at the time, and got into trouble with the law, and that caused me to drop out.

The socio-cultural capital, in particular in relation to his personal circumstances, which had prevented Dave from succeeding on his previous attempts, also contributed to his lack of success this time. Dave was the first participant to withdraw (during semester 2, 1998)

Perceptions of lower levels of academic/linguistic capital were present in some of the participants' accounts of their decision-making processes. For instance, some participants had negative experiences of school and left early:

> When I was younger, I had this dream of going to university... but I was really poor at school – and I ended up leaving when I was 14...that was when most people were still leaving school at 16. (Yan)

Other participants believed that university was beyond their intellectual capacities:

> *Personally, I never felt I had the ability to be accepted into university. I believed only the really smart were accepted and university was beyond anything I could comprehend.* (Sandy)

Participants also noted that advice from school guidance officers/counsellors had contributed to participants' decisions not to access HE. In part, this advice stemmed from guidance officers/counsellors' assessment of the participants' academic/linguistic capital. In Della's case, career advice had a negative consequence:

> *I desperately wanted to do social work/psychology and it was very much advised against by the school counsellors. So I didn't go and I've always regretted it.*

The school-career-guidance system didn't assist Gary either:

> *…because at that stage I didn't know really what I wanted to do. Now I do and I think my goal is a bit more fixed.*

The participants' evidence thus concurs with James and Beckett's (2000) finding regarding the lack of adequate career information: that many students base their choices on informal anecdotal channels rather than on formal career counselling. Jon provides an example:

> *I was doing work experience at a radio station and I volunteered there in the hope that it would lead up to paid work – which it did. At that stage, I wanted a career in radio – I heard that you just don't go and get a qualification in radio – you just start volunteering and work your way up, and that was that.*

Jon's testimony reveals the ways in which students' levels of socio-cultural capital can act to limit the range of resources students are able to access as they make their career choices.

Alternatively, some groups' socio-cultural capital facilitates their familiarity with university discourses, along with their conviction that HE is attainable. Dave was the only one of the 17 participants who proceeded, initially, to go to university as a SL. Dave, however, also differs from the other participants in that his background is considered to be higher SES, according to the parental education and occupation level indicators used by James (2002). That Dave had also been educated at a private secondary school supports the assertions by critical researchers (Bourdieu 1988 and Corson 1999) that the type of school attended may reflect a socio-cultural capital that is more in tune with mainstream university discourses. The other exception was Lucy, who attended a selective Brisbane secondary school on a scholarship – *I went to Brisbane state high school where nearly everyone went onto uni.* However, for family-financial reasons (or lower levels of economic capital), Lucy did not follow her selective school cohort to university.

...I was one of the very few who didn't [proceed to HE]. Financially speaking it wasn't fair on my mum and I didn't want to be working a busy week and studying and so I decided to opt to go to uni at a later stage.

Both Dave and Lucy, as SL, acknowledged the relevance/value of HE. These findings support research literature from Australia (Bearsley 1997; James 2002; Postle et al. 1996), the UK (Yorke 2000) and the USA (Tinto 2001). James (2002) argues that the predominant effects appear to be psychological or psychosocial factors associated with the perceived relevance of HE with different economic groups having very different ideas on how useful or attainable university will be. The participants' responses also support James' (2002) finding that initial educational disadvantage stemming from the cumulative effect of an absence of encouragement and a range of inhibiting factors is exacerbated by a lack of knowledge of, or significantly, lack of familiarity with university as well as people who have been to university (in other words, lower socio-cultural capital). Most participants cite the lack family/peer reference groups, who had knowledge of and valued HE (lower academic capital) as a contributing factor in their decisions not to access HE as SL.

The participants' accounts also give credence to recent research (Harvey-Beavis & Robinson 2001), which argues that when individuals nominate an occupational preference, or when describing their aspirations, they are doing so, in part, on the basis of their beliefs about themselves and their location in the social world (their socio-cultural and economic capital) Brad, for example, was influenced by his desire to emulate his father's drive and certainty about a life on the land.

Dad knew what he wanted, he wanted to own country and work on the land and do well and that was all he wanted to do basically since he was at school.

In a similar way, Brad began his own fencing business straight from school.

Like my father I obviously must have had a bit of drive to start doing it, and then the good feelings I got from that, I mean financially and the fact that I was doing it, running a business on my own, employing people. All that gave me confidence. So that momentum carried me for a number of years.

Individual belief systems were also significant in the decision-making process. Some participants made their decision not to proceed to university quite consciously. Lucy, despite the majority of her selective secondary school cohort proceeding to university as SL, postponed HE for a combination of personal reasons. Lucy simultaneously demonstrates her awareness of the consequences of these choices:

I had burnt myself out by the time I got to 14 or 15. I was more into finding my own place to live and getting some money and come back as a wealthy student...I also believed back then that I wasn't in the position to make a career choice and I wanted to experience life and take on a bit of independence – discipline myself first and then go onto being a student.

Participants also noted that their original decisions not to access HE were compounded by a series of life's circumstances. Lucy's decision-making processes were governed, to some extent, by the circumstances in which she found herself, and these are indicative of the influence of her socio-cultural/economic capital. First, Lucy married young and began a family and, secondly, she became a single mother with financial responsibilities:

I got married at 19, which was quite unexpected. I became a mum at 21 and by the time I was 23 I was doing correspondence (grade 12) just to rehash because I wanted to go back to uni. But at that stage it was very hard between nappy changes to study. Income became a problem and so I joined the army reserve and then I went into the full-time air force.

Sandy also discusses the economic/cultural roadblocks that impeded her university goals.

I had to earn an income, so I did. Then you get to the stage where the money's very nice, then I got married, and we built a house, and the time never seemed to be right.

Jim, like-wise, was waylaid by work concerns:

After school I was offered a chance to go to college in Newcastle, but I decided to go to work for twelve months to get some money behind me to do that degree, but things changed, and I stayed in the work force...Then four years ago I sat for an exam to enter Gatton Agricultural College. Got accepted to go, but work commitments came in play and I couldn't quite actually force myself to go.

In summary, the participants' accounts of their decision-making processes in relation to whether or not to access HE as AL reveal the role played by socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital. This capital influenced the participants' attitudes towards HE and its value/accessibility/suitability for them, including their views about the accumulation of debt and the career advice they both sought and received. So, what was it that prompted the participants to re-consider the initial decision? In the next section, the decision-points that led participants to reverse the decision not to access HE as SL will be analysed.

6.2.3 Decision-points

In this section, the decision-making processes that underpinned the participants' resolutions to become AES will be analysed. Whereas the analysis suggests that a critical event galvanised many of the participants' decision-making processes, other contributing factors included a desire for self-improvement (both financially and professionally) and the

presence in the participants' lives of family/peer reference groups who were familiar with, or who had completed, a HE degree.

The participants' accounts confirmed that the decision to participate in HE later in life was often prompted by a critical event that demanded a 'change of life' for many participants. Yan, retrenched from his work, had difficulties finding alternative employment:

> After I was retrenched from my last job at Telecom, I found that I just couldn't get another job.

Dave was motivated both by financial and personal reasons:

> Financially – I've recently broke up for the second time in the last 12 months and child support was absolutely tearing my wages apart – and personally – having a degree means I can get a job that pays well.

Dan and Della had both suffered major medical conditions:

> Medical problems caused me to make a decision: two spinal operations, one when I was 23, and one at Christmas this year. The doctors told me the first time that I never go back to manual work, and I didn't take any notice of them. They told me that if I do go back this time, I'd be in a wheelchair in 4 years. I had to make a decision, and my wife and I had previously talked about university. (Dan)
>
> I've worked in a number of different areas and about seven years ago we bought our own farm. And I was working on my own while my husband was away working most of the time and I hurt my back and had to have back surgery and I couldn't work the farm anymore. So there was a lot of personal trauma for me in all of that, not being able to work…I took it as a time where I sat back and took stock of my life…I decided to give it a try, it was now or never. (Della)

Jim and Brad experienced a crisis in terms of their businesses:

> My accountants actually asked me to corporatise my business, which I am not really overly happy about doing, because I think you just need more management for that, which I am not prepared to do, because I want to try something different. I want to go to university…it's a stepping-stone. (Jim)

Brad had set up a bush fencing and yard building business but after ten years was finding the traveling and living in others' homes difficult to sustain, especially as he had began a serious relationship with his future wife – I wanted to change my lifestyle, full stop. Brad also discussed the frustrations of working in rural industries buffeted by increasing globalisation and escalating commodification:

> My wife and I talked about it - we both had the feeling that persisting in the industry we were in, we couldn't eke out an existence…its worth was becoming less and less, even in our own time…the commodity prices in real terms have gone backwards hand-over-fist, dollar for dollar.

The crisis in one aspect of the participants' lives was sometimes accompanied by additional considerations. Dan's medical problems increased his desire to obtain qualifications.

> I had to make a decision about what I was going to do after my operations, I made the decision that I had to have a career change, and the only way I was going to go about a career change was to get more qualifications: ones that were going to be relative to the world as it is today. My qualifications are irrelevant now.

Some participants were primarily motivated by vocational/financial goals, implying a drive to increase their levels of economic and socio-cultural capital. Gregor, for example, wanted to aim for a higher and better job. Jim's goal was a new career:

> I have a lot of contact with people in overseas markets, selling commodities and things, and I would like to have a job along similar lines. I was hoping to fill a gap that I think is lacking between the marketing side and the actual relationship with the producers… I want to get a MBA, which is needed for that sort of scenario.

Lucy's goal was to become a doctor:

> I am now 28 and I left the army in May this year, hopefully to get into medicine.

Eric, Sandy and Shaz wanted to enhance their work prospects:

> I don't want to have a job that will be low paying and probably stop in a few years. I want something that's going to last and go onto another stage in a career. (Eric)
> When I finish I can go out and say I now have a piece of paper that says I have these formal qualifications, plus I have my industry experience. That was the problem – I'd really been caught in a catch 22. I had the experience, but because I didn't have the piece of paper…! (Sandy)

> If I want to go further I have to return to study. (Shaz)

Andy, working in real estate, wanted to increase his income (his economic capital):

> The university is a gateway to good income, the key to working society, because everything revolves around money. I want to retire when I'm about 50 and I need to have a degree in a field that's going to earn me that sort of retirement money.

The participants' accounts also revealed their motivations to improve additional aspects of their lives. Shaz, for example, recognised that she wanted to acquire theoretical knowledge (or linguistic capital) to enable her to converse more effectively with senior levels of management. Jon, meanwhile, desired the status of a university education (and thus increase his levels of socio-cultural capital):

> In the back of my mind I still wanted to be at uni, just to say that I was at uni. You say to people "I'm volunteering at a radio station" or you say "I'm at university" – they tend to see going to university as a lot more beneficial.

The decision to access HE was a long-considered option for some participants. For instance Sandy's decision-making processes slowly evolved over a number of years:

> I always, consciously or unconsciously, made decisions, which put it [university] off … but about 18 months ago I thought seriously about it. I started looking at when the planets were going to be all lined up so I could do it. I started planning to get some of those that weren't in alignment, in alignment.

However, for other participants, the decision to access HE was far more casual. Linda's decision, for example, was more ad hoc, prompted by a vague desire to be a nurse but stimulated, finally, by a USQ Open Day. The Open Day not only provided information but also a ready access to enrolment forms:

> I had always been thinking about doing my Bachelor of Nursing…they stopped doing them in the hospital, so I knew the only way to do it was through the uni…. We did a USQ market day this time last year… I went up to the nursing block, and found out a bit of information there, and then went into the refectory and got some information out of the big stand there about Tertiary Preparation Program.

Linda's decision-making processes continued to be unplanned. Following the Open Day conducted at USQ she was guided by the decisions of others:

> I looked at all the paperwork, and filled out the information, and they sent me an application slip for a scholarship. I had looked at the prices, and I decided if I got the scholarship, I'd be going to uni, if I didn't get the scholarship, I'd be sitting at home. And luckily enough, I got the scholarship. So that sort of threw me in at the deep end, and made my decision for me.

This ad hoc decision-making continued into the degree itself:

> I also got a scholarship for the 3 and a half years (of the degree)…It came from administration, because I got a scholarship with Tertiary Preparation Program, they sent me an application form – I didn't ask for it!

The participants' testimonies demonstrated that another of the factors contributing to participants' deferred decisions to access HE as AES was the subsequent presence in their lives of reference/peer groups who had developed some familiarity with university discourses. Families were an important source of such familiarity. Yan's wife, for example, had completed her degree and was teaching at the university. Dan's wife had begun her degree a year earlier, Dave's sister was currently studying as a mature age student, Jon's brother and sister and Gary's two brothers were studying and Shaz's friends were also returning to university study. That Andy's siblings had been to university facilitated his decision to access HE:

> My brother studied here, a Bachelor or Commerce, and my sister at the University of Queensland, a Bachelor of Arts/Journalism. I also observed that my brother – I tend

> to think we're both the same sort of mental capacity – was doing quite well, and I thought if he can do it, I can.

Gary watched his two brothers, one studying Bachelor of Technology in Chemical Engineering, the other an education course:

> I think I was a bit envious of them learning all the time. For about six months I watched them do that, and I thought I want to do this too.

Some parents had an influence on their children's choices. Brad's mother finally roused her son into action by encouraging him to complete a scholarship application form.

Peers and friends also played a role in assisting the participants to see that HE was possible and beneficial for them. The *Psycho-social Foundations of Nursing* student put it this way:

> I gained support from my work peers who encouraged me to complete my senior at night school. This is where I learnt that education can lead to new credentials and new job prospects, significant changes in social position, life chances and life styles. It was then that I visualised my goal of attending university to be a nurse.

Sandy's friends encouraged her to obtain a qualification:

> For some time I had had people encouraging me to go to university and obtain my accounting degree as they felt I was being wasted doing the work of an accountant but not being paid as one.

The participants' testimonies support the idea that contacts with university or with university students and graduates were significant contributing factors in the participants' decisions to access HE as AES. The presence of these contacts, by raising the participants' levels of socio-cultural/academic capital, increased the participants' familiarity with university discourses and the belief that they, too, could obtain a tertiary qualification.

In summary, participants' testimonies revealed that their reasons for seeking to access HE as AES were varied. One of the most significant was the occurrence of a critical incident, prompting the participants to re-examine their priorities and goals. This finding supports the literature (Benshoff & Lewis 1989; Conrad 1993; Kantanis 2002) that indicates that the decision to return to study can be precipitated by a major life change (divorce, death, retrenchment, a mid-life crisis). The participants' evidence also supports the research (Kantanis 2002; Postle et al. 1997) that suggests that the motivation to study springs from a desire for self-improvement, in particular in a vocational/financial sense (therefore increasing their levels of economic capital). The third reason identified by participants related to the presence of family/peer reference groups in participants' lives who were familiar with university and who were prepared to support them. The presence of this

contact/support, by increasing participants' socio-cultural capital and therefore their familiarity with mainstream university discourses, suggests the critical role that capital continues to play in influencing the decision to access HE. Socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital not only affect secondary students' initial decisions not to access HE as SL, the capital also influences their subsequent decisions to access HE as AES. The participants' testimonies also revealed that the desire to increase their levels of socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital contributed to participants' decisions to access HE.

6.2.4 Roadblocks

After finally having made the decision to access HE as AES, the participants were frustrated by roadblocks that impeded their journeys to university. Overcoming these roadblocks required not only planning and preparation but also perseverance and persistence. This section traces the frustrations the participants experienced following their initial decision to access HE and analyses the ways in which they overcame the roadblocks obstructing their paths.

The process of gaining access to HE was sometimes complicated by 'life's events', including both financial and personal difficulties. Lucy's story is typical:

> When I joined up originally I did a posting to Canberra. I really wanted to go to ANU [Australian National University] but I couldn't get the time as a single mum. In the military it was very hard and study became very difficult. I looked at different schemes through the military - a mature age airman's entry into the Australian Defence force Academy (ADFA) but the courses and the Return of Services Obligation (ROSA) meant that you had to give back yearly so financially it wasn't worth it. I was trapped so I decided to finance myself and get a Bachelor of Science. A second stop will be the gamest[45] to get into medicine. It was a long decision and a lot of calculations financially looking at net figures rather than gross figures because they can be quite deceptive. I was ready to do the commitment.

Lucy displayed persistence and flexibility in her drive to access a university education. Jon too, thwarted in his original choice to study music, exhibited flexibility in his approach:

> I applied for music in Brisbane, for last semester. I got an A for my audition, and everyone said I was going to get in, but then I didn't get in. I was disappointed and didn't really know what to do. Then it came up to the time for mid-year applications, and I thought 'I might as well apply – I'm applying for music next year, but I might do a semester, get the feel for it, if I don't get in, I'll stay at USQ.

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[45] The Gamset is the formal graduate-assessment pathway into a medical degree in Australia.

Yan was hampered by financial considerations, as his wife was already at university:

> I had to wait a year before I could come to university, because my wife was finishing her degree. So I was working as a Taxi driver for a year, because I still couldn't get a job, even after doing the Tertiary Preparation course, which was equivalent to a senior certificate. So I waited a year, and then I came here.

Yan, in a similar way to Jon and Lucy, displayed a perseverance that stood him in good stead when he was finally admitted to university.

Dan, meanwhile, frustrated by both medical and entry requirements, eventually overcame both difficulties. Dan's experiences exemplify the benefits of developing informal contacts within the university, thereby increasing the participants' sources of support/information:

> Last year we enrolled and the results came out - my wife had got in and I hadn't. We both put in for psychology and because I didn't have year 12 maths, they denied entry to me...So, after six months I applied to the Prep Studies Program and one of the people there said "Look, why don't you apply again for mid-term entry", even though I'd already got a scholarship for the Prep Studies Course. So I applied for uni again and got in...I was happy as Larry.

In summary, participants' testimonies confirmed that alternative entry to university requires students to be persistent, determined and to exhibit flexibility in overcoming roadblocks they may encounter following the initial decision to access HE. This testimony confirms Kantanis' (2002, p.5) research which found that, for mature age students, often returning to formal study constituted the realisation of a long-anticipated goal, achieved after a considerable passage of time but that, further, this goal was generally not achieved without some degree of effort and personal sacrifice. The participants' stories demonstrate the benefits of flexibility, perseverance and a willingness to search out alternative strategies in the pursuit of the goal to access HE as AES.

6.2.5 Preparations

In this section, the preparations the participants made as they readied themselves for university study are analysed. These preparations included personal, social, business, work and academic preparations. The participants' preparations reflect the diversity of both their experiences and their attitudes towards university study. Some participants, for example, prepared formally (by undertaking preparatory courses) whereas other participants were more casual and improvised in their preparations.

Some participants planned comprehensively. Sandy clearly demonstrates her capacity for both preparation and reflection *before* practice (see section 3.6.2):

> *I didn't apply until mid semester early this year, because first I investigated it all I looked at the costing, the impact on our finances because I work for myself - I've given up my income for two and a half years. Finally I took the step. I applied in both ways: via recognition for my past work experience and via the entrance exam. I found the entrance exam a nightmare and dealt a severe blow to my confidence. It had been many years since I'd sat for that type of exam and I didn't feel I could prepare enough. I obtained an OP1 for my entrance into university - this was via my recognition of past experience, certainly not as a result of the entrance exam I'm sure. I never found out how I obtained this OP1 but that's what I was rated.* (Sandy)

Other participants were not as thorough and clear-sighted about their preparations. Jim, a rural student with his own business, admitted he had not physically prepared:

> *I certainly didn't prepare for it physically – been sitting around doing nothing for the last six months!*

However, whereas Jim could see the value of such physical preparation, *I think a fit person's got a lot clearer mind,* he doubted whether anyone could prepare mentally:

> *I really didn't know how to prepare. I didn't know what was actually required of me. I knew it was going to be hard but I really didn't know what to fully expect.*

Jim's evidence illustrates that, despite the information provided to assist students to prepare at least academically (for example, at USQ, information about OPACS courses and workshops are distributed with enrolment packages), some students continue to remain unaware about the potential of such preparations. However, despite this lack of academic awareness, work-wise Jim had prepared, *I got a Manager into position.* Although this move didn't succeed as well as Jim had hoped:

> *...I thought the manager would have been able to handle a lot more than he did. It comes back to personalities. The people we're associated with seem to want to always talk to the person who owns the enterprise rather than the manager.*

Brad, a rural student who, like Jim, operated his own business, prepared more consciously for his university studies. However, Brad's preparations were also primarily related to the area with which he was most familiar – finance:

> *When I got serious, when I had filled out forms and talked to my wife, I did a cash flow projection: if we sell this; put that money there; rent, fuel will cost this much. But I haven't done it in enough detail and I should have updated it now. Some were realistic; the financial side of it is probably worrying my wife more than myself.*

Interestingly, and unlike most of the other participants, Brad did not automatically select USQ, nor did he have a clear idea of what he wanted to study. As a result, Brad performed a needs analysis to empower his decision-making processes:

> I started writing letters and making phone calls – probably around October last year to different universities. I spoke to someone from Rockhampton and someone from here – at no stage did I feel that I wouldn't get accepted if I applied. I just thought that hopefully my marks from school would be enough to get me a position. So that wasn't one of my worries, it was more a matter of what I was going to do, that's really the biggest thing that's influenced me. I rang this uni and that uni and tried to speak to career counsellors. Greg, at USQ, sent some things to fill out which are personality-type things, which I filled out – but I found that I was a bit of a misfit.

Brad also had to prepare by coming to terms with his cultural, family and personal attachment to earning a living on the land. Brad and Sara, his wife, planned together:

> ...we have both been echoing the same feelings about a lot of the hardships and the reasons why it wasn't the best thing to stay in that game, and then we started looking at all the different options.

Brad also tried to anticipate the consequences that university would provide for his family:

> I made the decision that I'd have to involve Sara as much as I could. I've always believed in being honest so I try and tell Sara everything because I 'd rather her know....if you're not going to tell them anything about anyone you're going to uni with, well its not fair because its all unknown to them.

However, despite Brad's planning, Sara's insecurity caused Brad anxiety, eventually contributing to his decision to withdraw in the second year of his studies.

Mel, living in a geographically isolated area, also investigated her university options:

> When I was up there, I was always ringing universities – can you send me this and can you send me that – and I looked at a lot before I chose.

Mel, who is now employed as a recruitment officer in the Sciences Faculty at USQ, eventually chose USQ because:

> ...USQ has a third semester and I loved the rural lifestyle...I didn't really want to go to Brisbane.

A number of the participants prepared for university by undertaking TAFE studies or preparatory courses. Yan entered through the TAFE system, testing his abilities after his failure at secondary school. Yan comments about the confidence he gained:

> I found out about the Tertiary Preparation course at the TAFE and I had a talk with my wife. I'd been interested in nursing, so I thought I would try the TAFE course, and if I did all right, then maybe I'd do all right at the university as well. So I did the TAFE course, and I did really well.

Sandy studied at TAFE but her testimony also demonstrates her impressive planning capacity, a capability that was evident throughout her studies.

> I'd been doing some study through TAFE for 5 years. I looked at what credits I could get, if I could get any credits, what units were involved, the time-span, the maximum number of units I could study in a semester, what the summer semester

> was about. I was trying to look at what the minimum and maximum impact on our lives would be and for what period of time. I had to make a conscious decision about whether I wanted to adjust to these new circumstances.

Linda and Eric both found the USQ Tertiary Preparation Course (TPP) empowering:

> I did the Tertiary Preparation Program. The work was a lot harder than I thought, but I found I really enjoyed the communication side of it, and the self-discovery side, and that brought me out of my shell in a way, because I discovered what my interests were, what I would like to do, and what aptitudes I have. It gave me a lot more confidence than I had before. (Linda)

The TPP course helped Eric to become familiar university discourses, reduced his anxiety and to have more realistic expectations about university study, for example:

> …about the workload and the requirements, because the last essay I wrote was probably in grade ten, in 1983.

Della was also prepared to undertake some preparatory studies:

> I was prepared to do the TTP but I sat the STAT exam and applied through the personal competencies. I did a bit of a refresher course on my own to see if I had the skills to sit the STAT exam. I also talked to people because I wanted to make sure it was realistic: that I would be able to cope with the workload and whether I had the personality to cope with the stresses of that sort of work [nursing].

Not all participants were convinced, however, of the benefits of preparatory studies. For example, Dan maintained that I didn't feel I needed it anyway, but for me to get into uni I had to. Dan felt he didn't need these studies because:

> …of my work experience, my academic experience, and my life experience… and my age should have got me into whatever I wanted, in my opinion.

That Dan's beliefs in his life/work experiences were not confirmed by eventual success may imply that the students who approach university study with a willingness, both to engage new ways and to question their own ways, may be more successful in adapting to university study. Certainly, the participants' accounts suggest that the participants who approached their university study by acknowledging that they needed to develop some familiarity with, and knowledge about, university discourses – for example, by undertaking TPP or TAFE courses – were also the students who succeeded. Sandy, Yan, Lucy and Mel, all successful participants, for example obtained as much knowledge as they could about university expectations and about how to plan and manage their own circumstances to meet these expectations.

Research by Kantanis (2002) suggests that despite the decision by many mature-age students being a well-considered, deliberate move, relatively little serious consideration

may be given to pragmatic realities that impact on such a long term undertaking. Kantanis cites as examples, time commitment, financial deprivation and the impact on family life. The experiences of the participants who have not yet completed their studies concur with Kantanis' research. For example, although Dave made preparations in relation to his support infrastructure he did not address the reasons for his previous non-completion, an omission which meant that he was not able to succeed this time either. Although both Linda and Della had prepared by undertaking preparatory courses, the fact that they didn't realistically anticipate and prepare for the impact of their studies on their families may have contributed to the fact that they too have been unable to complete their degrees to date. Whereas Brad and Jim anticipated hurdles in relation to their business circumstances, it was their personal circumstances which ironically and none-the-less eventually contributed to their decisions to withdraw from HE.

6.2.6 Expectations

In this section, the participants' expectations about university life/study are analysed. These expectations stemmed from the participants' socio-cultural, economic and academic/ linguistic capital. The expectations primarily related to whether or not HE would be difficult, but also encompassed expectations about the attitudes of academics and the participants' perceptions about their student cohort.

Yan's expectations were based on his knowledge of the British system, which had remained pervasive in his belief system. Yan thought university would:

> …be a struggle, intellectually: I still have this idea of university being like Oxford, Cambridge – the elite. So you're expecting everybody to be very clever, and intelligent, and obviously working hard to get their degree – and it wasn't like that. When I got here, I was surprised at the level of some of the people – even the younger ones who had just finished year 12… were not very clever.

Many participants expected that university would be difficult; expectations that were exacerbated by the time spent away from formal schooling processes and reflected participants' lack of familiarity with mainstream academic/linguistic capital. Jim anticipated that:

> …it would be hard, a result of the time that has passed since I finished secondary school. So transition would have to be hard.

So did Mel and Jon:

I expected uni to be difficult and time consuming. I expected that I would have to work very hard to gain a pass. I expected to be in a class full of very capable people. (Mel)

When I first got out here I thought it was going to be work, work, work. (Jon)

Some participants found that the expectations of hard work did not materialise:

That's not to say it wasn't [hard] but the amount of work I had to do wasn't blowing my mind. (Jon)

Additional expectations related to the role of independent study. Mel and Eric, for example, expected to have to work independently in the new culture.

You are responsible for yourself: if you don't do it, nobody else will. (Mel)

It's basically up to the student to perform; it's not up to the teachers to make the students perform. (Eric)

Sandy had similar expectations:

I suppose I had always set high standards for myself in my working life and I perceived those academically qualified to have higher standards than myself. To say I took on a major task, by trying to complete a degree in less than the allocated time and work part time, was something I don't want to do again. I expected to attend university and see standards to which I would wish to aspire.

Jon's belief that university study was equated with self-directed learning strategies was gained in secondary school (a result of his academic capital):

It wasn't indoctrinated, but it was drummed into us at grade 12 – if you hit uni, you're not going to be spoon-fed, and it's going to be a whole new world. So I thought it would be academically reasonably hard…I thought it would be harder (academically) than it is.

The participants' accounts revealed that the participants whose expectations illustrated more synergy with mainstream academic discourse were also the participants who were more successful. For example, participants who found that their expectations about the calibre of work required were realistic and who expected to work independently, were, ultimately those who also succeeded. These participants included Lucy, Yan, Mel and Jon. The successful participants did not include Linda who, influenced by her school/life experiences, thought university would be school-like, very teacher-directed:

I thought of it as a lot like school, where you went into a classroom, you opened your textbooks, and you did this exercise, blah blah. Very much like schools.

Other expectations of HE related to the accessibility of academic staff. These expectations stemmed from the participants' perceptions about the high status of universities, and university academics, and their own relatively lower academic/linguistic status:

I thought that lecturers would be 'high and mighty'. (Jon)

One problem I expected would be the (negative) communication between lecturers/tutors and me, backwards and forwards. (Gregor)

However participants also found that these expectations were not realistic. Gregor acknowledged: these expectations didn't come to fruition.

The participants' expectations also focused on their fellow students' motivations. Lucy's expectations reflected her socio-cultural and academic capital, gained through her status as an AES who had thought through her goals and prepared comprehensively. In contrast to her own views, Lucy identified the apathy/lack of direction exhibited by many SL:

My expectations of university were both realistic and unrealistic. I expected that almost all students would have concrete goals and reasons for studying what they did, but in reality, a minority had definite goals and future career plans and most were undecided and floating. Many were not sure of why they were at university, possibly because it was expected and a natural transition in study, rather than for personal goal reasons. I noticed that most mature aged students had definite goals and reasons for commencing tertiary studies. It may be because they have given up work and income in order to commence study, and so have much more at stake.

Lucy's analysis of SL' motivations supports research which addresses the lack of motivation sometimes demonstrated by SL as well as its negative impact on their perseverance and success, see for example McInnis (2003) and Krause (2003).

The participants' evidence, overall, suggests that although the personal investment for AES in deciding to return to study is high, it is tempered by apprehension regarding personal and academic inadequacies that could affect their progress, a finding which supports those of Kantanis (2002). The analysis of the data also indicates that the more realistic the participants' expectations regarding the requirements of academic study, the more likely they were to eventually succeed in gaining their degrees.

6.2.7 Summary

The threads analysed in this section of data analysis included a question of capital, decision-points, roadblocks, preparations, and expectations. Each thread delineated a decision-point along the participants' roads to university. These decision-points include participants' initial decisions not to access HE as SL and their subsequent decisions to become AES. Additional threads traced the participants' persistence and flexibility in overcoming roadblocks that impeded their efforts to access HE, the preparations the participants made as they approached HE, and their expectations about university study.

The roles played by socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital was evident in each of the threads documented in the section. The levels of capital the participants possessed not only determined participants' initial choices not to access HE but also played a role in the participants' reversal of the initial decisions – to make the choice to access HE as AES. The participants' levels of capital also influenced their preparations for, and expectations about, university study, shaping their attitudes in relation to these factors.

6.3. Rites of Passage

6.3.1 Introduction

Martin-McDonald (2000) argues that the notion of rites of passage is a theory that assists in the understanding of transition from one social status or position to another. Rites of passage occur when there is 'a transition in cultural expectations, social roles and status, interpersonal relations, and developmental or situational changes to being in the world' (p.20). The students' experiences, as they made the transition to the new university culture, are redolent of these rites of passage. These experiences encompass both culture shocks (see section 6.3.2) and collisions (see section 6.3.3).

6.3.2 Culture Shocks

The participants' first impressions of the university not only mirror the socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital participants bring with them, they also reflect the diversity present in the alternative entry cohort. This diversity stems from the range of the participants' experiences: from being in the military to being involved in competitive business environments; from being at home, responsible for dependent children, to being single and independent; from being self-employed to being unemployed; and from being in control of life's situations to feeling constrained by personal circumstances.

Both Gregor and Lucy had come from a military background, which was reflected, for example, in their attitudes to time: 'being-on-time' in the army means being 15 minutes early whereas 'being-on-time' in the university context means being up to 5 minutes late. Gregor and Lucy discussed the relaxed nature of HE in contrast to that of the army:

> I think the biggest change is just a change of schedule. It's more relaxed, and because of that relaxed atmosphere people aren't breathing down your neck all the time to see that you do your work. (Gregor)

> With a military background, university is the total opposite. At university you need to learn all the 'norms', which are very different. Casual wear versus

immaculate uniforms and presentation. Choosing your own timetable: that was incredible. When I turned up on the first day, I did not know where to go or even how to read the timetable. Organising your study and assignments, everything is totally up to you personally, with so much responsibility left on yourself, when it is totally the opposite in the military, whereby you must fit into the group and not be an individual. (Lucy)

Gregor and Lucy also noticed the individualistic culture of the university as opposed to the more collective army culture. There was the culture shock:

...of making a lot of decisions for yourself rather than seeking the information from somebody superior to you all the time (Lucy).

Gregor commented about the implications for independent learning:

As no-one is watching over you, it's up to you – if you want to succeed, then you have to put in the time and effort to make things work for you.

Lucy attributed what she saw as the competitive nature of university practices to the need for students to compete for restricted funding opportunities, to the hierarchical structures that still persist in many HE organisations, and to the university's predominantly individualist culture:

The military is very group-orientated, and I think that university is actually very individualistic and extremely competitive. The military is also competitive, however if you ignore the group aspect of it, you will not get ahead. It's really all about teamwork. At university you must have strength within the individual primarily, although uni students who work in a group are probably at an advantage if they are in a group and work together as a group. The teamwork at university is not as efficient as the military, I have noticed in the last 6 months. The attitudes at university were quite surprising. (Lucy)

Gregor, however, found the university culture more relaxing and less pressured:

...whereas I know the work still has to be done, I find there's not as much pressure to perform or conform, and individuality and uniqueness is something that along with multi-culturalism here is something I find very appealing. It's good not to be flat out on the go, always watching your back all the time, to afraid to make mistakes, because you're worried of how superiors might come down on you if you don't. That's a difference between my experience in the army and my time here. I don't feel as afraid to make mistakes, so I'm more prepared to step out and venture and try new things, and feel under a lot less pressure to be able to perform better and be more creative because, I don't have that stress, that pressure. (Gregor)

Dan and Andy, meanwhile, from the viewpoint of a competitive business environment, also observed the lack of pressure attached to the university experience. This perception stemmed from the socio-cultural capital Dan and Andy had accumulated:

There doesn't seem to be a sense of urgency as far as getting things done, marks, that sort of thing. Coming from a business background, everything's got a sense of

urgency on it. It's not so much a stressful time, but it's a highly strenuous time. And wanting things done, getting things done doesn't seem to be a sense of urgency out here; it's a very laid back. **(Dan)**

It's just a matter of slipping into the times that university works at. I suppose, I actually slow down in university. The process is more concise. Because I know if I don't do this work now, I'll fail. So it's just a matter of doing this and that and this and that. I think the step-by-step process helps reduce the pressure. **(Andy)**

Cross-cultural shocks were also present in the participants' accounts of their university experiences. These shocks were a culmination to the socio-cultural capital the participants embodied and included their responses to the diversity present in the culture:

One barrier I didn't think about when I first joined was cross-cultural. In my introductory computing course, there was a lovely New-Guinea woman, and a lady from Singapore. Trying to communicate was very much of a barrier – one I didn't expect anyway. **(Andy)**

There's a more multi-cultural blend amongst the students and staff than I usually encounter in my normal, everyday activities and life. That's one of the attractive sides or appealing sides to me, because of previous experiences with other cultures – visiting Japan on a student exchange – I really enjoy and appreciate that. **(Will)**

I expected that the students at USQ would be mostly rural and the number of international and mature-age students shocked me. I was surprised that the level of ability of the students in my classes was lower than I expected and I felt a lot more comfortable because of this. **(Mel)**

It's like a microcosm … there's all these different people in one area. There are people from different parts of the world who you wouldn't see outside the university. I walk down the streets of Toowoomba every day and I never see as many foreigners as I would here. Really is a little world I suppose. **(Andy)**

Culture shock was not restricted to ethnic identity, it also applied to cross-discipline areas:

Psychology was the biggest culture shock that is a culture within its own. I have heard the stereotypes of art students and psych students as being 'weird'. That stereotype came to life when I went to my first psychology lecture it really was like Woodstock, with a very psychedelic atmosphere. **(Lucy)**

Linda's cross-cultural shocks included age and background as well as ethnic background:

…it's a very diverse culture, because you've got a lot different ages, backgrounds, a lot of young students, that, it's totally different, it's a whole different group of different cultures and people all mixed in one. Whereas, in the world, you probably maybe just socialize with one, the old people or someone your own age group, whereas here, you just mix in. In my study group the ages ranged from 57 down to 31, but normally I would mix with people around my own age or Hubby's age.

The participants' accounts clearly support the contention that the university constituted a different cultural context to the ones with which participants' were familiar, challenging the participants' understandings in relation to their socio-cultural capital.

Some participants' culture shock emerged from the contradictions between work and university practices. Jon observed cultural rules and practices that contrasted from those that he had derived from his workplace culture:

> I think there's an unwritten rule that you've got to complain about your teachers. Everyone has to do that at some point or another. Things like, they don't know what they're talking about, just basically incompetent. There's always complaints about a unit that's just completely irrelevant or pointless or not effective. Another unwritten law is not to get to lectures too early. I chopped and changed when I got there but I found when I got there fifteen minutes before there were maybe 2 or 3 of us in the lecture theatre...it gets to five to and then everyone just piles in. I'm really surprised that a lot of students never ever go to the computer labs and they don't have computers at home, they just don't care. Like when an assignment is handed in, I'm out there every night checking my results to see if its come in yet. My friends just don't care. I think if you want to be a student, you don't care, you get your results when you get them: get a bad result, then the lecturer's an idiot. I was surprised at some of my friends, who've been out here for a while, don't put the effort in that I was putting in. like going out to the library or the computer labs – they get it done just on time and they just get through.

Eric similarly reflected that fellow students felt relaxed about walking out in the middle of a 'boring lecture' or in not attending lectures, acknowledging I was used to school... university is more relaxed. Jon and Eric's perceptions about the cultural practices they observed support McInnis's recent research in relation to student disengagement (2003).

The participants' evaluations of cultural practices within the university context also revealed differences in attitude between AES and SL, simultaneously illustrating the anti-academic culture perpetuated by SL. Jon, for example, stereotyped SL as the have-to-be-naughty-culture whereas Lucy filtered SL through the lens of her own experiences:

> Some of the attitudes of school leavers are a bit disturbing, as many seem to have no direction, with no ultimate goal or plans in place. Some students seem to have no personal reasons to be at university and were there mainly due to the ambition levels and natural expectations of their parents and not their own. I think that lack of ambition will manifest itself in their studies. Mature-aged students are distinct as they seem to be people on a mission. You can tell by the way they behave and pour themselves into their academic studies, and their level of devotion. In contrast, students whom had not been in the workforce seem to be very relaxed as they are not

accountable to anybody for their own progress. I see that as a pitfall for many young students, as they are ultimately responsible for themselves. If they do not turn up at a lecture, the lecturer won't worry about it, and it's easy for them to slowly be consumed by the new culture of uni and not pass their subjects.

Lucy also discussed the competitiveness between students:

Some psychology students get upset if you are not a psychology major and get a higher mark. I feel sorry when they can't handle the reality of it, because if they get jealous as a student of another student's performance, they are in for a rude shock in the real work force. You cannot envy somebody else's success and blame your own failure on another person's success. Ultimately it's your own fault, nobody else. Some suffer from 'excuse-itis'.

The youth-age dichotomy was the basis of another of the culture shocks experienced by participants, another reflection of the participants' socio-cultural capital:

I found my age was a bit of a barrier. I felt separate from most of the other students, because even the older ones were only in their early 20's or middle 20's. There were only 2 or 3 who were over 30... People would walk up to me in the Refectory and say, "are you a student or a lecturer here?" They just want to talk: then they'll sit down and say, "Well at least there's someone here older than me! **(Yan)**

The difficult thing was that, for most of my classes, I was the oldest person – and not just the oldest by five years, but the oldest by fifteen years. You could see all the young ones looking at me, and I was looking at all the young ones. **(Sandy)**

Yan was not only frustrated by the younger students he was also tired of 'youth culture':

...it's only some of the really young students – you find the ones that are just out of school, and they've got a mental age of about ten... "Ah, you're so old!" Or you might have to say something about something, and they'll say "Yeah, my dad's *really* old too, and he's like that, and he's 43!" And you think okay!"... Yes, you don't want to feel pressured by the fact that you're getting older, but somehow the whole culture in Australia is so youth-biased. You even sit and listen to the sport reports, and they say "And Fred Bloggs, 26-year old rider from so-and-so", and you think "Who cares how old he is!" You know, if they're doing the job or doing the sport, it doesn't matter that they're 22 or 28 or mother of three, or all this sort of stuff that always seems to get attached to people as labels.

The younger students also troubled Dan:

How I was going to fit in with them was worrying me, because I don't get on with young people. I have very little tolerance for young people. I might have been young once, but I was brought up in the old school.

Whereas Dan's negative views may have been influenced by his wife's experiences at university, they also evolved from his socio-cultural capital:

We both had a pretty long work experience over the years, and she said it was very different to actually being in the workplace...It's actually more the attitudes of the

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students. Most of the students here are young. They disregard worldly experience: it was irrelevant, it wasn't important. They don't seem to have any respect for the old people who have had the experience – the work experience, the life experience, the academic experience. Just because we're at uni, it doesn't mean that we haven't done anything before. It might be different!

Linda and Lucy both experienced culture shocks in relation to the student personality and profile. Linda thought that uni would be populated with 'arty' type, younger students:

You've seen the art students, you know the arty farty students, I suppose that's a preconceived idea of what I thought they were. I thought of uni as being for young students, I didn't really look at it as being for the older person.

Lucy was surprised by the attitudes of the psychology students:

The ironic thing was that some of the psychology students that I did get to know hadn't sorted their own lives out yet ironically wanted to become psychologists. I thought that they needed to take control and direction of their own life before they can help others… I just think its great they want to help others, but they need to help to themselves first. Maybe doing a psychology is a good way of getting therapy.

In summary, the participants' testimonies revealed that their alternative entry status influenced both their views of the university and their attitudes towards the student body and its cultural practices. The testimonies also confirmed that the socio-cultural, economic and academic /linguistic capital that participants brought with them not only determined the tone of their experiences but also the ways in which the participants addressed the culture shocks they experienced as they negotiated the university culture. The participants' testimonies substantiate the diversity inherent in the student experience: that there are few common experiences, even in this small group of AES.

6.3.3 Collisions

Collisions between different aspects of the participants' lives were also present in the participants' testimonies documenting their initial experiences at university. The different aspects of the participants' lives included their family, social and personal lives as well as the participants' physical, geographical, financial, and employment circumstances.

The collisions between the participants' family and study lives loomed large in the participants' accounts of their initial experiences at university. Linda's main difficulties with study emerged from her family circumstances, which included four children, three boys and one girl, aged 11, 10, 9 and 7:

> The main barriers I find are having the kids at home and trying to get enough time... It's time really. You're racing around in the morning getting the kids organised. You're racing off to uni. You're going to uni and doing all your tutorials and everything, and then you're going home and you're having that family situation again, and finding that time to sit aside and say, "well OK this is what I've got to do". I think my biggest barrier at the moment is organising time. Because a lot of the work that you do at uni, even though you go to tutorials and that, there's a lot more that has to be done at home, and it's finding those extra 40 hours per week, with 4 kids and a husband who's away, and home, and away, and home. It's not easy...Hubby's very supportive, but kids I find aren't that supportive. They're not willing enough to help in tidying up things, and everything...I've sat down and talked to them. But, you know, you can talk 'till you're blue in the face, and they're not going to listen.

Linda demonstrates the study and family collisions that students need to manage and control if they are to succeed. Linda was not the only participant with dependant children. Lucy's dependant child affected her capacity to study effectively:

> ...I've got the responsibility of a child, in particular an only child, and that is quite demanding on my time. I'm her mum, her best friend, her companion, her guide, and her discipliner. She is at school in a composite class. I have to keep my schedule between 9 and 2 to pick her up and run her around, so I lose a lot of hours. I see it as a barrier compared to a normal student, who has only got themselves to look after. It makes me prioritise, it makes me organise my life and the use of my time.

Although family support did not loom as an issue for Della in her first interview, it had become a hurdle by her second interview, as she and her husband decided to separate:

> It's got a lot tougher for me. I haven't got the support that I thought that I had. So that made studying a lot more difficult...it was a huge disappointment. Been extremely difficult to keep going.... It comes down to the nitty gritty of how much work that you need to put in and how much sacrifice you need to make in your personal life. Others around me didn't comprehend that I was going to be so involved and have so little time for them.

Generally, dependent children recurred as a bigger issue for the female participants than for the male participants. Although Jim, Eric and Dave also had dependant children, their children's care did not appear to be the collision that it represented for the female participants. Dave was married and Jim, while separated from his wife, had placed his children in boarding school. Eric's discussion had more to do with financial considerations than the demands of his children's everyday care. Brad was the only male student who commented about the pressures of being an AES, balancing collisions between finances/study/family:

> *...I've got more at stake than someone who gets out at the age of twenty-one ...more so when you have dependants because they've agreed to do this, I mean, I'm doing it, they're part of it and it has to be all together or it wouldn't work at all and they're swinging off whether you're going to succeed or whether it's the right decision, you know.... they are real factors.*

Some participants, by virtue of their age, were caught between the demands of two generations. Linda had to cope with her mother's needs and those of her children:

> *Mum's good, but I find since Dad's died, she's very mean. That's another barrier, because she says you don't spend enough time with me now, and I just don't have enough time, and I've always found I'm always split between Mum and my family. And that's cause a lot of problems... Mum's very demanding. When Dad died, I took on the role of organising everything and it's still hard that she still relies on me ... I mean I've got a husband and kids that I need to deal with as well, and she does pull a lot of my time...I just couldn't cope with being pulled in 2 different directions. I suppose now that I'm doing uni, I'm using uni time as an excuse not to spend as much time with Mum. It's probably not the right thing to do, but I find that emotionally I can't cope with all that pressure. I don't think she's quite coped with Dad's death...It's only 3 years ago... I mean she's still got his toothbrush in the bathroom. I think she's always looked at me being the eldest as being... I seem to take Dad's role.*

Linda's evidence demonstrates the collisions that can occur between family, extended family and study. Sandy, too, had to cope with the grief she experienced following her father's death as well as manage its collisions with her study goals.

Physical location caused difficulties for the participants. The literature (McCann 1996; McInnis et al. 1995 and 1999; Stuart-Hunter 1996) argues that geographical location can inhibit the process of forming connections at university. Della points out the implications of living in a rural district some distance from the university:

> *...because I'm out at Brookstead, which is nearly sixty kilometers out, I'm only at uni on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and that's it.*

Brad, who lived 20 minutes away from USQ, was worried about the effects of isolation on his wife and small child, a situation exacerbated by his wife feeling threatened by Brad's university study. Eric also lived some distance from the university, a difficulty intensified by the lack of a car and the intermittent nature of the bus service to USQ:

> *Transport is a bit of hassle. I live well basically on the other end of West Street, on Bridge Street. I've walked out a few times from there ....I had to set out about an hour and a half beforehand.*

However, eventually Eric took charge of the situation:

> *I get the bus out now as I've worked out the bus time and I keep money aside for it.*

The participants' accounts also revealed difficulties stemming from collisions between the reality of university study and their incentives for studying. Gary's collisions were derived from the dichotomy between his motivation and the status of becoming a university student:

> There are times when I can be very motivated and other times when I almost don't want to do it. I reason with myself that it's too important and since coming to university I enjoy it too much. I suppose there is a temptation to get a bit snobbish if you don't keep things in perspective – "Look at me, I'm going to university now". There is the status of being one of those intelligent people going to university.

Brad's collisions were derived from balancing career anxiety and the demands of study:

> I'd like to find my career. I haven't yet; it's been the biggest anxiety for me, which I would like to deal with before anything. I have got to keep looking and keeping my eyes open, hoping that I will meet someone or get stimulated enough by a particular unit or meet people who are doing that in real life.

This anxiety affected Brad's motivation to study:

> From time to time I just start to think what am I doing, where am I going? The most frustrating thing about that is – I've had this feeling for years too – if you had a goal you could do that much better. It almost gets to sounding like an excuse for not doing as well as you could because you don't know what it is you want to do.

Sandy experienced collisions between the relevance of her work/life experiences and knowledge and the theoretical perspectives demanded by the university discourses.

> I have a little bit of self-doubt. I suppose the best way that I can explain it is that it doesn't matter what knowledge I've got to now – it's worth nothing. I've really got to relearn – academic writing, academic life and academic study. I'm doing accounting – what I've learnt up to now and the way I'm being taught the theory now – there's the conflict. What the theory is in the real world… so I've got to say "Okay, this is what I know, but this is what I've got to learn". So I'm going through a purging of information, I suppose in a way, to come back to the result that is required in the academic atmosphere.

Sandy's account acutely demonstrates, from the student point-of-view, the sense of powerlessness precipitated by the deficit model (see section 2.2.10.2).

Participants' difficulties also sprang from the collision between physiological problems and the physical demands of study. Jon provides an example:

> I've got chronic fatigue syndrome, so I thought that that would be a huge barrier. So far it hasn't really been too bad…I thought, 'I'll give it a go until the 29th of August, when HECS and everything was due, and if everything is completely down the tubes, then I'll give it away…I honestly didn't think about getting help from Student Services… I've had a lot of physical problems all my life. I mean the basis of my fitting in has just been to try to be like everyone else. So I don't like to draw attention to it, unless it's absolutely necessary.

Other participants had to learn to accommodate collisions between their restricted financial circumstances and the costs of university study:

> I'm living at home paying hardly any board. last financial year in Real Estate, I earned $45000 and now I've taken a giant leap back to Austudy at $250 a fortnight. It's always fun to have a little bit of money in the bank. I'm living hand-to-mouth sort of stuff now, like putting $10 of fuel into the car so I can save up until the next Austudy payment...At the beginning it wasn't too difficult, because I didn't have any big payments! But halfway through the year I didn't have insurance or car registration... it's hitting now, my car costs $400-500 for registration, costs another $200-300 for insurance, expensive text-books, I'm in computing – it's more software orientated now – I need to buy programs so I can work effectively. So it's starting to really pinch me now. **(Andy)**

> Hubby's wage is $410.60 per week, that's it. We pay $150 rent per week. So that only $260 a week we have to spend. Then I get family allowance, which is $480 a fortnight, which is not that much. So I've had to borrow a lot from the social thing to get my study books, and textbooks. **(Linda)**

Gary experienced the collisions between his financial situation and study:

> Finance was a big thing, because I've had some dramas with Austudy and they're not too organised – or they are, but they've just understaffed. It took me nine weeks last semester to get paid. Finances were...building up on me...it was a big barrier.

Gary had to borrow money from his family and sell his car to stay at university. Eric's financial pressures collided with his relationships and affected his ability to concentrate:

> ...I applied about five weeks ago for the AuStudy supplement loan. Yes we'll send you out an application, we'll send you out the notice and you can go and apply for it. Two weeks later I called them up again and they hadn't done anything about it, so I had to go in and do it, so that's been two weeks behind, I would have had my money two weeks ago... I got a $100 emergency loan...I got a text book with that, but I mean I've got a $200 electricity bill, a $150 phone bill, that's for three months each, and bank and student union fees and association fees, that's $150. So I've got around about $600 worth of bills. They've just piled up because the money hasn't come in even though we did everything right. My little daughter's birthday was last week and I couldn't afford a present for her, so we just ripped apart an old umbrella and made a light shade out of it and set it with a Barbie...She loved it but its still feral. I felt horrible because I didn't have any money for her present and then my family went ahead and bought presents for her and gave them to her mother, not to me, so I've never even seen them...I can't concentrate on anything because I don't have the correct books or I don't have the money to pay for things.

These financial collisions also hindered Eric's transition:

> If I had the facilities at home, like the textbooks, in the beginning, I wouldn't have had so many problems.

Eric, continuing to balance the collisions between family, finances and study, is still enrolled in his undergraduate degree (in June 2004). The participants' accounts give credence to recent research documenting the financial difficulties increasingly being experienced by students (see section 2.2.4.3).

The participants also nominated the negative affects of the collisions stemming from the need to balance work and study. Mel and Jim explained:

> Financially it's a problem because I have to work. I don't have a car and I work most nights, late, in hospitality, and then I have to get up early and be at eight o'clock lectures and I find that pretty tough sometimes…definitely financially it is hard…I finish at 1, 2 in the morning and the next day when you wake up, you get up, clean up the house, do a bit of washing, sit there and do your books. Before you know it its time to go back to work again. And then you get to Sunday afternoon, and the weekend's gone and I think what have I done? I've got an excellent timetable and am organized at home, but there's really not enough time. (Mel)

> I find it hard being a mature age student and also having a current business. (Jim)

These testimonies exemplify McInnis's (2000) research, which found that the most significant variable affecting the student experience was the fact that more students worked and more students were working longer hours (see section 2.2.4.3).

Many of the married students faced difficulties stemming from the growing fragility of their relationships with their partners: a consequence of the collisions between participants' partnerships and study. Linda's husband was threatened by her increasing confidence:

> He was very much dominating – he never hit me or anything like that - it was more mental abuse – putting down. In the last 2 years, since going to the Tertiary Preparation Program, I have gone from being the shy little sit-in-the-corner girl, to the one who can have her own say, and stand up to him. And he said to me one day… "Finally, you're making your own decisions. I was tired of you always coming to me always saying 'what do I do, what do I do'" and with him being away a lot now, I'm more self-sufficient which in a way is scaring him. It's gone from one extreme to the other – he feels threatened. He said to me, "I used to have the wife that would be home waiting for me, and now I have a wife who's not home when I come home". It spooked him, really big-time, because now I'm an independent person, who's out there, studying, meeting new people, becoming more self-assured, and it's shocking him, because I became more self-sufficient in the house, he said to me one day, "What do you need me for!" It scares the living daylights out of him.

Brad was faced with a partner who felt threatened by the presence of young eligible female students whereas Mel's difficulties stemmed from collisions with her family and their attitudes towards her study:

Definitely my family could prevent me from finishing because they stress me out all the time. They make it really difficult too. I wouldn't say that my parents are overly supportive...they say you don't really know what you are doing...you had a good job what are you doing, you want to be a professional student, you wouldn't work when you were at school now you won't work...all you want to do is study. And then my other aunties and uncles, I've got four lots in that little town, they say to me, 'you are bloody mad, what are you doing?'.

Participants' testimonies confirm Benn's (2001) finding in Britain – that a significant variable for success at university was the support of a significant other. For Linda and Brad the collisions between their relationships and their studies became insurmountable and they withdrew from study. Although Mel did succeed, it took her longer (5 years).

Some participants' experiences speak to the multiple collisions that can occur. Mel discussed the collisions resulting from the multiple pressures faced by participants:

I anticipated that the distance that I have to travel could be a barrier, that the workload would definitely be a barrier and that the financial costs would also be a strain. The barriers that I didn't anticipate were the cumulative stresses involved in travelling, in the workload, and in the financial stress.

Although Mel had anticipated difficulties she was unprepared for collisions between them.

Overall, the participants' accounts revealed the complexity of studying at university. The complexity radiates from the collisions between the various facets of the participants' lives: their family and personal, physical, geographical, financial, and employment circumstances. The participants' evidence suggests that the capacity to manage and balance the competing demands of these collisions directly affected the participants' ability to persevere with their university studies.

6.3.4 Summary

The participants' testimonies, in relation to their rites of passage, reveal the culture shocks and life/work/study/family collisions that are critical in terms of students' engagement with university. Some participants, for example Jon, battling chronic fatigue syndrome, and Lucy, a single mother with a young child, were able to successfully accommodate the culture shocks and collisions they faced whereas other participants found it to be a more difficult and dislocating process. Very early on in the semester the pressures on Linda, Brad, and Jim, for example, were escalating, testing their capabilities to persevere.

The participants, including Sandy, Lucy and Jon, who demonstrated a greater flexibility and a greater capacity to reflect on their experiences as they negotiated university study,

were also the participants who persevered. These participants displayed persistence in their experiences in accessing university; comprehensively prepared, not only in terms of university study but also in terms of their personal circumstances; possessed more realistic expectations about the demands and requirements of studying at university; prepared their support systems; and were able to both anticipate and manage the roadblocks, culture shocks and collisions that challenged them as they negotiated their university journeys.

The participants' evidence also suggests that the expectations, cultural shocks and collisions participants faced as they accessed the university culture were influenced by the socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital participants brought with them. This capital also accompanied the participants as they attempted to adjust to the new culture. Some participants clearly acknowledged, that to be effective, they needed to confirm, adjust, stretch or transform the belief systems stemming from the capital they possessed. The experiences of the participants who felt the most discomfort confirm the importance of understanding the ways in which new students' levels of capital might interact with mainstream university discourse and literacies; that such capital may negatively affect some students' chances of successfully adjusting to the university culture. In the next section, the participants' accounts of their experiences whilst making their transitions to the university culture will be probed.

6.4 Transition Journeys

6.4.1 Introduction

In this section of data analysis, the data detailing the participants' transition journeys will be analysed. The analysis confirms that participants perceived the university culture to be unfamiliar (section 6.4.2), encompassing a range of new literacies, languages and discourses (section 6.4.3). The analysis also verifies participants' beliefs that transition constitutes a process of becoming familiar with the university culture's multiple literacies, and discourses (section 6.4.4). Section 6.4.5 analyses the metaphors participants selected to describe their feelings as they negotiated the university culture.

6.4.2 An Unfamiliar Culture

The socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital embodied by the participants influenced the ways in which they initially perceived the university culture. The

participants' perceptions confirmed that the university culture was unfamiliar. The words 'totally different', 'strange' and 'foreign' recurred in the participants' testimonies.

Brad, from an isolated country area, found university to be a strange culture to the one that I was used to, whereas Linda considered that university is totally different to normal life. Yan reflected that it's different from the outside world. Lucy, providing advice for new students, counselled that:

> …university is totally different to high school and the work force. It is a culture within itself that is foreign to all other things they may have been involved.

Dan reflected that university was:

> …totally different from life in town…It's sort of another little town inside a little town. It's totally different – culturally based. A very vast range of different cultures all mixed in, in one little area. And it takes a bit of time to get used to, because it is totally different.

Linda identified why she felt university was an unfamiliar culture:

> …its fast-rushing, you go from one place to next. Its more complex, there's a lot of things you have to learn for yourself which you're not told, less direction in a way. Outside in the world you read street signs and you know where you're going, or you've got maps and everything. Even though with uni you get maps, there's still a lot that they don't tell you: certain books that you're supposed to have, or equipment; how to set out your work; this is how you set it up, so that you can get organised. Except it's bring your notepad, and then work it out for yourself after that.

Linda's testimony supports the notion that not only was the culture unfamiliar, but that also there were few signposts that explicitly helped new students navigate their way. That Linda had also anticipated that study would be teacher-directed, rather than self-directed, exacerbated the discomfort she experienced.

In summary, the participants' accounts confirmed that the university culture was an unfamiliar culture. The new literacies and discourses with which the participants were immediately confronted further provoked their feelings of unfamiliarity. The next section analyses the participants' responses to these new literacies and discourses.

6.4.3 New Literacies and Discourses

Participants' accounts testified that one of the most significant transition processes was that of accessing and negotiating the range of new literacies and discourses in the university culture. These literacies and discourses included discipline discourses, library and information literacies, academic writing (incorporating referencing, grammar and

expression and editing discourses), research discourses, computer literacies, and assessment literacies.

Among the first literacies the participants confronted were unfamiliar discipline literacies. Shaz, for example, juggling work and study, was unprepared for the unfamiliar discipline terminology: *I found the language very confusing.* Shaz also noticed that the discrepancies between work and university languages were exacerbated if she was already familiar with the area and had to adjust to changed or different jargon:

> *Because Government Business Relations was a new subject area I didn't have to juggle different meanings...I went in with a clear mental state.*

Lucy reflected about her journey of gaining familiarity with the new science literacies:

> *Science is a complete language of its own, and in order to succeed or even understand the subject, you must have a clear understanding of the style of language and literacy. I have come a long way since the beginning of my degree in science, whereby I can now pick up most biology, physiology, chemistry and microbiology books in the library and I can understand most of what I am reading. When I first started the degree I would have not understood most of it, it would be like reading a foreign language. I also now understand the reason why science is communicated in its particular style, as the language and methods of science are the basic building blocks to any concepts. They are all inter-related, and so my degree in a way was learning the language and ideas of science, so that I can apply it to unfamiliar science (new technologies) and figure out for myself what the information means. This primes science students for on-going study during their careers, whereby they are required to refer to science journal articles to keep up-to-date with the rapid advances in science technology today.*

Yan confirmed the importance of adjusting to particular discipline literacies, for example to the nursing course's cultural practices, revealing the difficulties he experienced:

> *I had ethical problems with nursing where I had to reflect on things, which are really tough...how you felt when somebody dies in front of you. They screw you up inside and it takes so long, because you're feeling so wound up in it, it really makes it hard to write...It's hard because it makes you think about it again and it brings it all back again. Partly as a debriefing, and partly just a way of thinking about what you're doing, and why you're doing it, rather than saying what you've done.*

Gregor was also conscious that he was accessing new discipline literacies:

> *I found that my land-use class was my hardest unit, because there seems to be a lot more content and more complex concepts to try and grapple and comprehend.*

Gregor also understood that the processes of engaging these literacies took time and effort:

> *So I put in the time and the effort and with time and repetition, I was able to understand more of the material, and remember more of it over time just through repetition...I decided not to fall down, and really put extra time into understanding*

> the concepts and the material. Through putting in a lot of time and effort I was able to get on top in a sense.

The development of information literaces was crucial for those participants who had to use the library (whereas some faculties place great value on library and database literacies and discourses, other faculties, for example engineering faculties, do not necessarily require students to master these literacies). Some participants had difficulties in becoming familiar with information literacies, for example Mel, who felt that trying to research in the library is hell. However Mel sought help in overcoming her unfamiliarity: I'm getting a modem for Christmas that comes with Internet lessons. Yan, too, had to access new library literacies, a process which he also found difficult:

> I find some of the problem is finding stuff in the library. Despite the fact that I've done library courses, I still don't find it very easy finding what I want.

Acquiring academic literacy was an arduous process for some participants. Brad, for example, was unfamiliar with the demands of academic literacy:

> Academic writing is an example of the languages and literacies that I am now familiar with but was not at the start.

Gary also had to learn to become more familiar with academic literacy:

> After doing an assignment or two I realised that I didn't know too much about academic writing. I mean I have basic writing skills in the format of writing an assignment but its just not that effective and I didn't realise that and that's why I came to some of the study skills…Communication and scholarship was also helpful because it reinforced the information.

Yan reflected about the agonies involved in learning to write academically:

> I'd just go through hell! I could never find stuff in the library. And the average – say 1500 word assignment, by the time I'd written and rewritten it and gone over it I'll have spend 8-10 hours doing a 1500 word assignment.

Academic literacy incorporates a number of sub-literacies, each of which constitutes a literacy in its own right: referencing, English grammar and expression, and editing. Gregor, for example, discussed the benefits of having a sound knowledge of grammar: a good command of the English language is very helpful. Andy reflected about the role of referencing in an academic context and the frustrations he felt in learning how to integrate referencing in an assignment:

> I was stressed out the first week. That was probably the most difficult thing… because of the learning curve… like referencing – what the hell's referencing? How do you use the library? So there's a giant learning curve in the first fortnight.

> Knowing how to reference properly was important…the first assignment really daunted me. If I had known how to reference properly, I think I would have done a lot better in that first assignment. It's the basis of all these assignments. And I didn't realise how many assignments and reports there would be.

Yan, meanwhile, contemplated the art of editing:

> …I just go over it and over it – every single word and phrase – I wonder if I can write it a bit better.

Participants also had to learn to accommodate different ways of thinking and writing, for example in relation to critical thinking and analysis:

> Your background previous to university affects your transition to university, for example to go from military intelligence to a science degree. One transition for me has been to express my own opinion in subjects such as psychology, since the military was not interested in my opinion, just the facts in intelligence reporting. So I had difficulty in the transition from military report writing to academic writing. (Lucy)

Della discussed the challenges in thinking critically:

> I do find it a challenge to get back into the thinking mode again. I'm quite enjoying doing something that I wouldn't have chosen to do…like data analysis… but I'm finding it quite stimulating.

There were also new methods of thinking. For example Andy reflected that university was:

> …more process orientated. Outside of here you tend to think of a problem where you'd jump to a conclusion, but within the university – everything has a step to another level. Yes, I think the step-by-step process that every subject, every teaching university goes through, is a lot different from the outside world – it's a mindset you need to take into consideration while you're at university.

The mastery of computer literacies (at USQ there are USQAdmin, USQConnect, USQAssist, Remailer, PowerPoint, Word and Microsoft Excel among others) is becoming essential in the university context. Despite this requirement, some participants testified that computer literacies were among the most difficult to master:

> The last time I played around with a computer was when space invaders just came out so I'm finding that really hard; that's the hardest. (Linda)

> Everything's computer-based, especially for physiology. If you don't have a computer with the CD Rom drive you really are behind. (Eric)

Eric also felt that the process of gaining computer familiarity was complex and difficult:

> Just understanding, just getting used to the computer – when I learn something new it takes me a fairly long time and I feel really stupid until I understand it.

Eric's situation was not helped by the fact that he didn't own his own computer and that he had to share the university computers with others which made mastery more difficult:

> I'm trying to get hold of a computer to help me too as I don't feel comfortable sitting down over there in front of the computer because other people want to use it and I don't want to take up time if somebody else is going to suffer for it.

Participants' accounts highlight the difficulties new students experience in organising and becoming proficient in the use of computer technology. The costs are also prohibitive, aggravating the pressures for lower SES students.

Assessment literacies also posed problems for participants. Jon and Lucy discussed the difficulties in mastering and demonstrating unfamiliar exam literacies:

> The whole concept of doing exams was difficult because I hadn't done any since high school and that was like six years ago. So that was, after the first one, you know, I knew everything to expect, but before that I didn't really know what to expect so it was difficult going into that exam. **(Jon)**

> There was also a transition in sitting exams, the preparation for it. I have learnt so much during my transition. **(Lucy)**

Sandy was conscious of her lack of knowledge and familiarity with assessment rules and how these varied from her own understandings:

> I am learning to play it by the rules because, if I don't, I can't survive and I won't do well. Like with assignments…if I write the assignment the way I think, but don't write it to meet the criteria, then I've not achieved its purpose and I'll lose marks.

Gary was intimidated by an unfamiliar assignment writing process:

> I would say I was a little bit daunted at the start, especially the first couple of days when you see the assignments that are due and the fact that I've only written 1000 words and that was the most I've ever written.

The participants' accounts revealed that they were aware of the multiplicity of new literacies and discourses that they needed to negotiate and, ultimately, master and demonstrate. Gregor, for example, outlined the multiple literacies and discourses he was learning to accommodate:

> Knowing how to relate to people in a different environment, how to write and think on a higher level in my writing skills, and communication skills…the requirement of sticking to deadlines for assignments, time-frames to work within…to retain and learn content and subject matter…sticking to a program and setting goals about what I wanted to learn and by when, and setting myself deadlines.

Sandy acknowledged the complexity of negotiating multiple literacies:

> I've sat down and written my good, bad, and ugly list. And what I've accepted is, this is what I have to learn. So, to get through my degree, this is the process by which I can go. I can apply my own knowledge to this, but in the academic sphere at present here, it means nothing.

Sandy's evidence suggests the disempowerment, even the defeat, she sometimes experienced in making her transition to university.

In summary, the participants' accounts corroborated the importance of negotiating, mastering and demonstrating the multiplicity of new and unfamiliar literacies, languages and discourses in the university culture. These literacies and discourses included faculty, discipline and course discourses, computer technologies, communication literacies, library, information and academic (including referencing, grammar and expression and editing discourses) literacies, and assessment literacies. Participants' accounts also revealed the complexity involved in negotiating these different literacies and discourses and the discomfort they experienced as they attempted to master them.

6.4.4 Transition: The Processes of Becoming Familiar

The perception that transition constitutes a process of becoming familiar with the new university culture recurred in the participants' testimonies. This section will analyse the participants' reflections about their experiences of transition. The participants' reflections include the viewpoint that not only does transition consist of a process of becoming familiar, but that it was also a process that could only be accomplished over a period of time. The participants' testimonies also highlight the phases of adjustment and learning incorporated in transition as well as the benefits to be gained by participants' capabilities to observe and reflect about their transition practices.

The participants' testimonies endorsed transition as a process of becoming familiar with the university culture and its multitude of literacies and discourses. Mel reflected that I guess the first semester was all about finding my feet at uni. Yan described the processes of becoming familiar that he underwent:

> …I think just turning up day after day, you get familiar with the place …Arriving here, there was an expectation of excellence, and then finding out that in fact most people are at your own level or lower. I think that helps because it takes a lot of pressure off, and you think 'Well they're not all that bright, so I can get along here okay'. Most people are fairly friendly, so you don't have to go out of your way to make friends.

Yan's transition was aided both by the processes of becoming more familiar and recognising that he was at the same level as other students. Eric maintained that:

> Just going into the classes and walking around helped me feel more comfortable.

Will explained that transition was the process of feeling more connected and comfortable:

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On your first day here you are not sure if you know anyone; you tend to sit by yourself and try and shrink into the background. But once you start going to classes and meeting a few people and start having conversations with them, you become more comfortable with the environment...feel more connected to the university and more confident in coming here everyday...You need to interact with the environment to become part of it, you need to be able to interact with the people because they are the environment.

Jim added that the transition process was like:

...getting to know a completely new lifestyle to the one you've been used to.

Eric explained his developing familiarity with the university culture, describing it as:

Slowly fitting in, I'm slowly using more services like the uni card, putting money in it, which is only a really simple step. I'm also getting used to the rooms and the library and how the refectory is.

The participants also pondered about what a successful transition would feel like. Jim felt that a successful transition would involve knowing where everything was:

A familiarity with classes, knowing where everything is, feeling confident to walk around the uni without feeling insecure.

In her first interview, Sandy deliberated about when she would know that she had achieved a successful transition:

I think I would feel settled in on the first day I can get up and I can think, 'Okay, I've got it in hand. And I'm confident that I've got it.' Just even the whole atmosphere of the place. Like getting an assignment, and going 'Okay, I know now where to find things in the library. I know what to look for, I know how to plan for this.' Whereas at the moment, whilst I am a very methodical person, I think 'Oh, I've already spent 3 hours doing that, and I'm on the wrong track'.

Whereas Sandy thought that the transition phase would come to an end, Gregor, meanwhile, had decided that transition would entail an on-going process:

I think I still am going through the transition. I am sure I will go through a transition next semester, in fact the whole degree will probably be a transition period, but a majority of it is initially.

The participants' evidence specifies that the process of gaining familiarity was a process that took time. Sandy clearly perceived that time was a factor in transition:

I've given myself this semester to really settle in. It is a major life change and to expect to settle in under 12 or 14 weeks is not feasible. A new job takes 4 or 5 months – and this is a new job as far as I'm concerned.

Dan also acknowledged that transition acquired time: *it took the first semester to realise where I was going.* Jim, however, was beginning to feel more confident *after 6/7 weeks.*

Gregor considered that transition processes took him:

...half way through the semester. Once I found my feet and got used to the change of schedule, and made a few friends and once I was starting to get marks back and see that I was doing well...then I had the confidence to know that I could do well and keep that level of performance going, or even improve on it.

Participants' accounts revealed that they considered that transition encompassed both adjustment and learning phases. Della reflected that adjusting to university involved *a big learning curve* whereas Brad maintained:

You're just studying and learning again and its just a process or procedure that's new to you which you're got to get the hang of.

Jon described the adjustment and learning phases he experienced:

When I first got out here I thought how am I going to keep coming to all these lectures and they are boring...and what if I don't succeed. After the first few assessments you get to learn how by asking questions and I went to study skills things, you basically learn what you've got to do – you've got to be able to listen, got to be able to talk to your teacher, got to be able to take notes, got to be able to study effectively, you've got to be able to use a computer system, these are all crucial.

Jim discussed his need to learn how to balance the pressures:

I'm again putting too much emphasis on keeping up with it, and everyone I speak to say that that's an impossibility – lecturers and tutors and students. I thought, no, this couldn't be an impossibility....this is what you have to do to achieve. I'm starting to learn that you just can't do all this in one hit. You have to let things go. But at the same token, I hope I don't feel too positive about letting everything go, because you can catch yourself in a position that you swing from one to the other, and it'll be a complete let down...So you've got to balance it all.

Jim thus discovered that, in the transition process, he needed to realign his belief systems.

Observation and reflection were also integral to the participants' lived experiences as they made their transition to university. Eric discussed the role of observation in helping him to feel more comfortable: *I just like to observe people and see their reactions and file it away.* Sandy explained how she went about the processes of gaining familiarity:

...That's what I really did for the first week – was I just went round and read all the signs. What does it mean, what can I use, what can't I use, who's available, what's it mean? So what I really tried to do is after the first week I was here, I went home and made a list of the things that I thought were important to help me achieve what I wanted here. One was first of all how to research because, what I'm used to, and what the expectation is here are two entirely separate issues. So that was important to me. Going to the library and being able to find things quickly is important to me as well. So that was important. Second was that I had to look at what I wanted to achieve from the subject. And then I had to look at my commitment level to that. I also looked at the things such as, 'Okay the consultation times are there – then I've

got to use them'. To me, that's just a free benefit – it's there to be used. And then I had to look at things on top of that, 'Okay, how's this going to impact on my home life'. Because I'm one of those people, with what I do, I do 120%. And that's what I'm trying to do – is draw back, and think 'Okay, I've got to find a balance'. So that's what I'm trying to do now is find a balance.

Sandy thus demonstrated her capabilities for reflection. Sandy also discussed how she overcame inadequacies about using the library:

…I found the library pretty daunting to start with, I avoided it for about the first two weeks then I came very early one day before any of the young students were there staring at this silly woman walking around. I asked one of the young fellows over there who was extremely unhelpful so I went upstairs and walked around and sussed it out for myself.

Eric's transition was helped by conversations with friends, acquainting him with the new literacies as well as the cultural practices in such different contexts such as the refectory:

They told me where to get the cheap books, the layout of the university, which people and the tutors to see, Student Services. Going into the refectory when people are just standing there waiting around for their chips, or you want something up ahead, you can walk straight past them and something just little things like that.

Will reflected about how he learned to develop familiarity:

It took a while to get into the swing of listening in lectures, taking notes and that sort of thing. Just learning how everything works, like I know now when a teacher's telling me something that's important whereas when you first get here you write down everything you possibly can…they'll either repeat it or they'll say this is important, or they'll just drop little hints, especially when its exam time obviously, and going to them aside from lectures and tuts.

During her third interview Sandy reflected back on her first semester of study. Her recollections illustrate her capacities for reflection:

How do I feel now about the first semester at University? It's quite strange; I have a sister-in-law and my nephew's wife who are both at university. They both admitted recently that they thought my comments about university were based somewhere between anger and fantasy – now they admit they were very factual. Both are experiencing similar circumstances to what I'd explained – however neither is as outspoken as myself, so they will "suffer in silence"…The first few weeks until you get into the rhythm of study are difficult – then just as you achieve the rhythm the assignments all start lining up – and your time is shot. It's an exercise in time management and discipline. I found it hard to turn my brain off one subject onto the next. I am the type of person that if I don't understand something it will haunt me and take over my brain until I do. This was very difficult as some subjects suffered as I tried to master concepts in others. Pre-reading for me was key – if I already knew what I was struggling with I would try to focus on this in the lecture hoping to "have the lid lifted on the mystery of the concept" and then I could focus on the tutorial questions and hopefully consolidate the learning.

Participants also discussed the sense of satisfaction gained from having successfully negotiated the first semester literacies. For example, Andy had focused on becoming familiar with the new subject literacies and was now feeling more confident:

> When I first spoke to you I spoke about the settling in, just doing the subject. But now that I've done it, I know what my limitations are, I can now enrich the processes of transition...just get out there and start meeting people. There's always an element of doubt saying "Am I doing enough work?" And even though I think my lowest mark was 75% ... and even though everyone kept telling me they're very good, I kept thinking, "Well, is it very good?" Now that I've gone through it, and I know what I'm capable of...I know that it's do-able.

In summary, the participants' evidence confirmed that transition was a process of gaining familiarity with the new university culture and its multiple literacies and discourses. Participants' stories revealed the function that time played in the processes of transition, the learning and adjustment phases involved, and the role of observation and reflection in assisting participants to become more familiar with the university culture.

Although most of the participants succeeded in making a successful transition (Dave was the only participant to withdraw in the first year) many participants experienced a sense of dislocation during the transition period. These experiences are analysed in the next section.

6.4.5 Transition Metaphors

Not only were the participants unfamiliar with the new culture, their experiences prior to university – including their levels of socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital – influenced the degree of adjustment they were required to undertake as well as the levels of discomfort and dislocation they experienced. The degree of pain and dislocation the participants experienced were reflected in the metaphors they selected to characterise their transition experiences.

Paradoxically, the more successful the participants had been in the workplace, the more difficult and confronting the transition experience. Jim, Brad and Sandy were successful in business yet their transition metaphors reflected their, at times, acute discomfort:

> I think the first few weeks of transition were extremely hard; you go through these rough periods of not really understanding what the hell you're doing here. (Jim)

Jim provided examples of the pressures involved for AES including being unprepared for the personal changes involved in transition, the need to seek help when this was something

he was unaccustomed to doing, and the consequences of wanting to be a high achiever at university rather than being motivated by vocational goals:

> It's a major implication in your life if you're not really aware of it, and can affect you in a major way, especially for those people who are not confident. So therefore you need a lot of extra outside help, not just from the university, either…. I've put more pressure on myself by wanting to achieve…I find that it's quite hard to make the transition.

Although beginning to appreciate his growing familiarity with the culture, Jim remained conscious of the huge challenges involved for someone used to being in control:

> It's really hard, coming from me, I'm telling you! Like I feel a lot different, being in my own environment, and when you come here it's totally different…I'm not in control, if that's the way to put it. I mean I'm not an ego-tripping person like I have to have total control. Although that's a new challenge for me, also…because in the 18 years I've been self-employed, I've created a lot of personal challenges. But this is another one that I've created. Whether it's a monster from the deep, I'm not sure?

Jim's metaphor – the monster from the deep – underscores the socio-cultural tensions and difficulties involved for many AES who, entering university from positions of relative power in their previous occupations, became intensely aware of their lack of control in the new, hierarchical university structure. Sandy demonstrated this discomfort:

> It is almost like, cosmic – it's intergalactic – it's a whole new world! It is! I told my girlfriend the other day "This is my thesis". I said to my girlfriend the other day, take your clothes off, put on a nappy, and walk around the house for a week – and try and feel like a kid again – because that's what it's like – it's a whole new… You're learning to crawl and walk again! And that's what it is.

Other participants chose metaphors that depicted the degree of the pain the participants experienced. Linda felt totally frightened, scared out of my wits, terrified to go near anyone, not wanting to approach teachers. Della also felt that the process was uncomfortable: like swimming against the stream and like a roller coaster. Brad characterised his experiences as being behind the eight ball all semester.

Participants' metaphors also reflected the discomfort experienced: depictions of battle, struggle, pain, a battle and being daunted. Lucy described transition as a struggle:

> It was difficult at first to make the transition from military requirements to university requirements, as the two vary so much. It was a challenge to discover what perspective the assignments required. The workload increased greatly, and it was a struggle to keep up with the assignments and not fall behind in personal study.

Mel conjured up a vision of pain:

It was really very painful, and although it was very rewarding also, I wouldn't volunteer to go through that again. It was a very big challenge to take on.

Mel lived below the Toowoomba range, forty minutes away, and provided this metaphor:

Driving up the range with smoke coming out of my engine, flat tire, my granddad sitting in the backseat, books blowing out the window, groceries going hot in the car and me looking very stressed.

Mel, who was caring for her grandfather, had to learn to balance different pressures:

Pressure on myself, because I had to do it or it doesn't get done. Pressure from my family because it's really quite negative. Even though they have good intentions, they think I'm wasting my time at uni, so if I didn't at least pass, let alone do well, then they're quite critical – 'I told you so'. Pressures from friends and acquaintances, sort of 'how you going at uni'? You feel like you need to be able to say, 'yea, pretty good thanks'. Just getting little things like, getting the bills paid and having a social life … the pressures to iron my clothes and look good.

Will observed that transition was like:

…stepping into cold water. When you first step in, you know, it's a jolt, it's a shock, its uncomfortable, but after a while you become accustomed to it. You become accustomed to the temperature of the water.

Jim's metaphors were related to juggling and battles:

It's so hard for me sometimes because I've been in three places trying to juggle it all. I find that probably the hardest bit – juggling it all. You know which is right and which is wrong, then you have to apply it to yourself psychologically. That sometimes becomes a bit of a battle. Which is right, which is wrong, what you should do, what you shouldn't do; this is what you have to achieve.

Gregor's metaphor described the changing pace of the semester:

It's like a walk in the park to a gentle stroll. Actually from a stroll to breaking into a mild canter, and then stepping up the speed a little bit.

Transition affected Gary's self confidence:

I think it has got a lot to do with the way I'm feeling on a personal basis outside of uni. These last few weeks I've started to get my self-confidence back and I feel a bit better about myself and therefore uni is starting to feel a bit better too. Cause I was a bit confused, bit unsettled. I was daunted about the course and stuff personally.

Eric reflected about his anxieties, a combination of financial and personal pressures:

I feel pretty stupid actually because I can't do the computer work and because I haven't had the textbooks. When I've got an overdue assignment, I feel bad about that because I don't like it. It's letting myself down, but it also makes it harder for the tutors as well and I don't like anyone down, let alone myself.

Although the pain involved in transition was palpable in participants' accounts of the first semester, transition was not totally a tale of discomfort and anguish. Some participants spun tales of enjoyment. Dan's account demonstrates his satisfaction with university:

I really do enjoy it...I love going home sitting there, hour after hour at the computer, doing an assignment. I love coming to class, I do – I really like the scene. I love the social scene – and that's really what it is, even though it's not social interaction.

Transition also wasn't as daunting for Yan as he had anticipated:

It all seemed too easy for me at TAFE. I came in here expecting it to be really hard, and academically rigorous, I wondered if I'd be able to keep up. I just flew through it.

However the thought of failing still overwhelmed Yan:

The thought of failing a unit was absolutely the end– it was almost to the stage where if I failed the year, I might have done something drastic and just left.

Some participants enjoyed a new outlook on life, which had been facilitated by their university experiences. Andy reflected that, for him, university constituted:

...an awakening. I've been floating along for years, my father who has the best of intentions – trying to do the best for me sort of has been guiding me – become a farm-hand you should really do this, this is what you're good at. Up until now I've been floating along with that, but now that I've enrolled in this and seen what potential future holds, it's like "Woah!" I don't have to do that! There's the whole world out there for me, and the vehicle for me to hop on is university.

Jon's choice of metaphor revealed his sense of accomplishment and delight:

I think I've taken to it like a duck to water. It hasn't gotten so on top of me that I've gotten out here. After the first few assessments have come back and I've found out about how it works and learnt things that I didn't know, I thought, wow, why didn't I do this sooner. I think it's been, another metaphor, just what the doctor ordered.

Most of the participants' metaphors of transition ranged from the distress to discomfort: wearing a nappy; learning to crawl; riding a roller coaster; swimming against the stream; suffering pain; the shock of stepping into cold water; a juggling act; and being behind-the-eight-ball. However, other participants' accounts were more positive: an awakening; and 'taking to it like a duck to water'. Whereas the last two metaphors belonged to participants who did succeed, there was no correlation between the more dramatic of the metaphors and the potential for success or withdrawal. Some of the more dramatic of the metaphors originated, for example, from the more successful students and encompassed visions of nappies, roller coasters, pain and the shock of stepping into cold water.

6.4.6 Summary

In this section of data analysis, the participants' transition journeys were analysed. The analysis confirmed that participants perceived the university culture to be unfamiliar, encompassing a range of new literacies, languages and discourses. The analysis also revealed participants' beliefs that transition incorporated the processes of becoming

familiar with the university culture's multiple literacies and discourses. Participants' experiences of transition varied however – from a painful and dislocating experience to an awakening. The metaphors the participants chose to describe their feelings as they negotiated the university culture revealed both the pain (for many participants) and the pleasure (for some of the participants).

6.5. Conclusion

The layered, thick accounts of the participants' experiences reveal the decision-points, roadblocks, preparations and expectations that emerged for participants as they engaged the unfamiliar university culture, attempting to navigate its multiple literacies and discourses. The impact of the socio-cultural, economic, and academic/linguistic capital the participants embodied was evident throughout their journeys: firstly in the participants' decisions not to attend university as SL, and secondly as they reversed the original decisions and strived to access He as AES. The role of capital was also manifest in participants' descriptions of their rites of passage as they confronted and attempted to address the culture shocks and study/work/family/life collisions that materialised. The participants' capital echoed as well in the ways in which participants embarked upon the processes of becoming familiar with the university literacies and discourses and as they reflected about and learnt how to master and demonstrate these literacies and disourses. Whereas the metaphors the participants chose to describe their journeys of transition reflected discomfort and dislocation, the metaphors also revealed the potential and promise participants felt.

In Chapter Six the themes, roads, rites and transition journeys, are symbolic. The themes characterise the participants' tales as they accessed and made the transition to the university culture, illuminating in the process, new ways of conceptualising both the university and students' experiences in negotiating the culture. Woven together, the participants' experiences provide the foundation for the development of a new model, the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery at University*, which is outlined in the final chapter.

In the next chapter, Chapter Seven, the themes are action-orientated, symbolising the processes or practices which empowered participants as they constructed their means of successfully negotiating the university culture and its multiple discourses and literacies. Chapter Seven will gather these threads, weaving them together to make transparent the means by which participants empowered themselves throughout their university journeys.

Chapter 7
Students Empowering Students

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 Background

The previous two chapters presented an analysis of the data primarily collected during the first semester of the participants' university studies. Chapter Seven characterises and positions the participants' university journeys. By both 'looking back' and 'looking forward', the chapter draws out the participants' reflections – about their university experiences, their significance and impact. These experiences are examined to seek out the means by which participants facilitated their perseverance and success at university.

Chapter Seven uses the layered, thick approach (see section 6.1) to ground the data and analysis. The data, as foreshadowed in the previous chapter, embrace, as over-arching reference points, the notions of reflective practice, the skills of engagement and critical awareness. Within these reference points, themes along with the threads woven through them, are again developed with supporting evidence provided in the form of participants' voices (written in *font style Bradley Hand ITC*). The themes developed in this chapter are action/process orientated, unlike those in Chapter Six, embodying the practices that participants' accounts revealed as fundamental to their perseverance at university. Woven together, the themes provide the basis for the *Model for Student Success Practices*, which is outlined in Chapter Eight.

In Chapter Seven the themes include ***Learning Practices***, including the threads *Lifelong Learning, Life-wide Learning and ExcelL Practices,* ***Socio-cultural Practices*** encompassing the threads, *Seeking Help and Information, Participating in a Group, Making Social Contact, Seeking and Offering Feedback, Expressing Disagreement* and *Refusing a Request,* ***Discursive Practices,*** including the threads, *University Practices* and *Teacher/Student Relationships,* and ***Dynamic Practices***, including the threads, *Reflective Practice, Socio-cultural Competencies* and *Critical Self-awareness* and *Critical Discourse Awareness* and finally, ***Evolving Practices***, including the threads, *Undergraduate-Postgraduate and University-Work Transitions.* The following table, Table 7.1 outlines the reference points, themes and threads developed in the chapter.

Table 7.1: Diagram of Thematic Analysis and Relationships in Chapter Seven

Over-arching Reference Points	Themes	Threads
Reflective Practice	• Learning Practices	• Lifelong learning practices • Life-wide learning practices • *ExcelL* practices
The Skills of Engagement	• Socio-cultural Practices	• Seeking help • Participating in a group • Social contact • Seeking and offering feedback • Expressing disagreement • Refusing a request
	• Discursive Practices	• University practices • Teaching & learning practices
Critical Awareness	• Dynamic Practices	• Reflective practice • Socio-cultural competencies • Critical self-awareness • Critical discourse awareness
	• Evolving Practices	• Undergraduate/postgraduate transitions • University/work transitions

7.1.2. Over-arching Reference Points

Chapter Six takes, as its over-arching and intersecting reference points: reflective practice, the skills of engagement, and critical awareness. Reflective practice assumes its meaning from Schön's (1987) 'reflection on action', the processes of thinking back on what happened in a past situation, what may have contributed to the unexpected event, whether the actions taken were appropriate, and how this situation may affect future practice (see section 3.6). Reflective practice is a pro-active tool for simultaneously improving communication and providing insight into priorities prior to reaction, focusing on the person's attitude to experience rather than on the experience itself (Boud 2001). Boud (2001) argues that reflective practice also involves a degree of self-awareness in order to extend understanding of situations and to be developed as a resource to help reveal assumptions and their power constituents: a view that intersects with those of critical discourse and self-awareness.

The skills of engagement encompass the socio-cultural competencies introduced in section 3.4.4. This over-arching reference point extends the study's post-structural and critical orientations (see section 1.4) and the theoretical imperatives developed from cross-cultural

theory (sections 2.4 and 3.4.4). The skills of engagement illuminate the practices/processes of engagement exhibited by participants as they attempt to master and demonstrate the university culture's multiple literacies and discourses.

Critical awareness constitutes the application of the fruits of reflection and reflective practice. Critical awareness encompasses twin capacities: people's capabilities for both language critique, including 'their capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself' (Fairclough 1995) (see section 3.2.2), and their capabilities for a critical self-awareness of their belief systems and cultural practices (section 3.6.6).

Critical discourse awareness stems directly from Fairclough's CLA (section 3.2.2) but with the term 'discourse' replacing that of 'language' as it more appropriately reflects the spirit of the theory. Fairclough (2001, p.1) himself acknowledges the shortcomings of the term 'language':

> Although I continue using the expression 'critical language awareness' because it is relatively well known, it has also become clearer that what is at issue is a critical awareness of discourse which includes other forms of semiosis as well as language: visual images in particular are an increasingly important feature of contemporary discourse.

Fairclough (2001, p.1) continues to widen the scope of critical discourse:

> Social life can be seen as constituted by networks of social practices, each of which consists of various elements including discourse (as well as material activities, institutional rituals, social relations, beliefs and values) articulated together in a dialectical relationship, such that each element internalizes all others without being reducible to them – each element has its own distinctive logic and generative.

Critical self-awareness recurs in cross-cultural theory (section 3.4.4) and reflexivity (section 3.6.4). Critical self-awareness incorporates people's capacities for unpacking their own cultural perspectives and belief systems (their socio-cultural capital), as well as their readiness to challenge these and to transform them if the need arises.

> If we want to create an inclusive environment, we must acknowledge our own socio-cultural histories, identities, biases, assumptions, and recognize how they influence our worldview and our interaction with members of a diverse community. Such awareness results from intense personal reflection and critical analysis of our work as practitioner or scholar. The key is to balance personal transformation with the vision of critical democratic education as a continuous process of social change and transformation (Alfred 2002, p.90).

Alfred (2002) suggests that linking the personal and the social transformation process begins with critical analyses of both self and practice.

The three reference points are integral to the participants' stories as they discussed their experiences in mastering and demonstrating the university's literacies and discourses. The

reference points are apparent as the participants deliberated the consequences provided for their lifelong and life-wide learning practices. The reference points also recur in participants' experiences of and responses to the power configurations operating at the site of the regional university. Again, the intersections between the reference points are dynamic. Although each reference point occupies a separate space within which the common themes and threads are gathered and assembled, they are not neatly bordered categories, they interweave and overlap.

7.2 Learning Practices

7.2.1 Introduction

Participants' capabilities for reflective practice are evident in their accounts of their learning practices: in their experiences in negotiating the university culture; in the rites of passage as they engaged the university's multiple discourses and literacies; and in their accounts of their changing attitudes to learning. The capabilities for reflective practice are also revealed in participants' changing sensitivities toward the notions of lifelong/life-wide learning. Lucy, for example, illustrates her approach to learning:

> There is a Chinese proverb which says that when a teacher is trying to give knowledge, the student should not present with a full bowl, instead with an empty bowl and let the teacher pour the knowledge in. Then the student is to sift through the bowl for what they don't know, and continue this process. Because as a student if you think you know it all, then you won't learn anything. Learning is an on-going process.

Lucy's reflection demonstrates her awareness of the connections between her learning practices and the notion of lifelong learning.

In this section, the concepts of lifelong and life-wide learning are defined (section 7.2.2) and the participants' accounts analysed in relation to notions of lifelong (section 7.2.3) and life-wide learning practices (section 7.2.4). Group A participants' accounts of their E*xcelL* practices will also be scrutinised (section 7.2.5).

7.2.2 Lifelong and Life-wide Learning

Lifelong learning is defined as `all learning activity undertaken throughout life' whether it is in formal, non-formal or informal situations (Giddens 2001, p.692). Although lifelong learning has long been present in the literature, the concept of life-wide learning has only recently emerged. Traditionally, lifelong learning was linked to learning for employability (Jarvis 2002, p.7). However the concept has recently changed shape and a more complete

meaning is being specified. In an address to the Danish Economic Union Presidency Conference on Lifelong Learning (2002, p.1), Jarvis reports that the European Commission's (2001) *European Governance: a White Paper* had widened the concept of lifelong learning to embrace that of life-wide learning, which promotes:

> …the goals and ambitions of European countries to become more inclusive, tolerant and democratic. It promises a Europe in which citizens have the opportunity and ability to realise their ambitions and to participate in building a better society.

The wider meaning includes learning in a complementary manner to promote employability and sponsor active citizenship, to ensure social inclusion and personal fulfillment and to empower individuals to acquire all the knowledge, competences and values they require by offering equal opportunities for learning (Jarvis 2002, p.1). This view includes learning taking place at primary, secondary, tertiary and at continuing levels and acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings.

7.2.3 Lifelong Learning Practices

That the participants in the current study were AES who had chosen to access HE later in life implies the participants' interest in lifelong learning, at least in the traditional sense of progressing employability. Will demonstrates this motivation:

> Getting your degree is pretty crucial to future success, if you plan on the more high profile jobs, because the way society is going if you don't have tertiary qualification or some other form of qualification, you might be brilliant at what you are doing but you're not going to get a foot in the door.

Whereas the participants' alternative entry status corroborates the strength of their beliefs in the value and/or benefits of further education, this status also influenced participants' attitudes towards their learning practices. One of the consequences of the socio-cultural and academic/linguistic capital participants embodied was that they often lacked confidence in their academic abilities (see section 5.2.3). This lack of confidence not only affected their decisions not to access HE as SL (see section 6.2.2); it also contributed to perceptions that university study would be difficult. As a result, many of the participants undertook tertiary preparation courses, studying modules on study and career skills as well as on communication and academic writing. Participants' involvement in these courses suggests a motivation to improve their leaning practices, at least in relation to their preparations for university study.

That all the participants had also either undertaken, or in one case had taught, TAFE courses prior to their university study (see section 5.2.3) also suggests that participants held positive attitudes towards the concept of lifelong learning. Lucy demonstrates her capacities for both lifelong learning and reflective practice:

> I think it (university) will change the sort of lifestyle I will be able to enjoy because I will enjoy greater personal satisfaction and achievement that I wouldn't have had, had I not attended university. A new attitude of not just learning to get the degree, but a change of philosophy of thinking and lifestyle including the understandings that life is continual learning process and that it is important to keep learning scholastically, academically, vocationally, and in all areas of life, even after university. University has helped change my way of thinking in making what I learn personal, part of me, instead of learning something just to get the grade, and not caring about it once you've got what you want.

Participants' positive attitudes towards lifelong learning are corroborated by their choices since the completion of their studies. Of the seven participants who succeeded, one is currently enrolled in postgraduate studies (Lucy), Will and Sandy have both pursued further studies and Mel is employed in the tertiary sector. Other participants also express desires to undertake further studies – Jon wants to enrol in Asian Studies and Mel has decided to undertake a Graduate Diploma of Public Relations.

7.2.4 Life-wide Learning Practices

Jarvis's (2002) definition of life-wide learning – that is, sponsoring active citizenship, ensuring social inclusion and personal fulfillment, and empowering individuals to acquire all the knowledge, competences and values they require – was demonstrated by the participants as they navigated their journeys through university. For example, participants' accounts reveal that studying at university had transformed their attitudes and approaches to learning. Jon discussed his changed attitudes to learning and how these contributed to a sense of academic achievement and personal fulfillment:

> I started wanting to learn and was quite good at it. I also started to change the way I thought about myself. Going to uni facilitated changes in the way I think and I now have more of an opinion and can be more of an individual. Uni gives you the resources to have more of an informed opinion. For example I am no longer prepared to accept things at face value.

Gregor revealed his increased motivation and commitment to university study:

> I think I've improved in my character, in having motivation, in being self-motivated, in developing communication skills, in seeking help, in organising my

time, my information, and myself and being able to stay committed to something. I think in those areas I've changed a lot.

Sandy reflected that university had created more questions for her than answers, crystallising her awareness that knowledge was an on-going process:

It did not fully complete the gaps in my knowledge, it created more – I found I still have a long way to go.

Gary discussed the links between his subjects, demonstrating a more holistic perspective as well as an acceptance of the role and impact of culture:

The communications, anthropology, and history that I'm doing at the moment...they relate a lot to each other. Even though they're subjects that you wouldn't actually think are related, but they all go into culture, and how people differ all the time – it's pretty interesting.

Gregor appreciated the benefits he was accruing though his university journey:

The rewards you can gain from putting in time and effort, being motivated, being able to make contacts and being able to be flexible and learn more including creativity, ingenuity, rational thinking, problem solving and argumentation skills. Things that weren't as developed or as keen or alert before starting.

The promotion of social inclusion is also evident in participants' reflections about their learning practices. Mel, from an isolated bush background, considered her growing capacity to develop cross-cultural relationships:

I was surprised that at the beginning I often found myself watching the international students, especially those who looked different. I had had very little contact with non-westerners before attending USQ. Now, four years later I have offered a home stay for a Japanese lady and I have some female Islamic friends. I have also made a very good friend in an older Indonesian lady.

In his first interview, Jon demonstrated the changing interests prompted by the core first year course *Australia, Asia and the Pacific* (AAP):

From a scholastic point of view, it's challenged me to get an interest in certain subjects, especially AAP. It's right on our doorstep; I had no idea of anything that was going on! So it's challenged me in that sense. It's motivating me in terms of doing well in my study. Because I want to be at the top of the list – and have those doors and contacts open.

Della reflected on her changing attitudes to racism after completing AAP, demonstrating the influence these kinds of courses can have in developing a more tolerant society:

I changed my outlook on what I would say to people. One thing that I kept my mouth shut about in the past, was that with people who were racist, or had strange political viewpoints, for example 'One Nation', I usually made it a policy to keep my views to myself. But studying AAP reaffirmed my views and I have spoken out

when someone said some horrible racist thing; that this ignorance this is not on. It's not normally something that I would have done, I would usually have walked away and thought 'you idiot', but now I correct people, at least let them know their views are not really that nice.

Della's anecdote illustrates the interactions between reflective practice, the socio-competency of offering constructive feedback (see section 3.4.4.5) and critical discourse awareness (see section 3.6.7).

Growths in active citizenship were also evident in participants' reflections about their learning practices. Jon described the personal fulfillment he gained after completing the first semester of his study:

I feel more confident in myself, because I've come out here saying I want to do well and I've done that so I'm a lot more confident. I think I've become better at asking questions and seeking help and realised how important they are. I've become a lot more focused, in terms of what I want, like I want a degree. The fact that I'm achieving, the fact that I feel close to my teachers, the fact that I've made new friends and that uni gives me the focus that I was lacking. Basically, I've come to realise it's where I'm supposed to be.

Gregor discussed his changing attitudes to learning goals and priorities:

I've learned more about myself in making decisions that I wouldn't have considered before … there is personal achievement and satisfaction from putting in the time and effort and making the sacrifice. That's something I've learnt and I expect to appreciate even more as I continue further into my course.

Similarly, Lucy considers the development of her capacity for lateral thinking:

I have learned a lot from studying at university, and I believe it has helped me think even more laterally than previously. It has also helped develop analytical skills and resourcefulness, for example when researching, how to research effectively and solve problems.

Dan, however, reflecting on his role as a student, saw university as no more than as a means to an end, not seeing any advantages in becoming part of a learning community:

My role as a student is to be a student – to learn. To use the lecturers and tutors, as they are here to help me, to use the library, to use all the resources I possibly can. Pass, get my degree, and go on in life! …That's it! It's a means to an end, but that's as far as it goes.

Despite Dan's forthright views, he demonstrates self-awareness about his student-role:

I don't need to belong…I'm here to learn, finish and leave.

Dan's reflections illustrate his growing capacities for life-wide learning in relation to cultural difference, though begrudgingly:

I'm a pretty black and white sort of a fellow and a pretty hard bloke to get along with but I'm trying to broaden my cultural horizons! It's a big learning experience

for me, and I hope that by doing this degree that it changes my perspectives and my perceptions, and that I'll become more culturally balanced. I'm accepting the cultural changes more now than I was.

In contrast, Jon perceived that fitting into the student role included becoming part of the community. Jon appreciates his growing ability to:

Communicate intelligently with people – lecturers and students, and have fun too – it's not a matter of being serious, it's also a matter of being relaxed.

Jon also reflected about his learning practices from the viewpoint of being a mature-age student, confirming the view put forward by Yost et al. (2000, p.41) who suggest 'the end result of critical reflection for the individual is cognitive change':

I'm glad that I've just started, because I sit in classes and I see the people... you can just tell that they're straight out of school – and I wouldn't ever want to do that. I don't think I'd be doing as well if I'd started earlier...It's an old cliché – I now have life experience in terms of reading and communication skills – just the general skills that you pick up from having been in the workforce...I think reading people is a very big part of having successful communication...If I had have started when I was finished school, I would have been 16. It was me versus the rest of the world. I just think that if I had have gotten any negative feedback from a lecturer or tutor, I would have just thought 'Oh yeah, crazy old fool', or something to those effects, that you think when you're 16.

Participants' accounts imply that university increased their capacities for critical thinking. Will, for example, appreciated the development of a deeper learning approach:

University teaches you a different way of thinking. Rather than just accepting things, you learn to question, you learn to take a broader view of things and be a bit more broad-minded.

Participants' accounts suggest that university study had increased their feelings of self-esteem. Linda demonstrated her increasing self-confidence:

I am learning that, you can rely on yourself, but you also can join in with other people. So that's what this last twelve months has done for me, I've gone from someone who's been a shy little stay-at-home who didn't want to try anything. Now I go out and meet new people, and tackle things head on.

Participants' accounts illustrate their increasing sense of personal fulfillment, growing cultural sensitivity, active involvement in learning, and development of critical thinking capacities. The participants' evidence thus demonstrates their capabilities to reflect on their learning practices and to develop strategies to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of these practices – in the process also integrating lifelong and life-wide learning practices.

7.2.5. *ExcelL* Practices

Another aspect of the participants' learning practices stemmed from Group A's participation in the *ExcelL* program, the action research intervention implemented in Phase 2 of the research design (see Figure 4.1). The quantitative results obtained through the administration of three pre- and post-tests (see section 5.3.3) did not support the hypothesis that Group A's adjustment was facilitated by their participation in the *ExcelL* program. However, the analysis of qualitative data is more positive, in particular in relation to Group A participants' reflections about the ways in which the program had positively influenced their learning capabilities.

Their participation in the *ExcelL* program exemplifies Group A's attitudes to learning. First, their choices to participate in *ExcelL* suggest Group A's participants' commitment to improving their learning skills, illustrating their motivations to enhance their cross-cultural skills and confirming that they considered that there were benefits to be gained by participating in additional learning opportunities. This perception is confirmed by the fact that participants were prepared to achieve these benefits by undertaking an additional experience program involving 18 hours of extra class time. Group A participants, Dan, Jim and Mel, additionally took part in a Learning Enhancement Program (on study and academic skills) conducted by the Student Services Centre at the university. As well as enhancing their confidence in relation to their study/academic skills, these participants' attendance in the learning enhancement program suggests their incentives to improve and transform their learning practices.

Group A participants' accounts reveal that their participation in *ExcelL* positively influenced their learning practices, including their capacities for lifelong and life-wide learning. Yan discussed how the *ExcelL* program contributed to his evolving worldview, simultaneously revealing his growing understanding of diversity:

> It opened up a whole new way of thinking about the other students ...Just the different culture, the way they think, and the way they act...looking at the world, and it shows that we have a set way of looking at things, and therefore they must be wrong, or need to change. I was quite embarrassed that the non-Asian students seemed so, I don't know, un-accepting of change or of the need for change...There was a lot of really blanket thinking there...somebody who's never been out of their home state ...The best country in the world no matter what and they act as if the ways other people are saying or behaving are wrong. That this is our way and this is the

right way...I mean I cringed a few times when I sat there listening, and I thought... glad I'm not Australian. I hope they don't think I'm Australian.[46]

Gregor argued that *ExcelL* helped him to become more responsive and flexible:

Understand what happens, so therefore how we can change our techniques, modify our behaviour so we will be better received, and be better understood, understand others better, and then be able to achieve more and learn more.

Will maintained that the *ExcelL* competencies are:

...the actual mechanics of the course, like the bits that make you remember what you're doing, the social skills are the glue that holds everything together?

Mel reflected how *ExcelL* had helped her develop life-wide leaning practices in relation to the acquisition of new knowledge and competence:

I've learnt a lot about myself and life...I've learnt general life skills, which I think *ExcelL* helped immensely. I use *ExcelL* nearly everyday in my life when I go to say something to someone. I think about how it sounds to them before I even open my mouth. I find that it helped me, not so much get my own way, but have my own small little wins. I think that really helped to get the stress out of my life because, instead of feeling really cranky at someone and very frustrated with them, I've got the ability to negotiate around it.

Gregor was appreciative of the assistance he received by participating in *ExcelL*:

It helped...very much so. I would have found it a little more difficult without that workshop to develop those skills. I think it increased my marks in the sense that it made me understand how we communicate and how we organise ideas, our time and ourselves.

Mel contemplated how *ExcelL* had assisted her in developing cross-cultural awareness:

I find the relationships with international students very rewarding. I love to share the Australian bush culture and I am fascinated by the way other people live. I believe that I have been able to achieve these relationships with the communication skills I learnt through the *ExcelL* Program.

After graduating in 2003, Mel gained employment as Marketing Officer at the USQ's Faculty of Science. Although having only worked in this capacity for three months, Mel has already influenced the Faculty's and USQ's policies and practices in relation to cross-cultural sensitivity. Mel's role includes:

...answering enquiries from prospective students, both international and domestic. These enquiries are via the telephone, email and in person. I provide information on the Faculty's 50 programs and 400 courses as well as general enrolment procedures, costs and fees, and provide contacts to other departments around the university that these students need to know about...I also attend trade

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[46] Yan was born in the United Kingdom

shows and career expos...I place ads, coordinate campaigns and do all the typical marketing responsibilities for the Faculty.

Observing that the international promotional brochures directed at Asian and Middle Eastern countries included language like 'boob tubes', background pictures of students 'making out', long difficult words and technical jargon, Mel gave feedback to the Faculty's Marketing Review Committee. The committee encouraged her to develop a more inclusive policy, which has since been adopted across the university. Mel discusses how the *ExcelL* program had enabled her to bring about these changes: not only by increasing her cross-cultural awareness but also by assisting her to be assertive:

The sooner one learns this skill of taking a stand or giving negative feedback, the easier ones life will be. You can't hide from conflict; you have to learn to deal with it. The more I deal with it the easier it gets. I have always worried about communicating and dealing with older male supervisors. In my current role I am calm and comfortable talking to the Dean and the Administration Manager, both men, because I was shown how to approach uncomfortable interpersonal communication situations in the *ExcelL* program, and I have continued to work on this...I believe that there should be a continuation of the *ExcelL* program, a level 2, I would certainly jump at it.

Overall, the analysis of the qualitative data confirms the efficacy of the *ExcelL* program, particularly in relation to the enhancement of Group A's attitudes towards and development of their life-wide learning capacities.

7.2.6 Looking Back: Learning Practices

Participants' accounts reveal their capacities to reflect on their learning practices. Participants' reflections raised their awareness of their learning practices, including their attitudes towards their learning and their views about lifelong and life-wide learning. The participants' evidence also confirms that the *ExcelL* program increased Group A's awareness of and reflection on their learning practices, enhancing both these and their capacities for life-wide learning.

However, the participants needed to do more than reflect on and develop the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning practices. They also required a means of actively intervening in and enhancing these practices. The next section analyses the participants' reflections about their use of specific socio-cultural competencies: whether the socio-cultural competencies provided participants with a means of mastering and demonstrating the university's multiple literacies and discourses.

7.3 Socio-cultural Competencies

7.3.1 Introduction

The efficacy of the socio-cultural competencies, given prominence in the *ExcelL* program and reviewed in the literature (section 3.4.4), is palpable in the participants' voices as they reflected on their practices in engaging the university culture's multiple discourses and literacies. Symbolised in this section as threads, the socio-cultural competencies include those of seeking help and information (section 7.3.2), participating in a group (section 7.3.3), making social contact (section 7.3.4), seeking and offering feedback (section 7.3.5), and expressing disagreement and refusing a request (section 7.3.6).

Like the over-arching reference points and themes, these threads do not constitute neatly bounded categories, they are dynamic, intersecting and overlapping: a capacity that is drawn out in section 7.5. Within each thread, the common strands that recur in the participants' stories are sought out and sorted out and, in the analysis in this chapter, are collected, organised and delineated into strands that are documented under each of the threads. Whereas the threads themselves appear straightforward, these strands attest to the complexity underlying the surface simplicity of the threads. The strands relate to each socio-cultural competency's availability, importance, risks, complexities and socio-cultural properties (although these vary between the different competencies). The strands also, by probing into and overturning thus far 'taken-for-granted' or at least unchallenged assumptions, extend the study's critical orientations.

7.3.2 Seeking Help and Information

7.3.2.1 Introduction

The participants' accounts reveal that the competency of seeking help and information constituted a key strategy that assisted participants to more effectively master and demonstrate the university culture. The participants reflected about the competency's (a) availability, (b) importance, (c) risks, (d) complexities, and (e) socio-cultural properties. The participants' accounts also reveal ways in which participants' use of the competency could be enhanced.

7.3.2.2 Availability

Participants' accounts reveal the availability of sources of help and information in the university context; some contrasting their university experiences with experiences outside university. Gregor commented:

> I was surprised to find people so friendly and helpful and courteous because often in general every day life, I find that people aren't so helpful and aren't so obliging to help you or to point you in the right direction - it's basically up to you to find out for yourself, and if you don't know or can't find out where to get the help you're seeking, it's almost stiff biccy's in a sense, tough luck – you should know what you need to know or what you need to do.

Gregor particularly appreciated academics' willingness to assist students:

> I found the lecturers and the tutors willing to spend time after class, despite their sometimes very busy schedules. That was something that really impressed me and I really appreciated it. I felt very welcome...it was a very friendly, helpful, courteous atmosphere.

Eric observed the university culture's explicit support for the provision of help:

> It's the relaxed, friendly, helpful and courteous nature of staff and fellow students; people always willing to give you a hand, give you directions, give you advice, point you in the right direction if you're confused or you don't know where you are or find it hard to find your feet, especially in the first few weeks or so of adjusting to university life.

Participants noticed the many sources of help that were available in the university context. Gary commented about the wealth of available resources of assistance:

> There's a lot of resources available here...the computer labs, the library... if I wasn't a student here, I wouldn't have access to them.

Andy appreciated the help offered through Supplemental Instruction programs; at USQ, these programs are called Peer Assisted Learning Programs (PALs) and are run by OPACS:

> They sent this little note out when I applied for economics. They said, look, there's a heap of people failing economics... so you can join the PAL system, and attend the classes. They'll be able to help you in basic algebra/graphing.

When asked if he felt that these classes were important to passing, Andy replied:

> Oh, hell yeah...I've got really no job, and I'm here to learn, I'm paying for this thing, so I may as well get as much as I can... Cause I know if I don't get my basics right, I won't get the rest right.

A key vehicle for accessing sources of help and information is USQ's use of consultation times (the times academics nominate as the specific times when they will be available for students). Sandy reflected about the value of consultation times to her study endeavours:

I use consultation times to a max! I've got to go and ask what the expectation is, if I don't believe it's clearly explained. Now I could do that in a class, but of course everybody's got the 'What if you're thought an idiot – stand up and remove all doubt' – so I have that barrier the same as everybody else. So I like to go and ask and say, "Okay, this is my understanding, is this right, or is this not? Am I on the right track? This is what I'm studying, this is how I study this'. (Sandy)

Overall, participants' corroborate the availability of sources of help and information at USQ; the helpfulness of staff, fellow students, the computer labs, the library, learning programs and the use of consultation times.

7.3.2.3 Importance

Clearly evident in the participants' reflections was the importance participants attributed to the competency of seeking help and information. Jon viewed it as 'an epiphany':

I asked the lecturer for help "am I on the right track"? It helped to a ridiculous degree, to the point that "is this all it takes to do well?" "Is all I need to do is ask for help, ask questions"…a big epiphany. I asked for and got help and things were clearer.

Eric put its worth at *99.9%,* whereas Brad reflected that the *ability* to ask for help is *60 – 70% of passing a unit of study.* Sandy was convinced that *the skill of seeking help would be the highest priority, crucial* and further that:

…asking for help is the basis for study because if you can't get help then what are you doing? If you don't understand, what have you learnt – nothing. My advice to someone starting university is to go and ask questions, what do I need to know, how does the university operate, what do I do. The mechanics of the university are more important than the study. In the first semester the mechanics of the university are subjects in themselves.

In section 6.4.2, participants revealed that they found the university culture to be an unfamiliar one. The participants' accounts, however, also confirm that the competency of seeking help and information enhanced their familiarity with the new university culture and assisted them to pass their courses:

Seeking help is very important: take a new student coming in who doesn't know his or her way around the campus, doesn't know where various blocks or building structures are, so they can't find their way around for their classes. (Gary)

Seeking help is crucial; you can't get by without seeking help, because you cannot know everything yourself and you have to be able to seek help from others to be able to find out everything you want to know. I think it is critical in passing, Very, very important. (Sandy)

The skill of seeking help and information is vital as ultimately a student is responsible for themselves and their own study success, and if a student does not understand something, then it is essential that they seek help and information successfully and are able to effectively express themselves and their query for further assistance. If a student does not develop this skill, then they will suffer in silence and ultimately may fail their subject as a result of a small problem manifesting itself throughout the semester and subject. On many occasions I have sought information and help, in particular when studying chemistry and working out problems. If I had not approached the lecturer, then my final semester results would have suffered. Clarifying the problem early also enabled me to better understand the subject matter, and future concepts that were taught. Don't be afraid to ask if there were anything you're in doubt about, rather it'd be better to be clear and sure about something than to be unclear and lose a lot of marks and a good grade because of it. (Lucy)

In section 6.3.2 and 6.3.3 the culture shocks and collisions the participants experienced were outlined. Participants' accounts in relation to the competency of seeking help and information revealed the competency assisted them in overcoming the problems stemming from these culture shocks and collisions:

I am seeing a counsellor over in Student Services – she is helping me brainstorm before doing an assignment, making sure I know what to do – everything I've got to do - and prioritise what I've got to do first, and that's helped...I was going on a personal basis just to talk to somebody, and she said to write down my goals, so we're going in to that now. (Gary)

The competency helped participants overcome financial problems and to feel more in control. For example, the fact that Linda was willing to seek help assisted her in achieving a short-term loan (through the Careers Resources Centre) and a HECS free scholarship. Combined, these services helped her to study more effectively:

So that's been great – I have my study books and textbooks and with HECS out of the way, it's really helped. It's taken a load off my mind.

The competency also helped participants deal with unexpected events and overcome problems. Gregor needed to overcome an unexpected illness close to exams:

I was in too much pain to do my final preparation before the first two exams. So I saw my doctors, got a medical certificate; basically I was incapacitated – I couldn't think about anything else except the pain I was in. I was able to get compassionate grounds for deferment of the exam.

Seeking help enabled Will to arrange his learning situation to better suit his needs:

I went and saw a lecturer and said "look I can't attend this tutorial because I've got a lecture for a different subject, is there any chance of my attending the early tutorial even though it's full".

The capacity to seek help and information reduced participants' stress. Brad maintained that seeking help reduces stress and solves problems that otherwise become untenable and uncontrollable and lead to withdrawal:

If you are having trouble with something, the longer you let something go, the deeper you get, or the further behind you get. I found that getting behind makes it very hard for you later on towards the end of your semester, when the bulk of your assessment is due. That's what's going to count in your marks, so if you let things slip, if you get too deep into the red, that's the time when you will want to pull out. When you let all those pressures build up on you and you can't handle it, I mean physically or time wise. You can get to a stage where you just can't handle it.

Participants considered the competency of seeking help and information to be the difference between perseverance and withdrawal. Brad, transferring his knowledge from the business world, readily identified its importance for successful study:

Good operators are the ones who probably get more help than anyone. If you're going to stick your head in the sand – you won't succeed. So I'm all out for getting help, I love asking questions not for the sake of asking questions - I like learning, I really like learning.

Sandy reflected that asking for help was crucial to her success:

Asking for help is Imperative. Crucial. It's very easy to put your own interpretation on a particular subject, because you can say, "No, it's rubbish". But, someone saying, "No, you need to know that, learn that!" That will help you in a future part of the course. That's the communication with people.

Jon extolled the virtues of seeking help and information, using it in many of his courses:

Because this is my first proper endeavour into tertiary study, I think it's very crucial. On a reassuring level, it lets me know that I am on the right track. I'm still amazed that when you're answered a question right, you just feel good – you still get that feeling in university – nothing has changed.

The use of the competency stopped Mel from withdrawing: *asking for assistance in an unfamiliar environment prevented me from doom.* Mel explained:

I didn't quit only because the internal support from Student Services...restructuring the workload was very helpful...they said there are ways around these. Don't stress, just take care of yourself.

Section 6.4.3 revealed that one of the most significant transition processes for participants was that of mastering the university's unfamiliar literacies and discourses. Participants'

accounts, however, confirm the role that seeking help and information played in enabling them to master and demonstrate these unfamiliar discourses and literacies:

> Learning the language of academic writing was a real struggle for a long time. Thanks to OPACS classes and one-on-one assistance along with the programs held at Student Services, I slowly improved in this area. (Brad)

> Getting help helps in assignment writing in taking the right line, especially initially because I'm not that experienced at doing it and the more help I can get the better... initially it will help me settle in quicker. (Gary)

Section 6.4.2 documented participants' difficulties mastering library literacies however participants also found library staff very willing to help them to master these library literacies:

> I was actually knocked off my feet with how helpful the library staff was. (Jon)

> I'd never used the library before. I compensated by asking all the library staff, and they're fantastic...Yeah, I would never have survived. They give you pamphlets on how to reference. (Andy)

Asking for assistance from classmates helped participants come to terms with difficult subject literacies:

> I asked other students in the class whom I thought might know the subject better and I also had a number of conversations, asking my lecturer questions, and was able to clarify some things that were a bit muddy, a bit grey for me. It helped me put two and two together and it made me appreciate them more...I think if I didn't do that, I would have really struggled and it would have made life harder. I wouldn't have had as good a chance of doing as well. (Gregor)

Jon specified that the competency helped him to engage and master the subject AAP:

> Like the CML's for AAP, there were about 6 questions I couldn't get – I went and saw Philip [the Lecturer], and he put me on the right track – and I got 96%. They've just been undeniably helpful. I haven't got anything under 90% for anything so far.... and I went to see [x] yesterday, he was just as helpful.

Sandy considered that the competency assisted her to master research literacies:

> It would be the highest priority I've got here...because you can just waste so much time, you can research things that are of great interest, but of no benefit to that particular assignment.

Jon's use of the competency of seeking help and information was particularly interesting in that it helped him to succeed (shine) in two separate tertiary institutions. At USQ, the competency helped Jon maintain the high standards he had set for himself:

> I was very anxious about getting my first assignment back because it set a standard for me. And now, that's the standard that I want to keep all the way

through. In order to do that, I have to utilise the help from tutors and lecturers – which I intend to do in full. I am concentrating on building connections between my tutors and my lectures and myself.

Following his first semester at USQ (in which he achieved 4 High Distinctions), Jon was accepted into the Queensland Conservatorium of Music (the Con) at Griffith University. At the Con, Jon experienced another period of transition, one that was initially difficult: I hated it when I first got there...during the first 6 weeks I wanted to quit and come back to Toowoomba. Transition was so different, problematic for Jon in a number of ways: he was moving away from home for the first time; the university was much smaller (600 students) and to Jon it seemed like everyone else knew everyone else, but me; Jon felt music was a silly thing to study not having relevance like AAP, the core unit Jon had studied at USQ which he had really enjoyed; the conservatorium was a performance-based uni where everything comes back to performance, to laying things on the line, learning how to become a better performer was much more confronting than listening to teachers like at USQ; he did not enjoy it as everyone else was making friends but I stayed in the background; he was also involved in a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* back in Toowoomba and was spending weekends there; and a high percentage of jazz contemporary vocal department (Jon's department) were mature age women with mothering vibe/instinct which Jon found that difficult to engage with.

One of the main reasons that assisted Jon decide to stay at the Con was that he asked for help from his major study teacher:

> ...who, when I said, "I don't know if I belong here', said "give it some time'. She was one of the major reasons I stayed there because she said that music makes a big difference and that it was 'not wrong for you to do this'. I also asked a lot of people and none of them said to pack it in.

The participants' accounts overwhelmingly confirm the importance of the competency of seeking help and information. Participants confirmed its role and significance in assisting them to gain familiarity with the new university culture; in overcoming collisions and culture shocks; in solving problems and reducing stress; in helping them to persevere and, conversely, forestalling their withdrawal from their studies; and in assisting participants to master the university's literacies and discourses. The participants' accounts, however, also reveal the risks, complexities and difficulties underlying participants' use of the competency of seeking help and information.

7.3.2.4 Risks

Participants identified the risks involved if they choose not seek help and information. Participants' accounts give credence, for example, to the literature investigating the under-utilisation of support services by some students, as well as the consequences provided for perseverance. Mel discussed the consequences of not accessing the information contained in *Course Introductory Booklets* available in most day and external courses:

> The information in the 'Introductory Book' of each subject wasn't fully appreciated by me early on either, because everything was so unfamiliar it was a case of learning as I went, and that was slowly. I remember the disbelief of discovering that past exam papers where available for most subjects, and that these papers were very similar to the current exam.

Gary understood the consequences of not accessing help: because if you don't understand something then you're missing out. Linda provided an example of not seeking help, and consequently, failing the core course, *AAP*. Linda hadn't sought help as she 'hated the course', didn't understand the assignment, was ill, and couldn't concentrate on her reading: I didn't tell anyone that I was having problems with the reading, I thought I could figure it out all myself. Linda could have requested a resubmission for the course but did not – to her detriment:

> If I had gone up to someone and said 'look can I resubmit this assignment', I would probably have got a yes, resubmitted it, possibly with more help, and probably couldn't have failed it and wouldn't not have to be redoing it now. So you learn from your mistakes.

Della acknowledged the benefits to be gained from seeking help, but only after she had proceeded without seeking help for most of the semester:

> Just to get some feedback on where you're headed. The assignments that were pretty good could've been really terrific if I had just gone and shown someone and just gotten a little feedback on what I could have done differently.

Will provided an example for how not asking for help lost him marks:

> Like for media, law and ethics I focused on the wrong area completely for the assignments, and as a result got marked down, not because of the content itself, but because it was on ethics as opposed to law. Whereas if I'd gone and shown a draft to Charles [the lecturer] well then …

Gregor, too, acknowledged the risks involved in not seeking help:

> And if they're too shy or unskilled in seeking help, then they're not going to be able to find out what they need to know, the information they're seeking. And that could

> come with any other situation, if they can't seek the help of their lecturers for any concepts they're unclear about, then they're never going to know. (Gregor)

Participants' comments support Gutteridge's (2001, p.144) view that 'disturbingly, even with insight or direct advice, students still tend not to access channels of support such as study skills development material'.

7.3.2.5 Complexities

The complexity underlying the use of seeking help and information are also evident in participants' testimonies. These complexities arose from the value/belief systems (socio-cultural capital) underpinning participants' use of the competency along with the efficacy of the participants' communication/interpersonal/social skills. Yan wished that at the beginning he had known that there was:

> ...a lot of help available...a lot of people either don't about it or don't feel that they can access help... I think the people here want to see people succeed. It's not a trick to see if they can catch you out and make sure you don't get through, and have to repeat and that sort of thing...So I think when you ask for help then you're going to get it, that's something I didn't realise at first.

The complexities in using this capacity recur in the literature (Gutteridge 2001; Taylor & Lawrence 2002). In my role as lecturer in a core first year course, my experience is that the students who fail are invariably those I never hear from. At Student Services I also counsel students who are overwhelmed, perceiving they have little control over their circumstances and appearing to be impotent and immobilised. These students have neither the energy nor the motivation to do anything other than 'bury their heads in the sand' and hope things will go away. My experiences in both positions give credence to the crucial nature of the capacity. [47]

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[47] Some lecturers perceive these students as simply 'needing to get a grip', not understanding students' feelings of being totally overwhelmed. At USQ I am a member of a committee trying to short-circuit this phenomenon by developing a policy initiative in relation to an intervention strategy aimed at encouraging the students designated to be at risk (with a GPA of less than 3/7) through a process of self-reflection. This process that will enable them to identify their area/s of weakness and to put in place for themselves a strategy to empower them to access the sources of help/information they need if they are to improve their academic grades.

Seeking help is also a competency that, whilst initially appearing to be simple, is deceptively so. Gregor assesses the skills needed if students are to effectively seek help:

> They must have good verbal skills in terms of speaking, listening, seeking help and getting that help, and if they can't find it from the initial source, then they must continue to seek elsewhere.

That the competency is inherently complex is supported by participants' evidence. Some participants found it difficult to ask for help because of their beliefs about how they were perceived by the fellow students:

> Because I'm so much older than everyone else, people assume that I shouldn't ask very basic questions. (Sandy)

Yan alluded to the underlying belief systems that inhibited his use of this competency:

> I had a feeling I had to do it absolutely perfectly, and I'd look stupid if I couldn't do it, and people would laugh… often I don't because I don't have the skill to do it. That makes it worse, because I expect to be absolutely immaculate, like a 20-year tradesman.

Gary understood his belief systems hindered his use of the competency: I'm a bit too independent because I don't ask for help sometimes… Lucy acknowledged the complexities involved in seeking help:

> Although you may be very diplomatic and tactful in asking for help or further information, sometimes the other person does not always receive it in a positive manner. For example, the other person may focus on the request and see it as a deficiency and insult to their skills, rather than approach the request from a positive view. Unfortunately, humans are complex creatures, and so some people are very approachable whilst others are unapproachable, and its necessary as a student to realise this difference and not be discouraged from seeking future help because of one person's negative response to a request. This realisation comes with experience and maturity; it's a part of adulthood that we all eventually encounter, be it at university or just everyday life.

Della's hesitancy stemmed from her generation's belief that it symbolised failure:

> When I went to school it was a sign that you weren't coping or you weren't achieving. If you asked for help it wasn't looked on as a very good situation.

However, Della also saw the need to overcome the tentacles of this cultural belief:

> But I can see since I came here that there's a lot of resources available to you and I guess you're cutting yourself off if you don't use them….

Participants identified the fears involved for some students in asking for help:

> You must also have the skill to plan ahead and the ability to ask questions and not feel intimidated by other students and lecturers and too scared to ask for help. Many people are too scared to ask simple questions that seem obvious. (Lucy)

I wouldn't ask things before if I was afraid other people don't care or don't know or couldn't be bothered or wouldn't want to help ...if you're in doubt about something, you just have to seek advice and people often are eager to help you. If they can't help you, then they will point you in the right direction with someone who can help you.
(Gregor)

Mel explained the agonies, and delays, involved for her in the physical act of seeking counselling assistance, assistance which was critical in her decision to remain at university:

Because there were a lot of communication barriers there that were scary, and caused a lot of stress - not knowing who had time to listen or, whose job it was to listen. Or who was available to listen. Book in a time, speak with somebody at Student Services, because everyone seems to be pretty busy at that time, and seems to get out of reach ...but I booked in, made a time and I made it – it was really stressful to get there because I couldn't get an appointment that was suitable, so I just had to wait, but it was worth the wait when I finally got there.

Prior school experiences (academic capital) also prevent the use of this competency. Several participants, including Jon, described attitudes implanted in secondary school:

It was drummed into us at grade 12 - if you hit uni, you're not going to be spoon-fed, and it's going to be a whole new world. So I thought it would be academically reasonably hard.

The term 'spoon feeding' is problematic in a number of ways. Its use negatively characterises such academic processes as providing students with help and making teaching expectations and requirements explicit. Some academics argue that such practices lower academic standards, facilitate 'learned helplessness' and prohibit independent learning. The provision of help is also cited negatively by some academics as a way of diminishing their colleague's contributions: equating the practices with a lack of academic rigor. 'Spoon feeding' students is equated with 'doing their work for them' and therefore not academically acceptable. As such, 'spoon feeding' is a term redolent of the deficit model.

Jon's observation also indicates the role that teachers, guidance officers and school advisors play in facilitating students' use of this capacity. Before giving a presentation to the National Association of Prospective Student Advisers Conference (NAPSA) in Adelaide in 2002, I asked my first year classes (in biology and nursing) if they had any advice for prospective students. The most frequent response was the need to challenge high school teachers' insistence that university lecturers were neither helpful nor approachable.

Not only are the individual belief systems (socio-cultural capital) underlying the

competency of seeking help and information many and varied, they can also inhibit its use by equating 'help' with 'remedial' intervention and, therefore, a 'loss of face'.

> I was concerned that I would ask for too much help, and that this would be frowned upon or that the 'helper' may have been thinking that it was my problem and not theirs. (Will)

Students may feel they may not have the 'right' or lack the confidence to ask, especially as they make their transition to the new culture. For example, Jon recognised that age plays a role, both in terms of asking for help and in how it is perceived by others:

> I accept it a lot more now that I'm older than when I was still 16, 17. It's just plain as day that it's up to me. If I didn't go and see the lecturers or tutors during consultation times, I wouldn't have had the help. Maybe too I wouldn't have been confident enough when I was 16 or 17 – the lectures might not have taken me seriously... I think they'd have reacted differently if I were younger.

Yan overturned his initial perception that had equated seeking help with a 'loss of face':

> You don't sort of go in there on your hands and knees, which is how I would've looked at the beginning ... you don't feel like you've failed because you need an extension.

Della felt that she would be seeking an unfair advantage if she were to ask for help (a belief system strikingly at odds with the individualist academic culture) when she was having an angina attack in a data analysis exam, a course she had to pass in order for her to be accepted into the psychology program the following semester:

> I felt that, maybe it was making excuses; I don't want an unfair advantage. We all have bad days and I had a bad day. In fact I had spoken to my doctor the night before. He wanted to put me into hospital. I was foolish, I guess. I shouldn't have sat it. I should've had a medical certificate to say I'm not well to sit it. I felt, when I walked out of the exam, well then, I'm finished with uni. I am the sort of person who won't make excuses when I haven't performed. Because I was unwell, I hadn't had a good preparation, and I think well, ok, you should have done a bit more work. It's an age thing, really.

Della eventually made an appointment with the examiner, explained the situation and achieved a credit result; a situation which would not have arisen if she had not been prepared to seek help from the course examiner. Gregor also needed to address his personal belief systems about seeking help rather than waiting for, as he put it, everything to fall in my lap:

> Some people have said to me prior to attending university that you have to be willing to go and find out anything you want to know for yourself. I suppose I took it for granted that everything would just fall in my lap, but I realise now that if you're

willing to look for what you want to find, then there's no reason why you shouldn't find it, and people can be very courteous and helpful if you can help yourself as well.

Students may also consider seeking help to be a sign of weakness. Jim grappled with the benefits of seeking help as opposed to the strong cultural belief that seeking help meant that he wasn't independent (a characteristic highly valued in rural Australian culture):

If you relied on asking for help totally, then your own initiatives probably wouldn't be as good as they should be. You tend to rely on other people, so you've got to find a happy medium there somewhere. If you see someone who's done exceptionally well, it would be nice to know the procedure that they followed, if there was a procedure....I wouldn't feel comfortable personally because that would be just like asking people how much money you make.

So did Yan, who had reached the point of separation from his wife before he asked for help from Austudy, imbued as he was with the cultural (and masculine?) belief in the importance of being self-reliant and independent:

Money was a worry, but my wife had finished her degree, and she assured me that we could afford to do it, and that she was going to be doing some work. So we were okay. It's still a real scrimp and save... If we hadn't actually got to the point of separating, and therefore applied for Austudy, I don't think we would have made it. I was feeling really guilty about the fact that I wasn't earning any money.

Eric, relying on his self-reliance, did not want to seek counselling help:

I don't think counsellors can do anything. I mean, I don't really like counselling, I can't talk to people about anything. I solve my problems myself.

Eric believed that counsellors would not be able to understand because they were not in his situation: that his situation was simply a 'black and white' case of having, or not having, money. Eric's reluctance to seek counselling also illustrates his lack of awareness of the belief systems or attitudes that may be contributing to his situation:

I just don't feel that they can help because they're not in my situation If they were in a situation exactly the same as mine then it might help a little bit.

That Eric, Yan and Jim are male gives credence to the literature that suggests that there is a gender variable in the use of this competency (Gray 2000). The participants' accounts also lend weight to the dominance of the value of self-reliance in Australian culture: a belief that inhibits, paradoxically, some people's capacities to help themselves by asking for help, or as they perceive it, by being dependent. One of the complexities of the socio-cultural competency of seeking help, for example, springs from the Western mainstream individualist notion of an individual 'sense of self'. Traditional western psychological and educational traditions are so strongly and steeply embodied in the importance of self-

reliance, individual motivation and an internal locus of control, that their dominance remains largely unquestioned. Sennett (2002, p.50) discusses the 'double standards' involved by arguing for the necessity of trust in social relations and for contending that dependence upon others is even more necessary:

> …a child who could not depend on adults for guidance would be a profoundly damaged human being, unable to learn, deeply insecure…By arguing that adult dependency is shameful, liberals and welfare-state reformers have separated private experience from public values: what we learn in love, the family, or from friendship is not the ideal which animates public policy. Both clients and courtiers appear to have lost the will, the very desire, to take care of themselves. The government will therefore force them to be independent - in welfare reform by compelling the able-bodied to work. The imperative of self-sufficiency appears again in education, by obliging students to finance their own education. There may be good arguments in favour of forcing people to take care of themselves, or for separating private and public values, but this liberal ideology creates a terrible paradox. The politician says: "Give me power but don't expect me to take care of you." They preach the virtues of flexibility and self-reliance among the poor, while doing little to repair the safety net of health care and unemployment protection…Denying the dignity of dependence puts the political class out of touch with everyday life, where survival depends on help. The fear of acknowledging that people need constant support seems adolescent. What liberalism meant to remedy was passivity…It becomes hard to engage people actively in the institutions on which they depend. "I need you" seems a shameful admission of personal failure; whereas in the polity, in business, as in private life, it should be the beginning of an honourable connection.

Sennet reveals the individualist ideology underpinning this competency, the consequences of which may also be reflected in organisations, as Figure 7.1 depicts.
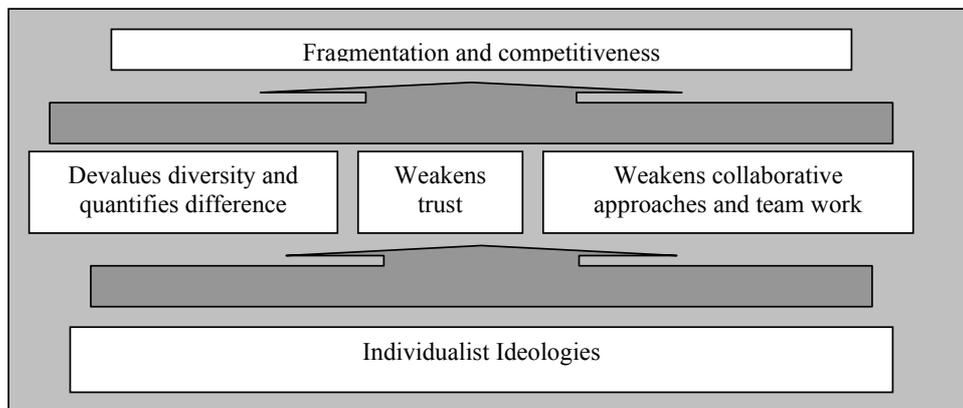
Figure 7.1 Individualist Ideology in Organisations (Lawrence 2004)

Individualist ideologies also determine difference by quantifying means and are at odds with the concepts of diversity, teamwork and collaboration; which can only effectively occur if others' skills, knowledge and talent are valued and trusted (Lawrence 2004). The

ideology also contributes to the fragmentation and competitiveness permeating some organisations, for example universities (see section 6.3.2). The ideology is evident in Australia, particularly in rural areas, for instance in the belief systems (capital) of drought-stricken farmers who are reluctant to accept help. The ideology was also evident following the 2003 Canberra bushfires when middle-class fire-sufferers felt acute discomfort in receiving help: in not being self-sufficient. It was acceptable to give help, but not to be its beneficiary (*Life Matters* 2003).

An additional difficulty in using the competency stems from participants' lack of familiarity with university culture. Sandy illustrates the depth of unfamiliarity she felt with the culture and its demands and how this inhibited her effective use of seeking help:

> Sometimes I don't know I need it (help), because I didn't know whom to ask. So what I'm looking for now is the trigger which tells me 'You need to ask'.

Another complication in the use of the competency is the need to demonstrate persistence. Jon provides an example (which also indicates students' awareness of the advantages of positively influencing lecturers):

> You have got to be persistent because for some reason they might not get the message or you might miss them by five minutes. Like I came out here one day during the holidays to get an extension and they were on lunch break. I sat there for like forty-five minutes. If I hadn't stayed out there I wouldn't have got the extension. I had to persist in doing that. And I had persist in terms of talking to teachers a) to make sure I was on the right track, but b) subconsciously because I want to be thought of as a good student which was very, very important to me in terms of getting a job after the degree. You know they're going to work from the top down. I want to feel closer to my teachers and I want them to think that I'm a good student basically.

A further aspect in the competency's use is a positive attitude. For example, Yan chose not to be deterred by any negative experiences in his use of seeking help and information:

> To be honest, I know that I have had a few negative experiences in this area, however I don't remember the exact incidents as I gave it little priority and sought alternative solutions when not successful with the first point of contact. I did not take the situation onboard as a personally negative experience; instead I saw it as the other person's personal issue. I also focused on the successful contacts in seeking further information. Therefore the negative moments didn't really matter, as the success by far outweighed them.

The participants' accounts reveal complexities underpinning the use of the competency of seeking help and information. Participants revealed the influence that others' perceptions wielded and the inhibitions that stemmed from their own belief systems; their socio-

cultural, academic and economic capital. For example, that seeking help and information constitutes a sign of weakness, a 'loss of face', remedial intervention, a sign of dependence or learned helplessness and/or weakness (in terms of individualist ideology).

7.3.2.6 Socio-cultural Properties

Adding to complexities of seeking help and information are the socio-cultural properties underpinning the competency. These properties enable the competency to be fine-tuned to the culture or sub-culture being engaged. The properties affecting the effectiveness of the use of the competency include the people involved, the situation, its verbal and nonverbal aspects, and the context involved (the time, place and relationship). Participants revealed, for instance, that 'who to ask' and 'how to ask' were important considerations in fine-tuning the competency to the particular sub-culture being engaged.

According to participants' testimonies, the question about 'who to ask' was crucial and often required prior preparation and research. Sandy commented, for example:

> I was never really sure where or who I should seek the help from.

There are many sources of help in the university culture: lecturers, tutors, Student Services, OPACS, Administrative Services, the Library, the Faculties and Departments, Outreach and Regional Liaison Officers (RLO), the USQ Help Desk and web sites. Participants' reflections however revealed that the most appropriate source to access required prior investigation and preparation – for example, by using sources of information participants had gained by making social contact (see 7.3.4).

'Who' to ask was sometimes fraught with difficulty. Brad, for example, needed to be aware of his wife's perceptions about the gender of the person he asked for help, especially if attractive young women were involved:

> I just said that's someone I have to do things with if I'm going to have to be here at uni studying. I can't do it on my own, I get help and we share help...There are going to be boys and girls, and if I can't do that I might as well not be there. Because I need that sort of support.

'How' to seek help and information was also an important consideration as the ways that participants asked for help needed to be socially and culturally fine-tuned to the particular cultural group they are communicating with at the time. For example, in terms of verbal communication, students need to consider the appropriate words to use – for instance whether to ask directly or indirectly or include explanations or reasons or not? In terms of

nonverbal communication students need to think about body language – whether their nonverbal behaviours like eye contact, tone of voice, pace, volume and pitch, how close they stood, etc, were appropriate to the situation and to the task at hand. These considerations imply, at least, some forethought or degree of preparation:

> You've got to try to put the effort in yourself before you go and see a lecturer – you can't just ask someone else to basically do your assignment for you, there's no way to do that. (Brad)

The verbal and non-verbal means of seeking help and information from their friends also differed, for example, from the means by which participants sought help from lecturers and administrative staff. Andy discussed the importance of accessing help in a culturally and socially appropriate manner, for instance, by accessing consultation times rather than turning up 'any old time':

> Some lecturers make their expectations clear…He (the lecturer) was very tight about it. Fair enough too, he'd get thousands of students knocking on his door. He made it quite clear that he wasn't available other than consultation times.

Whereas some lecturers require students to make an appointment during consultation time others do not. Some lecturers respond better to informal, direct email enquiries whereas others expect students to access their help only through the formal channels of the university's Outreach Centre. Eric's lecturer, for example, was more informal:

> I just went in the other day when it wasn't a consultation time and I apologised for going in, but he was fine with it and he didn't mind, it was early in the morning.

However Eric did not access consultation times in computing, his most difficult course, because he needed 'hands-on' help which he felt he couldn't get in an office context:

> I can't actually understand it there. If I was talking to a tutor in the computer room then I could show them how I'm having difficulties and that would help, but just talking to them in their office wouldn't help.

Overall, the participants perceived that the properties affecting their use of the competency of seeking help and information included the people involved, the verbal and nonverbal components, and the contexts involved (the time, place, situation and relationship). Participants revealed that 'who to ask' and 'how to ask' were important considerations in fine-tuning the competency to the particular sub-culture being engaged.

7.3.2.7 Enhancing Students' Use of Seeking Help and Information

Participants also reflected about their practice of the competency, particularly the role academics played in facilitating participants' use of the competency. Jon, for example, would not have requested help if it had not been for the encouragement of academics:

> I don't think I would have asked for help. The only reason that I did is because every tutor or every lecturer said – come and see me in consultation times. I thought 'Ok well they said it, I'm going to go'. So I doubt I would have asked for it. Not to the same extent that I am now.

Jon provided an example where the help received from a tutor made the difference, providing him with a means for success:

> The first time I went to see my tutor for AAP during consul time… like I didn't have an epiphany or anything to that effect, but it became obvious to me – the help I got, I thought, 'Okay, this is what I've got to do'.

Participants acknowledged however that they also had responsibilities in demonstrating this competency. Andy pointed out the value of simply 'having a go', of just trying it out:

> Mainly because of my attitude: because I got away with it the first time, I can do it again.

Participants found that their awareness of the usefulness of the competency had been honed by their previous experiences, illustrating one of the advantages of being an AES. Lucy, who had been in the military, transferred the skills she had learnt from there:

> One thing the military did bash into me was the ability to ask for help. After you are taught the first time around they are going to ask you to do it within three minutes. For example with a weapon you really have to ask if you don't understand. So I have transferred it to here and it has been helpful. I think I will transfer it to the rest of my life as it actually saves you time in the long run, it helps speed up the learning curve, rather than waiting until a problem becomes too big and uncontrollable.

This willingness to ask for help could explain the perception that mature-age students are more studious than younger students. Shaz recounted the story of a SL in her class who appreciated her willingness to ask questions and her facilitation of the class' learning.

ExcelL assisted Group A participants to overcome inhibiting aspects of the socio-cultural capital they possessed and request the help they needed to pass. Yan, for example, felt more confident about seeking help and information after he had completed *ExcelL*:

> [After ExcelL] I have been asking for help, and people don't think you're a moron because you can't do it. Because one of the librarians said all these new electronic databases when they first came into the library, they got used to them by using

them, and that's what they're there for, so ask them! So today, I was having trouble printing something out, and it just didn't seem to work, and I just walked straight up to the desk and asked.

Overall, participants' accounts confirm that their capacities to seek help and information were facilitated in a number of ways: through the encouragement of academics and other staff; by 'having a go', or trying it for themselves; as an effect of participants' previous experiences (their socio-cultural capital); and as a consequence of programs like *ExcelL*.

7.3.2.8 Looking Back: Seeking Help and Information

Participants' evidence demonstrates that the socio-cultural competency of seeking help and information was significant in their perseverance in the university culture. The participants confirmed the value of the competency: in assisting them to become more familiar with the university culture; to overcome the culture shocks and collisions they experienced; deal with unexpected events; reduce stress; and to more effectively engage and master the university's discourses and literacies. The competency's capacity as a problem-solving strategy and as a skill of engagement highlights its power and potency. The analysis also identifies the risks involved for students if they chose not to seek help and information.

The competency's socio-cultural properties, however, attest to the complexities underpinning its use as well as the difficulties some students have in implementing its use: difficulties which are emerging as problematic and perhaps linked with student attrition. The analysis also revealed that academics could enhance students' use of the competency, along with students' own motivations to do so and programs such as *ExcelL*.

7. 3. 3 Participating in a Group

7.3.3.1 Introduction

The socio-cultural competency of participating in a group recurred in participants' accounts of their university stories. Participants reflected on the competency's (a) importance, (b) risks, and (c) complexities. That the course *Communication and Scholarship* included a group assignment presented opportunities to also investigate participants' attitudes towards these kinds of collaborative learning approaches.

7.3.3.2 Importance

The importance of participating in a group is clearly evident in the participants' accounts of their university journeys. For Linda, belonging to a study group meant the difference between withdrawal and perseverance:

> The study group was very important, because if I had done it all alone, and not had a study group, I probably would have given up. I found it essential, even just for the social contact.

Linda had formed the study group during tele-tutorials when she was undertaking the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP), a move central to her success in that program:

> We had a study group. I was the youngest, and the oldest was 57, so that's when I realised that, hey, everyone can do it. If I hadn't gone to that Tele-tut we probably would have never have met. We used to get together once a week and have coffee...I found it very helpful because I always lacked self-confidence. But Jeanie and others would always say we know you can do it – you're going to do it. You're the one that's going to pass everything. It made the difference. So especially now that I've found out I have ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder]; I've found I need reassurance, because I'm very hard on myself, and I've always been a quitter. I mean, I finished the Tertiary Preparation Program, and I did the exam and I'm like "Wow, I actually finished something".

Linda's anecdotes demonstrate her capacities for reflective practice about her learning approaches and style. Participating in a group increased Linda's feelings of confidence, connection and belonging. Capacities, which other students, in a diversity of classroom settings, also perceive to be essential to academic success. A mature age female in one of my Learning Enhancement classes for example maintained:

> Every single time I have been involved in a study group, I have achieved a distinction or high distinction. Just talking about the objectives or an assignment for an hour a week reinforces key points and examples in your memory. They are definitely well worth the effort.

Yan reflected that participation in a group helped him to achieve better results in exams:

> In the first semester, I didn't get together with anybody before the exams. I just read all sorts of stuff, and I think the second semester when I actually got together with three others, and we sat down and went through previous exams papers. I did so much better. And it was so much easier... its true that two heads are better than one, and four is better than two. I think istudy groups bring out a lot of things that you don't know that you don't know. Somebody pops up and says, oh this is something or other, and you think, oh I didn't know that. Even after the session, you can go home and read about it again so that, when the exam question pops up, you can just sit there and write about it.

Participating in a group also assisted participants to accumulate 'participation marks' built into assessment:

> It helps you understand the material. It helps establish and maintain social contacts and generally get better marks for participation in tutorials. (Will)

Participants revealed that group participation gave them feedback about their performance. For example Jon considered that group participation was a crucial competency in providing him with a gauge about how he was performing:

> It's crucial in that you get feedback on what you are thinking and you can learn what is expected and what you've got to do from others who have been out here before. I found that everyone had the same doubts I had – it wasn't just because I was out here for first semester and didn't know what was going on. So I think it's crucial in terms of getting information. Even if you express an opinion and you get told its wrong, then you'll know you're on the wrong track. You've got to just not care what everyone else thinks, ask the questions and participate. You'll think you've got a good point and you'll say it and even if someone says, 'no that's wrong, or that's a good point or I hadn't thought about that before', you feel really good about yourself. Well, it makes me feel really good about myself, it makes me feel that I'm processing information and that I know I'm on the right track.

Andy considered that group participation helped him measure his adjustment, perceiving that it ran a close second to his individual study efforts:

> It comes a close second. I tend to use them as a sounding board. Talking about assignments...one person might say, "Oh, I haven't even looked at that assignment yet"...and you think, 'Well I have' so that gives me a bit of a gauge of how I'm going, and my adjustment.

Della discussed the benefits of group participation for understanding and feedback:

> I think that participating and general discussion everyone gets a feel of what's going on and you get feedback from one another. It helps to grasp a concept that wasn't totally clear.

Participants revealed the many benefits they gained through their group participation. Sandy acknowledged the value of group participation in helping to increase motivation:

> We push each other to learn from each other and I found that useful and helpful.

So did Linda, who felt that class participation enhanced her learning capabilities:

> It gives the teacher an idea that you are not someone who's sitting in the corner and not learning anything. It helps you develop a bit more confidence by participating instead of sitting there and hoping that everyone else is going to do everything. It shows the teacher that you know your work, you've been listening, that you are not sitting there sleeping and it also proves to yourself that you can participate in a group situation.

Participation in a group helped Shaz overcome the discrepancies between workplace and university discourses:

> We were able to bounce ideas off one another, which helped me to understand better and adjust my work experiences to the demands of the course's language.

Mel explained the support she gained from being a member of a study group of friends:

> We pulled together and worked as a team. We all did our own individual work but we encouraged each other and we stressed out together and we de-stressed together and then we stressed again and then we de-stressed again. When someone went off the rails a bit we pulled them into line and, yes, we really were like a team.

Della's class participation helped her to feel more comfortable at university.

> I felt fairly alienated I guess. I felt that I didn't know anyone here and during the first tutorial groups everyone was keeping to themselves. After two or three weeks people were starting to get a bit comfortable and chatty. I'm usually a person who chats to anyone, so after that started, I felt comfortable.

Participation in a group helped Brad overcome his unease in the new environment:

> Interaction is the only way you overcome anxiety.

Gregor recognised that his participation in a group contributed to his ability to communicate effectively, assisting him to develop analytical and critical skills:

> ...you have to be able to know how to communicate in all different sorts of environments, to get help with subject content. So, the more you're able to communicate well in a group, the more you'll take advantage of brainstorming, of getting more out of the group and learning more from it. It is a critical skill, very definitely. If you can't work with your colleagues, then you're going to lose your argumentative communication skills, and that will very definitely determine a fail, where you might have passed if you had those skills.

Della reflected that class participation helped her maintain concentration:

> Instead of a teacher standing at the front and teaching and you wander off, everyone's saying something. People putting a different perspective on things keeps your attention and you can see its relevance.

Yan reflected that group participation increased his self-confidence:

> You feel like you're contributing something that the teacher probably wouldn't and the other people in your class don't want to, so I think it's a plus for everyone. I think it helps your own self-esteem when you get it right.

Mel considered that it enhanced her engagement with the course content:

> I think that it really helps you mainly because you can ask questions and receive answers. You can question what's being said or add some personal experience that someone else can benefit from. I think things stick into your mind more too.

Mel's observation illustrates how, in a discussion, students momentarily become 'expert', the teacher, in the classroom.

Jon's successful transition to the Con was also positively influenced by his ability to participate in a group. First, in one subject Jon had to put together a band, 33 1/3, and do a gig, an exercise that acted as an icebreaker, helping him to feel more connected to the Con – so much so that during the summer break Jon toured Papua New Guinea and America with friends from the Con. Jon commented:

> I was astounded to be standing in Times Square with 2 Con friends when at the beginning I wondered how am I ever going to be friends with these guys?

Secondly, Jon became a significant member of the first year vocalist group:

> At end of first year I was friends with all first year vocalists. Their mothering instincts had something to do with wanting to help me and to be a friend to me...wanting me **not** to be excluded.

Both of these connections helped Jon to feel a part of the Con community, so much so that his second year there was a boom year. Jon won an academic award and, although he worked 12/15-hour days at university:

> ...it felt good to work hard all day. More and more students knew me and knew my work, which helped me to build networks/connections. I became a 'big man' on campus, which helped me develop a real sense of belonging.

Interestingly, many Group A participants volunteered to participate in university committees/teams. Yan became a student representative in the Nursing Faculty:

> I began to feel more part of the uni when I took on the second year reps job. Somebody has to do it and have a voice with the faculty. By sitting in these meetings, even though we don't get much of a say, you hear about what's happening from the Faculty side of things. Plus, all the students come with all their concerns – sometimes they're valid, sometimes they're just stressed out people who are having a bit of a whine about how things aren't really good for them – and you have to make them feel more confident.

Mel and Gary also volunteered for representative duties. Gary was elected onto the USQ Student Guild. Gary had alluded to this goal in his first interview: the way the place is run as far as student services, I would like to get involved in that. Mel became President of a Marketing Group, formed by the Faculty of Business' Marketing Department. That Mel later secured employment as a Marketing Officer at USQ may have also been influenced by her participation in this group, for example, in contributing to the development of her leadership and group skills and by corroborating her initiative.

Overall, participants identified that the competency of participating in a group contributed to increasing their feelings of connection, confidence, motivation and concentration. The competency also assisted participants to achieve better results, to overcome anxieties, to resolve problems and difficulties, and to more effectively engage with the course content.

7.3.3.3 Risks

The risks of not participating in a group, or of not being provided with opportunities to participate, were also present in participants' testimonies:

> I just did x unit and hated it. There were no tutorials at all and it was horrible. I didn't have people around that I could talk to and complain to and this affected my confidence and study. (Della)

Andy, who had previously and unsuccessfully attempted external study, argued that this failure was due to the lack of class participation. Andy felt that being an on-campus student helped him considerably:

> It is because I'm now internal, and I have got the access to the people that are going through the same things that I am.

Gary contrasted on-campus participation with the external mode of enrolment he had experienced in the TPP course he had completed:

> When I was doing TTP I didn't know anyone from here. When studying externally you can't relate to the university as well, you can only relate to your course.

Overall, the participants' accounts revealed the risks of either not participating or of not having the opportunity to participate. Their testimonies support the contention that, for some students, participation assists them to study more effectively.

7.3.3.4 Complexities

As was the case with seeking help and information, the competency of participating in a group is more complex than at first appears. Its use reflects differences in value orientations and in individual and cultural practices. Della discussed its complexities:

> I've done it, but I'm not really comfortable because of my age and my upbringing. I was actually a shy kid and there wasn't a lot of class participation. The teacher just stood up there and wrote it on the blackboard and you wrote it down. So I felt uncomfortable to start with, but it has become easier as I went along.

Yan commented about the negative views he held about participating in a group:

> Hate that. I really don't like it. I think most students hate it. The moment the lecturer or the tutor says 'ok, now I want you to break into four groups' everyone goes into some mental turn off.

There are also the difficulties that stem from the clash between collective and individualist orientations. Lucy provided an example of the cultural clashes that can arise:

> Don't tell people your grades if you get higher, as some people get jealous and visually upset. In the military, if you do well, it's seen as the group doing well due to the level of teamwork. However, at university, some people get quite upset and threatened if you get a higher score. I believe this demonstrates that uni is more individually competitive and does not value collective teamwork.

Della suggested that one of the difficulties for AES is that class participation was not a teaching methodology routinely used when they were at school. Her anecdote demonstrates the deficiencies she felt in her level of academic capital:

> It was not something that was ever done much when I was at school. It was only the same students over and over. It wasn't something that was encouraged and we did not do the oral presentations in front of the class that are the norm today.

There are differences in learning styles which impact on students' affinity with this competency. Whereas Dan felt that learning is between me and the people who are teaching me – a notion that ironically embodies a team approach – he was not comfortable with teamwork per se:

> I don't see any way – unless someone can show me a valid reason – where group work helps me?

Although Gary acknowledged the value of group participation, he also revealed some of the difficulties he had in participating in class:

> It's pretty vital, especially at tutorials if you've got a point to say or when you've got a make a presentation. I struggle at talking in groups though. If I haven't got a clear mind or when I don't know what I'm talking about or if I get a bit anxious I tend not to say what I mean – I get all muddled and they don't know what I'm talking about.

While some participants expressed an initial anxiety about participating in class, they also documented their increasing confidence in their capacity to participate in class:

> The ability to put my hand up in class and answer a question is really important. I still shake when I stand up and talk and risk ridicule but I feel a lot more confident in myself now. Once I get relaxed I'm right, I participate more and I stick my hand up and just do it. It's just a matter of getting comfortable with the people you are with. Once I'm comfortable, then I can open up more.

The emphasis that some discipline areas place on group work tangentially affected participants' skills in group participation. Jon observed that different teaching styles had an impact on class participation/interaction:

In my computing course I didn't make any friends at all. You recognise faces and maybe nod, but I wouldn't have spoken more than five to ten words the whole semester to people in my computing tutorial. But in some units, especially Communication and Scholarship, opportunities were provided for a lot of group work and class interaction. I'm going to miss going to those tutorials because everyone was there and talking.

Fine-tuning the socio-cultural competency to the particular group is also an important feature of effective group work. Yan explained how one of his groups operated:

I'm in a study group with two others. We go over the previous week's lectures, mainly to know the facts. There's not a lot of analysis in it, we have a whole swag of questions, and we work them out between us and it sticks in your mind then. I'm sure it helps because you don't know what you don't know. So when you study on your own, you don't know what you should really be looking at. Whereas somebody else will say, 'Well, what is so-and-so'? Everyone knows different bits of the puzzle and they all fit together when you study as a group.

Overall, participants revealed the complexities underpinning the use of the competency of participating in a group. Participants also reflected how differences in value orientations and in individual and cultural practices either enhanced or inhibited their use of the competency. However, despite the difficulties some participants have, their testimonies reveal its role in assisting them to negotiate the university culture.

7.3.3.5 Group Assignments

Group assignments, both summative and formative, are a form of assessment increasingly used in a range of discipline areas. Their use reflects the prominence given to the development of teamwork in university mission statements, which in turn reflect changes in organisational structure (from hierarchical to flat and thus increasingly incorporating team approaches). Lucy, in science, and Yan, in nursing, presented with group assessments in the first year, perceived the important role of effective communication in group-tasks:

In many experiments during my science degree, it was necessary to conduct the experiment in a group setting, with each person tasked with a particular part of the experiment, and the results pooled together for interpretation. If communication was a problem, then the experiment efficiency and precision would suffer, hence the result would be poor. (Lucy)

In 1998, *Communication and Scholarship* had an assessment item based on teamwork: a joint essay and oral presentation. Participants regarded this assignment both positively and negatively. Eric discussed its potential for assisting him to gain feedback:

That's probably the one assignment that I felt comfortable about. Because I had other people I could bounce ideas off as well.

Jon reflected that the group assessment had increased his sources of social contact:

The fact that we had to do the group assignment first off and we were forced into it I thought was really good because you're forced, I mean, it made us work together and from then on we just clicked. Our *Communication and Scholarship* group is getting together this weekend although the course has finished.

The group assignment positively influenced Della's learning practices:

I got going with the group from *Communication and Scholarship*. We met in the library numbers of times and I asked them any questions I had.

Eric felt that class group work had facilitated his participation comfort in class:

I feel a lot more comfortable in class now. It probably happened the week or two after I had the first group assignment.

Other participants, however, felt disadvantaged by having to submit group assignments:

Most group contacts were positive, but there were a few whereby it was negative. For instance when other students do not want to co-operate and make an effort to participate, yet are happy to receive the high grade that the others in the group worked hard for. This situation is unfair, however eventually the person who does not co-operate loses, as they never develop the skills of teamwork and success. In the future their work will suffer and their careers will not progress as easily as the hard working members of the group. **(Dan)**

Dan, Lucy and Yan experienced problems with group assignments:

No disrespect to you, or anyone else, but this idea of group activity, I don't think it's necessary. I think I can get as much experience from doing that particular subject on my own, as I can from getting it with a group. **(Dan)**

In several assignments, we had 'free-loaders'. They had their names on the assignment yet did not contribute to the assignment. This happened in Biochemistry II, Microbiology and Communication and Scholarship. **(Lucy)**

Just doing the essay we've done, I mean it was so hard to get people together, people would say we'll be there, and they wouldn't turn up or you'd read somebody's submission and think, this is crap! And yet you can't tell them it's awful, or it's only awful in your mind, other people look at it and say yea that's good. So it is really hard to get on with people. **(Yan)**

However Yan, although begrudgingly, also acknowledged the value of group assignments:

Even when everyone is so different, I think that's a valuable skill and you use it in the work place a lot.

Some participants expressed personal concerns about their participation in group assignments. Eric, uncertain of his skills, was worried that he would let the group down:

> I think the group assignment was good,. I mean, as long as it doesn't as the other people don't drag me down with my studies or I don't drag them down. I'm not really worried about the other people I'm more worried about whether I can keep up?

Mel was conscious of the difficulties involved, especially for AES balancing multiple responsibilities:

> Outside distractions from full group members can be a bit difficult, because everyone has something going on outside of university, and those factors need to be identified. Like you don't need to know what they are in people's personal lives, but you do need to have an appreciation that these things are going on.

Linda had a bad experience in the group assignment, which impacted on her confidence:

> I had a major problem with a group in Communications and Scholarship. We were divided into a group of four, then one of our group pulled out. The other two in the group were third year students and I was the only first year student. We went over to Brad's place and worked on the computer and what I had written was totally ripped to shreds. I knew what I had was not in an academic style of writing, but it said exactly what it needed to say, except it wasn't written with big words. So they proceeded to basically pull it apart, and virtually said that 'well, you don't want the teacher to think that you're a grade ten student'. They knocked my confidence down a lot. I left their place virtually in tears and was ready to give it all up. But then I said 'no, I'm not going to let them stand in my way'.

According to the participants' testimonies, collaborative assignments provided both negative and positive consequences for their study efforts. That many graduates will be expected to work collaboratively nevertheless corroborates the key nature of this competency for both university practice and future professional practice.

7.3.3.6 Looking Back: Participating in a Group

Group participation, despite its complexities, emerged from participants' stories as a key skill of engagement. The participants confirmed that group participation enhanced their connections with the university culture, promoted their capacities to think analytically and to engage more deeply with new subject matter, enabled them to do better academically, assisted them to be more confident, and equipped them to communicate more effectively. Improving their group skills not only helped participants to gain cultural literacy, it contributed also to their critical thinking and questioning, supporting Boud's (2001) contention that strategies such as collaborative learning and reflection-in and reflection-on

learning are important in enhancing the students' clinical decision making skills in practice. According to participants, the competency helped to develop their engagement with and reflection about the task or project being accomplished. Participants' accounts also gave credence to the claim that group assessment can have an important role in facilitating students' capacities to use and demonstrate this competency. However participants also identified the complexities in the competency's use, especially in relation to cultural differences and to personality and individual differences.

7.3.4 Making Social Contact

7.3.4. Introduction

The importance and benefits of the socio-cultural competency of making social contact, reviewed in the literature review in section 3.4.4.4, were palpable in the participants' university journeys. Again, making social contact is, prima facie, a simple competency. However its socio-cultural properties complicate participants' use of making social contact, both individually and culturally. Making social contact is also a competency overlooked in terms of its positive impact on students' capacity to persevere and succeed academically. This section will analyse the competency's (a) importance, (b) complexities, and (c) socio-cultural properties.

7.3.4.2 Importance

The importance of making social contact value cannot be disputed – its benefits recurring throughout participants' stories:

> The most helpful support at university was the friends I made. (Mel)

> Friends are crucial in getting the best out of you. (Linda)

> You've got to establish a support network of other students, both fellow students coming in and with other students who are either switching from finished bachelors to postgraduate studies or finishing postgraduate studies or just further along in your course. You can gain knowledge and a level of expertise higher than your own because they know more about the subject than you do. Making social contacts also, in conversation with professional staff, is important too. They're trained to help you. The better the network, the better you can make contact and conversation with staff and students. (Gregor)

Participants identified the importance of making social contact in relation to generating feelings of confidence and connection. Their testimonies give credence to the literature

(Kantanis 2000; Tinto 1998; Yorke 2000). They support, for example, Stuart Hunter's (1996) assertion that 'joiners are stayers'.

> Because, before [you meet friends] you are just one person and you're drifting around. If you're not friends with other people who are part of the university I don't think you could ever feel part of the uni. **(Yan)**

> I think making social contact and social conversation needs to be done because there is a life outside of university, and to truly fit in, you need to have the ability to say "G'day mate, how ya going" and forget about the subject, and talk about other things ... personal interest and that sort of stuff.... It's having that link, even talking about the university per se. **(Andy)**

> The ideas that students are willing to make friends with people they've never seen before and know nothing about made it easier, made me feel at home and not so alone and out of place and resulted in lower levels of stress. It is a good foundation. It's like getting off on the right foot, a good start which makes for a good learning environment. **(Gregor)**

> It's a very necessary part of university life. Eventually, as a student, you need to make social contact as you cannot exist as a lone student for a complete degree and make no social contact whatsoever. It is also important as you can make your own study groups and work together to help each other understand subject material. It is also a comfort to know that other students also have the same queries as yourself and so as a group you can address the lecturer for further assistance. It is also therapeutic as a student to have conversation with other students as you have a lot in common, and it can make the study day more enjoyable. Hence you are emotionally happier and university 'ups and downs' can be easier to navigate around when you can share common experiences and insights with other students. It's like having a family. It gives you the strength to belong. **(Lucy)**

Friends helped Will adjust to university:

> I was lucky when I came here because I already knew a couple of people. They were a foothold into a social group, and then you start to meet a few more. At the start it's just a matter of holding on, just keep chipping away at it, until you become used to it. Friends are actually very important...partly as a support group, because a lot of them do the same subjects as well as have previous experience in different units, so they can help you pass. It also helps you enjoy yourself. At work places where I haven't really got along with the people, it's just a misery to keep turning up everyday. I think the ability to fit into university, the social scene, having friends there, surpasses your academic skills or your intellect. Regardless of how smart you are, if you don't enjoy coming, you're not going to do well.

Brad considered the support of friends very highly. As a result of his participation in *ExcelL* Brad forged a strong study relationship with Jim and Mel:

> You've got to have other people around to support each other. I don't want to overrate it, but it's probably one of the most effective aids in learning. It's a crucial thing to have relationships with some people, as in friendships and study, whether you call it a study relationship, or a learning circle.

Brad's friendship with Jim was instrumental in helping Brad to feel more confident about his university studies:

> There are only a handful of people who I really interact with...Jim's one of them. He's one of the fellows that I ran into earlier on. I have a lot of things in common with him. Having a couple of other people that are in the same boat as you are definitely helps because you can talk about your problems.

Social contact, as well as his social support network, helped Gregor's connection to and enjoyment of university:

> I think university is the best thing I've ever done. It's great, I'm enjoying it, I enjoy the friends I've made and will continue to make, I enjoy the rewards and benefits of knowing I can do something that previously I didn't think I could do. The social contact is a very big motivator. It might be more difficult to have a motivation to keep going otherwise. It makes a big difference having friends so you don't feel so out of place, and also having that support network to draw from.

Making social contact assisted Gary, Dell and Linda to settle in to university life:

> Just to talk about experiences, just to share with someone. Because if you don't feel wanted by anyone you can become a bit of a recluse and I don't think that's too healthy for anyone. (Gary)

> If you know their name and they are willing to stop and have a five minutes chat with you, or you are walking back to the car and have a chat, that's important because that feels like you are not alone. (Linda)

That some of these links, with both mature age and younger students, were facilitated by class interaction and group assignments supports the role played by group participation (see previous section) as well as the dynamic relationship between the competencies:

> I guess it's the friendships that I've formed and the acceptance from the other students: because mature-age students seem to attract other mature-age students. One good thing about the *Communication and Scholarship* class was going into a group and working together. Even though that it had its difficulties, it was very good in establishing friendships with younger ones.

Social contact helped Andy overcome the potential barrier of his age:

> It helped me overcome the barrier of my age. In our communication class Liz was mature age, so were Peta and Leisha. I thought there'd be a problem because I'd be surrounded by 18 and 19-year-old boys and girls. Now I don't feel like I'm sticking out or anything. The only real thing I've been part of is this circle of people

surrounding the subject, as I don't play sport or any extra-curricular activities. So really anything to do with people certainly helps. Because when you first start off, you think you're the only person going through the upheaval of going from work to a schooling career. I think that one third of passing is making friends and talking to people. A third is your peers, a third is your own personal input and the other third are your teachers and friends.

Eric reflected that social contact helped him to see beyond his own point of view:

No man is an island. Because they've been through the same thing that you've been through, they may have a different view about the subject. Because once you're in a situation you can only see one way out and they might able to give you a different view on something and approach it from a different angle.

Brad felt that social support might help his wife, at home with a 20-months-old daughter, to feel less threatened by her husband studying on-campus:

I just want her to have interaction. I don't know if there are any groups or anything like that. I'd like her to meet people.

Making social contact also develops more sources and resources of help, especially in difficult economic times, as a student in one of my classes illustrates:

On my first day I didn't know anyone at the university. I had only one lecture and I spent the rest of the day in a frustrating attempt to track down books. I printed the booklists for my three units on the website and I had been shocked by the prices. It was up for about $370 (after the student discount). I went to the bookshop and discovered I needed a student card so I went to the Student Guild to get one. There I discovered they had a second-hand booklist. I went through it and found not one single title I needed. Then I spent over an hour going through second-hand book ads on noticeboards. I found only one book and made several unsuccessful attempts to call the number. Then I went to the bookshop and tried to decide how many books I could afford to buy. On my second day, after one lecture, another student began a conversation with me as we left the room. We went to the refectory for a coffee and three of her friends joined us and introduced themselves. They were very interested in which units I was taking and who my lecturers were. They volunteered all sorts of useful information and advice. Between them all, they also offered me almost all the books I needed second hand, either cheap or free. We exchanged names and numbers, and I picked up the books over the next few days for a total of $50. I later found that both the books for one unit were available free, on loan, from the lecturer. I bought only two books new from the bookshop for $120. Now I can't lift my backpack.

These kinds of experiences recur in university discourses. In a graduation edition of the USQ magazine, a female, mature-age student who won a University Medal, commented:

At first I was completely confused doing full time study but I wanted to be a teacher and Alex [my husband] was emotionally very supportive – I absolutely couldn't do

it without him. Also I made a good group of friends and we often met at the coffee shop to talk over things and help each other along.

Social contact helped Mel form a group of study buddies:

We seemed to go through the same sort of problems and hiccups around the same time so we all had an appreciation of what the other person was going through. Instead of feeling like 'oh my God, how can this happen, what's going on with me', we had a sense of, this is just a time that this happens and we're stressed out at the moment and we can read off each and get a little bit of benefit off each other because we're buddies. We just end up having a bit of a laugh and a drink, which is probably exactly what we needed.

Eric identified the benefits of study groups:

You get feedback about what they're doing and what they've been through it as well. Also, if somebody says they're really struggling with something and I found it quite easy, then that gave me a bit of a boost. It's very important, because if you get positive feedback it shows that you're doing the right thing and that everything is working out.

Critically, in the light of the increasing diversity of the study profile, making social contact can also help students communicate with different cultural groups:

I've started meeting some of the overseas students and that's helped because they make up a large part of the population here.

Gary reflected that making social contact was important in getting involved:

Get involved with everything, like the ExcelL Program, you meet people from other countries – you just get to know new people and experience stuff like that.

Gary's sense of alienation was reduced by his participation in a university soccer team.

I went away to the uni games and that helped. I didn't know the blokes in the team beforehand and then I was socialised with them for the whole week. I was also coaching the girl's team, so I can relate to them better too now.

Gary's comment illustrates the connections between group participation and making social contact. Social contact also enabled participants to seek out mentors:

My one-hour lesson with teacher not only helped technical skills but helped 'shape me as a person'. I got to go to her house and became friends with her family. She became a mentor and took me away to a gig on Magnetic Island. (Jon)

Eric could see many benefits of making social contact:

...if you need support from other students or if you need to find out information. It's always good to get on well with people in authority. If you need help, they're more readily available. As well, the more contact you have with people, the more ideas you get, the more views on a situation you might have or they might have a solution to a

problem that you've got with administration or courses or books. For instance, textbooks, they may know someone? If you came across somebody who's in the same situation as yourself, if they've persevered through it, you can probably get valuable information from them too.

Participants' accounts confirm the importance of making social contact. The competency assisted participants to generate feelings of confidence and connection, adjust to university, feel more confident, overcome potential barriers, develop sources and resources of help, form study partners and study groups, find mentors, get involved in university life and reduce alienation. A heady list!

7.3.4.3 Complexities

Like the other socio-cultural competencies, making social contact is complex. Underpinning its use are the socio-cultural properties stemming from differences in cultural and value orientations, personality styles and personal circumstances. Dan, for example, was not personally comfortable with making social contact nor did he see any benefits for him personally:

I don't believe that I need any other student to help me get my degree. The interaction with students is a social thing. I'm well and truly past the social life! I already have a social life. I made the decision right from the start – I wasn't here to make friends. I'm here to study, and that's what I'm doing.

Dan's view supports recent research that indicates that the emphasis on providing opportunities for on-line discussion groups may be off-putting for those students who are uncomfortable and/or who do not have the time to participate in such activities (a situation that is also affected by the numbers of hours that students are engaged in full-time or part-time employment) (Postle 2003). Weinstein (1991) and Lander et al. (1995) recognise the complexities sometimes involved in group work both in and out of class, arguing group activities bring together students with different interests and abilities and place social demands on them that some are poorly-equipped to handle (Weinstein 1991). Yet despite this, Lander et al. (1995) contend that the benefits clearly outweigh such problems, since they give students invaluable opportunities to learn how to deal with such common social problems and to develop the skills to overcome them.

Brad notes the benefits (in this case in finding part-time work) of making social contact when he discusses his wife and her participation in a playgroup:

> She's becoming pretty good friends with one or a couple of them there and has started working for one of them, part time, in a catering service. She's gone and done a function with them and they want her back whenever they can.

However, Brad also notes some of the complexities involved (arising from the socio-cultural capital the couple brought with them from their rural background):

> She doesn't really enjoy it because she's an outdoors person and she doesn't like to be thrown in with a bunch of housewives who just go on about a heap of rubbish about children. That's not her style, like she's got rodeo but it's not like a real social thing.

Participants' mid-year entry status also created complexities for participants in relation to making social contact. Some participants, for example, Jon, Della and Linda, were enrolled in core courses as a means of being admitted to faculty-specific courses the next semester: *Communication and Scholarship, Introductory Computing, Australia, Asia and the Pacific and Data Analysis.* Participants perceived that their enrolment in these courses prevented them from forming friendships with students in their potential faculty:

> I'm just doing the core subjects, whichever major I decide to take if I'm here next year; I've really got no doubt that (social contact) will happen. **(Jon)**

Linda also commented about the difficulties of undertaking core courses:

> The major barrier at the moment is that I'm doing core courses. With these, you go to class with people who are from all different backgrounds and they go off back to their Bachelors. That's where I find it really hard, because I'm not meeting enough people from the Bachelor of Nursing. And because you're a year behind everyone, they don't want to know you.

Gender played a role in the capability to making social contact. Gary, revealing his ambivalence about making social contact, alluded to the complexities posed by gender differences in the university context:

> Blokes are all right, chicks [girls] I think they're just a little bit shy. I haven't got too many friends here – it doesn't worry me so much, but I wish I had more.

Yan was concerned about the aspect of gender differences in his nursing course:

> The majority of students in my year are young women (there's only 10 or 12 men in the whole 240 initial intake) so I had the feeling that they might think that I'm some sort of dirty old man trying to latch on to some young thing, rather than just wanting to be friends and talk about the course.

Brad, who was younger, presents another perspective of this issue:

> I'm at uni and I'm meeting people and a lot of people are younger, and a lot are girls. So that's something which I'm having to deal with as I've got to be sensible – I don't see a bunch of nice looking girls and go 'oh look at them'…that could automatically pose as a problem for me.

This situation eventually interrupted Brad's ability to concentrate on his study:

> If something gets on your mind, it takes up a lot of your thoughts and basically you can't concentrate on much else.

Brad's wife, isolated at home in a new environment with a young child, was threatened by her attractive and personable husband's ability to make friends – particularly with young female students. This wasn't helped by Brad's participation in *ExcelL*.

> I think that's one thing about ExcelL, by just doing the role-playing, you find out more perhaps [about others]. It is far more informal than most classes.

Brad's comments make transparent the *ExcelL's* program capacity to forge deeper relationships among the participants.[48] This situation was compounded by Brad's wife's insecurity about being surrounded by 'educated people' and by younger, attractive women:

> It's omething that really affects her because she said it feels as if everyone around me is educated, and she feels uneducated. She went to grade 12, but she did miss out earlier on in life when she did primary school by correspondence. Her schooling wasn't given the priority it should have been and that really does have long, far-reaching ramifications. She's quick witted and a really quick learner, for example, on the computer she'll learn quicker than I will.

Their partner's insecurity was apparent in other participants' accounts of their university experiences. Della's marriage broke down and Linda's relationship with her husband changed. Eric also commented on the individual and personality differences that can affect students' use of the competency of making social contact:

> It's just that most of the time I don't want to and I'm pretty a solitary person.

Financial circumstances played a role in participants' capability to make social contact. Eric's continuing financial problems restricted his capacity to make social contact:

> I don't really have a social life with anyone at the moment, but I would like to just to get out and relax more with people in the same situation. When I get more money, I'm going to start going to the gym.

Full-time or part-time work hindered some participants' abilities to make social contact. Mel and Shaz's accounts confirm the negative affects that financial hardship and the growing needs to work have on students' capacities to make social contact. These accounts confirm McInnis's (2003) discussion relating to students' increasing disengagement with university, a consequence of students' work commitments.

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[48] As a facilitator of the program I was party to this aspect of the program on many occasions, sometimes between members of the opposite sex.

7.3.4.4 Socio-cultural Properties

Again, there are cultural differences/variations in the ways that different cultural groups approach making social contact. These socio-cultural properties confirm the importance of socially and culturally fine-tuning the competency of making social contact to the group, situation or task at hand, in particular fine-tuning the use of the competency to specific verbal and nonverbal behaviours and cultural practices. For instance, there are choices about the topics used to initiate conversation. In some cultures some subjects are 'taboo' and their use would lead to communication breakdown, if not offense. In Australia, personal topics, for example the cost of a car or house, are taboo topics whereas in other cultures, for instance some Asian cultures, these topics help to establish the basis for a relationship. Preparation and observation are again important considerations in the use of this competency. Yan considered that:

> We tended to gravitate together, we'd meet at the coffee shop and I'd get to know people better. The coffee shop was about the only way I got to meet people and know people because I wasn't confident enough just to go up to people in the class and say, 'how would you like to go for a coffee'? I thought they'd probably turn around and say, 'who are you'?

Yan's comment confirms the role of areas like the coffee shop or the refectory in facilitating social contact, supporting Dearn's (1996) assertion that the provision of social spaces is critical in facilitating students' connections and networks. Taking advantage of networking opportunities is also important. For example, by attending tele-tutorials and/or additional experience programs (such as *ExcelL*, or supplemental instruction/peer assisted courses). Linda initiated a study group during tele-tutorials conducted for the TPP course.

Andy discussed the advantages of living in college for making social contact. Andy advised students to:

> ...try and get as much as they can out of university, join everything you can. I understand that in the colleges there are many more opportunities available to do extra-curricular activities than there are for someone in my position. The only way you're going to meet people, the only way that you can really submit yourself to university society is by joining everything you can and by getting stuck into it.

Alternatively, Brad used his observation skills of both verbal and nonverbal behaviours to identify like-minded people in his courses:

> After the lecture I wanted to see the tutor about some question and Jim was there before me and he was asking questions and I could hear him talking. You can see

where someone is coming from pretty quickly when you hear them talk and I detected that he was obviously from a rural and business background. I'm interested in business and you have to have contacts. I just approached him when we walked out and we ended up talking nearly all day.

Classrooms also provided opportunities to make social contact. Eric talked to people sitting next to him in class, *when I couldn't do something, I'd just ask them.* Although Eric wasn't comfortable, he had considered the strategies he would use, noting the socio-cultural 'rules' often in place. *I don't like interrupting people, but I always say excuse me and thank you, and that tends to help.* Jon felt that it was easier to make friends at university:

Everyone's got a common interest and that is getting through their course and a lot of the time everyone's got the same problems and the same stresses. So if you can talk to someone and they say 'oh I'm so stressed about this', you think 'oh good! At least I'm not the only one'.

Participants' accounts confirm the importance of socially and culturally fine-tuning the competency to the group, situation, or task being engaged, in particular in relation to specific verbal and nonverbal behaviours and cultural practices. The accounts also support the assertion that the provision of social spaces and opportunities are critical in enhancing students' connections and networks.

7.3.4.5 Looking Back: Making Social Contact

Participants revealed that making social contact assists students in useful ways. The competency generates sources of support as well as increasing the resources students can use to brainstorm solutions or to solve problems. It can assist in developing networks, mentors, friends, partners and a 'significant other', confirming research literature which emphasises its importance in relation to career, work and promotion (see section 3.4.4.4) corroborating the efficacy of the saying 'it is not what you know but whom you know'.

Participants' accounts confirm that there are many opportunities for making social contact in the university setting but that these also depend on individual and cultural conditions. Participants verify that university policy and practice have a role to play in facilitating this capacity – for example by providing public spaces conducive to social contact. That social contact can also be facilitated by participation in a group, for example, in group assignments or class group work (see previous section) also implies that academics have a role to play – in both curriculum design and class activities – in enhancing students' use of the competency of making social contact. That the mature-age status of participants

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enhanced their capacities to use this competency reinforces the role that universities and academics can play in providing 'safe' environments and ensuring opportunities for the students who may be less skilled in its use, such as SL and international students.

Making social contact also emerges as a useful competency, assisting participants to engage university literacies and discourses. Participants' stories revealed that its use assists in forming chat/discussion groups, study groups, study partners, learning circles and mentors as well as 'networking' opportunities and connections in and out of class. That the competency of making social contact is sensitive to socio-cultural and personality properties, however reveals the complexities underlying its use in the university context.

7.3.5 Seeking and Offering Feedback

7.3.5.1 Introduction

The three competencies – seeking help and information, participating in a group and making social contact – provide students with a means of accessing and engaging university literacies and discourses. The final socio-cultural competencies – seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request – provide students with a means of mastering and demonstrating these discourses and literacies. The competencies are more complex, however, and their use, for some students, may be fraught with difficulties, in particular in situations where there are unequal power relationships (for example between academics and students). However these competencies are also the ones that enable students to set boundaries, make a stand and take more control of their learning practices.

This section analyses the competencies of seeking and offering feedback, whereas section 7.3.6 examines the competencies of expressing disagreement and refusing a request. The strands given prominence in this section include (a) seeking feedback, (b) offering feedback, (c) accepting constructive feedback, and (d) complexities.

7.3.5.2 Seeking Feedback

The socio-cultural competency of seeking feedback is similar to the practice of seeking help and information. Students need to be able to ask lecturers for advice on how to improve a draft plan or the structure or body of an assignment to ensure that their understanding is in accord with those of academics (or markers). A student in one of my

classes wrote in a 'thank you' letter (which in itself is a form of feedback, often collected or solicited by the academics in their quest for tenure/promotion):

> Thank you for taking the time to look at and give me feedback on my drafts and assignments. Your support and advice was crucial to my understanding and to my development as a student but best of all helped me to attain better marks. The emphasis you placed on understanding what was expected and sticking to the topic assisted my interpretation of the question. As a first year it was difficult to know if I was on the right track so your help reduced my fears and guided my actions.

This letter reveals some of the complexities of seeking feedback. Academics need to mindful of the possibility of 'sucking up' and/or of hearing 'what they want to hear', especially in relation to their teaching 'prowess'. In addition, seeking feedback is dependant on students' capacities to plan ahead, to undertake preliminary lead-up work, and to be willing to accept perhaps negative feedback about their efforts (see also section 7.3.5.4).

Nevertheless, participants' accounts illustrate the benefits of seeking feedback. For example, feedback assisted participants to achieve better assignment marks:

> Asking lectures and tutors about assignments, and why I might have got marked down here, and what I did wrong, and why? Or what I didn't necessarily do wrong, but what I could have done better, and why – and the reasoning behind that. For example I asked my land-use lecturer about why I only got a pass mark - my worst mark – for an assignment, and I was given the feedback that it was because I wrote the assignment in too formal a structure, and that they expected a much less formal piece of writing, so that's why I got marked down heavily. I wouldn't have known what I had done wrong if it was not for that feedback...It definitely would have made a difference. On that occasion I didn't get feedback before I handed in the assignment, but in a number of anthropology assignments I did get feedback about what the lecturer was looking for in terms of an answer/solution. I picked up marks there by listening to the lecturer's recommendation where I might have got a lower mark if I had not listened. So it can make a very big difference. **(Gregor)**

Feedback helped Mel pass assignments:

> On drafts I find that it is very helpful, excellent! If, after your first or second draft you show it somebody and it's very wrong, that can be the difference between a pass or a fail.

Feedback assisted Mel in dealing with *Data Analysis*, a difficult course for her:

> I think you're mad if you don't get feedback, because there are marks there just for that little bit of effort. Go in there and they say 'this is right, this is wrong or redo this'. I mean, it is definitely crucial.

Andy reflected that seeking feedback was a crucial part of assignment development:

Feedback is very important! Again, with that Government assignment I did. Without the feedback saying 'your referencing is wrong', it could well have continued the way it was. They also helped me with the headings, to expand certain parts, and discuss them more, or cut back on certain other topics. And again, feedback helped me in relation to writing assignments. I had this 1500 word assignment and to fit everything in, it took me up to 3000 words. So I took it to the tutor, and she said 'cut this out, cut that out, put this in a table, put that in an illustration'. So that cut it back to about 2000 words. So feedback saved me time, it got me marks in the end. I find it's a natural part of the subject, crucial.

Feedback provided participants with a gauge about how well they are performing; a benefit that, according to Kantanis (2001), is crucial in helping students acculturate in the new university environment. Gregor provides an example:

I think both giving and seeking feedback is vital – a crucial element of our skills that we need to get along. If we don't have feedback on what we're doing, how we're communicating on our performance, whether we are achieving our objectives or not, then we don't know where we're going, we don't know if we're achieving anything or not, and we don't know where we stand.

Feedback enabled Della to feel less alienated, more confident about her abilities to study:

Feeling that I could cope with the level that was required, helped me to feel less alienated especially as the feedback on my assignments and the marks that were coming back were telling me that I'm coping.

Feedback does not only exist between students and academics. Dan and his wife worked in partnership with feedback an integral part of the relationship:

Donna and I use each other as sounding boards. I'll say, 'Listen to this and tell me what you think'. We use each other in that way. She does the same with me. I got involved by reading the texts and I helped her a lot by testing her for examination. She used me a lot for ideas for assignments. I think I learnt as much about psychology as she did, just by getting involved.

Participants' evidence confirms that seeking feedback is integral to the communication processes operating in the context of the regional university. Feedback helps students to improve their marks and provides them with a gauge about their performance. Students can then adjust more comfortably to the new environment and feel more confident as they attempt to master and demonstrate university discourses and literacies.

7.3.5.3 Offering Feedback

A parallel notion to seeking feedback is that of offering feedback (see section 3.4.4.5). This socio-cultural competency is related to providing negative or constructive feedback, a

practice that is beneficial for students. Offering feedback enables students to be more in control and to reduce stress and anxiety. Offering feedback also enables students to manage better and to more effectively align their learning environments with their needs.

Whereas the term 'negative feedback' is specifically used in the *ExcelL Program*, it is also a term clouded by negative connotations. A more appropriate and positive term would be that of 'offering feedback'. Offering feedback encompasses the concepts of being assertive, 'taking a stand', setting boundaries and taking control, concepts which are more positive. Lucy discusses the importance of offering feedback:

> It is important to be able to effectively give negative feedback in a constructive way. You need to have the skill of wording negative feedback accurately and in a politically correct way, in order to not offend the person you are communicating the negative feedback to, so that a constructive solution can be the focus of the contact and not personal offence be the focus of the conversation. It is important to address issues without upsetting people unnecessarily. It is also important to give negative feedback if things are not understood or a tutorial is not effective, as the lecturer or tutor cannot adjust the class if there is no feedback. As a student it is ultimately your own responsibility to communicate and give feedback. Developing the skill is important in order to succeed as a student. If you don't provide feedback, then you suffer in silence and get left behind the pack.

Offering feedback is integral to the development of critical engagement. Andy notes how it helps him to more critically engage the subject matter in his courses:

> Before I wasn't sure about expressing my disquiet about a subject, but now I've got the confidence to go 'nah I don't believe that'! Picking the course I don't like, Marketing and Government, if I know that something should have been raised in a field of experience that I'm familiar with, I've now got the confidence to go 'no, I've been told...' or 'I understand that this particular government situation'. I now have the confidence to question something. Before, I would have just said 'oh, ok that's fine". But now I say 'no, no, you sure?' I don't think anybody gets the idea the first time round; they need to clarify certain points.

Andy's comments suggest a way forward for AES, who often have to integrate their practical experience with the more theoretical university approaches.

The competency of offering feedback can enhance the quality of the teaching/learning environment. For example, in relation to difficulties in anticipating lecturers' requirements in the absence of a Marking Criteria Sheet, being unable to hear a lecture or read an overhead transparency/PowerPoint slide, accessing lecture notes, and overcoming the lack of constructive feedback on assignments or unexplained technical language:

If I have another lecture in the main lecture hall with the microphone not working properly I am going to say something. It makes it difficult and I'm not going to be disadvantaged. **(Della)**

The last couple of weeks we've been having tutorial presentations and the print on the overhead viewer is really small. They said, 'okay, we've got this, you can write this down', I said, 'I can't read a word of that' and they said, "oh, too bad" and carried on. It's important to give feedback because if I don't say anything, I'm not going to get the information I need. **(Yan)**

Lucy discussed the frustrations caused by inadequacies in the learning environment:

Students need to find a solution instead of just staying frustrated. The student is also responsible. If you are not happy, then you should take the initiative to do something about it. It's hard to confront some lecturers, as some do not like constructive criticism. You don't just turn up and say 'you stink'. Instead you must be constructive about your criticisms and suggest solutions.

If students feel unable to take a stand then lecturers and other staff may remain unaware of the ways in which they could do a better job. Will determined that:

...if we can't give feedback to others, then they don't know how they are relating to us, whether they are coming across in the intended meaning, or whether they are helping us to achieve our objectives. I think the skill to be able to give and receive feedback is important in knowing how we relate to others and how they relate to us, and whether our communication with each other is clear and effective, how we are going and how others can help us to do the best we can.

Della notes the disadvantages of the lack of opportunities provided for feedback:

In one unit I am studying there are no lecture notes and the examples that are given aren't explained in a way that relates back to theory. I am having difficulties learning and so are most of the other students. There is no student evaluation form so next year's students will experience the same things.

Sandy, faced with a lecturer in one of the core courses who was difficult to understand, illustrates the frustrations that students sometimes face, even when they do take a stand:

One of the subjects I'm doing at the moment has a particularly poor lecturer, and I mean a very low standard. I spend my time being frustrated – I even went to see this person in consultation time and explained what my problem was, how I was having difficulty understanding the technical information that was taught. It is the general consensus of that class that they feel the same way, but of course nobody will go and say anything. I didn't go and point particularly to her teaching style, but I asked how could I adapt my learning to better to suit that style... or could the style change to help me? The point I made was if it could help me, maybe it could help others. As a result, she asked in the tutorial what people thought of the course, and I said that I was overworked and overwhelmed, and thought that the theory was just mind-boggling, and she asked if there's anything that could be changed in the

> tut and I said, 'well, instead of just going on with all this information, why not work through the chapter, go back and relate it to something. Work through what do we know and what don't we know. Find the points at which people are struggling." She said, 'you're the only one who wants it that way". So I've decided that that subject is just one now, that if I get through, I get through. But I've reduced my expectations of myself.

Sandy's story not only illustrates how the deficit model may be operating at the grass roots of the FYE, it also demonstrates the difficulties in speaking out in the context of the unequal power/status relationships that can exist between academics/students in the hierarchical university culture. Lucy discussed her experiences:

> Overall, negative feedback was received positively, but that also depended largely on the wording of the feedback. If it was inappropriately worded, the feedback would not be received in the manner intended, and would create hostilities. However I did experience negative response to my negative feedback. I consulted a psychology PhD regarding his marking of one of my assignments. I questioned his answer regarding the vagus nerve as only controlling the heart. I had written that but also the other functions within the body, which are documented in many physiology books. I pointed this out in a positive manner however he was very negative and did not want to reconsider his marking of that question on my assignment. I sought a second opinion from the physiology lecturer and he confirmed my answer was physiologically correct. However the PhD that did the marking did not want to change his mark. I believe he felt intimidated when a student questioned his knowledge and marking. The issue was not resolved and I lost that mark.

The participants' evidence demonstrates that the competency of offering feedback is not only difficult for students it may also be frustrating in that difficulties may remain unresolved. Both Sandy and Lucy questioned assignment marks and, in both cases, academic staff rebuffed their feedback. Section 7.4 analyses discursive practices such as these operating in the university context in more depth.

In more personal circumstances, however, offering feedback assisted participants to balance collisions between relationships and study. Eric, faced with a partner who wasn't supportive of his decision to access HE, offered feedback to address the problem:

> My girlfriend still annoys me to get a job. She still doesn't think that I'm doing the right thing. I told her that I'm not thinking of the immediate or the short-term future. I'm thinking of the long-term future so that in six or seven years when I've gained my qualifications I will have a good job with a base rate of around thirty thousand dollars.

Linda, who was coping with collisions with both her mother and her children, her study and a job exhibiting at local markets, found that feedback was critical:

> I said to Mum, we'll only do one market a month, because otherwise I'll be running out of time and I'll become burnt out. So it's limiting yourself to what you can cope with, at home too. I try to get the kids to do more, so that you do not have to rush around after them all the time, keeping up-to-date with things. Otherwise, you're doing everything for everyone else and nothing for yourself.

Della also identified the need to take a stand as well as to negotiate the collisions between her family and the stresses of tertiary study:

> If you're not prepared to do it or your family isn't prepared to see less of you or demand less of you, then you need to work on that before you come.

One of the non-risk ways of providing feedback is through Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs). At USQ[49], SETs have been conducted since the mid-1990s. These are anonymous and have become compulsory. Lucy comments:

> On some validations I actually wrote my name. I didn't realise it was to be anonymous, but it didn't worry me. If they wanted to query what I wrote they were free to come and chat to me and I would validate my comments. They were not personal attacks on the person's character. Instead you must focus on what the objectives are and be constructive and positive, highlighting the areas of concern and most importantly offering constructive solutions. Always offer a solution and don't just criticise. Australians are very good at running people down and not very good at being constructive.

Participants' evidence confirms the desirability of the socio-cultural competency of offering feedback in relation to their learning and life management practices. That it is also a practice that exists in a dynamic relationship with an awareness of the power relationships operating in the university context was also apparent in participants' accounts. Section 7.4 investigates testimony that illustrates that students in a university context often find themselves at the wrong end of the power relationship.

7.3.5.4 Accepting Feedback

Participants' accounts revealed that accepting constructing, or negative, feedback is also a crucial cultural practice for students negotiating university discourses and literacies. The process of becoming familiar with the university's literacies, for example academic writing, necessarily involves the processes of accommodating feedback, if not on draft assignments

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[49] SETs constitute a main form of evidence of teaching process used in promotion rounds at USQ. However their use and format is also subject to debate.

then certainly on the assignments themselves. This capacity is accepted as a natural part of the process by many academic markers but is a difficult and sometimes confronting experience for many students. Della provides an example, which entailed 'leaving her ego at the door':

> It's like constructive criticism. It helps you to refocus or just see something from a different point of view. I have to leave my ego at the door, accept what they tell me and then change what I have written.

Yan notes the role that accepting feedback played in his learning:

> Accepting feedback is really important. I mean, if you sit down for an exam and you never hear the result, then you might as well have not have done it. You do an assignment and you think you've done wonderfully. But if you really made some basic mistakes, you need that feedback so that you can look at what you are doing and next time you won't do the same thing.

In some discipline areas feedback is of critical importance. Performing arts is one discipline where feedback is very public. Good performance brings acclaim and applause. Poor performance brings restrained praise and, perhaps, possibilities for humiliation. Thus in training for the performing arts, the capacity to receive and grow from negative feedback may be critical to a performers' ultimate success. For Jon the question of feedback was integral as studying performing arts is so personal. It is you in your entirety and you put yourself 'on the line'. People performing are vulnerable. Jon felt the Con was a very nurturing/supportive environment, an advantage in a context where feedback on performance is critical. At the Con, feedback rules are explicitly laid out, however, at USQ, the 'rules of engagement', as far as feedback is concerned, may not be as explicit, for example in relation to feedback on assignments.

Participants' accounts therefore reveal that accepting constructive feedback is a daunting prospect for many students. Participants confirm that the student role involves a continuous process of judgment/evaluation, a process requiring tact and sensitivity. However the provision and acceptance of feedback are also processes conducted in the context of unequal power configurations. These are discussed in section 7.4.3.

7.3.5.5 Complexities

Seeking and offering feedback are practices that are potentially hazardous and for that reason especially dependent on the use of appropriate socio-cultural properties:

When my land-use lecturer explains something I may not agree with it because I don't understand it or because I think there are elements that have not been explored, or I want to challenge it or give someone food for thought. In those situations I might disagree. But when you disagree with anything, naturally you do it in a very respectful, civil tone, a very polite manner and a respectful use of vocabulary. (Gary)

Offering negative feedback are often 'risky' behaviours when used in relation to a high status academic. Jon discussed the power relationships involved:

Negative feedback is harder because you think 'well I don't really want to step on their toes, I'm a student, and they are the teachers'. I think also it is important because a lot of the time if you don't tell them, they won't know. In our Communication and Scholarship lectures we talked to our tutor about whether she could have a talk to the lecturer about her lectures. She was giving out too much information and not having enough time. I think that feedback here was important.

Will discussed the complexities of offering negative feedback to a lecturer:

I wouldn't do it, because a lecturer's generally got the last say on marks and when you're giving feedback. Whether you do it properly or it's coded properly or whatever, you're still criticising them and it depends on their personality how they take it. So, I don't know, the consequences might be far-reaching.

Mel alluded to the inhibiting role time can play in offering feedback:

Is there time to offer feedback? It's nice to think that someone does it, because you have to sit down and plan it. Is there time to do that? Wouldn't it be nice to write a well thought-out letter to each department after you've completed a subject?

Timing can be a vexing issue in a university context, for example, in seeking feedback on an assignment draft. In many of the first year courses I have designed I have not only incorporated a drafting process but have also allocated marks to the process. The students who do not (or are unable to) take advantage of these 'gift' marks are inevitably those who are working, for example, nursing students working night shifts. This situation gives credence to McInnis et al.'s (2000) identification of the impact of part-time work. There are issues, therefore, in relation whether students have the time, energy and commitment to prepare and submit assignment drafts. There are also issues in relation to the costs involved for academics – whether academics have the time, energy and commitment (as well as inclination) to mark drafts as well as mark the final presentation of an assignment.

7.3.5.6 Looking Back: Seeking and Offering Feedback

The competencies of seeking and offering feedback emerge as important capabilities in the participants' repertoires. The competencies' use enabled participants to become more

critically engaged, to take more control of their learning environment, to overcome problems and hurdles, to improve communication and to reduce their anxiety and stress. However, the competencies' use is also problematic, influenced by students' socio-cultural capital as well as by the effectiveness of the interpersonal communication exhibited by both the teachers and students engaged in the teaching/learning process.

7.3.6 Expressing Disagreement and Refusing a Request

7.3.6.1 Introduction

The final key competencies relate to the competencies of expressing disagreement and refusing a request, again in socially and culturally appropriate ways. In this section, the participants' accounts of their university experiences are analysed in relation to expressing disagreement (section 7.3.6.2), refusing a request (section 7.3.6.3) and socio-cultural properties (section 7.3.6.4).

7.3.6.2 Expressing Disagreement

Participants acknowledged that the competency of expressing disagreement is vital at university. The competency assisted participants to be assertive, a key ingredient if students are to succeed. Mel, preparing for her second semester at university, put an effort into taking control of her learning needs:

> I'm getting a new car that will have air conditioning, so it will make my life a lot more comfortable. I'm getting on top of all the cleaning and household duties that seem to endlessly pile up and that nobody else seems to be able to or wants to do. I'm getting a student loan to get a computer to have it at my own house rather than having to come to down to Dad's office because I have to talk to him before I even get onto the computer, which drives me crazy and is very negative. I'm really eliminating all the negative things that hold me back, that upset me to the point where I'm still so cranky that I can't focus anymore. Then I'll be able to look forward to being an expert student.

Expressing disagreement is an essential ingredient if universities are to be induced into incorporating more flexibility into their practices, an important feature when increasing numbers of students are working part-time/full time:

> I had a few dramas organising a few things next semester because academics in different departments don't communicate with each other. I got a letter saying I couldn't do 5 units but when I questioned this they let me. (Sandy)

Sandy completed a double degree within two and a half years by taking five rather than four courses each semester and by studying semester three courses each year.

Participants reflected about the relevance of expressing disagreement in relation to their critical engagement with their course's subject matter. Gregor argued, for example:

> Expressing disagreement has a very important role because you can't agree with everything that everyone says. You must have your own opinion, your own mind, your own view, and be able to express that, and you must be able to back that up with reasons, with good supported evidence about why you think that. So argumentation skills and being able to disagree with people is very important in assignments and in communication. It does not just involve saying "I disagree". You must be able to explain 'why' in-depth, and be able to back that up with supportive evidence.

Andy commented about the competency's capacity to help him critically engage subjects:

> Expressing disagreement is having an alternative view. That is something you gain through learning at the university.

Participants' accounts revealed some of the reasons why it was important to express disagreement at university. Lucy reflected about the centrality of expressing disagreement in relation to assignment marks:

> Expressing disagreement is a vital life skill, which is essential at university. You need to have the skill to say 'no' to fellow students regarding certain requests, or to express disagreement in a positive manner to fellow students or staff. For example, if you disagree with the marking of a particular assignment, it is necessary to have skill in approaching the assessor and presenting your case for disagreement with the marks. I myself had to utilise this skill for two assignments in psychology subjects, and in both cases, my marks were upgraded. If I was too shy to approach the assessor or had no skill to express my disagreement, then my marks would have remained unchanged and my overall results would have suffered.

Will provided examples of the university's discursive practices as well as the need to be tenacious in expressing disagreement:

> I know people who handed in newspaper articles that they thought were good, they followed all the techniques, but because of the subjectivity of the marker, they haven't done as well as they thought they would. They read through it, took note of the reasons for the mark, and then, if they can find fault, they might go up and ask about it, and say 'I thought it was worth a bit more'. It teaches you to be just a bit tenacious. Because university is pretty much a bureaucracy you have to filter your way up the levels to get anything done. There's a good chance that things might get lost, or get postponed. It won't have a big effect on the university itself, but for you it might have larger consequences. If you aren't prepared to follow it up and keep pushing, then it might not get done.

Participants revealed that even when they did express disagreement, and had comprehensively planned how they would do, this there were times when their use of the

competency didn't achieve the results that participants had hoped for. Sandy's university experiences were tarnished to a large extent by her experiences when expressing disagreement about a failing grade she received. Sandy sought advice about the best ways to go about this (from both the Student Guild and Student Services) and followed all the appropriate university grievance procedures before ultimately choosing to take the matter to the Dean of the Faculty and the Vice-Chancellor. Although granted an interview by the Vice-Chancellor, Sandy was unsuccessful in overturning her failure and had to re-enrol in the course. In an email a year after she had graduated Sandy reflected about this experience:

> To find the standards of university lecturers and administrators were very low, and most with a bad attitude, was somewhat of a shock to me. When I reflect back now I suppose, to them it's a job like any other, and all others have varying degrees of dedication and application. Even my meeting with the Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of the Faculty was a disappointment - there seemed to be no incentive to deal with the issues - it was almost a session with the underlying tone to brainwash me into thinking this institution was perfect, or close to it, and how dare I speak out and say otherwise, even though my documents of complaint listed all the issues and were backed up by fact. I feel the VC and Dean were attempting to massage the truth in an endeavour to have me tone down my outspokenness.

Sandy's reflections about this experience not only reveal the consequences of expressing disagreement. They also demonstrate the intersections between expressing disagreement and the need for critical discourse awareness (see section 7.5.4).

7.3.6.3 Refusing a Request

'Saying no' is the everyday equivalent to the *ExcelL* competency of refusing a request. Saying no recurs in the participants' accounts of their university experiences. Participants found that saying no is essential in organising and maintaining a balanced timetable:

> I've got a friend who finished his exams before I did, and first thing he wants to do is go out, get drunk. But I still had exams to go to, and he can be a very persuasive person, so you have to know how to say 'no sorry, but I've got to do this'. It also comes into time management, if you've always got people trying to monopolise your time, then the impact just throws out your whole schedule. (Will)

> You should have balance in all your life – balance study with rest. You've got to work hard to achieve what you want, but at the same time, if you just keep pushing yourself beyond your limits, then you'll burn out as well. You need to mix work with play, you need to have friends and have a social life, and you need to have personal, individual pursuits and interest. No one but you can help you achieve this balance. (Gregor)

The use of the competency of refusing a request helped Brad to sustain his will power and maintain the self-discipline he needed to study effectively:

> It's no good just having a time table you also need the willpower to stick to it.

'Saying no' is essential in maintaining discipline, for example Jon took a stance not drink towards the end of his first year at the Con:

> I was playing with a guy who drank a lot and realized that the musical lifestyle was prone to self and substance abuse so I said I'm not going to do that.

Gary also provided an example of the benefits of 'saying no' to drinking:

> Like drinking habits! I tend to just socialise, it's not a night-to-night problem. But on the weekend, after soccer, I had a few beers and I was going to do an assignment the next day. I was just too tired to do anything – I did a little bit, but I found myself sleeping next to the computer and I was a day late.

Della discussed the role of saying no in assisting her to reduce stress. Della describes the strategies she would put in place in the following semester:

> I'm certainly going to make sure that I've got some time for me. I've allowed too much time to go to other people. I'm here for everyone else but not for me. I have a lot of people who talk to me...they ring me up with all these problems. I'm going to have to stop that or just cut it off to a certain extent, because I cannot have time for everyone else, and give this the full time it deserves.

Nevertheless, Della was unable to sustain this goal and, by the end of the semester, she had become stressed and her health deteriorated, impacting on her capacity to study.

Saying no is also essential in reducing anxiety in a variety of situations. Brad, faced with a personal attraction for another student, needed to provide feedback and to 'say no' in an effort to reduce the stress he was feeling, stress which was interrupting his studies:

> I confronted it and spoke to this person I like. It's something that we talk about in ExcelL - you don't know whether you're going to overstep the mark in saying anything But I like to have things on the table, I don't like just wondering about things. So I talked about it, which was very good and this other person was very good too. Basically we have much the same feelings about the rights and wrongs of it. I felt that I had to deal with it as it can have adverse effects on your studies.

The capability to refuse a request assumes significance in relation to the issue of part-time and full-time work. McInnis's (2003) research demonstrates the impact of work on students' connectedness and engagement with the university (see section 1.1.2). There are also the consequences provided for students' abilities to complete assignments and to prepare for exams as well as to organise their timetables and set aside enough time to obtain feedback on their proposals and drafts. Successful students need to express disagreement

and say 'no', for example, in the case of a nursing student refusing to work more shifts, or a business student like Shaz refusing to undertake increased work hours. In fact Shaz's inability to balance these demands has prevented her from completing her degree:

> I first attempted full time study after a number of years in the work force. During this period of time I came to realise if I wanted a high-level management job, I would need further education beyond casual business courses. Even though I enjoyed full-time study, after so many years of being financially comfortable, I found it hard not to take on work. Unfortunately the work that I seemed to take on always started as a casual position, but would end up becoming full-time. On both occasions these became senior trouble shooting management positions, one for a large national transport corporation, the other a national non-profit association. They were ideal for any business student. Even though study would have supported these positions perfectly, I found the pressure of long work hours, (14-16 hour days), bouncing around the country, 24/7 on call, often interfered with this attempt. In hindsight, I would have been better equipped to handle the stress of my work positions had I finished my degree first, or continued to study. I do not regret any of my work experiences, but I do find myself hesitating taking on any further senior management positions, without first obtaining adequate academic knowledge. I now find myself pondering which direction I wish to take, but I know that it will result in me returning to some form of study.

Shaz' work (both part-time and full-time) interrupted her studies on more than one occasion. She has again deferred study to work full-time during 2003.

Participants also revealed the role of saying no in assisting them to take control of their learning practices and to stand up for their study needs and requirements:

> To say no is definitely very important. I think the ability to say no puts you in a position of control. That is the ultimate communication, to say 'NO'. **(Andy)**

> Being able to refuse requests is very important. You might want to borrow a study book for a subject, and it's close to exams, and you might want to go through vital material in that study book and you can't always say yes, because you need to be able to stand up for yourself, and be able to draw the line - be willing to help others out, but there has to be limits and parameters. You can't just totally open yourself and sacrifice to people all the time, sometimes you just have to say no. But you can do it in a very polite, courteous manner people will usually have no problem with accepting that…in terms of home, and academic life as well. You can't say yes to everyone at home or even to professional staff and you can't say yes to every request or arrangement or appointment or plans that you make with people. So sometimes you just have to be able to refuse a request – politely decline and even mix that with offering a positive alternative. **(Gregor)**

> You are always going to get people wanting you to go out and ignore your assignment. 'Come on we'll have a wonderful time, you can do it some other time'.

> Or they are trying to borrow money because they're always short of cash, students. There are always people saying, 'oh just lend me ten bucks until next week' and then next week comes and they haven't go it. It goes on and on...so you really do need to be able to say no, but still be friendly. (Yan)

Participants' accounts reveal the centrality of refusing a request in the university context. Participants verified its capacities in assisting them to balance and maintain an effective timetable, incorporate self-discipline in relation to study and social habits, reduce stress, and take control of their learning practices and study environments.

7.3.6.4 Socio-cultural Properties

Participants' accounts illustrate, however, that the competencies of expressing disagreement and refusing a request are inherently risky, a consequence of the socio-cultural properties underpinning their use. Will reflected that expressing disagreement was a difficult and somewhat precarious competency, finely tuned to the situation:

> It's not a good idea to just walk in and say 'look this is crap'. You can't bulldoze your way through you have to be tactful about it'. Look, I agree with this, but I think I've been hard done in this bit and for this reason'.

Will's anecdote reveals participants' awareness of the importance of being careful in planning and using the competencies (for example, by offering alternatives and by 'being friendly'), indicating their awareness of its risks. Group A participants suggested that their participation in *ExcelL* had been beneficial in their effective use of the competencies. Mel, describing the pressures involved for her, acknowledged that the *ExcelL* program had developed her confidence in expressing disagreement:

> I did really have to disagree with my family over a lot of matters involving university and refuse requests to do things for them. Personally, it was very difficult to do, very draining, and all the communication skills under the world can't help you out when the other person is not willing to communicate. That was frustrating in itself. But through *ExcelL* I learnt that communication is a two-way thing and if two people aren't willing to communicate then it's best to just get out of the situation. So I just said no.

However expressing disagreement and refusing a request remain difficult socio-cultural competencies whose use is inhibited by a variety of individual and cultural belief systems:

> It's not something that I do easily, say no to people, I always think 'oh well, I'll have time for me later on, to do this, or I'll work a bit later'. (Della)

> The ability to say no without offending the person you're saying no to is very important – because what goes around, comes around. (Andy)

However, the participants' alternative entry status may provide them with more experience in articulating these competencies:

> In real estate, the industry I've been in, we're talking about money – your money and their money. People try anything in the situation of negotiating for the sale of a house. For example, with the sale price of the house you've either got to accept that offer, or say no, or renegotiate. The vender might say if you cut your commission in half, I'll accept it. After a couple of times of that happening, you'll definitely know how to say no. (Andy)

Andy characterised the life skills that mature-age students bring with them: that they have more experience with their use of these competencies honed in work and family contexts. At the same time, participants illustrate that AES possess a greater understanding of the consequences of expressing disagreement and refusing a request and have a greater awareness of the power relationships that may be operating in the university context.

7.3.6.5 Looking Back: Expressing Disagreement and Refusing a Request

The participants' evidence confirms the benefits and potency of expressing disagreement and refusing a request. Participants' accounts demonstrate that the competencies were significant in fostering their critical engagement, in balancing work, study and family demands, in enabling them to take more control of their learning practices, in organising their timetables and study routines, in developing their problem solving capabilities and in reducing stress. The competencies are also crucial in helping participants to negotiate the vagaries of the power relationships operating in the context of the regional university.

The competencies intersect with Chapter Seven's third over-arching reference point, critical awareness (see Table 7.1). For example, they incorporate an awareness of the power relationships existing in the university culture (critical discourse awareness) and emphasise the need for students to be willing to change their situations, and transform their practices, to better suit their course's needs and requirements (critical self-awareness). Section 7.5 will extend the analysis in relation to critical discourse and critical self-awareness and their intersections.

7.3.7 Looking Back: Socio-cultural Competencies

The participants' responses affirm the importance of the socio-cultural practices of seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request (saying no). The participants'

evidence suggests effectiveness in these competencies within the university culture equips students to enter and achieve more meaningful exchanges and dialogue with the many cultural groups present within the culture (for example, locals, staff, older people and younger people, people of different cultures, different socio-economic levels and different genders). The socio-cultural competencies constitute concrete practical strategies that allow students to enhance their familiarity with the culture's literacies and discourses. The competencies enable students to develop and improve their learning practices and provide them with a gauge to better judge their performances. The competencies empower students to smooth the processes of their adjustment to the university culture, to organise and manage their learning environments to best suit their needs and requirements and to better manage the stress arising from the impact of the life/work/family collisions influencing their study goals. The competencies also enable students to establish their support networks and sources/resources of assistance, facilitating their transition to and perseverance in the university culture. The socio-cultural properties, complexities and risks that underlie students' use of the competencies reviewed, however also reveal the presence of discursive practices operating in the university context. If students remain unaware of these power relationships and how they may affect both students and their university practices, students may continue to be impeded in their efforts to persevere in the university culture. These are practices that are analysed in the next section.

7.4 Discursive Practices

7.4.1 Introduction

The study's fourth over-arching reference point, critical awareness (see section 3.2), is threaded through participants' accounts of their university journeys. Critical awareness emerged in participants' discussions of the power configurations operating at the site of the university and in their reflections about the university and teaching/learning practices that impacted on their efforts to master and demonstrate the university discourses. This section analyses the threads in relation to university practices (section 7.4.2) and academic/student relationships (section 7.4.3).

7.4.2 University Practices

Mid-year entry was the cause of difficulties for some participants, exacerbating their discomfort as they attempted to master and demonstrate the university culture. Mid-year entry comprised one of the university sector's responses to the investment-cost paradigm

shift with the sector initiating new ways to increase student enrolments. While mid-year entry commenced in 1992 at USQ, the infrastructure developed for the semester one intake, for example, student orientation was not offered. Mid-year also meant that students studied courses out of sequence. Staff teaching mid-year students were also not informed about their beginning status, a circumstance intensifying participants' feelings of isolation and confusion. Participants testified to being 'thrown in at the deep end'.

> Because I came in the mid semester intake, we didn't have an orientation. So that was difficult. I really spent the first week walking around looking for signs, and asking people questions – where it probably could have been relieved a little bit if we'd have had a couple of hours, or a session over coffee, or even if someone walked around said "This is where these things are". (Sandy)

Shaz felt behind the eight ball as it meant:

> ...everybody else knew how to use the library and their 'help' systems were in place. I spent the first month trying to learn the ins and outs when the rest of the class had 'been there done that'. I felt I was playing catch-up all the time, which added to my edginess and lack of confidence.

Brad also discussed mid-year entry. Brad considered that the semester's study might have been 'a sacrifice', as there had been no orientation:

> It is definitely important to get some type of orientation before you start. And not just an orientation as in knowing your way around the uni, but whether they have some introductory talks about what you are studying. The more you put yourself in the picture, the better off you are going to be.

Many participants were primarily or exclusively enrolled in core or foundation courses (often students enrolled in these courses were in a special category called *Foundation Studies*) and did not feel they were able to make the connections to the faculty in which they were majoring or to students in those faculties. These students felt disadvantaged by these practices. Jon, Linda and Della were in this category. Della felt that she was an *in-limbo student at uni...no one seemed to want to know about me* and felt disadvantaged:

> On a personal level, the only thing that I found disappointing is that I'm in General Studies and having to pass data analysis. I guess it's just that at the moment I'm not doing any psychology subjects and that's why I came here.

Jon felt mid-year entry disadvantaged him in making friends and building networks:

> I'll be doing a specific major next year so it'll be more on my list of priorities to make new friends because these are the people I'm going to be doing the next two and half years with. So I want to make a lot more friends, in terms of a) just socially and b) it's going to help me through the course.

The lack of consistency in university practices and discourses was another consistent theme in participants' stories and was frustrating for them. These feelings were intensified for those participants who studied across discipline areas:

I expected that there would be a higher level of standardisation between faculties and subjects in course delivery, such as course notes, assignments and assessments. In fact, there is a large discrepancy between faculties and subjects, whereby some subjects are better organised and delivered than others. Some subjects were poorly organised by their departments and the students overall suffered in their results. I found that the psychology and humanity subjects were very well structured and student support was fantastic, unlike many science subjects where students were left on their own to cope and the support was not there. There were no tutorials for subjects such as biochemistry, microbiology, physiology, the subjects that did need tutorial help and discussion to grasp the concepts. Subjects such as psychology and communication were very well structured, including tutorials where students could discuss concepts as a group. This came as a surprise to me as I thought there would be more assistance offered for the science subjects. (Lucy)

When my science subjects commenced, they were so different and difficult in comparison to the psychology subjects and core subjects. (Della)

As the number of double degrees and cross-disciplinary studies escalate, this fragmentation in terms of both teaching philosophy and practice has implications for all the stakeholders involved. Mel reflected that:

Doing the combined degree increased the problem because the faculties are very different in expectations and procedures. I overcame the uncertainty of the systems and processes by building personal relationships with each of my lectures and tutors. I found that once I got past the title, these lectures and tutors where very helpful and everyday people. Out of the 32 subjects I studied at USQ I had wonderful relationships with all my lectures and tutors bar one.

Lucy outlined some of the ramifications of the differences between each subject:

Each faculty has its own unfamiliar culture with a subculture for each subject. In order to succeed you must come to terms with the underlying culture of the subject, and have a clear understanding of it, otherwise it would be an obstacle to your success in the subject. The ways of thinking and arguing in science subjects such as chemistry, biochemistry, and microbiology are completely different to other subjects such as psychology or communication. What is emphasised in one subject, such as concise usage of language in communication subjects or psychology, is not as important in pure science subjects when writing an assignment. For example, in psychology assignments, the wording is very important to the overall mark, with more effective language usage corresponding to higher grades. However in some science subjects, if you take the time to write concisely, it didn't necessarily mean that your grades would be higher compared to another student who did not make the effort in the language component, yet had the same numerical and statistical

results. In science, there seems to be much less of an emphasis on clear language than in humanity subjects, and I find this a conflict as I presumed that science would need clear and concise language in order to clearly address a scientific concept to another via a scientific report. From my perspective, the theory of an unfamiliar culture is very relevant in order to succeed as a student at university.

The university is segmented as well, so when you speak as the university as a whole it's like a physical location as opposed to the community itself. (Will)

The lack of consistency in the university culture caught some participants by surprise, limiting their mastery of the university discourses:

I believe that it took me until about my second year, the third semester of study to appreciate the 'study package' for each subject. Some subjects required the package and textbooks while some subjects only require the textbook. There are no standard rules to rely on. (Mel)

Andy confronted the philosophical differences between different subjects:

In some subjects I just shut-up and follow the steps without questioning. Which is different from communication you see, because communication is a back and forwards subject, but with economics, you've got your 1 + 1 = 2. It's black and white, there's no arguing about that.

Andy also found the differences in format and style frustrating.

One thing that I had a bit of a guff about is that the formats between the courses are all different. The introductory marketing was probably the one I liked the best. Throughout the study book, they have 'read this part of the chapter, answer these questions, study this bit, answer those questions' – the questions relate to the part you just read. That part I like, because 1 or 2 questions will reinforce what you've just been reading through. But the other ones really annoy me. You go through the whole module and there are 16 questions at the end. I don't think it's helpful. I believe there should be a break-up between the questions and what you're reading.

Another of the university practices about which students depicted a critical awareness of discourse was the practice of tutorial/workshop placement. In big first year courses, like many of the core courses the participants were undertaking – *Communication and Scholarship* and *Introduction to Computing* for example – teaching and marking was undertaken by teaching teams comprised, in many cases, of casual and sometimes inexperienced teaching staff. Students were faced with an array of staff with varying levels of effectiveness and did not yet have the knowledge to make the most appropriate choice for them. The practice of changing tutorials was also one that was frowned upon by most of the staff involved, including the administrative staff whose duties included changing computer records in relation to assignment records. Despite this more successful

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participants used their resources to find the most appropriate choice for them and were willing to change their tutorials – especially if they perceived that their marks would be disadvantaged if they remained in the original tutorial:

> By second year I had worked out that you could find out who the tutor was going to be for each class and that by doing this I could make a more educated decision on which class I would enrol in. I began to make contact with the lectures and tutors of my up coming classes prior to the beginning of the semester to introduce myself and seek any inside information that could be of use to me. **(Mel)**

> I changed computing tutes twice because the person tutoring didn't seem interested in his students, and was very monotone, scattered and disorganised in presentation of information. And I thought if I remained in this tute group, I would end up scattered and disorganised. **(Lucy)**

> Choose your tuts well, find out who you're tutor is going to be. **(Dan)**

Participants felt that it was important to change the learning situation to suit their needs:

> I think you can only be as good as your teacher, whereby if you are not taught the concepts clearly, then you cannot demonstrate the concepts clearly in an exam. I changed *Data Analysis* tutes 4 times, until I found a tutor that was good for me, and presented the information that I wanted as a student and could answer my questions satisfactorily. **(Sandy)**

> It is important to change the situation, as many students who won't change the circumstances or classes, use that as an excuse for their poor performance. If the tutor is unreliable for consultation and information, then I just change tutors....I would just change tut classes by myself and then tell them about it. Some people are too embarrassed to change classes and so the problem persists. **(Lucy)**

Participants' reflections confirm that one of the characteristics that distinguish successful students is their willingness to change the situation to meet their needs. This capacity not only requires a critical awareness of discourse but also the socio-cultural competencies of expressing disagreement and refusing a request. Both Sandy and Lucy revealed that they felt personally responsible for ensuring the quality of their learning environment.

Participants were also conscious that the increasing fees they pay for their courses have consequences for university policy and practice. Andy presented a perspective: I'm paying the money so I'm getting as much as I can out of it. Sandy argued that:

> ...some people are too embarrassed to leave a class but I see that I pay uni fees and if I am not getting what I am paying for, then I will move on until I find it. Some are happy to put up with it, but not me. My time is valuable and I am not willing to waste it in sessions that are non-productive to my studies.

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The dichotomy between theory and practice was another issue that was particularly stressful for participants. Participants' experiences in merging their past (practical and applied) experiences (socio-economic and economic capital) and knowledge with the new (largely theoretical) university discourses were often confronting, and, for some, constituted the grounds for withdrawing from their university studies. Della, studying psychology, discussed the inconsistencies between her experiences in the 'real world' and the theory taught at university:

> I started to struggle with what I felt was utter garbage being taught in comparison to what happens for real people in the real world. I had also undertaken a Lifeline counselling course, and successfully got to fulfil my need to be practical with my skills...I continued my studies on campus in the 2nd semester of 2001 but with great difficulty. I found myself questioning the validity of what was being taught, the blinkered vision of lecturers as to what the 'big' picture was about, and for me that was being someone trained to be a good psychologist with abilities not only practical but also sensible within the realms of everyday life. I switched to external study with not very good success, finding it hard to be motivated with what I felt was an outdated, out-of-touch abysmal course. I guess I felt like I had spent a lifetime bucking the 'system' and here I was again in middle age trying to do the same, and it felt like I was beating my head against a brick wall. I am still enrolled at USQ, passing the half-way mark of my course, but with the realism that even if I finish my degree, it will lead me nowhere for a work situation unless I complete my honours, which is not enough for private practice, and then my masters. I have virtually given up my dream, my goal, my ambition, and what I truly believed was my calling in life. The only satisfaction I ever gained was in doing a practical course like Lifeline, and being at the coalface dealing with emergency callers on the spot.

Dan reflected about the differences between life and the fantasy world of the university:

> The difference between life and how things work at university and how they really work in real life is very different – it takes you a bit of getting used to, especially after being so long in the real world, and then going back to uni at my age, getting used to the fact that a lot of people out there live in their own little fantasy world – that takes a bit of getting used to! Academic staff's ideas differ greatly from how they really work in the real world. How they think things work, and how they expect things to work in the classroom... it doesn't happen – it's different. And getting used to that – taking that on board is very hard when you've actually seen how things really work, and then they're trying to teach it in a totally different way and you know that they're not right.

Shaz, continually juggling the demands of work and study, also entered the theory/ practice debate. Shaz recognised that her AES provided her with advantages: to be more familiar with the university terminology and language; relate better with lecturers; be more mature

(there is more to university than just partying); and possess the real world experience rather than textbook examples. Shaz also, however, nominated disparities between work and university (in courses like *Human Resources Management*), which threatened her comfort zone and increased her feelings of insecurity.

Mel argued that university practices needed to be flexible to help meet students' needs, particularly in response to the changed funding arrangements:

> Because I am paying to go to university and I am, I am a customer as much as I am a student, and if I'm really doing everything that I possibly can, doing the right thing by myself, the university and by the other people around me. I think it would be very fair, from the view that I am a customer, that the university be flexible for the benefit of the students and I think that that would be a very healthy environment for the students.

Participants' testimonies, in relation to the university practices which they found unhelpful, or which intensified their feelings of discomfort and insecurity, confirmed the importance of flexibility in the university context. Unhelpful practices included inflexible tutorial allocations and timetabling, mid-year entry unsupported by orientation programs, fragmentation in the university culture, inconsistencies in courses and discipline areas, and differences between theory and practice.

7.4.3 Staff/Student Relationships

The participants also subjected the academic/student relationship to critical scrutiny. The students viewed their relationships with the teaching staff as well as academics' roles in students' perseverance and success both positively and negatively. Participants identified the role that university staff, particularly academics, played in enhancing student success:

> Good lectures and tutors can make all the difference in a classroom and to a student's grade. (Mel)

Mel, in fact, felt cheated if her lecturers were not effective:

> Most lectures and tutors where very good at what they did and I really felt 'cheated' if my tutor wasn't what I classed as good at their job.

Gregor felt that good lecturers made a difference, enhancing the university experience:

> I was enjoying university very much as I had a very good lecturer.

Shaz recognised that lecturers and their teaching philosophies and practices had a central role in helping her to do well:

> In *Government Business Relations* I was able to grasp the lecturer's way of thinking right from the start… if the lecturer could see you were enthused and relating well he

> would give you a lot of help...I also benefited as I got double support because Simon (the lecturer) was both my lecturer and tutor.

Tutors also hindered Shaz's understanding:

> The tutor couldn't relate on an intellectual level, he didn't explain or communicate well and wasn't able to adapt material to the audience's needs. It took me the whole semester to get used to his way of thinking and I did not do as well.

A strand recurring through participants' stories was the acknowledgment of the power and status of faculty academics, a situation that participants agreed was at once helpful and challenging. This strand supports Lander et al.'s (1995) assertion that it is usual in HE for the teacher to exercise powerful control over the curriculum and assessment. A situation, which Lander et al. (1995) also argue, is increasingly perceived to be in conflict with the goals of permitting students to learn in their own way, to exercise choice in what they learn and to do so with a degree of independence. That there was unequal power and status in the teaching/learning relationship was also a strand woven through the students' university stories. Sandy emphasised the loss of power she felt in the university context:

> It's just like another new job, and you've got to learn the whole process. The difference and probably the most difficult part for me, and I'll be quite frank here, is I've always worked in jobs where I've told people what to do. Now I'm in the role where I'm being told what to do. And that was hard because even though I might be able to see a better way or a different way, I can't implement it.

Dan provided an explicit example of the deficit model at work in the university context:

> I asked for help and was told that 'no, I'm not giving you the lecture notes, because I don't know whether you went to lectures or not, and you'll just give them to your little network of friends that didn't go, and that will help them pass the exam. I was a mid-year student, and this particular person talks down to everyone as if he's a doctor.

As a result of this experience, and although he had done well in assignments, Dan failed:

> The exam questions had absolutely nothing to do with what I learnt in the tuts or what was taught in the lectures. I couldn't answer the exam and failed.

Bruised by the experience, Dan was also not willing to provide negative feedback:

> I would have gone and done the exam again, if they had shown any interest at all. I would have re-studied. But there was no way in the world I even cared about sitting that exam again because of their negative attitude. I was willing to take on a fail on my academic record, rather than give them the satisfaction.

Dan, embittered, also withdrew from that major:

> I've withdrawn completely, from that course – and from the major...it was my main one. I don't think they really care. If they cared, they would have assisted me when I asked for it. It doesn't matter whether I'm an 18-year-old student who doesn't go

to the lectures or whether I have a network of friends. When you go and ask somebody for help, they have an obligation to help you. I don't know whether they realise this, but their pay comes from students.

As a consequence of this brush with the mainstream discourses, Dan recognised that the power configurations operating at in the university context were not going to be dented:

You've got to take it on the chin really, haven't you? Because your complaining doesn't help—it falls on deaf ears out there.

Participants revealed unhelpful practices demonstrated by academics. Yan, for example, discussed the practice of not making PowerPoint notes available to students:

Often a lot of these notes don't end up in the library. It seems to be a policy that lecture notes don't get put in libraries anymore, because people don't turn up to the lecture, which sounds like a bit of an ego trip to me. I mean, who cares!

Della felt disillusioned with the authenticity of what was being taught:

I found myself questioning the validity of what was being taught, the blinkered vision of lecturers about the 'big' picture, and for me that was being someone trained to be a good psychologist with abilities that were not only practical but also sensible within the realms of everyday life. Something I truly believe these lecturers have no idea about!

Whereas Sandy accepted her responsibilities as learner – to try to improve the teaching/learning situation – her feedback was ignored:

I was just told that was the way I learnt...that no one else was having a problem, and I was the only person who'd been in and said it. That 'you think about things much more deeply than other people, and I'm sure you put in a much better effort than other people'. An assumption was made which was fine and I was very flattered. But then I came back and said, 'okay, thank you very much for that, but this is the difficulty that I'm encountering'. Because the difficulty was related to teaching, it came back to the fact that I was the problem. So I'm finding that very difficult. And it's a subject that I didn't think that I would struggle in, but I am finding now I have to put in twice as much effort to get the same result in other subjects. I have been warned that not every lecturer really puts in a huge effort, and because I have been at TAFE and I have done teaching myself, I have realised that things do have ebb and flow. In a consultation time I opened myself up, and said, 'look, this is how I'm feeling'. I didn't think it was risky, but I thought it would have been accepted a little better. I was holding up the white flag... please help me! What other options have I got? If I can't cope with this one, have you got another option? And the option was no, there is no other option...it's my way or – tough. I found that very difficult. It's a subject that now I've accepted – if I can get through, I'd be quite happy, but I've lowered my standards.

Some participants, like Lucy, were quickly aware of underlying cultural practices and their role in maintaining the dominance of the mainstream discourses:

> It doesn't matter what the student wants, the student must adhere to what the lecturer wants and must submit the assessment accordingly. You cannot try and reinvent the wheel to suit yourself. Many people think that university is the place to express your true opinions and feelings, but somebody once said to me that it is not the appropriate place to do it. Instead you must express yourself and justify what you say, not just present your ideas and not validate them without supporting evidence. There is a falsehood that if you write what you want and it sounds good, then you will get top grades. The reality of it is that there is structure and research to validate the argument of the paper and protocols to adhere to.

Dan compared university to a game controlled by other forces:

> It is a game. I'm a good game-player...I learnt the rules through life. Life is no different to university. Forgetting all the irrelevant games, the major rule at university is to put in the effort, show that you're interested, do the hard work and you'll get help! If you don't, nobody will bother with you.

Jon spelt out his views about academics' credibility. Jon's testimony illustrates his perception of the differences between AES and SL:

> I think that in terms of taking lecturers' and tutors' words as being true, that's still a hurdle to me. I think I'm old enough to say 'well, hang on, what they're saying I don't have to agree with, and it might not be right – I mean usually it is', but I can tell myself that they don't have to be right. Whereas when you're 16, if a teacher tells you something – it's right!

Lucy understood that academics' views were dominant:

> Your attitude must be right, whereby you are humble enough to listen to the 'experts' and think about what they are saying, rather than thinking you know it.

Jim questioned academics' political views:

> The more people I speak to, I find they have very strong beliefs about some of the things that they actually teach us. Lecturers tend to put their own point of view across a lot more severely than what I would have thought. I thought they would have remained neutral, especially in political issues. With tertiary education you have to look at things a lot more broadly. Some lecturers however try to convince you of one specific issue, like politics for argument's sake. They tend to knock the other opposition parties compared to their own when they haven't actually said what their beliefs are.

Jim had to deal with integrating his own views, honed in his business, with those of the dominant university discourses:

> You've just got to look at it more constructively and say, right, this is what the procedure is, to do these certain issues...I guess everyone's going to have their own point of view, and it depends on the situation that you're in and how you project that

opinion. Through my own business, I project an opinion of how I want my business to run, and that's how I want my people to act. Maybe lecturers might tend not to want to do that, but they tend to do it, not on purpose maybe. But, in the same token, I'm not going to condemn a person for their views. I just find that some of the students here, their views are very narrow. They're not broad enough to understand the whole complexity of life outside. I think that's helped me, being a mature age student, that I've actually experienced a lot of those things.

Sandy discussed academics' focus on research at the expense of teaching:

As a student I was a hindrance to those whose role it was to teach. It took a while to understand advancement for university lecturers is via research and publications. Therefore teaching students is a by-product of this advancement. To experience the feeling of utter stupidity because as a student you did not fully comprehend something that one person had spent many years singly focusing on was to me a surprise. I would have thought the technical and real skill in teaching is to be able to take something you understand well and break it down to allow those with less exposure to understand it.

Jon, however, held more positive views about the academics teaching his courses:

I got the sense that lecturers want you to figure it out. They steer you in the right direction rather than giving you the directions themselves. (Jon)

Jon's anecdote illustrates academics' roles in promoting students' active learning capacities, confirming Ramsden's (1992) argument that support for students' independent learning is important for their development of deep approaches to learning. Eric was also conscious of the value of active learning in the university context:

If you make an effort and you want to learn, then the tutors will help you, if you don't make an effort they don't have to waste their energy and I think that's fair enough. It's up to me whether I want to do the work or not. And that makes me want to do it, as of late I haven't been able to concentrate but it makes me want to do it.

Academics played a more positive role however in fostering participants' confidence and success. Alison Feldman, a recipient of *The Faculty of Arts Excellence in Teaching Award* (2002) and the USQ *Excellence in Teaching Award* (2003), was Jon's teacher in *Communication and Scholarship* in his first semester at university:

Alison is a great teacher. I never forget the great teachers, they totally make a difference. Wow that person has imparted knowledge. They give you self-confidence and motivation. They bring their experience to you in terms of how things work.

Jon's second semester, at the Conservatorium, was successful due to the intervention of his teaching supervisor, who assisted Jon in making the decision to persevere with his studies. Jon's experiences support Lander et al.'s (1995) assertion that academics' oral and written encouragement is critical in assisting students to succeed. Academics' roles in cultivating

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students' abilities and skills in critical reflection, in particular, is an issue in a study that analyses the role that reflection and reflective practice play in students' perseverance. Biggs (1991) argues that it is often the case that students have had little experience of critical reflection and find it difficult. Lander et al. (1995) contend that for this reason, considerable effort should be made by teachers to arrange stimulus experiences that provoke reflection, challenging students' assumptions and focusing on differences in viewpoints. For example, providing contradictory formulations of events is uncomfortable and can be effective in generating reflection. Academics can also assist students to make connections and links between ideas and events, not only between current events and their prior experiences, but also between theory and practice, and between relationships, commonalities and principles:

> Whereas some students become highly reflective, not all do so. However, all do at least have the experience of thinking about some things in depth and of making some useful connections. Again, different subject matter may provide different opportunities for reflection, but these do need to be built in. Activities such as debriefing with peers or learners, seeking feedback from learners on a regular basis, and keeping a journal also provide vehicles for reflective practice (Lander et al. 1995, p.3).

Boud (2001) supports these views by arguing that reflection can be undertaken as an informal personal activity for its own sake or as a part of a structured course. Within a course, reflection may focus on special activities (for example, workshop activities), events of the past (for example, what learners bring to the course from prior experience), or concurrent activities in the learners' workplace and community that act as a stimulus. Participants' experiences give credence to these views. Jon, at the Conservatorium, was required to undergo a personal journaling process, for example. Whereas Jon *did the bare minimum in first year,* in his second year the journal became *a real learning experience.* Jon reviewed concerts and lessons and reflected about what he had learnt:

> *I really started to care about it. It was good to sit back and reflect. Reflexive practice helped me move from "I don't know if I belong here' to "this is excellent, I've got to go to uni today".*

Jon was not the only participant required to undergo the process of journaling. Journals are an assessment strategy incorporated into many courses, either in the form of a continuing journal or in the form of assignments where students were required to write about the development and growth of their 'sense of self' – often in relation to their future professional practice These exercises were often amongst the most profound that the students experienced. For Kym, the first year student in one of my classes who was asked

to write an assignment for her nursing course, *Psycho-social Foundations of Nursing,* exploring the 'factor' which has influenced her 'sense of self' assisted her to identify the role that her parent's belief systems played in her decision not to go to access HE as a SL. Della sent me two of her assignments to illustrate her views on her university experiences, both of which were reflective exercises stemming from her education course *Instructional Psychology: Lifelong Learning*.

A critical awareness of discourse also identifies the power configurations present in the university culture, some of which may not be explicit. Jon discussed the teacher's role:

> I think it's hard not to take everything they say as gospel. I talk to a tutor in AAP and then I talk to someone else who has also done some study and they just blow the tutor's theories out of the water. So you've got to accept that whilst they're here to get the information out of you and the work out of you, its still going to come down to their opinions. So I think you've got to take that on board and make a conscious effort to think about it for yourself.

Will reflected about the capacity of teachers to affect the university experience, arguing that he sees approachable teachers as:

> …more as a person (as opposed to some monarchs up the front that you really don't want to approach) and you start looking forward to actually going to the lecture. You feel more of a connection to that tutor which is good.

Will's use of the terminology 'monarch' illustrates the power configurations operating in that course. Students however sometimes also acquiesce in mainstream approaches, remaining unquestioning of teaching styles and practices. Yan commented:

> When we did medication calculations in first year, I think only 12 out of 240 people passed for the first exam. These are all kids who had done mathematics in Year 12 – and they were just lost and didn't have a clue.

Yan did not question, for example, whether the staff had made their expectations clear, or whether the assessment was well structured, instead 'blamed' students for their lack of knowledge and efficacy. Sandy put it this way:

> There is definitely a certain way of thinking in the academic world but needs to be explained. Unhelpful vague comments on assignments mean nothing and achieve nothing. Word limits are set and many topics are expected to be covered in the assignment and then the markers writes comments such as "you could have expanded more on this" - why not leave the word limit as unlimited if this is what they are looking for. Short answer questions in assignments for which more than one page was meant to be submitted - why not write "answers should be no less than one page". Provide sufficient information to allow the student to submit what you are looking for.

7.4.4 Looking Back: Discursive Practices

Participants' accounts confirmed their awareness of the discursive practices operating in the university context. This awareness, of both self and the university context, enhanced participants' capabilities to analyse and challenge university policies and practices – particularly those that operated to marginalise students or hinder their efforts to master and demonstrate the university discourses and literacies. These policies and practices encompassed the issues of mid-year entry, the lack of consistency as well as the fragmentation evident in the university culture, the theoretical imperatives exhibited by mainstream university culture, students' feelings of powerlessness and the role played by academics in hindering/stimulating students' learning.

7.5 Dynamic Practices

7.5.1. Introduction

Palpable throughout the participants' stories were the practices that enabled participants to persevere and succeed at university. The practices include reflective practice (section 7.5.2), socio-cultural competencies (section 7.5.3), critical discourse awareness (section 7.5.4) and critical self-awareness (section 7.5.5). These practices shone through the layered thick descriptions documenting the participants' journeys. They are re-visited in this section as a way of summarising participants' evidence in relation to the practices that, participants perceived, empowered them as they negotiated their university journeys. Like the over-arching reference points, although these practices are separately delineated, they exist in a dynamic relationship with each other, intersecting and overlapping. To corroborate the efficacy of the practices, confirm the dynamic relationship that exists between them and foreshadow the recommendations drawn in the next chapter, the participants' testimonies, in the form of their voices, are again consulted.

7.5.2 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice, as explained in Chapters Six and Seven in relation to the over-arching reference points, encompasses the capabilities of observation and reflection in and on practice (Schön 1987). Participants singled out these capabilities, linking them to their perseverance at university:

> I watched what a few others were doing, thinking, yea, that's a lot more sensible than what I'm doing. (Della)

Andy illustrated his capability for observation and reflection, in particular in seeking out

good role models:

> I knew one guy in my marketing class, and I think his lowest mark throughout the whole exam and all the assignments was 94%. His key was apparently that he did the assignments very well – he summarised the start, made one major point - made the point to start, then backed it up and then summarised it all in one paragraph. Each paragraph was like that. That's my picture of a model student.

Jon discussed the importance of listening to lectures and asking questions of teachers, endorsing the benefits of observation and the socio-cultural competencies of seeking help and participating in a group:

> I basically asked a lot questions. I talked to other people I knew out here and I also just listened and just basically figured it out.

Dan discussed the importance of both reflecting on and adapting his learning practices:

> To be able to get through the units, to be able to get through the education and the teaching, I have to adapt – I have to be able to take it all on board and learn.

A clear thread woven through participants' stories was the benefits that stemmed from their abilities to observe and reflect on their own learning practices:

> Each semester, I further refined my method of attack to succeed in my studies, I analysed what my weak points were and worked on them to improve. Overall, I discovered that the transition is a continual process that is not completed within the first few weeks of university life, its on-going process throughout the degree on a daily basis. Each new subject requires some level of transition from the previous subject, and each year makes you stretch just that bit further than the previous year, and so the growing pains never stop. (Lucy)

Lucy's view supports Ethell and McMeniman's (2000) assertion that the purpose of reflective practice in respect of learning is to become more knowing, and becoming more knowing requires learners to make their own decisions and judgments regarding their own practice. For example, Jon integrated reflective practice into his study routine, asking himself and others what I need to do to do well with this subject. What can I learn and how can I do my best at this? Brad illustrated his capability for reflection as he considered his organisational skills and the implications for his future success:

> You've just got to look at university like a job, I mean there are tasks that you've got to do to achieve, and it's just a matter of organisation. I've realised how much easier it would be if I'd been making good notes every week on each module. Next semester, hopefully because it's not my first, I'll be able to get organised from the start. The jobs I've been used to – you're organising and doing things as you go, whereas with

this, you've got to be really good at organising from the outset, sticking to your schedules.

Gregor reflected about the learning environment he needed to create to do well:

I developed a code or a standard of rules for myself: to try and be relaxed, work hard and enjoy what you're doing. Make it part of yourself. If you do that it's easier to stay motivated and do everything that you need to do. It's a personal philosophy, a way of thinking and a lifestyle. Basically I am determined to enjoy it, no matter how hard or difficult or whatever challenges I may face. That this is for my future career and I feel very relaxed and very at home here.

Gregor not only demonstrated his willingness to improve his performance but also illustrated that these depended on observation and reflection:

I think there's always room for improvement, so I'll be looking to ways how I can improve, how I can put in more time, effort and sacrifice, and see if I can even more finely balance work and study and social contacts.

Della reflected on her timetabling practices, recognising that her previous decisions had exacerbated her stress. Della also demonstrated her readiness to change these practices:

Because I live so far out I pushed my timetable up into three days. It was an advantage because I wasn't traveling so much, but it also meant that I had one day that was hugely long and I got extremely tired. So, pacing is probably something that I will be doing a lot more differently.

Mel reflected on her idea of the competent student: combining control, organisation, balance, self-awareness and effective communication:

My idea of a competent student would be someone who is very in control, physically, mentally and emotionally. They get hours sleep; they have a computer at their home. They have a big desk with everything in place; they're organised. They've got sufficient income so they're comfortable. They are in good health and they have every Sunday off (from work). They have a very balanced lifestyle – which is hard enough to get – good health, good mental health …balance definitely balance…I think it comes with practice, from learning from your mistakes from something that can be taught…a course similar to communication should be prerequisite for your degree.

In summing up his first semester, Jon reflected on the literacies he had mastered as well as his practices in learning and in using the socio-cultural competencies:

In terms of knowledge I've basically learnt how to be a good student. I've leant how to study effectively, I've learnt how to write assignments effectively, I've learnt how to talk to teachers and I've learnt how to take on board the difficulties that the international students face. I've learnt how to use the library, get the right information, take notes reasonably effectively. In terms of communication theory, I

learnt a lot, but in terms of dealing with other people I think I was pretty good with that to start with. I've learnt how to listen effectively, I've learnt that university is where I should be and I think if I want to get any further I've got to get a degree. I've learnt that and I didn't really believe it before. I've learnt not to hassle people for marks too much, but then I've also learnt how to effectively hassle them when I need to.

Reflective practice, including its sub-skills of observation and reflection, constitute key practices that enabled participants to improve their learning practices and persevere at university. The participants' evidence testifies to the dynamic relationships between the socio-cultural competencies and critical awareness.

7.5.3 Socio-cultural Competencies

The socio-cultural competencies, outlined in section 3.4.4, in terms of a theoretical rationale, and in section 7.3, in relation to their resonance in participants' journeys, were present in participants' reflections about the practices that successful, or expert, students demonstrate. Participants' accounts also confirm the dynamic relationship that exists between the socio-cultural competencies and the capacities for reflective practice and critical discourse and self-awareness.

Mel demonstrated the practice of seeking help and information as well as her capabilities for reflection and critical self-awareness. Mel reflected that:

…asking for assistance in unfamiliar environment is a common barrier that is very scary and leads to stress…If I didn't seek help when I was stressed out to the max like I was, then I would've been doomed.

Mel also provided some words of advice to new students about transition:

I would be as prepared as I could be, you probably can't be prepared enough. Learn about time management and stress management. If you believe in yourself and if you seek help, you'll get through those days when you really can't cope.

Brad extolled the competencies of asking for help, social contact and group participation in helping him to master assignment literacies, verifying their intersecting effectiveness:

It is helpful to know that all is not lost, if something major does happen during the semester, there's ways around it. Going through that strengthens you but a group of people going through uni is even better. It's like networks, a new word for me, but I mean, networking is important.

Jon ensured that he gained some familiarity with the new assignment and exam literacies by asking for help, making social contact, seeking feedback and listening:

I went and saw about two or three different people in regard to the assignments and things like that. I just asked, and I basically, I told them what I thought I was expected of me and put it into the question and I'd say is that what I should be doing. And they basically said yea. As far as exams go I just tried to take on board all the advice like you and Alison and everyone was giving and talked to people about the exam situations, read past exam papers, just basically prepared myself as much as I could.

Jim, grappling with the demands of the new culture, argued you need a lot of extra outside help, not just from the university, either. Yan substantiated the value of feedback:

With assignments I just try and get as much information out of the lecturers and out of the tutors that I can. Then I do it roughly myself, and after I've worked on it for a while, I might go and ask someone how they are going, and compare, just for a self-reassuring point of view.

Eric observed the value of accessing help and seeking and offering feedback:

Make time to speak to tutors or lecturers about misunderstandings. Get help with assignment extensions, or just plain help with the assignment. Get help with study books or text books, and also about using USQ connect to get onto exams, assignment results and discussion groups. Speak to the tutors if you're having trouble with books and study packages. I found every one of my tutors and lecturers really helpful.

Linda reflected that successful students needed to possess problem-solving strategies, including the capacities to access sources of help and participate in class:

The ability to communicate well with the teachers, because if you're having a problem, don't sit at home saying 'I can't do it', forget about it, get help if you can. Knowing that there's help out there, just knowing where get it. Don't feel that if you've got a question to ask, that it's a stupid question, because someone sitting next to you probably wants to ask the same question saying 'oh god I hope someone else asks that question'. If you don't understand anything, talk to the lecturers. That's what I'm really starting to do now, if there's a problem talk to them. The only way you're going to get through it and pass is to work it out through them.

The benefits of participating in a group recurred in participants' stories. Jon argued that a group assignment had helped him to adjust to the essay writing literacy:

The first essay was difficult but I was in a group and so that was a lot easier, because the person I was with had written essays before and knew what was expected so. I found it really hard to know what I had to do, but once I asked around and hassled people, I found out what I had to do.

Likewise, participants confirmed the relationships between the competencies of making social contact and participating in a group:

The more friends and the more contacts you can make both in professional staff and students, the easier it will be in developing a greater support network for yourself. (Gary)

Having very good communication skills and being able to relate well to people around made a difference. (Shaz)

Establish networks, in the first few weeks find people who are like you and who you can get together with and learn from ... form learning networks. (Yan)

Gary reflected about the dangers of social isolation and its impact on perseverance, confirming the literature (see section 3.4.4.4)

You tend to be ostracised if you don't do anything, if you don't participate. Get together with fellow students...networking is vital.

Linda reflected about the efficacy of the study group she had helped form:

You pat each other on the back and say you can do it. It's a moral support.

The intersections between the competencies of social contact, group participation and seeking help shone through participants' stories. Andy, for example, reflecting about the differences between his last (failed) university attempt and this current (successful) attempt, discussed the overlapping roles of help, feedback and social contact:

The difference was the communication between lecturers, tutors, fellow students and past students (because my brother is a past student as well). I think it is at least 60% of any mark can be contributed towards communicating with somebody because the other 40% is really you just writing it. Knowing how to do it properly, what other people are writing about, where the sources are, am I doing it right or am I doing it wrong? The feedback is worth its weight in gold.

Eric's capacity to express disagreement/take a stand (in his case to Centrelink) and to be tenacious about it enabled him to persevere, rather than to withdraw from his studies:

They stuffed me around for about ten weeks, which it made it very, very difficult with books, and I got behind in study and assignments and I just got too depressed and I couldn't concentrate... I was getting pretty close to quitting at around about six or seven weeks... If I hadn't of kept on bugging them and annoying them about it, they would've taken longer to do it, and I wouldn't have just gotten annoyed with it I would have stopped the study.

Eric also identified the importance in critically engaging with the material in his courses:

It's very important if you don't agree with something, you've got to engage in the discussion, so different opinions can be heard, different ways of working things out. If you just automatically believe everything and do not challenge other people's ideas about certain subjects, you won't learn.

Jon acknowledged the effectiveness of the competencies in facilitating his success:

I found that teachers are just happy that you came to talk to them and are willing to give you the information because you're putting in the effort.... I couldn't have done

absolutely half as well if I hadn't of done that. One, its reassuring, two, you know that you're on the right track. Almost every time I've come to see them independently I've picked up something else that is important. If you go to them one on one, they can sit down and talk it out with you. I don't feel embarrassed asking questions, you just ask away if it's just you and them.

Reflective practice and the socio-cultural competencies recur in participants' advice to new students about how to balance work, study and social life: how to manage the life/work/study/family collisionsn they experience:

Keep yourself fresh, and get ahead of your work schedule early, so you're not playing catch-up and it's too hard, too much, too late. Put in time and effort, but don't drain yourself of social contact or friends or having other interests. (Linda)

Lucy equated the competencies with problem solving strategies in her advice to students:

It is very important to be responsible for your own studies, and to seek information as needed, and not just hope that it will go away. You must know how to budget your time effectively and attend all lectures, even if you believe you know the subject matter, as you always come away with a new piece of information that you previously did not know. You must have concrete goals for being there, as its your long term goals that keep you hanging in there when you are overloaded with assignments and the worry of impending exams. If you don't' have a reason for being there, then your grades will suffer, and you will most likely quit. Make sure that the degree you pick is one that you are interested in, as it makes it less painful if you are actually interested in the subject matter then study is a pleasure and not a pain. Do not expect to be spoon-fed the information, you must be resourceful and seek other references if you can't understand what is in your textbook. It is ultimately up to you how well you do. If you don't put in the effort and take responsibility then you will not succeed at the level you may wish.

Participants verified that the relationships between reflective practice and the socio-cultural competencies enabled them to master and demonstrate the university cultures' multiple literacies and discourses. Participants also confirmed that their use of the competencies was dynamic, interacting, intersecting and acting in tandem with each other, coordinating in an integrated practice to foster their perseverance, to overcome and solve problems and to refine their adjustment to the evolving university culture.

7.5.4 Critical Discourse Awareness

The recognition that the communicative exchanges conducted at the educational site may be on unequal terms warrants further consideration. That there are power configurations operating at the site of the exchange infers that, if students are to succeed, they need to integrate the means to identify and re-shape the discursive practices which impact on and

sometimes serve to constrain their university endeavours. This step involves students' critical awareness of discourse, which, whilst primarily positioned in this analysis as an over-arching reference point, also contributes a practical strategy that can be used by students to empower themselves as they negotiate their university journeys. As section 3.2 observed, critical discourse awareness is a site of reflection upon and analysis of the socio-linguistic order and the order of discourse that equips students with a resource for intervention in and reshaping of discursive practices as well as the power relations that ground them.

Section 7.4, *Discursive Practices*, documented examples of participants' awareness of, as well as their efforts to transform, the discursive practices impacting on them. In this section, the links between critical discourse awareness and the other success practices, reflective practice and the socio-cultural competencies are drawn out. Sandy demonstrated her capacity for critical discourse awareness in her analysis of the 'academic game':

> The "academic game" is what I call having to placate unit leaders and markers, sometimes in very different manners, to achieve a decent result. Often there is an assumption you can read their minds and will produce exactly what they think you think they know you should produce – yes it's that confusing.

Dan disclosed the deficit approach personified by of some of his lecturers:

> The literature lecturers' attitudes towards the students – their idea of 'if you don't come to the lectures we're not going to help you' – assumes that not coming to the lectures meant you are going down to the pub drinking beer or something...there are implications for a mature-age person with a job.

Dan's comment reveals the inadequacy of such deficit approaches given the work/life/study collisions increasingly occurring, not only for mature-age but for most students as they find themselves funding more of their own study in an increasingly complex globalised world with jobs increasingly becoming casualised (see McInnis et al. 2000). Sandy revealed the shortcomings of such thought processes:

> I found the first week at university so deflating – every lecture contained substantial time going through the people who fail the unit. I can tell you as a result of failing a unit myself, not everyone who fails is a "failure and does not put in any effort". There are many reasons people fail units. This is part of the area in which the university does not facilitate or accommodate mature-age study. Mature-age students have a definite purpose and focus for study – these comments are generalising and not very helpful. For someone like me who felt university was way above anything I could do, these comments didn't do anything to enhance my confidence. I soon learnt that it is hard work and you

have to keep up with the work. My results first semester were better than I expected but once again I was disappointed that for two subjects I missed a higher grade due to one mark difference. I would have given anything for those marks when I failed the unit later on - believe me. Sitting exams for the first time after a very long period of time was no fun.

Della applied a critical awareness to her experiences in a reflective essay she wrote for an education course, *Instructional Psychology: Lifelong Learning*.

My own scenario is indicative of that faced by many adult learners. What I believed was to be the solution to my lifelong dream; that of studying to establish a new career may well not be met by the course undertaken. The inflexibility of university regimes and the frustrations of being bogged down in theory may cause the demise of the initial ambition. How do we address this? The need to offer courses of more practical basis seems obvious: as does the need for more career-counseling/guidance seem imperative before taking a university course.

In order to re-shape such practices Della would need to use the socio-cultural practice of offering feedback, seeking help and information and critical discourse awareness.

In the future the individual learner will ideally be able to tailor a course to meet their needs or seek sound advice that will direct them towards courses where those needs may be best met. I believe that while universities hold onto traditional methods of learning and assessment, this is unlikely to happen. The need for practical education is paramount within these resources. Universities could do well to take example of areas such as TAFE, corporate and workplace courses in the realms of education and nursing. A vital element of the learning process is the importance of relating learning to real life. The value of adult education is undeniable, but it should have a contextual reflection of the workplace and society.

Lucy applied critical practice, reflective practice and the socio-cultural competencies to her postgraduate experiences at the University of Queensland (UQ):

UQ is going fine, but they are a bit snobby. You can't talk to the PhD's, you need to get a student representative and find them amongst 300 to 1000 people in the subject...then forward that to them and from there to the tutor and from the tutor it may go to the PhD. They are almost untouchable!

Lucy also contrasted USQ practices with the practices at Queensland University.

A comparison I can make between UQ and USQ is that, in science, USQ by far has more laboratory work and experience, and makes you utilise your knowledge. I now understand what previous UQ students whom have swapped to USQ mean when they say that UQ is full on theory and no practicals really. If you were to put a UQ and USQ first year student in a lab, the USQ student would by far have more experience... and USQ students could also actually name the apparatus they are using. Also this semester I do not have an actual scientific report for either biologies and yet in first year at USQ we had 4 per biology subjects. They don't like to read too much, as it becomes too much marking - their idea of a report at UQ

first year is filling in an A4 paper with 3 points (in point form!) for the discussion of the paper – quite amazing when we would write a page and a half at the least with proper sentences and blend theory with our results and explain our results. I am glad I learnt how to write reports at USQ. The reports really did teach me a lot and that's so important for a science student to understand the experiment and interpret the results with theory.

However as Sandy indicated, it was not always possible to transform the practices about which participants had gained some critical awareness:

The university brags about the number of mature-age students it attracts, but it is not set to cater to mature-age students. In the time I was there I considered starting a group for mature-age students in an endeavour to have some of these issues addressed. However I quickly learnt the university does not like anyone to "hinder" or "comment" on their processes, so I gave this idea up in defeat. People such as me who are endeavouring to fast track through university are told you must be mad; this is not how to do it. There was little encouragement or any effort to assist with methods in which to allow me to do this. I had to fight the whole way through. Due to the death of my father, and the failing of one subject, I would say in hindsight (of for the benefit of hindsight) it was undoable – but I got there – very defeated personally and mentally exhausted.

Still angry and hurt about an unsuccessful appeal she made against a failure (following the USQ's formal procedures which finally involved a meeting with the then Vice-Chancellor), Sandy also reflected on the dominant mainstream discourses she perceived to be operating in the university context:

The funniest thing is that recently I attended a dinner given by the VC and he remembered me very well, coming up and shaking my hand and asking me how I was. This didn't surprise me – after all his position is somewhat political. Then as part of his address, which I felt was crass, he mentioned "that it's only for people in the community to say good things about the university and the others should just shut up". Did I take this to mean me? You bet I did. Even though my statements are based on truth and fact – he was making it clear they were not welcome. I don't think this is healthy in any environment. It's by being realistic and dealing with problems – not by ignoring them and believing the pinnacle has already been achieved. This applies to individuals, including myself – not just the university.

Though a more complex and difficult practice, participants' use of critical discourse awareness facilitated their capabilities to take control of their learning situations and to reveal the unequal practices and power configurations which may be operating at the site to marginalise them from mainstream university discourses. The participants' testimonies illustrate that critical discourse awareness also provided them with a basis from which to transform their practices: that it operated in tandem with the socio-cultural competencies

of expressing disagreement or offering (negative) feedback to assist participants try to change unhelpful university practices and policies.

7.5.5 Critical Self-awareness

Critical self-awareness was apparent throughout participants' journeys. Participants' accounts in Chapters Six and Seven confirm their capacities for critical self-awareness and its value to their studies. Their status as alternative entry students not only illustrated their willingness to challenge and to change their personal circumstances, it also reflected their readiness to examine their belief systems (their educational and socio-cultural capital), for instance in reversing their original decisions not to access university. This willingness to change was also evident in their preparations for university and in their rites of passage as they made their transition to the new university culture (see section 6.3). Critical self-awareness also echoed in participants' accounts of their learning practices and in their capacities for lifelong and life-wide learning (see section 7.2) and the socio-cultural competencies (see section 7.3), the effectiveness of which rely on students' capacities to be aware of not only their own but also others' socio-cultural understandings and worldviews. Sandy was the first of the participants to graduate. Her recollections demonstrate her capacity for critical discourse and self-awareness:

> My grades in the first part of my degree were exceptional and surpassed any expectations I had. However the death of my father changed my life and I think my personal "recovery and grieving" process flattened my enthusiasm and my ability to concentrate on the subjects. Therefore the marks in the latter part of my degree were less than I expected. The last two subjects I undertook I just wanted to get out I didn't care about anything other than achieving a pass if necessary. The high and lows for me were obtaining the Faculty Prize for a subject and failing one in the same semester. It was really a paradox - I wanted to achieve a "With Distinction" on my degree but I just wouldn't push myself towards the end. I was just too tired - mentally and physically. I had started a new job also prior to finishing my degree and the job was very demanding. My final GPA was much less than I wanted but I have to accept in light of all the circumstances. The irony is the students who achieved much less than me in the beginning benefited from my pushing for study groups (which were all at my house of course) and they all achieved much higher final marks than I did. For some I felt it became a competition to beat my marks. To achieve a "special commendation from the Dean" in the graduation booklet was for me a major high. However the lowest low for me was not to have my father present at my graduation. He would have been so proud.

Participants bore witness to the inter-relationships between critical self-awareness and the other success practices, giving credence to Alfred's (2002) view concerning the pivotal

nature of these inter-relationships. Alfred (2002, p.94) argues that the process of 'critical awareness through reflection, enhancing understanding through knowledge, and engaging in critical action does not proceed in stages; instead, it is an interactive process of continuous transformation of the personal and the social'.

5.5.6 Looking Back: Dynamic Practices

Participants' accounts corroborated the inter-relationships between the capabilities for reflective practice, the socio-cultural competencies and critical discourse and self-awareness. Like the over-arching reference points, and although separately delineated, they operate in a dynamic relationship with each other. Additionally, participants reported that their successful use of one of the practices often depended on the use of another and that, if implemented together, the participants' were often more effective in achieving their goals and objectives.

7.6 Evolving Practices

7.6.1 Introduction

An analysis of data collected during the third interview, conducted with the participants who had graduated, yielded further evidence concerning the success practices – reflective practice, the socio-cultural competencies, critical discourse and critical self-awareness. Lucy, Will, Yan, and Mel (from Group A) and Sandy, Andy and Jon (from Group B) had successfully graduated by June 2003. Lucy was undertaking postgraduate study and Jon was touring overseas with the *Ten Tenors*, the first of his cohort at the Conservatorium to achieve full-time professional employment. Will, Andy, Mel and Yan were working professionally in areas associated with their degrees: Yan in nursing; Mel in marketing and public relations; Will as a journalist; and Andy in information technology.

In this section, these participants' reflections from the field, including the undergraduate-postgraduate and university-work transitions they experienced, will be summarised.

7.6.2 Undergraduate-Postgraduate Transitions

Lucy strived to be admitted into the postgraduate medical or dental degree offered by the University of Queensland. However, Lucy was soon discovering the consequences of not being a graduate from a Group of Eight (GO8) university, simultaneously demonstrating her capacities for critical discourse awareness:

If you were a graduate of another university and had never studied at UQ, then the GPA cut-off for a science degree over 3 years was a whopping 6.9!!! In other words, it's a closed-door policy to graduates of other universities in QLD. In sept 2002, they held weekend secret meetings and the faculty decided to 'sell' degrees to Aust. citizens. If you were willing to give them $116 000 then you can have a GPA of 4.0 and get into dentistry (ranking of about 95 or less).... but if you are an A student (forget it)...They have sold 10 positions to Australian students who were willing to donate a Mercedes to the dental school...and 10 overseas students (paying the same price)...So I have been priced out of a position in dentistry. There were no second round offers as any vacant positions are sold off instead. I got my 2nd preference of vet science, which is now an OP of 1, rank of 99 (intake of 85 students)...which they also sell positions into for a cost of $28,000 per year for the 5 year courses. The problem with vet is that many graduates find it hard to get employment and the award rate for a newly graduated vet is only $16.75 an hour!!! That's about 33 K a year... which I find insulting considering its 5 years of study, and that I was earning 40 K 4 years ago in the RAAF without a degree, if I had stayed in (with their pay rises) and promotion I would be on about 50K now... so it seems quite mad to study all these years to earn much less.

Lucy's experiences support the notion that elite courses in elite universities are becoming the privilege of the wealthy:

The UQ Health Faculty practises discrimination and inequity and seems to get away with it. I feel cheated because I did the work but I didn't get the reward, instead my position is sold to somebody with more money and less grades.

Sandy critically reflected about her university journey whilst acknowledging that she may have to continue to study if she wanted to continue to achieve at work:

Now I'm in a "catch 22' – do I continue studying or do I just stay at this level. I don't really want to do more study, but can see I will probably have to.

Even though Sandy had completed a degree, gaining an Award with Distinction, her entry into a new postgraduate culture (to undertake a Graduate Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language) was again difficult and problematic:

I didn't have a lot of confidence in my academic ability prior to commencing university, but have even less now. There seems to be so much emphasis on presenting material in a manner to suit the unit leaders and/or markers, or you just don't do well. Petty things become the focus on the markers comments – such as referencing. In one assignment I obtained full marks for content, construction and handling of the topic, but lost major marks due to referencing – this was all the marker could go on about - I mean what's more important – whether I understood the subject to did I get a few referencing formats incorrect. Once again one of the subjects I undertook was not to be done in the first semester – this was not told to me until nearly half way through the semester. I achieved a Distinction for it – for which I worked extremely hard. It's called a "Graduate Certificate" but Masters level

> work was expected – and of course the assumption was made that I was a schoolteacher, which they knew I wasn't when I commenced. Consequently I had a major debate with the unit leader and markers in these subjects also. I did very well in the end but the "going through" stage is just too hard. I just don't think I am cut out to be an academic or to "suffer" through the academic path to obtain the certificates I would like to.

Sandy's reflections signify the pain and suffering she experienced in studying at university: experiences that reveal the debilitating affects of the deficit model operating in the university culture:

> I just don't feel I have "the want" to deal with the time wasting exercises they seem to put you through. I put so much effort into my submissions and then receive such petty comments on them. I feel this is disheartening. I'd rather focus on what makes me happy than putting myself, and my husband (who has to suffer through this also), through continuous unhappiness and stress for outcomes I feel are below what I would like to achieve. Sometimes the result I expect and the result I achieve is separated by one mark – this I find disheartening. I do enjoy the increased knowledge as a result of these studies. I just don't enjoy the path to the outcome. I just know at the moment I don't want to do anymore study. I am sure I could do well at it if I tried – I just don't want the personal "no space/no free time" that studying and working places on me.

Will, who has also contemplated further study since graduating, is currently victim of the life/work/study/family collisions that were prevalent in participants' undergraduate stories, giving credence to the view that they are just as critical in the postgraduate area. Will's story suggests that the university-work transition has its own pressures and that the socio-cultural practices are just as useful in this new context:

> The *ExcelL* program aided my entry into my new field of employment by familiarising me with concepts not often encountered in my previous work. It also helped by demystifying the process of tertiary education and the university system – enabling greater confidence when dealing with people.

7.6.3 University-Work Transitions

Mel, employed as a Marking Officer in USQ's Faculty of Science, reflected on the juxtaposition of being an AES and her new role in assisting prospective students:

> I love helping prospective students by answering their questions and enquiries, especially as I have first hand knowledge. I am happy to share my experience and tips. I also like offering encouragement and removing that great big cloud of unfamiliarity. So what's foreign to prospective students? What isn't! The Internet enquiries I get through our web site are often difficult to answer because the prospective student has such a limited understanding of what university is. Non

School leavers are the worst off when it comes to understanding the concept of university. Some simply want to pay to enrol. Others feel they need to justify why they are 'good enough' to go to university because for so much of their lives the idea or the option of getting a degree was non-existent. Sometimes when I am answering phone enquiries the prospective student becomes very emotional, very excited about the prospect of being a university student of gaining a degree. The process of pre-requisites, enrolment, HECS, the timetable, including lectures and tutorials, contact hours and assignment writing are all foreign to the majority of prospective students. It would be far easier to answer the question "What is not foreign to prospective students?"

It is Mel's belief that university staff and, in particular, academics, need to undergo a customer service course. Mel's comment further illustrates the pervasiveness of the deficit model. Mel's reflections speak both to the pain of her journey and to its celebration:

I feel very OK when I reflect on my 4 and a half years at USQ. I have only one regret and that is I didn't allow myself enough time off. I always felt too guilty, and as a consequence I was sick a number of times and the whole journey was very painful. I think now, well I was just trying to do my best and I am fine with that. Who would of thought I would end up with 2 degrees and a foreign language under my belt?

Yan, with a Bachelor of Nursing, outlined other difficulties in the university-work transition:

When I applied to go on the casual list at St Vincent's Hospital I was told the hospital only took on nurses with experience. When I explained I needed to work to gain experience, the person I was speaking to said, "Yes, it's a real Catch 22".

7.6.4 Looking Back: Looking Forward

Participants' tales from the field identify another transition phase, the post-university transition – to either the workplace or postgraduate study. This transition is beginning to be addressed by an emerging literature, some of which focuses on competencies that are very similar to those given prominence in this study. Hawkins and Winter (1996) discuss what they term self-reliance skills – skills they argue have been assumed, or neglected, by both employers and HE. These skills have come to the fore, Hawkins and Winter (1996) argue, because career transitions are becoming more frequent; graduates need to manage uncertainty and change; knowledge rapidly becomes obsolete; supporting structures have disappeared; and staff-student ratios in HE have increased. Hawkins and Winter (1996) further propose that in the twenty-first century the most significant challenge for graduates will be to manage their relationship with work and learning and that this requires skills

such as negotiating, action planning and networking, combined with qualities such as self-awareness and confidence. Hawkins and Winter (1996) recommend that students should take every opportunity to develop these self-reliance skills – which include those of (a) increasing self-awareness, (b) making an informed decision about what, how and where to study, (c) gaining relevant work experience, (d) developing skills for the workplace, (e) setting aside opportunities to reflect on learning, (f) using contacts, (g) developing the art of networking, and (h) practicing negotiation skills. These 'self-reliance skills' are very similar to those developed throughout this study and give credence to the applicability of the success practices for university-work and undergraduate-postgraduate transitions.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has documented the complexities involved as participants strived to master and demonstrate the university's multiple discourses and literacies. The participants' evidence unveils the three success practices that assisted them to persevere in the university culture: (a) reflective practice, (b) the socio-cultural competencies and (c) critical discourse and self-awareness. The participants' evidence also corroborates the intersections between the practices: that they exist in a dynamic relationship.

In the next chapter I will bring my understandings, both data-based and literature-based, to a conclusion, clarifying what those understandings might reveal not only for alternative entry students but also for other students making their transition to, and persevering in, the university culture.

Chapter 8
Looking Back/Looking Forward
Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This study has combined a review of the literature, theoretical reflections and empirical data to provide an analysis of the experiences of alternative entry students (AES) negotiating their journeys into and through the university culture. This chapter will articulate the issues for all the stakeholders involved in the processes of transition and perseverance at university as well as in the first year experience (FYE). The chapter presents a summary of conclusions and recommendations, followed by recommendations for further research. Also included is an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study.

8.2 Strengths and Limitations

All research studies make compromises: for the strengths they embody, there are inevitable limitations. The major strength of this study originates from the multidisciplinary but dovetailed congruency of the philosophical approaches, encompassing post-structural and critical orientations, the theoretical perspectives, including critical discourse theory, (CDT) transactional communication theory (TCT) and cross-cultural communication theory (CCT), and the critical ethnographic methodology and methods. In addition, the use of the collective case study design contextually embeds the knowledge produced, which is original in approach and in the topic of this research. Each level of knowledge production energised and fuelled the study. This was compatible with my personal philosophy, which not only continues to enrich my development both as a researcher and as a teacher, but also augments the detail and richness of the study.

The participants' stories, presented in layered, thick detail, acknowledge the uniqueness of their experiences. Their stories belong to them, communicating their lived experiences as they chose to tell them. Their voices are heard, illuminating knowledge about the student experience and this knowledge serves to inform educational theory, policy, practice and research. The conclusions and recommendations put forward in this chapter encompass these motivations.

The research used a combination of methods, although a focus was maintained on the participants' perspectives and knowledge of their own experiences, a strength confirmed by

the participants' validation of their stories. These understandings were grounded by the profile and action research data, which, although incorporating too small a sample for the purposes of statistical analysis, helped to establish the profile of the participants, enhancing the meaningfulness of the qualitative data. These understandings were extended by my extensive observation at the site as a teacher of first year students and as a learning enhancement counsellor at USQ. As the research progressed I sought feedback from colleagues as to the veracity of both the theoretical framework and the two models that I developed to frame and facilitate student transition and perseverance at university. This feedback, being grounded in the practice of teachers, counsellors and researchers skilled at university practice, allowed me to refine and improve both models.

The reflexive nature of the research sought a theoretical explanation that has expanded and refined previous explanations, making valuable contributions to the literature on the FYE and leading to a re-conceptualisation of the processes of transition and perseverance. This review contributed to the development of an original theoretical construct, the 'deficit-discourse' shift. This theoretical shift reconceptualises the FYE. The shift advocates changes in university policy and practice: challenging academics to make their discourses explicit and to collaborate with students to ensure students' perseverance at university.

Whilst the findings are not generalisable in the sense that quantitative researchers seek, the findings are transferable to people and contexts similar to those of the participants in the study. For example, whereas the research specifically investigated the experiences of AES, the findings may also be applicable to other groups of students making their transition to the new university culture, for example, school leavers (SL) and international students. To this end, two models for student success, derived from the analysis of data, have been generated: The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery at University* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*.

8.3 Theoretical Contributions

8.3.1 Challenging the Deficit Approaches

The review of literature in Chapters Two and Three and the qualitative data analysed in Chapters Six and Seven confirms the presence of deficit approaches to the increasingly diverse student body. The deficit approaches are representative of models of pedagogy that emerge from the mindset that cultures and languages other than those of the mainstream

represent a deficiency, a shortcoming. In the university culture, the deficit approaches stem from the mindset that there is a mainstream academic culture, with mainstream discourses and literacies, operating within an unchanging, static and inconsistent organisational context.[50] This mindset is characterised by several factors. The first is the recognition that universities, particularly in times where government policies are driven by economic rationalist and liberal/individualist ideologies, are inherently conservative. University staff with this mindset, for example, may display a reluctance to examine their policies and attitudes as a first step in sponsoring a more equitable culture for the diversity of students now participating in HE. The second implication is that, with this mindset, university staff may label the students who do not succeed or who have difficulties in mastering and demonstrating mainstream academic discourses, as being under-prepared or 'intellectually deficient; revealing a 'sink or swim' approach to the issue of diversity. University staff with this mindset may accept that it is the students' responsibility if students fail – with staff perceiving that they have little role in, and therefore little responsibility for, the perseverance and ultimate success of students.

The New London Group (1996, p.72) argues that such deficit approaches involve 'writing over the existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture'. The deficit approaches deny the impact of multiple linguistic/cultural differences in the university culture.

8.3.2 The Deficit-Discourse Shift

The study, through both its theoretical review and the analysis of data, has generated and demonstrated the efficacy of an alternative to such deficit approaches, establishing the grounds for the development of an original theoretical construct in the process: the deficit-

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[50] Some of the conclusions in this chapter have been previously published in the following peer reviewed articles and conference papers:

Lawrence J. 2002, ''The Deficit-discourse Shift: University Teachers and their Role in Helping First Year Students Persevere and Succeed in the New University Culture' presented to *The 6th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference* held at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, 8-10 July 2002. This paper was one of four selected for inclusion in RMIT's online *Ultibase Magazine* (July 2003)

Lawrence, J., 2001, 'Academics and First Year Students: Collaborating to Access Success in an Unfamiliar University Culture', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning: The Journal of The Institute of Access Studies and The European Access Network*, Vol. 3, No.3, December, pp.4-14

Lawrence, J., 2001, 'Succeeding at University: The Use of Socio-cultural Competencies in Facilitating Transition to an Unfamiliar Culture' 2001, presented to *The Fourteenth International Conference on the First Year Experience*, held in conjunction with *the 5th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference* in Hawaii, 9-13 July.

discourse shift. This shift re-conceptualises the contemporary university as a dynamic culture, subject to ongoing and rapid change and encompassing a multiplicity of diverse cultures and sub-cultures.

The shift also contends that, for the increasing diversity of students now participating at university, their transition necessarily involves the processes of becoming familiar with and of learning to access and engage the university culture's multiplicity of literacies and discourses. Students' perseverance is conceptualised as the processes of mastering and demonstrating these literacies and discourses.

8.3.3. The Impact of the Deficit-Discourse Shift

The data analysed in the study also spelt out the consequences arising from the deficit-discourse shift. Chapter Six documented the multiple literacies students need to access and negotiate in their first year. Among the first, and most critical of these literacies are their first semester subjects or courses – each of which comes complete with its own discourses and its own cultural knowledge and practices. These include, for example, specific:

- Entry requirements: prerequisites and assumed entry knowledge;
- Subject matter: content or process orientated, text-bound, oral or computer-mediated;
- Language: definitions, jargon and technical terms and key words;
- Texts: textbooks, study packages, lecture notes, PowerPoint notes and discussion groups, web CT documents;
- Expectations and cultural practices: ways of dressing, ways of showing respect (Sir, Professor, first names) and addressing one another;
- Attendance: lectures, tutorials, practical sessions, workshops and clinical sessions, external/ internal/online;
- Behaviours: rule-governed/flexible, compulsory or optional attendance, use of consultation times, electronic discussion groups; supplemental instruction classes;
- Class participation: passive, interactive or experiential;
- Rules: about extensions, participation, resubmissions, appeals;
- Ways of knowing;
- Theoretical assumptions, for example scientific or sociological understandings;
- Research methodologies: quantitative/qualitative; positivist, interpretive, critical;
- Ways of thinking; recall, reflective, analytical or critical, surface or deep;

- Referencing systems: Harvard/APA/Oxford;

- Ways of writing: essays/reports/journals/orals;

- Setting out, structure, format in relation to assessment;

- Tone and style decisions: about word choice, active/passive voice, third/second/first person, sentence structure, paragraph structure;

- Formatting: decisions about left/right justified, font, type, spacing, margins (which are increasingly delineated and regimented in response to communication technology);

- Assessment requirements: exams, assignments, orals, formative/ summative, individual/group

The analyses of data reveal that, to pass the course, students need to become literate in the course's discourse. Students need to access, engage, master and demonstrate relevant rules and regulations. They need to exhibit ways of thinking, knowing and understanding, writing, reading and talking particular to that course's discourse.

8.3.4 Multiple Literacies and Discourses

The analyses of data reveal that the university can be understood as made up of a multiplicity of such discourses – with each discipline area and subject, each section, each faculty, each group of students, each staff group and staff member possessing their own literacies and discourses and overlay of cultural practices. These include:

- Administrative discourses (unit/course specifications; drop/add dates; combined degrees; contact hours; GPAs/IDS);

- Academic discourses;

- Research discourses;

- Communication technologies;

- Library literacies;

- Faculty, department and discipline discourses;

- Student discourses: school leaver, mature-age, international, on-campus, external, online;

- Different learning styles, for example independent and self-directed learning styles;

- Different teaching styles; and

- Different learning environments.

The deficit-discourse shift thus reveals the multiplicity of literacies and discourses that students need to master and demonstrate if they are to persevere at university.

8.3.5 Study/Work/Family/Life Collisions

The review of the literature and the analyses of data revealed that there are corresponding and competing demands and requirements that students need to master if they are to succeed – management skills, time and stress management practices, and a range of 'life's demands' – including the need to balance effectively work, social and personal demands. Participants' evidence in Chapters Six and Seven confirmed the critical and complex nature of these competing demands.

The debilitating toll of these demands was particularly evident in the accounts of the participants who did not succeed: Linda, whose family commitments proved overwhelming despite the fact that she had been awarded a scholarship; and Jim and Brad who forsook their university studies to return to conducting their own businesses. The debilitating nature of the demands was also linked to the slower progression rates of the participants who are still enrolled but yet to complete. Shaz continues to juggle the demands of work and study and in 2003 again deferred her studies. Eric continues to deal with balancing the responsibilities of his family, study and finances. Della is faced with balancing study with a debilitating illness that caused her to question the university's theoretical imperatives as opposed to the practical realities she perceives as more viable.

Conversely, it was clear that those students who had graduated had learned to balance study with their family life, illness and work commitments. Jon, for example, battled a recurring illness, Sandy and Lucy had to cope with the death of a close family member, and Yan had to accommodate his wife's life-threatening illness. There is an inference that success may come after a cost has been paid elsewhere in the student's life.

8.3.6 A Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery at University

The patterns uncovered by the data analysis established the grounds for the development of the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery at University* (see Figure 8.1 below).

The *Framework* has several key features. First, the *Framework* visualises the university as a culture made up of a multiplicity of sub-cultures, each of which has its own discourse or literacy. Secondly, the FYE is represented as a journey of engagement with these multiple discourses and literacies. Thirdly, students' transition to university is symbolised as the processes of gaining familiarity with, accessing and negotiating the university's multiple

discourses and literacies, whereas perseverance is characterised as the processes of mastering and demonstrating these multiple literacies and discourses.
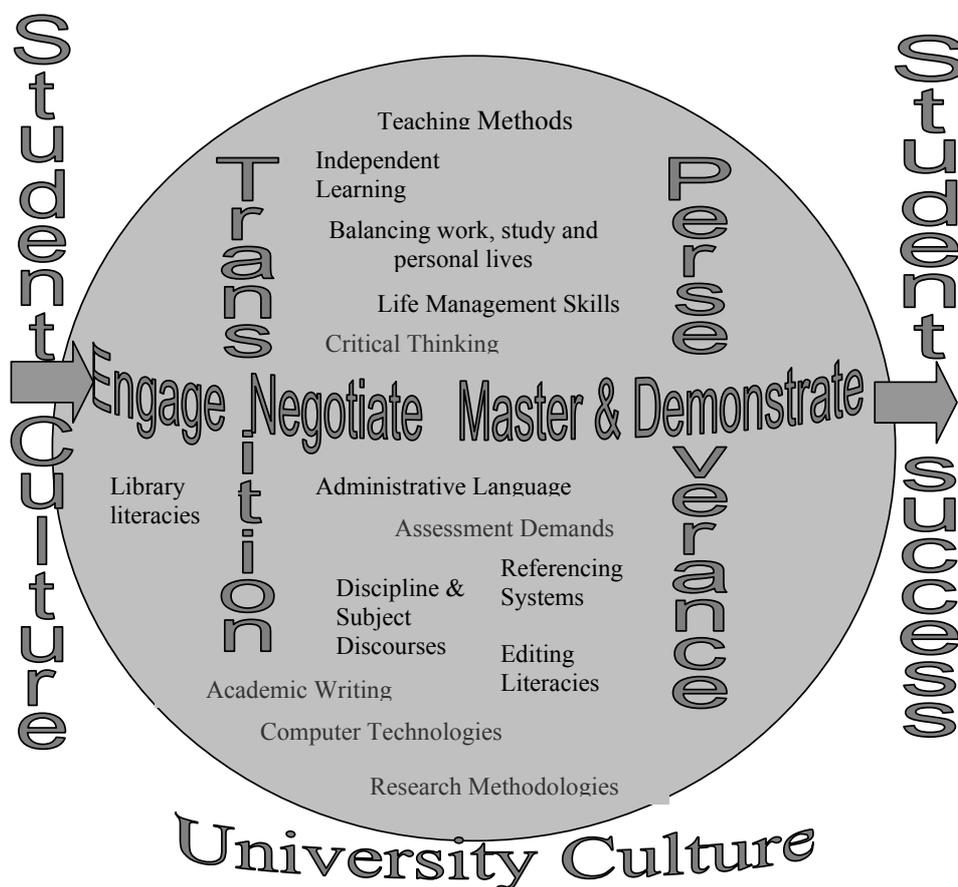
Figure 8.1: *The Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery at University*

8.3.7 The *Framework*: Strengths

The *Framework* has a number of strengths. First, the *Framework* is able to embrace diversity, both in terms of the student profile and in terms of the university culture. The *Framework* accommodates, for example, the understanding that the specific literacies and discourses each student engages varies from individual to individual – reflecting not only the individual's own choices and aspirations but also the socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital each student brings to the university. Some AES may need to master computer technologies and referencing and research literacies whereas others, a consequence of their workplace experiences, may not only be familiar with computer

technology, but also very proficient in its use. That AES' experiences vary from each other and with those of other students, such as SL or international students further extends the presence of diversity within the culture, an extension that the *Framework* is also able to reflect and accommodate. The *Framework* thus accommodates the understanding that the relationships between the students, the university culture and the multiplicity of literacies and discourses students negotiate in their university journeys are dynamic, subject to the particular student and to the particular discourses and literacies the students are encountering and engaging.

Change is one of the key themes appearing throughout the study, especially in Chapters One, Two, Six and Seven. Another strength of the *Framework* is that it has both the capacity and the flexibility to reflect the constant and ongoing change stemming from local, national and global contexts.

8.3.8 The *Framework*: Challenges

The analyses of data reveals a number of challenges, which need to be confronted and accommodated in the view of the FYE illustrated by the *Framework of Student Engagement and Mastery*.

First, there is the challenge of inconsistency. The analyses (see sections 6.4 and 7.4) reveal that the requirements, expectations and demands inherent in the discourses and literacies that students need to master and demonstrate differ across the university culture and across faculties, departments, courses and units. There are different referencing, writing and reading systems, different research paradigms, different knowledge (theory) systems and different teaching and learning styles. These may, in principle and in practice, be inconsistent, and even in conflict. In negotiating the multiple discourses and literacies of the fragmented and dynamic university culture students therefore need to learn to accommodate differences: to be flexible. The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* accommodates this understanding in that it depicts the multiplicity of discourses and literacies involved and appreciates that these vary from student to student.

The second challenge is time. The participants' stories, analysed in Chapters Six and Seven, endorse Mak's et al.'s (2001) assertion that students are under pressure to gain − simultaneously and rapidly − the necessary, technical, interpersonal and self-presentation

skills central to their success. Participants' metaphors of transition (see section 6.4.5) also attest to the accuracy of Kantanis's (2001) contention that students:

> Have to adjust simultaneously to the environment, teaching and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and disciplines of the university…[and that]…due to the nature of the course structure students do not have the luxury of adjusting to the new culture over an extended period of time.

The third challenge is posed by diversity. The participants' testimony (see section 6.3.2, in particular, although this is a thread woven throughout Chapters Six and Seven) confirms the literature (Beasley 1997; Bourdieu 1999; Eijkman 2002; McLean 2002; Postle et al. 1996), which argues that transition is a more difficult task for those who are not familiar with the university culture. Influencing factors revealed by the data include those students who are the first generation of their family to go to university, who are from the designated equity groups and who are mature-age students. Participants' testimonies also revealed that it is difficult for those students whose socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital is not in tune with mainstream university discourses: their parents or friends may de-value education and its benefits; have an aversion for getting into debt (HECS); have negative experiences of school/poor study facilities; and may lack family/peer reference groups which have knowledge of and are familiar with university. The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* is able to accommodate these understandings in its capacity to embrace and illustrate the notion that each student, as they enter university, embodies and brings with them not only their own socio-cultural but also their own academic/ linguistic and economic capital.

8.4 Contributions to Practice: Students

8.4.1 Introduction

The 'deficit-discourse' shift and the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* have implications for the stakeholders involved in the FYE. These stakeholders include the students, universities (their philosophies, policies and practices), academics, schools and schoolteachers, prospective students and prospective student advisors, and marketing officers. This section summarises the implications for students. The following sections summarise the implications presented for university philosophy and policy (section 8.4), for university staff and academics (section 8.5) and for the other stakeholders involved in the processes of the FYE at university (section 8.6).

In this section, the three success practices that emerged from the participants' evidence – reflective practice, socio-cultural practice and critical practice – will be summarised (see sections 8.4.2 – 4), along with the relationship between them (see section 8.4.5). Section 8.4.6 will address the challenges provided by the three success practices and section 8.4.7 will outline the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*.

Whereas the deficit-discourse shift and the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* are able to characterise the nature of and reveal the challenges posed for students in making their transition to the university culture, they do not explain how students can actually go about accomplishing the processes of familiarity with and mastery that is integral to their success. Apparent in the data analysed was evidence of the practices that participants believed had assisted them to negotiate and master the university discourses and literacies. The presence of these practices was evident in the literature review in Chapter Three, reiterated in participants' accounts throughout Chapters Six and Seven and summarised in section 7.5. The potency of the practices was communicated through the over-arching reference points in the two chapters of qualitative data analysis and their authenticity shone through the layered thick descriptions documenting the participants' journeys. The practices included the capabilities for reflective practice, the use of the socio-cultural competencies and the practices of critical discourse and critical self-awareness.

8.4.2 Reflective Practice

The review of the literature (in section 3.6) and the participants' evidence, documented in Chapters Six and Seven and summarised in section 7.5.2, endorsed the power of reflective practice in student perseverance at university. Participants substantiated the value and benefits to be gained by reflective practice, including the sub-skills of observation and reflection. The participants' confirmed that reflective practice had contributed to their capabilities to reflect in and on their practice, as they negotiated and engaged the literacies and discourses in the university culture, providing them with a means to enhance their learning practices and to persevere with their studies.

8.4.3 Socio-cultural Practice

The value and benefits of the socio-cultural competencies were introduced in Chapter Three, in terms of developing a theoretical rationale for their usefulness, endorsed in section 7.2, in relation to their presence in the participants' commentaries, and summarised

in section 7.5.3. Participants confirmed the utility of the socio-cultural competencies. Participants agreed, for example, that the competencies provided them with a means of engaging and mastering the university culture's multiple discourses and literacies. Participants also identified that the competencies represented skills of engagement that enabled them to navigate the fragmented, inconsistent and dynamic university environment, allowing them to be more in charge of their learning environment. Participants further corroborated the practices' capacities in empowering them as they strove to counter the impact of study/work/family/life collisions. Finally, participants agreed that the competencies embodied problem-solving strategies: strategies that participants used to overcome or minimise the difficulties confronting them as they negotiated and engaged with the university culture.

The value of the competencies is supported by their innate properties. The competencies are more than communication skills, not only because of their capacity to be culturally and socially fine-tuned to the particular culture or literacy being engaged, but also because of their capacity to symbolise and reflect the belief systems underlying them. The competencies' value is also demonstrated by the recognition that they are more than 'self-management' strategies, as it is not just 'the self' that is involved. The competencies lie at the heart of a process of interpersonal interaction and transactional communication that is far more complex than at first appears and far more problematic than many people perceive. This complexity arises from the competencies' socio-cultural capacity: that they each also typify or represent a cultural belief system or social or cultural practice which varies from participant to participant and from that of the other participant(s) involved in the process; and that, further, these differences need to be identified, negotiated and shared if the communication transaction or teaching/learning process is to be effective.

The term 'socio-cultural competencies' is not, however, a simple term to accommodate. A less complicated term and one that would have some symmetry with the term 'reflective practice' is that of 'socio-cultural practice'. Whereas the term 'reflective practice' is a term commonly used in the literature, the term 'socio-cultural practice' is not. It is a new term developed for the purposes of this study. The term has a number of advantages. First, it is better able to illustrate the dynamic inter-relationships between the competencies, embodying the notion that they are more than separate skills or abilities. Secondly, socio-cultural practice reflects the idea that used together the competencies constitute a co-

coordinated strategy enabling students to engage and master the university's multiple literacies and discourses. Thirdly, the term incorporates the spirit of immediacy and the dynamic nature of the use of the competencies. For example, whereas the competencies' use and effectiveness often benefit from prior thought and preparation, sometimes this is not possible. The term socio-cultural practice is able to accommodate this contingency by endorsing students' use of the competencies as an engrained, integrated and established practice that they can utilise spontaneously if necessary. Fourthly, the term highlights the practical nature of the competencies. Fifthly, the use of the term socio-cultural practice helps to highlight the competencies in students' minds, substantiating their value to them and their applicability to effective university study.

8.4.4 Critical Practice

Strongly evident in participants' stories was the development and use of critical discourse awareness and critical self-awareness. As section 3.2.2 observed, a critical awareness of discourse is a site of reflection upon and analysis of the socio-linguistic order and the order of discourse that equips students with a resource for intervention in and reshaping of discursive practices as well as the power relations that ground them. Section 7.4, documented examples of participants' awareness of and their efforts to transform the discursive practices impacting on them. In section 7.5, additional examples were provided to develop the link between critical discourse awareness and student perseverance as well as to outline the intersections between the critical discourse awareness and the other success strategies, reflective practice and socio-cultural practice. Though a more complex and difficult practice, critical discourse awareness facilitates students' capacities to be more in control of their learning and to unravel the unequal practices and power configurations operating to constrain or marginalise them from the mainstream university discourses.

The benefits to be gained by participants' use of critical self-awareness were also uncovered in their accounts of their universities journeys (see section 7.5.5). The participants' capacities to examine their own cultural practices and belief systems (or capital), as well as their willingness to challenge and transform such practices, were crucial to participants' capabilities in mastering and demonstrating the university's multiple discourses and literacies. However, like the term 'socio-cultural competencies', the terms 'critical discourse awareness' and 'critical self-awareness' are not readily accommodated. A more precise term, one that would integrate and underpin the twin practices and have

more symmetry with the terms 'reflective practice' and 'socio-cultural practice', is that of 'critical practice'. Whereas the term 'critical' recurs in sociological and educational literature (see Chapters One, Two and Three) and is referenced in relation to action research projects and strategies directed at transforming and empowering students (see Chapters Three and Four) the notion 'critical practice', as it is understood, developed and delineated for the purposes of this study, is original – specifically in its capacity to encompass both critical discourse and critical self-awareness.

8.4.5 Dynamic Practices

Evident throughout the layered, thick descriptions documenting the participants' journeys in Chapters Six and Seven, then, were the practices that successful or 'expert' students demonstrate. These characteristics include three discernable, dynamic, and interrelated practices, (a) reflective practice, (b) socio-cultural practice and (c) critical practice. Like the over-reference points, although these practices are separately delineated, the evidence demonstrates that they also exist in a dynamic relationship with each other, intersecting, overlapping and empowering each other. The analysis of data (see sections 7.3 and 7.5) revealed, for example, that observation and reflection are pre-requisites for fine-tuning the socio-cultural competencies to the particular culture or sub-culture being engaged. Likewise, the socio-cultural properties of the competencies rely on students' capacities to observe and reflect on the cultural practices operating at the site of the communicative exchange. The socio-cultural properties of the competencies also rely on students' capacities to appraise not only their own cultural assumptions and expectations but also the external, and often hidden, assumptions and power configurations impacting at the site of the exchange. The capacities of students to challenge and, where it is possible, to transform unhelpful policies and practices operating in the university context also rely on their use of the socio-cultural practices of offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request.

8.4.6 Student Success Practices: Challenges

8.4.6.1 Introduction

The three practices pose a number of challenges that need to be considered. The first is the frequency of the three practices' manifestations: in daily life, in everyday discourses and in a plethora of disparate research literatures (see section 8.4.7.2). The second challenge arises from the alternative-entry status of the participants involved in the study (see section

8.4.7.3). The third challenge is presented by the practices' surface superficiality and inherent complexity (see section 8.4.7.4).

8.4.6.2 Shifting Meanings

The three success practices are in daily currency: we use them, consciously and unconsciously, and to varying degrees and to varying degrees of effectiveness each day. Some people use them more purposefully and effectively, whereas others may negate or devalue their potency. This feature, coupled with their surface simplicity, means that the practices may be delineated as 'common sense' or 'self-management practices' for example, or are actively de-valued by mainstream discourses (see section 7.4).

The three practices are also present in everyday discourses. Section 3.6.1 delineated the shifting meanings applied to reflective practice, for example illustrating their presence in the media, in promotional material and advertising and in self-help literature. Section 3.4.4 revealed the power and value attributed to socio-cultural practice. For example, the usefulness of seeking help and information (for example, 'kids help' lines, youth suicide); of participating in a group (for example cancer support groups, pensioner and retirement groups); offering (negative) feedback (for example, in setting boundaries and in being assertive); 'saying No' (for example to drugs, to drink driving, to unsafe sex, to gambling); expressing disagreement (for example, in 'quit smoking' campaigns). Sections 3.6.5-8 documented the shifting meanings and understandings allocated to critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness. The three practices are also present in a plethora of research areas, including HE, FYE, access and equity, educational, sociological, cross-cultural and psychological literatures, as well as in critical literacy and discourse analysis areas (see Chapters Two, Three and Seven).

The study, by advancing specific understandings in relation to the three practices (see sections 7.5 and this section) highlights the applicability of the three practices: that, together, the practices constitute students' means for successfully engaging, mastering and demonstrating the university's multiple literacies and discourses. In common with the understandings embodied by the study, students develop their own understandings and use of the practices, a process unique for each student.

8.4.6.3 Alternative Entry Status

The second challenge arises from the question of whether the three practices are more, or less, readily used by the participants in this particular study because of the participants' alternative entry status (AES). The qualitative evidence suggests that the mature-age status of the participants enhanced their use of the three practices: for example, participants' use of reflective practice and, in relation to socio-cultural practice, the competencies of class participation and expressing disagreement and practice (see data analysis section 7.3).

The participants' socio-cultural and academic/linguistic capital, however, also inhibited their use of the practice: for example, in terms of asking for help and making social contact and conversation (see participants' evidence in section 7.3). Despite some commonality in the participants' experiences, their accounts also highlight the diversity intrinsic in their experiences. The participants' individual experiences reveal the role played by the socio-cultural and academic/linguistic capital that they brought with them as they accessed the university culture and in the choices they made as they negotiated their university journeys. A complicating factor lies in the fact that the relationships between the students and the university are also dynamic; subject to the particular student and the particular discourses and literacies the student encounters and engages in the culture. The influence of the students' socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital, including their alternative entry status, is therefore not easily measured, reflecting the post-structural intersections between the universal and the individual and the complex and the unique. There is no definitive answer, then, to the question of whether the participants' alternative entry status positively or negatively influenced their use of the three practices. Each student's experiences are dependent on the socio-cultural capital they bring with them, on their critical awareness of this capital, on their relationship with university, and on the particular discourses and literacies the students encounter and engage in the university culture.

8.4.6.4 Socio-cultural Properties

The third challenge to be addressed stems from the socio-cultural properties embodied by the practices. The strands unpacked and sorted out within the participants' accounts (throughout section 7.3) confirm the significance of these socio-cultural properties. For example, the superficiality and simplicity often assigned to them means that the practices are frequently de-valued, their effectiveness actively minimised or marginalised as

'common sense'. This view nullifies and/or actively denies the innate socio-cultural character of the practices: that each needs to be fine-tuned, and constantly refined, to the particular cultural or sub-cultural group being engaged. The participants' experiences confirmed the complexities inherent in students' use of the practices. These experiences verified the notion that students' use of the practices ought to be flexible and dynamic. Able to accommodate the implications provided by the capital that each student brings to university and be sensitive to the diverse and multiple discourses and literacies that students encounter there.

In addition, the socio-cultural nature of the practices enhances students' capabilities in responding to and accommodating the rapid and ongoing change endemic to studying, living and working in the early 21st century (see section 1.1). This understanding stems from and underpins the study's post-structural imperatives, characterising the intersections between the absolute and the uncertain and the singular and the complex. The understanding also reflects the critical orientation woven through the literature review, the research design and the analysis of data, and epitomises the study's themes – change, culture, discourse, diversity, multiliteracies, power and thematic relationships (section 1.5).

8.4.7 A Model for Student Success Practices at University

8.4.7.1 Introduction

Not only did the analyses of data reveal a means by which students could facilitate their transition and perseverance at university, the data also provided the grounds for the establishment of a model, the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*.

The *Model for Student Success Practices at University* (see Figure 8.2) incorporates two key features. First, the model represents and embodies three key practices that, together, constitute a means by which students can make their transition to and persevere in the university culture: reflective practice, socio-cultural practice and critical practice. Secondly, the model is able to characterise and symbolise the dynamic inter-relationships that exist between the three practices.

Error!

Seeking Help & Information

Seeking & Offering Feedback

Expressing Disagreement

Making Social Contact

Refusing a Request

Socio-cultural Practice

Participating in a Group

Observation & Listening

Dynamic Success Practices

Reflection before Practice

Critical Self-awareness

Reflective Practice

Critical Practice

Reflection in Practice

Reflection on Practice

Critical Discourse Awareness

Figure 8.2: The Model for Student Success Practices at University

8.4.7.2 The Model: Strengths

The model has a number of strengths. First, the model highlights the importance and viability of the three practices for students' transition to and perseverance in the university culture. Secondly, the model promotes the use of the three practices, prioritising them in the students' minds as their means of persevering in the university culture. Thirdly, the model coordinates and integrates the three practices into a practical, dynamic model that is both specific and action-orientated. Fourthly, the model is able to accommodate the socio-cultural understandings embodied in the study.

The model also integrates and highlights a number of disparate strategies or practices that are already present and promoted, to varying degrees, in the literature as well as in educational theory and practice. For example, reflective practice is promoted in the literature and in practice both explicitly (formally), through curriculum design, and implicitly (informally), for example in many university courses (see literature review section 3.6 and data analysis Chapters Six and Seven). Socio-cultural practice, constituting as it does a new term, is not present in the literature or in practice as an integrated or coordinated practice. However, the individual competencies, although not explicitly

acknowledged or highlighted, are present in the literature (see section 3.4.4). Critical practice is also present in the literature (sections 3.2 and 3.6.6 and 7) and in practice (see section 7.4) and integrated in many courses. The practices are, however, subject to a wide variety of meanings and uses, with the boundaries between them blurred and imprecise. Thus, like the notion of socio-cultural practice, which draws together the separate competencies into an integrated practice, the notion of critical practice, by having its properties and meanings clearly delineated and explained, affirms the viability and the benefits of integrating critical discourse and critical self-awareness into students' repertoires of success practices.

The model not only draws together the three practices, it also explicitly delineates their specific meanings. A strength of the model is that, in doing so, it gives prominence to and highlights each of the three practices, integrating them in a dynamic and practical model that, when used by students, can facilitate their transition and perseverance at university.

A further strength of the model is that it is also able to address the complexity inherent in the students' engagement with the university culture. The model is able to acknowledge not only the role of an academic transition but it is also able to appreciate the social and the personal transitions that the students are simultaneously experiencing. The model thus amalgamates affective and cognitive domains and takes into account the social contexts of learning. Research has tended to either concentrate on one or the other (see section 2.2.9.6) and it is only relatively recently that researchers have begun to acknowledge the critical and dynamic relationship that exists between the academic, social and personal transitions students undergo. McInnis and his team at the University of Melbourne have begun, for example, to study the central nature of student engagement (section 1.1.2). Other researchers are directing their efforts in the development and implementation of programs designed to address these issues (Kantanis 2002; McLean 2002). A further strength of the *Model* is, then, that it addresses and accommodates the separate domains, acknowledging and incorporating the complexity involved. An additional strength is that it is also able to promote practical strategies that are flexible and can therefore be used to similar effectiveness in the different contexts the students experience during their university journeys.

8.4.7.3 The Model: Challenges

The *Model for Student Success Practices at University* also presents challenges that need to be addressed. First, in relation to those students who choose to withdraw from their university studies and secondly, in relation to whether or not there are grounds for a training program to be developed to facilitate students' use of the model.

Re-framing Withdrawal

Participants' evidence confirmed that, for some students, 'success' is not going to be measured by a university qualification but rather to be perceived in terms of their decision to leave. This understanding underpins the importance of acknowledging that it is appropriate for some students to use critical practice, in terms of both their critical self- and discourse awareness, and the socio-cultural practice of 'saying No' in relation to the question of students' continued university participation. Seven participants took a stand in relation to their perseverance at university. Although both the framework and the model use the concept of 'success', these experiences (see sections 5.6.3 and 7.3.6) confirm that these participants did not perceive their decisions to withdraw as negative, but rather, were indicative of their decision to embark, instead, on a different journey.

This view re-conceptualises the potential blame allocated to students who withdraw or are delineated as 'failures'. It challenges the notion that their efforts are considered to be synonymous with deficiency, recasting it terms of their choices to express disagreement. The 'deficit-discourse' shift therefore has implications in relation to this issue. Having already re-conceptualised the processes of transition and perseverance, the shift also offers the potential for a re-conceptualisation of the notion of 'withdrawal'.

Training Programs

There are a number of challenges that arise from the question of a training program. First, there is the challenge of whether the implementation of the action research program, *ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership Program* (Mak et al. 1998), enhanced Group A participants' use of the practices. The second challenge concerns the efficacy of *ExcelL*, in relation to its capacity to represent the *Model for Student Success Practices at University.* Thirdly, if it is concluded that the *ExcelL* program is unable to substitute, in itself, for such a training program, then there is the challenge of whether a

specific training program could, or should, be developed to facilitate students' use of the model.

Phase 3 of the study's research design was specifically incorporated (see section 4.2) to determine the efficacy of the socio-cultural competencies in assisting AES adjust to the university culture. Phase 3 sought to determine whether or not *ExcelL* had facilitated Group A participants' adjustment compared with Group B participants. The results however did not support the hypothesis. Despite one anomaly, on the *Interaction Skills Checklist* (see discussion section 5.3.5), there were few significant differences between the results of the two groups. Group A's participation in the program did not therefore quantitatively increase this group's adjustment to university. However, the results of the analysis of qualitative data in Chapters Six and Seven were more positive. The analysis confirmed the efficacy of the socio-cultural competencies in assisting participants to adjust to the university culture. Group A student testimonies, analysed in section 7.2.6, confirmed, for example, that the program positively influenced their use of the competencies. The postscripts of the four Group A participants who have graduated (see section 7.6) also testify to Group A's use of and belief in the efficacy of the socio-cultural competencies both at and beyond university**.**

The evidence presented in the study, however, suggests that some participants are able to succeed, and succeed well, without undertaking the *ExcelL*. Group B participants' evidence, for example, revealed that they were able to integrate and use the three practices into their university modus operandi without the benefits of participating in a formal program. The three Group B participants who succeeded in obtaining their degrees, Jon, Sandy and Andy, demonstrated their capacities to use and integrate reflective, socio-cultural and critical practice into their university practice (see analyses in Chapters Six and Seven). These participants' accounts also confirmed that they associated these practices with their success. That the practices occurred frequently in Group B participants' stories of their experiences may be a consequence of the practices' presence in daily life. It is contended that this presence may amplify rather than diminish the efficacy of the three practices. The question of whether the successful Group B participants would have benefited from participation in an *ExcelL* type invention program remains inconclusive however.

The three practices were also present in the stories of the Group B participants who were not as successful. Whereas Linda, Shaz and Della illustrated their use of the practices, they also confirmed that they would have benefited from using them more consistently and more effectively. For example, Linda acknowledged that she might not have failed the course *Australia, Asia and the Pacific* if she had asked for feedback and sought help when she was ill, leading up to and during the exam. Shaz's inability to refuse requests to taking on more casual work has prevented her from completing her degree. Della remains unable to reconcile the theoretical demands of the psychology discipline she is studying. Della also was less able to effectively juggle the demands of her illness and the aftermath of a difficult divorce. Dan, the remaining Group B participant, illustrated throughout his testimony that his use of the practices was not consistent; he was not comfortable with group participation or making social contact for example. Further Dan demonstrated an unequivocal black-and-white, right-and-wrong, approach to many university issues, continually displaying an unwillingness to practise critical self-awareness. Dan's unwillingness to use socio-cultural practice, specifically the competencies of expressing disagreement and refusing a request, also contributed to a failure in one of his first semester subjects. Therefore, although three of the Group B participants succeeded in their university studies without participating in *ExcelL,* other Group B participants may have benefited from the program's enhancement of their socio-cultural competencies.

The question of whether a program could be developed and employed to enhance students' use of the model was tentatively addressed by the study's research design. Whereas a program has not been designed to develop specifically the students' efficacy in the use of all three of the success practices, the *ExcelL* program, the original training program from which the socio-cultural competencies were derived, was designed to develop the specific socio-cultural competencies integrated in the model. *ExcelL's* efficacy had already been firmly established, validated by studies conducted in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia (Mak et al. 1999; Pearson 1999; Shergill 1997).

ExcelL focused on the use and enhancement of specific socio-cultural competencies. The program did not integrate the competencies into a dynamic co-coordinated practice, strengthen the intersections between them, or promote the use of socio-cultural practice per se. Whereas students need to employ their reflective and critical capabilities if they are to successfully use the model, *ExcelL* does not delineate either reflective or critical practice as

components that students need to demonstrate if they are to succeed at university. Therefore, although the program focused on students' socio-cultural competencies, and whereas students also need to employ their capacities (although far more implicitly than explicitly) for both reflective and critical practice if they were to accomplish the *ExcelL* objectives, the program, in itself, is not a substitute for the *Model for Student Success Practices at University.*

The *ExcelL* program nonetheless provides a prototype or framework of a training program that could be useful for some students. The Group A participants' evidence, for example, commend its socio-cultural emphasis – an emphasis that would be expressed in a training program promoting the *Model for Student Success Practices at University.* Participants' evidence point to the benefits gained through its essentially experiential nature, for example through the program's emphasis on explicitly practising the competencies. Participants also appreciated the fact that *ExcelL* comprised an 18-hour program, incorporating a longer timeline than many other intervention programs. The longer duration of the program enhanced participants' opportunities for reflective practice. Reflective practice, in its turn, also contributed to the participants' opportunities for critical self-awareness and critical discourse awareness.

The question of whether there is a need for a formal training program to be developed to enhance students' development of the model and/or to improve the effectiveness of their use, particularly given the practices' daily currency and manifestation in everyday discourses, is difficult to answer on the basis of the evidence provided in this study. However, the students' testimonies imply the value of a training program for students who are not confident of their capacities or who are juggling the difficult demands inherent in the study/work/family/life collisions that impact on their lives. The underpinning socio-cultural emphasis of the model also suggests its relevance for accommodating the changing contexts and the pragmatics of learning, studying, studying and living in the contemporary university and engaging the multiple discourses and literacies the students encounter there. That the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* provides students with a means of engaging and succeeding in the university culture infers that there may be grounds to develop a training program to prioritise and enhance the model's use.

8.5 Contributions to Practice: University Philosophy and Policy

The 'deficit-discourse' shift, the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* challenge universities in terms of philosophy and policy development, both individually and in partnership. The review of literature in Chapters Two and Three, the data analysis in section 7.4 and the participant observation I conducted at the site highlighted the strategies that could be developed to facilitate students' engagement with and perseverance in the university culture, providing implications for university philosophy, policy and practice. In terms of philosophy and policy, for example, the students' testimonies confirmed that the university could assist first year students to become enculturated into what Kantanis (2001) describes as the educational and cultural 'modus operandi' of the university by:

- Re-conceptualising diversity as a resource. A response to the 'deficit-discourse' shift is to re-think university beliefs and practices in relation to diversity, to re-conceptualise diversity as a 'resource' rather than as a 'problem' (Allen 2001)

- Engaging the students' own discourses. Gee (1997) argues that each student enters university, and each class, with their own cultural ways of knowing and that, to override these, would be to impoverish the spectrum of diversity present. A university, using the diversity of its staff and students to make connections and to build understandings, thereby acknowledges, integrates and promulgates its cognitive, social and cultural complexity (a university is, by definition a universe, composed of diversity).

- Re-thinking the blame attached to failing students. This encompasses the blame incorrectly apportioned to the secondary sector for not adequately preparing students for HE, or to entry policies that accept 'below-standard' or students with 'low' tertiary entrance scores. Kantanis (2001) argues that it is important to accept the reality that first year students present in a mass education system;

- Challenging the assumptions of deficit, underpinning many of the approaches to dealing with the growing diversity of the student body. Inherent is the assumption that there is one mainstream culture, with one mainstream discourse, operating within an unchanging, static organisational context and that languages and literacies other than those of the mainstream represent a deficit or a deficiency on the part of students unfamiliar with them.

- Developing polices in relation to, for example, the first year experience, transition and diversity, at department, faculty, institutional and national levels;

- Developing a more explicit university-wide teaching and learning framework. The development of the model and its integrated success practices, as well as their implementation, become even more critical if the implications stemming from the complex, fragmented and dynamic nature of university culture and practices are identified and understood (Beasley 1997; Coady 2000). The lack of a university-wide, explicit teaching and learning framework, for example, further complicates the difficulties experienced by students as they engage and negotiate the multiplicity of university literacies and discourses. That these difficulties may have been exacerbated by the Nelson reforms and the continuing hard-line economic rationalist and liberalist/individualist philosophy of the Howard Coalition government, whose attitude towards HE in Australia is acting to increase access and equity concerns (see 2.2.5.2), justifies the creation of the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*.

- Integrating support systems into the institutional mainstream, widely discussing them to enhance their credibility, efficacy and use, rather than marginalising them as 'fix-up' systems, separate and distinct from ordinary university business.

- Developing and implementing policies and practices, which facilitate and cultivate a learning community and the practices of lifelong and life-wide learning.

8.6 Contributions to Practice: University Staff

8.6.1 Transition and Perseverance

The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* demand responses from university staff, in particular the academics, involved in the processes of learning and teaching and communication at the university. The review of literature, in section 2.5.3, the data analysis, in section 7.4, and the participant observation I conducted at the site as teacher, researcher and counsellor, highlighted the strategies that university staff can use to enhance students' engagement with and perseverance in the university culture. The 'deficit-discourse provides implications for first year academics in particular, sponsoring a shift in focus from the deficit view to one which takes into account the ways in which staff can assist in facilitating students' familiarity with the culture, its discourses and literacies.

Central is the need for staff to acknowledge that the increasing diversity of the student body means that each student entering university does so conditioned by his/her own social, cultural and educational capital and that, further, this may not be in tune with mainstream university practices – whatever they may be and by whomever they are expressed. To be effective, students need to be aware of, respond to and align with these cultural differences. Mcfarlane (2002) suggests that this process involves orchestrating the learning environment in a culturally connected fashion whereas Gee (1998) refers to it as building a meta-discourse within each teaching/learning context. Macfarlane (2003) argues that not only is teachers' knowledge of students' culture important for building a supportive social climate but that knowledge of these cultural factors also contributes to task interest, academic engagement, and student understanding.

Academics have particular responsibilities in this regard. Academics need to challenge their use of the transmission model of teaching and acknowledge that they teach students as well as, or perhaps instead of, teaching content (Kantanis 2001). The key to teaching/learning, according to an alternative model – the transactional communication model – becomes as much the 'process', as the 'content', with academics acknowledging that perseverance relies in part on what academics do in the classroom, both as professional educators and as effective communicators. An important thread is thus woven into the philosophy of university teaching. This thread lies in recognising, participating in and facilitating the processes by which students learn to negotiate and integrate a number of competing discourses and multiliteracies – the university, faculty, department and discipline discourses they are engaging. Central is the need for academics to actively to seek and look/listen for feedback about the effectiveness of their curriculum planning and teaching strategies. The participants' evidence confirms that academics have a vital role in the processes whereby students learn to negotiate the multiple linguistic and cultural differences of the university – processes that are central to students' capabilities to persevere and succeed in the university culture.

8.6.2 Explicit Discourses

Participants revealed that it was important that university and teaching staff make their discourses explicit (see data analysis, Chapters Six and Seven). To not only explain and make clear the rules, but also to make explicit the hidden agendas, the covert or hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations as well as the expected (but not stated) behaviours

intrinsic to students achieving success at university (Benn 2000; Boud 2001). Awareness is a crucial first step for university staff. University staff need to identify the specific literacies and discourses (the requirements, rules, practices, behaviours and expectations) that students need to access, engage, master and, in fact, demonstrate, if they are to pass. This awareness includes the identification and, ultimately, implementation of the methods by which these discourses can be made clear and explicit for students and for teaching and marking teams.

The data analysis confirms that lectures are often overwhelming for new students. Participants support the value of Hoey's (cited in Lawrence et al. 2001) argument that lecturers can facilitate their students' learning by making transparent their often-implicit expectations regarding:

- Objectives – by explaining the basis of objectives in the first lecture, by commencing each lecture with competency-based objectives, and by identifying the relevance of meeting each objective;

- Lecture notes – by providing a summary of main points/written outline and/or whole lecture (on discussion boards, in library) ahead of the lecture to help students to pre-read and to structure notes; and

- PowerPoint – by placing presentations on the web at least a week before lectures; by encouraging students to print PowerPoint presentations and annotate directly; by including images from textbook whenever possible; by building concepts and diagrams; and by including video segments to add variety and interest;

Participants support the authority of Burton's analysis (cited in Lawrence et al. 2001) of techniques that assist students to effectively navigate a course of study. These techniques, Burton contends, encourage student participation, cater for a variety of learning styles, provide stimulating learning experiences, engage students in the learning process and challenge them to become independent learners. The techniques include:

- Interaction – by posing problem solving activities, reflective discussion points, class demonstrations, group work and role plays;

- Accessibility and consultation – through structured discussion groups, set consultation times, and flexibility in contact opportunities;

- Discussion – through electronic discussion groups, telephone tutorials, video conferences and residential schools – to reinforce material, particularly for external and international students, by posting issues for understanding, discussion and reflection;

- Review and feedback – actively seeking and looking/listening for feedback about the effectiveness of their curriculum planning, teaching resources and teaching strategies, incorporating student feedback in the process through the use of anecdotal observation and questioning, quality circles, use of student representatives and evaluations.

Participants confirmed the critical nature of assessment: that it encompasses a diversity of different and sometimes conflicting demands and requirements (see section 7.4). As a result, participants testified, learning to write effective assignments was a difficult and often arduous process that can be helped by lecturing staff (markers) making their expectations and requirements clear. For example, lecturers can help by incorporating:

- Model, exemplar or sample assignments providing guidelines about structure and process;

- Formative assessment, including drafts and proposals;

- Assessment targetted early, coupled with constructive and realistic feedback, both to provide students with a gauge about the degree and speed of their adjustment and to implement early warning systems and strategies;

- On-line interactive learning experiences, including self-test exercises;

- Marking criteria feedback sheets, clearly explained, linked to objectives and provided ahead of time;

- Opportunities for feedback, through structured discussion groups, set consultation times, incorporating a variety of contact opportunities;

- Constructive, consistent and clear feedback, incorporating referrals and encouragement to seek out sources of help and information if there are difficulties in accessing the discourses of the discipline;

- Re-submissions permitted and encouraged for failing first assignments, as well as referrals as above.

8.6.3 The Model for Student Successs Practices at University

A further responsibility for academics is to acknowledge that successful students are those who are 'expert' students. This involves the understanding that the students most likely to

succeed are those who actively seek to become enculturated into the teaching/learning styles, life, procedures and practices of the new university culture (Kantanis 2001). This study would argue that 'expert' students are the students who use, in socially and culturally appropriate ways, the three success practices.

8.6.4 Reflective Practice

Reflection and reflective practice are, to some extent, already facilitated by university teachers and integrated and promoted in their curriculum design (see discussion Chapters Six and Seven). Teachers however can further assist students by:

- Delineating and prioritising reflective practice as a dynamic practice that can enable students to succeed in the university culture;

- Explicitly linking reflective practice to success; also differentiating its sub-themes, observation and self awareness, as success practices;

- Promoting it as a practical and concrete strategy (a starting point) to help students engage the new literacies and discourses they encounter in their journey through university;

- Implementing teaching/learning strategies that help students both incorporate and facilitate its use – for example, incorporating sample assignments; models, drafts, re-submissions, demonstrations etc that highlight the benefits of reflection, not just as a practice that helps students come to terms with subject content but as an active strategy that can enhance their confidence in completing assessment.

- Modelling reflective behaviours and practices themselves and sharing how reflective practice has assisted them.

- Incorporating class strategies to facilitate reflection, for example class activities that help students to share their experiences with each other and to develop mentoring relationships that facilitate reflection.

8.6.5 Socio-cultural Practice

Whereas reflective practice, specifically in relation to reflection about content, is facilitated and implemented by curriculum design and practice already in place, socio-cultural practice has not been addressed as explicitly. The analysis of data suggests that staff have fundamental input in assisting students' use socio-cultural practice (see section 7.2).

Seeking Help and Information

Participants highlighted and confirmed the central role that staff can play in developing students' capacities for seeking help and information. These accounts revealed that, to facilitate students' utilisation of this practice, university staff could:

- Provide and nurture a supportive/encouraging learning environment/culture where it is safe/expected to ask/seek help and feedback;
- Encourage students to access help by building proposals into assessment, incorporating formative assessment and self-assessment exercises;
- Target assessment early in the term;
- Emphasise the role of consultation;
- Ensure accessibility and flexibility of consultation through the use of set consultation times, structured discussion groups, tele-tutorials, telephone, e-mail, face-to-face, individually and in groups;
- Develop partnerships (Student Services, Learning Centres, Faculties and Departments);
- Research, develop literature and collaborate with other researchers re (school-tertiary interface, transition, perseverance, diversity, FYE).

Participating in a Group

The qualitative data also revealed that staff, and especially teachers, have an important role to play in promoting the practice of participating in a group or team, including:

- Incorporating ice breakers, especially in early classes, group work and problem-solving activities; by developing interactive learning environments;
- Encouraging, and making safe, active class participation;
- Implementing group assignments: the use of collaborative groups demands a non-traditional teaching role that Biggs (1991) describes as that of a facilitator who supports the students' construction of meaning. This facilitation includes structuring the learning situation to enhance students' choices and participation: helping with resources, encouraging reflection and giving feedback;
- Reflecting on the importance of teamwork in future professional contexts and in their careers and most importantly, having fun in class.

Burton (cited in Lawrence et al. 2001) describes some useful techniques to encourage student participation, (simultaneously also catering for a variety of learning styles,

providing stimulating learning experiences, engaging students in the learning process and challenging them to become independent learners). These techniques include:

- Interaction – by posing problem solving activities, reflective discussion points, class demonstrations, group work and role plays;
- Discussion – through electronic discussion groups, telephone tutorials, video conferences and residential schools - to reinforce material, particularly for external and international students, by posting issues for understanding, discussion and reflection;
- Accessibility and consultation – through structured discussion groups, set consultation times, and flexibility in contact opportunities;

Making Social Contact

Participants highlighted the value of making social contact in a university context. The participants' accounts revealed that university staff and academics could take more responsibility in helping students to develop and use the competency. University staff and academics could:

- Facilitate interaction in tutorials, fostering dialogue between different cultures and different cultural groups;
- Encourage group/team exercises as well as chat/discussion groups, study groups, study partners, learning circles and mentors; and
- Encourage 'networking' opportunities and connections in and out of class, emphasising its importance in relation to university, career, work and promotional success, as well as the importance of developing their oral and interpersonal communication skills in these contexts. The use of icebreakers and getting-to-know-you exercises are crucial.

Seeking and Offering Feedback

Participants noted that feedback is an expected point of contact between the university and students. Feedback assists students to take control and ownership of their learning environment, providing a gauge that helps students to assess their progress. Feedback is critical in ensuring that students incorporate the flexibility needed to overcome the culture shocks and collisions students experience as they engage with university culture. Feedback also encourages students to engage critically with the material they are encountering (see section 7.3.5). Participants reported that university staff's and academics' abilities to

provide effective, timely, appropriate, explicit and empowering feedback assist students to make their transition to and persevere at university.

Yet feedback is a capacity that is often taken for granted or at least neglected in the university context by the stakeholders involved: university staff, academics, and students. There are also the consequences stemming from a paucity of training provided for first year teachers, a situation aggravated by the casualisation of first year teaching staff, intensified by the 'investment-cost' shift and exacerbated by the Nelson Reforms. These pragmatic concerns are also complicated by the recognition that feedback, whether positive or negative, or whether from sender or receiver, student or teacher, staff member or student, is integral in the transactional communication process. Thus the provision of effective feedback relies on the effectiveness of the communication process: on the willingness of all the participations involved in the process to ensure that their meaning is effectively negotiated and shared. There is a socio-cultural dimension to feedback.

Feedback is also intrinsic to the processes of assessment. There are issues related to the use of marking criteria feedback sheets, the marking criteria themselves, the role of proposals and drafts, the quality and quantity of written feedback, the provision of feedback on exams, the appeal process, the role of computer mediated assessment and self assessment exercises, formative and summative assessment, the role of re-submissions, assessment choices, multiple choice questions, orals, essays and exams (see section 7.3.5). Section 8.5.2 outlined how university and teaching staff could assist students by providing opportunities for feedback. University staff and teachers could, for example, assist students to both seek and offer feedback by:

- Modelling both the provision and receipt of appropriate effective feedback;
- Implementing review and feedback loops about the effectiveness of curriculum planning teaching resources and assessment items;
- Encouraging students' skills in and use of feedback through model/sample assignments, formative assessment related to structure and process, drafts/ proposals, marking criteria sheets, on-line interactive learning experiences, including self-test exercises;
- Provide opportunities for feedback during the assessment process;
- Targetting assessment early and complement it with constructive and realistic feedback;
- Providing students with a gauge about the degree and speed of their adjustment;

- Identifying students who are 'at risk' and need to develop/use their sources of 'help';
- Implementing early intervention strategies;
- Giving constructive, consistent and clear feedback incorporating referrals to encourage overwhelmed students to seek out the appropriate sources of help;
- Permitting and encouraging re-submissions for failing first assignments; and
- Raising awareness about importance of this skill in terms of content/career/professional practice/life and in developing critical self-awareness.

Expressing Disagreement and Refusing a Request

These practices are vital in organising a timetable, in being assertive, in maintaining discipline, in preventing stress, in balancing study and work and study and social life, in ensuring flexibility, in setting boundaries that can enhance their study routines and habits, in overcoming study/work/family/life collisions, in overcoming culture shocks, in problem solving, and in facilitating critical engagement. University staff and academics can help by making the use of the competencies not only safe but also an expected part of university routine: by reducing the risks involved for students; by raising awareness of the efficacy of the practices and linking them to the students' success; by emphasizing the practices' importance to course and future career assertiveness and professional practice; and by modelling them in authentic ways.

8.6.6 Critical Practice

Participants linked their use of critical practice to their perseverance in the university culture (see sections 7.5.3 and 7.5.4). Participants' accounts of their experiences confirmed that university staff had a role to play in facilitating students' use of critical practice. As critical practice overlaps and intersects with the other practices (for example reflective practice, offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request) several of the strategies already recommended in sections 8.5.4 and 8.5.5 also apply to students' development and use of critical practice. These strategies include modelling and encouragement of the practices, facilitating students' critical engagement and critical discourse awareness and explicitly identifying the role of critical practice in enhancing students' mastery and success. Academic staff, for example, could incorporate journalling activities and assessment into their teaching practices (see section 7.4.2).

8.7 Contributions to Practice: The Stakeholders

That transition and perseverance are processes suggests further considerations, particularly in relation to the other stakeholders involved in the FYE. These stakeholders include parents, schools and schoolteachers, prospective students and prospective student advisors, school career advisors or guidance officers, marketing officers and university, faculty and department administrative staff. Although these stakeholders were not subject to scrutiny in the study, participants provided evidence that affirms the importance of the relationships between these stakeholders and students.

The deficit-discourse shift, the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* have implications for schools, highlighting the need for schools to implement strategies that can act to inform students, empower their career choices and decisions and assist students to become more familiar with the university's discourses and literacies. Developing links and facilitating joint programs between the universities and schools are vital components in this process. Parents also have roles in assisting prospective students to view university participation as a viable possibility and to assist them to visualise/place themselves at university. Parents can also assist students to become more familiar, more in tune, with university cultural practices and mainstream discourses (by attending University Open Days etc).

Another aspect of the deficit-discourse shift relates to parents', teachers' and schools' promotion of the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* and its success practices. These stakeholders can highlight the central nature of the students' use of socio-cultural practice, as the effective use of this practice depends on the socio-cultural and academic/linguistic capital that students' bring to their university experiences. Parents, teachers and schools are in an appropriate position to positively influence this capital as well as the belief systems and cultural practices that accompany it. Schools have a role in highlighting the practices and the individual socio-cultural practices. Participants' accounts, for example, revealed that teachers and schools advocated the notion that university teachers would neither be helpful or approachable, thus inhibiting students' use of the powerful socio-cultural practice of seeking help and information.

School career advisors, marketing officers and prospective student advisors work at the first point of contact between the students and/or the schools and the university.

Participants revealed the critical nature of the roles of these stakeholders in student transition. Della's evidence revealed the negative input provided by a guidance officer whereas Mel, in her role as a marketing officer, not only substantiates the lack of familiarity that students display as they access HE but also exposes the cultural insensitivity displayed in university promotional materials (see section 7.5).

An understanding of the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* can assist stakeholders to do a better job, encouraging them to better understand the processes involved as students access and participate at university. The stakeholders' promotion of the three success practices would also be useful in raising the model's profile in prospective students' eyes, providing them with a practical means of facilitating their transition to the university culture.

8.8 Summary of Conclusions

This study has developed several findings that support the conclusions made. They are that:

- The appropriateness and effectiveness of the deficit approaches to dealing with the increased participation and diversity of the student body need to be challenged;

- The 'deficit-discourse' shift introduces an original theoretical construct that presents a viable and more empowering alternative to the deficit approaches that have characterised the university's responses to the increased participation and diversity of the student body;

- The 'deficit-discourse' shift re-theorises students' experiences at university as a journey – with transition conceptualised as the process of becoming familiar with the university culture's multiple discourses and literacies, and with perseverance conceptualised as the processes of mastering and demonstrating these discourses and literacies;

- The 'deficit-discourse' shift conceptualises university engagement as an ongoing process – having implications for the students' learning practices, including their capacities for lifelong and life-wide learning, and their critical awareness of both self and discourse;

- The deficit-discourse shift reveals the inherent complexity involved as students negotiate, master and learn to demonstrate each new literacy or discourse they encounter in the university context.

- The 'deficit-discourse' shift reveals the multiple demands and requirements of the literacies and discourses that students need to become familiar with, master and demonstrate if they are to succeed at university.

- The 'deficit-discourse' shift conceptualises university engagement as an ongoing process, providing implications for both the students' lifelong and life-wide learning practices as well as their critical awareness of discourse;

- The capacity to negotiate and balance the study/work/ family/life collisions students experience as they negotiate the university culture is critical to their transition and perseverance at university;

- The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* delineates the first year experience as a journey, with transition viewed as the processes of accessing, becoming familiar with, and engaging the multiple discourses and literacies of the new culture. Perseverance is viewed as the processes of successfully negotiating, mastering and demonstrating these multiple discourses and literacies;

- A strength of the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* is that acknowledges that each student enters university with their own socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital and that these may differ from mainstream university practices;

- A strength of the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* is that it is able to acknowledge and embrace the diversity present, not only in terms of the students and the university culture itself but also in terms of the specific literacies and discourses each student encounters there.

- A strength of the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* is that it is able to reflect the constant and ongoing change that impacts on the university from local, national and global contexts;

- The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* is able to conceptualise and accommodate the dynamic and fragmented nature of, and the inconsistency inherent in, the multiplicity of discourses and literacies in the university culture;

- The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* identifies the need for the students to accommodate differences and be flexible in their negotiations with the university culture;

- The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* accommodates the understanding that students need to become familiar, simultaneously and rapidly, with the discourses and literacies central to their transition to university;

- The *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* is able to accommodate the repercussions of the increasing diversity in the student profile, including an acknowledgement of the socio-cultural, economic and academic/linguistic capital each student brings to the university context;

- Reflective Practice facilitates students' capacities to engage and master the university culture's multiple literacies and discourses;

- The term 'socio-cultural practice' more usefully and purposefully portrays the integrated and dynamic use of the separate socio-cultural competencies: seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing a request;

- Socio-cultural practice assists students to engage, master and demonstrate the university cultures' multiple literacies and discourses successfully;

- The socio-cultural practices of expressing disagreement and refusing a request, as well as the 'deficit-discourse' shift, challenge the notion that students who choose not to continue to participate in a university education are perceived as failures: rather that they are embarking on alternative journeys;

- Socio-cultural practice helps students to engage and effectively master the university cultures' multiple literacies and discourses;

- Critical practice assists students to understand their own socio-cultural belief systems and practices as well as how they impact on their university experiences.

- Critical practice also assists students to be more aware of the power configurations operating in the context of the university, providing students with a means to be more in control of their learning situations as they negotiate the multiple demands and requirements of the university culture.

- The three practices exist in a dynamic relationship with each other, intersecting, overlapping and empowering each other.

- Although their everyday resonance as well as the plethora of meanings associated with them reinforces their application, the specific meanings allocated to the three practices

in the study also need to be delineated and prioritised by the students engaging the university culture.

- By accommodating these specific meanings the three practices are not only highlighted and prioritised, their value is also amplified, confirming their significance for student transition and retention at university.

- There is no definitive answer to the question of whether the participants' alternative entry status positively or negatively influenced their use of the three practices, as each student's experience is dependant on the socio-cultural capital they bring to their university experiences, on their relationship with university and on the particular discourses and literacies that they encounter and engage there.

- The three practices' significance is enhanced by their innate flexibility; that they are able to be sensitive to, accommodate and embody the socio-cultural emphasis and imperatives pivotal to living, studying and working in the rapidly changing and dynamic world of the early 21st century.

- The *Model for Student Success Practices at University* constitutes students' means of making their transition to and ensuring their perseverance in the new university culture.

- The *Model for Student Success Practices at University*, with its capacities to address, accommodate and integrate the academic with the social, the affective with the cognitive and to take into account the social contexts of learning, is not only able to acknowledge, reflect and incorporate the complexity involved in the first year experience at university but also symbolises the flexibility required as students engage and negotiate the university culture.

- The *Model for Student Success Practices at University* integrates and gives emphasis to separate research strands, uniting them in a dynamic and practical model that, when used by students, can facilitate students' transition and retention at university.

- The *ExcelL* program positively influenced Group A participants' use of socio-cultural practice.

- Although the successful Group B participants did not participate in the *ExcelL* program they nevertheless demonstrated their capacities to use and integrate reflective, socio-cultural and critical practice to help them succeed in their university studies.

- Although three of the Group B participants succeeded in their university studies without participating in *ExcelL*, the other Group B participants may have benefited from the program's promotion of their socio-cultural competencies.
- Although the qualitative evidence confirmed the efficacy of *ExcelL,* the program cannot substitute for the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*.
- The socio-cultural, experiential and longitudinal nature of the *ExcelL* program contribute key features that would be beneficial in a program if one were to be developed to promote the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*.

8. 9 Recommendations

This study has significantly contributed to the body of knowledge about the first year experience at university, advancing several findings that support the recommendations made. These are that:

- That the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* be embraced as representative of the students' experiences as they negotiate the discourses and literacies of the university culture.
- That students facilitate their perseverance and success at university by incorporating three dynamic and inter-related practices: reflective practice, socio-cultural practice and critical practice.
- That students employ *The Model for Student Success Practices at University* as a means of making their transition to, engaging and ensuring their perseverance in the university culture.
- That the socio-cultural practices of expressing disagreement and refusing a request, as well as the implications provided by 'deficit-discourse' shift, challenge the notion that the students who choose not to continue to participate in a university education are perceived as deficient or blamed as failures. Rather that they be perceived as making a decision to embark on a different journey.
- That the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* provides students with a means of engaging and mastering the new university culture, infers that there are grounds to develop a training program prioritising and enhancing its use by students.
- That university philosophy and policy development incorporate the ideas and strategies promoted by the 'deficit-discourse' shift, the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University.*

- That teaching staff acknowledge their responsibilities, as both educators and communicators, in students' transition to and retention in the university culture.

- To maximise learning, teachers need to understand each individual in the classroom as well as possible, and be sensitive to the socio-cultural, educational and community and family values that can have an impact on a student's educational experiences.

- That teaching staff implement strategies to help first year students engage, master and demonstrate their own courses' discourses and cultural practices.

- That teaching staff implement strategies to make their own discourses explicit as well as those of their tutoring and marking teams.

- That teaching staff implement strategies to facilitate student learning in their lectures, including reflection about their use objectives, lecture notes and PowerPoint.

- That teaching staff make explicit their assessment expectations and requirements by implementing strategies that unpack these expectations and requirements.

- That teaching staff implement strategies to assist students navigate a course of study including the incorporation of interaction, discussion, accessibility and consultation, and review and feedback.

- To enhance their success in their courses university teachers need to facilitate students' use of the *Model for Student Success Practices at University.*

- That teaching staff raise students' awareness of the efficacy of reflective practice, facilitate their capacity to incorporate it into their learning practices and explicitly link the practice to the students' ability to succeed.

- To maximise students' use of socio-cultural practice university staff should incorporate it into their teaching practice, model its use and link it to the students' capacities to succeed.

- To maximise students' use of critical practice university staff should incorporate it into their teaching practice, model its use and link it to the students' capacities to succeed.

- That all the stakeholders involved embrace and adopt both the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* to assist them better advise and empower students as the students approach, access and participate at university.

8.10 Recommendations for Further Research

This study has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge about the experiences of alternative entry students accessing and negotiating a university education. However, as with any other study, it is not all-inclusive, suggesting further research directions and recommendations. These include:

- Research attention be given to ways of making visible the implications provided for both current and prospective students by the new theoretical construct, the 'deficit-discourse shift', and the two models, the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* and the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery*, as well as ways to promote their capacity to positively influence students' retention and success at university.

- Research attention be given to the implications provided for university philosophy, policy and practice by the 'deficit-discourse' shift as well as the two models developed and put forward in this study.

- Research attention is directed at exploring the applicability of the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* for the postgraduate research culture.

- Research attention be directed at investigating the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* and its applicability for facilitating the processes of transition and retention for other groups of students accessing a university education, for example, school leavers, international students, and external and on-line students.

- Research is undertaken to explore the 'university-work' transition and the applicability that both models provide for the students' post-university transition.

- Research is initiated to investigate the applicability of the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* for describing and facilitating the processes involved in negotiating and mastering the postgraduate research culture.

- Research attention be directed to the possibilities of re-conceptualising student withdrawal, particularly as the withdrawal rate in first year is so high.

- Research is directed at ascertaining the viability of a training program to be developed whose primary objective would be to facilitate students' use of the *Model for Student Success Practices at University*.

- Research be initiated to investigate whether the *Framework for Student Engagement and Mastery* and the *Model for Student Success Practices at University* can better help all the stakeholders involved to advise and empower students as students approach, access and participate at university.

8.11 Closing Comments

My journey into the postgraduate research culture paralleled that of the participants. I too navigated an unfamiliar culture with new, often unfamiliar, literacies and discourses that I needed to master and, in most cases, learn to demonstrate. I too had to negotiate life/work/study/family collisions. Throughout my journey, I also employed the success practices. In fact, if I had not employed these practices, I would not now be writing these closing comments. This thesis thus represents my journey, a journey of growing familiarity, engagement, and mastery: rich and rewarding in terms of personal growth and nourishing and validating in terms of lifelong and life-wide learning.

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