

University of Southern Queensland

Education students' first year experience on a regional
university campus

A Dissertation submitted by

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors which impact on the first year experience of pre-service education students on a small campus of a regional university, the timing and interaction of these factors across the full first year of study, and the effectiveness of the research method to gather data on the students' first year experiences, as well as a unintended but effective method of supporting students to be successful. The initial impetus for the investigation was the researcher's concern that despite the efforts of secondary schools to equip students with the required academic, social, and emotional skills to transition to tertiary study, a substantial number of university students continued to withdraw from university either during, or shortly after, their first year of study. With the researcher's move from secondary school to take up a teaching role on a small campus of a regional university, the difficulties the students faced when transitioning became more evident, as too was the knowledge there was extensive support available to these students if they so wished.

The literature review undertaken in this study enabled the researcher to identify a range of factors proven to impact the students' first year experience in higher education, as well as identify the predominant theories that formed the basis for those studies. While this knowledge provided the researcher with some valuable insights, the fact that there had not been a significant reduction in the number of first year university students considering, or actually withdrawing from their studies, it was clear there were still aspects of the students' first year journey that were unclear or hidden. Further, students identified as originating from low socio-economic status, regional, or families with limited previous involvement in tertiary study (first in family) continued to be over-represented in withdrawal statistics and could be seen as particularly 'at risk' (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012). Thus, an in-depth study of the students' first year experience was strongly supported by the literature, especially one focussing on students deemed to be most 'at risk'.

Within the first year experience literature a key message that emerged was the need for more creative methods of research, ones more nuanced to the local settings and focussed on the students' perceptions of what they experienced (Harper & Kuh, 2007; Kahu, 2013; Karp, 2011). The researcher chose to use a mixed methods

approach including a small survey instrument (quantitative) and semi-structured interviews (qualitative). The survey instrument, called the Student Experience Scale (SES), consisted of seven broad dimensions that required students to rate their perceptions of their experience using a score between 1 and 10. The SES was distributed to students on 13 separate occasions throughout their first year of study, reflecting an Experience Sampling Method (ESM) (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). The SES data was used as a stimulus for student interviews, as well as being graphed to create pictorial representations of the students' full first year experience. While monitoring the SES results, the researcher invited students to complete semi-structured interviews to describe in their own words their first year student experience with special attention being paid to students whose SES scores dropped by 3 or more points (on a 10 point scale) between subsequent surveys. Over time the interview questions were expanded as new lines of enquiry emerged, specifically in relation to the personal outcomes achieved by students due to their involvement in the study. In depth analysis of the semi-structured interview data was conducted using the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven (QUAGOL) to ensure that concepts and themes emerged from the student responses and were not abstractions from the researcher's own experiences (Dierckx de Casterlé, Gastmans, Bryon, & Denier, 2012).

The findings from this study identified factors perceived by the first year students as having the greatest impact on their first year student experience. Of special note is that the majority of students providing this information were from 'at risk' backgrounds (low SES, first in family, regional). Further, the variability of the student experience across their full first year of study provides valuable information which can be used by higher education institutions to better support students during times of need. The implementation this innovative ESM research method to monitor the students' first year experience has also provided new and important insights into strategies which will not only enhance the reliability and trustworthiness of the student data, but also in itself can act as a highly effective support mechanism for the students.

Certification of Dissertation

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

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Signature of Candidate

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Endorsement

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Why is the first year higher education student experience of particular interest to the researcher?

Coming from a family of teachers, I was very aware that the pastoral care of students was a critical role, one central to effective teachers. The need for students to receive pastoral care when they faced change and uncertainty was born out on a regular basis but was especially evident in times when students were transitioning between life stages. In the secondary school there were three transitions that stood out for me. These were, the move from Primary School to secondary school (usually Year 7 to Year 8), the move from junior secondary to senior secondary (usually Year 10 to Year 11), and the move from Year 12 to work or further study. At these times the students had to choose the new person they wanted to be and how they wanted to be viewed by their peers, family and teachers.

In the last 10 years that I worked in a secondary school setting I taught predominantly Year 11 and 12 classes as well as undertook duties as a Pastoral Care Teacher and Senior Student Coordinator. The focus of these duties were the preparation of senior students for a successful transition to higher education or work. During this period I was continually surprised by the number of senior students who went on to study at university only to withdraw and return home before the end of their first year. What was most surprising was that these students were not characterised by having attained the minimum marks required for entry to the university, nor were they always students who may have appeared immature or unready for moving away from home. The conundrum for me was, if we work so hard to get students ready for this transition, and they appear to be both academically and socially ready, why is it that they are not continuing on to complete their higher education studies? Having spent nearly all of my teaching career in regional centres I wondered whether this phenomena was just specific to students from regional areas or was it common for all students transitioning to higher education.

After 25 years teaching in secondary schools I took up a position as a lecturer on a small campus of a regional university, and was offered the opportunity to continue

my interest in pastoral care by undertaking the position of First Year Coordinator (FYC) for pre-service education students. Within the FYC role I conducted weekly 1 hour workshops throughout the first year to assist students to transition to their new role as first year university student. The workshops, designated Common Time, usually focussed on the development of academic skills such as time management, analysing readings, writing academically, using correct referencing formats, and understanding assessment requirements. Outside of the workshops the FYC also met with students to discuss concerns they were facing and provided guidance as to the support available from university staff. While working with the first year students I became aware that many of the frustrations and insecurities they reported were similar to those exhibited by younger secondary school students, for example: issues such as making friends, not getting on with their teachers or finding them hard to understand, and concerns over relationships with parents and partners. At this same time, it was also clear that the first year university students were living very different lives to secondary school students, ones that were much more complex. What was clear to me was that the first year university students appeared to face more pressure and stress than their secondary school counterparts.

While in the position of First Year Coordinator my own children commenced their university studies. In contrast to the situations and difficulties my first year university students reported, my own children did not communicate as many concerns, nor the depth of concern. As my children had resided in the same geographic area as his first year university students and had attended the same or similar schools previously, the question of what factors were affecting the students' experience arose again. Could the difference be associated with different student backgrounds? When comparing the backgrounds of my children with those of the first year cohort on the small campus of the regional university, characteristics such as Socio-economic Status (SES), first in family (FinF), and not moving out of home to study, were noted as differences that may be playing a part. Further, it was impossible to predict student success based on the available data (e.g., demographic factors and academic results).

It was clear to me that there was much more that needed to be learnt about the factors affecting the successful transition to the role of first year higher education student, a transition which may be more problematic for some students originating

from regional areas. *Thus the goal for this study, emanating from my past experience, was to understand the dynamics of factors affecting the first year experience of students in higher education at a regional university.*

1.2 Was the researcher's goal able to be met by interrogating the first year experience literature?

To meet the research goal of this study I firstly analysed the research findings reported in the first year experience literature to identify what was already known. The depth and breadth of research into the transition of students into higher education was extensive.

Over the last fifty years there has been rigorous research into the factors that shape the first year student experience in higher education. The early research focus was on the students' backgrounds and whether this information could be used to identify those students most at risk of withdrawal. Later research has seen the focus has shifted to include the identification of higher education practices proven by research to enhance student learning outcomes. Constructs such as Integration (Tinto, 1975), Involvement (Astin, 1984), and Engagement (Kuh, 2001) have been measured with the goal of better understanding the students' first year experience in higher education and assessing and benchmarking the effectiveness of higher education institutions in meeting their objectives. While this research has ensured that higher education institutions pay more attention to how their practices and processes affect the first year student experience, more recent research has identified concerns that the existing theories upon which much of the existing research has been founded may be flawed or lacking in detail, and their appropriateness in describing the experience of today's university students may be limited.

Firstly, issues have been raised that only the factors under the direct control of the higher education institutions have been intensively studied and relatively few studies have investigated the broader student context beyond the campus gates (Krause & Coates, 2008a). There has been a call for a more holistic approach to the investigation of the first year experience not limited by the researcher's own personal experiences or theories that have been relied upon previously (Coates, 2004; Harvey & Drew, 2006; Kahu, 2013; Vinson et al., 2010).

Secondly, the relevance of existing student experience theories for the increasing proportion of non-traditional students (e.g., low SES, first in family, regional origins) now entering higher education institutions have been questioned (Axelson & Flick, 2010; McPhail, Fisher, & McConachie, 2009). There is a growing consensus that the student experience of non-traditional students is presently neither visible nor understood in all its richness and resulting implications (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011).

Thirdly, the research methods that predominate in studies of the first year experience (mostly quantitative surveys) are being questioned due to their ‘snapshot’ approach to capturing the dynamic nature of this experience (Chalmers, 2007; Christie, Tett, Cree, & McCune, 2014; Kahu, 2013; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The use of research methods that use both quantitative and qualitative measures, as well as methods with regular touch points throughout the students’ first year of study have been identified as important steps in developing a better understanding of the ebbs and flows of the student experience. Harper and Kuh (2007) take this position a step further in supporting methods which can describe the experience of individual students, noting that statistical measures provide information that does not actually represent a single real student.

Lastly, research that focuses on the individual students’ perceptions of their first year student journey are seen as central to the development of an improved understanding of the first year experience (Nevill & Rhodes, 2006). The lack of the students’ perspective has been viewed as limiting the acceptance of previous research and theories (Hagel, Carr, & Devlin, 2011).

Thus, upon reflection, it was clear to me that my original questions and research goal could not be satisfactorily answered by reviewing the first year student experience literature, and as such, further investigation was required. To direct this investigation the researcher formulated three specific research questions, namely:

1. How do pre-service education students perceive their first year experience on a small regional university campus?
2. How does the student experience vary over time throughout the first year of study?

3. How effective is the use of an Experience Sampling Method* in the collection of data associated with the student first year experience?

*Details of the Experience Sampling Method are provided in Chapter 3

1.3 Problems faced by the researcher in answering the research questions

Following the formulation of the research questions, I was confronted with a range of problems that needed to be addressed in order to get the answers I required. Firstly, the identification of a research method that would be effective and efficient in collecting student perceptions of their first year experience was faced. As it was hypothesised that there may be aspects of the students' first year experience that remain hidden, this same method would have to be sufficiently flexible to allow the students to highlight factors *they* deemed to be important and not provide responses to questions that I or the literature thought may be important. The issue was resolved by the construction of a simple survey instrument, the Student Experience Scale (SES), designed to allow students to respond about any elements of their student experience they deemed important. The SES was also used to stimulate discussion during the semi-structured interviews, allowing the students to describe in detail their experiences and explain why they were of importance.

A second problem I faced was the identification of a process where data from students could be collected over time, throughout the full first year of study, to allow investigation of the '*dynamics*' of the factors affecting their student experience, how they interacted with each other and compounded. I chose to use a form of Experience Sampling Method (ESM) to address this issue, whereby the SES was emailed to students on a regular basis (2 – 4 weekly) throughout the full first year as recommended by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1987). When student responses reflected a substantial change in their perception of their first year experience they were invited to attend semi-structured interviews to elaborate on the significance these experiences held for them personally.

A final problem I faced was how best to monitor and measure the effectiveness of the research method used to harvest the first year students' perceptions of their

experiences, and whether the method achieved its goal without adversely affecting the student experience it set out to measure. To minimise the disruption to the students' first year experience due to their involvement in the study, I decided to add a small number of questions to the semi-structured interview to answer this final research question.

The research methods chosen, and briefly described above, reflect a constructivist paradigm, one founded on my relativist ontological position and subjectivist epistemological stance (Guba & Lincoln, 1994b). As such the study was conducted in its natural setting, in the same timeframe as the researcher wished to understand, the students' first year of university study. Under the constructivist paradigm I acknowledged that my tacit knowledge was essential to aid the co-construction of meaning for all involved parties, but was aware that I needed to be open and flexible in accepting and investigating aspects of the student experience beyond my previous understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1994b).

1.4 How do the results and findings of this study extend and enhance what was known previously?

The results and findings of this study provide a rich and deep description of the experience of first year students enrolled on a small campus of a regional university. This description has significantly enhanced what has been previously known about the experiences of non-traditional students, especially students from first in family, low SES or regional backgrounds. By studying the perceptions of these students and allowing them to identify the key aspects of their life which shaped their experience, the manner in which these aspects interact and compound has been made visible. This visibility will enable higher education institutions to understand some of their student subgroups better and thus target their support more efficiently and effectively.

The use of the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) to investigate the first year student experience has also uncovered significant insights that broaden the range of tools available to researchers and challenges the effectiveness of tools used previously. The practicalities of the use of the method employed in this study, its effectiveness in monitoring the student experience over their full first year of study,

and the benefits accrued by students due to their involvement in the study, offer a new perspective to be considered when choosing research methods appropriate to an investigation of the factors that impact on the students' first year experience in higher education. The evaluation of the ESM method uncovered the attitudes first year students from non-traditional backgrounds hold about their involvement in research projects such as, the sharing of their personal information and/or perceptions, and the relationship they feel needs to exist between the researcher and students. These student attitudes raise questions that need to be considered by first year experience researchers before they choose the most appropriate method for their studies.

While the research findings provide new perspectives on the issues faced by students who have previously been classified as potentially 'at risk' of withdrawing (e.g., students from low SES, first in family, or regional backgrounds), they also clearly identify the knowledge, skills and attitudes that higher education staff should hold if they are to be perceived by students as being supportive. Previous to this study, some researchers had called for specialised staff to be allocated to working with first year students. The findings of this study take this further clearly articulating the attributes required of staff who support first year students which it is suggested should form the basis for the selection of those staff.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

This thesis is presented in 7 chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the background of the researcher and the stimulus for the investigation of the first year student experience on a regional campus. The research context and contemporary literature were noted in order to substantiate the formulation of the study's three specific research questions. Subsequently, the problems I faced in designing the study, and the significance of the findings were discussed to justify that the study will make a significant and original contribution to knowledge related to the first year experience in higher education, as well as identify a productive methodology with which to more comprehensively investigate the first year experience.

Chapter 2, the Literature Review, details the theory and models which have formed the basis for much of the research into the first year experience in higher education over the last forty years internationally. Following this, some of the more

substantive research projects within the Australian context are discussed to give the historical background for more recent studies. Finally key research is identified to support the formulation of the research questions of this study and to substantiate the study's relevance and importance in extending the body of knowledge about the first year student experience.

In Chapter 3, the Methodology, my ontological and epistemological position as a researcher are discussed to explain the theoretical base upon which my actions were undertaken. My position as an insider or an outsider depending on the situation is justified, as too are the strategies used to counter possible biases. The three research instruments (demographic survey, Student Experience Scale, and semi-structured interviews) are described in detail. The ESM research method used in this study is explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the possible limitations of the study and the consideration of ethical issues to protect the participants.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report the results for each of the three research questions sequentially. Each chapter also includes discussion of the results for each research question, as well as the identification of implications arising from these results.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, is used to bring together all of the results and discussions presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, to create my relational understanding of the first year experience of students on a small regional university campus.

1.6 Definitions of frequently used terms

In this study the following definitions have been applied:

First in family – a student who is “the first member of their immediate family to attend university, which means their siblings, parents or primary care-givers have not participated in any form of university education” (Luzecy, Scutter, King, & Brinkworth, 2011, p. 92).

Low SES – a student who, before commencing their higher education studies, resided in a postcode associated with low socio-economic status as per the Australian Bureau of Statistics Index for Education and Occupation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b).

Regional university – a university with its headquarters (or central campus) residing in a regional location, a university with its headquarters not in a capital city (Universities Australia, 2009).

First year student in higher education – a student commencing their studies towards the award of a higher education qualification. These students will not have achieved the equivalent of a full year of credit before the completion of the calendar year in which they commenced.

Secondary school – in the Australian context, a school catering for students typically studying in years 7-12, the studies preparing students for movement to the workforce or continued studies in higher education institutions.

Higher education institution - consists of independent, self-governing public and private universities and higher education institutions that award higher education qualifications (GO8 Australia, 2015). In the context of this study it will be used interchangeably with the term ‘university’.

Non-traditional background – student backgrounds previously under-represented in the university student cohorts, e.g., low SES, first in family, originating from regional areas, and mature aged backgrounds (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2014).

Headstart student – a student undertaking a university subject while still completing their Year 11 or 12 studies. By successfully completing the subject the student prequalifies for entry into the university.

Pre-service teacher – a student undertaking an education degree that leads to registration as a qualified teacher, able to teach unsupervised in an Australian school.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

In Chapter 1 the researcher's background and the stimulus this provided for an investigation of the first year student experience on a regional campus were described in detail. A brief summary of key findings from current and relevant literature was provided to assist the reader to understand how the broad questions that confronted the researcher were resolved into the three research questions that founded this study. This chapter provides more specific detail on the literature described in Chapter One and provides evidence that a study of the first year experience on a regional campus is of great importance given the changing demographics of first year university students. Further, it provides evidence that by answering the three research questions this study will make a unique and valuable contribution to existing knowledge.

2.2 Predominant theories/models used in student experience research internationally

Within current higher education student experience literature three constructs figure most prominently; these are Tinto's (1975) *Student Integration*, Astin's (1984) *Student Involvement*, and Kuh's (2001) *Student Engagement*. Along with these three constructs, Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate education* have also been included as they too shaped research efforts following their release. Each of these author's key contributions to improving understanding of the student experience will be described separately to set a historical background to recent Australian research and that of this study.

2.2.1 Student Integration

Prior to 1975 there was extensive research into the characteristics of students that might lead to higher rates of drop out from higher education institutions (McKeown, Macdonell, & Bowman, 1993). Characteristics such as socio-economic status (Astin, 1964), student and family commitment (Hackman & Dysinger, 1970), academic ability (Wegner & Sewell, 1970) and persistence (Spady, 1971) were researched in an attempt to identify those students who were most at risk of withdrawing. In the mid-1970s, Tinto conducted a review of contemporary literature related to student drop out and identified that there were no "longitudinal models" that

would explain why individual students persisted in, or withdrew from, tertiary study (Tinto, 1975, p. 90). The interactions with the institution and how these were interpreted by the student were deemed to require further investigation.

Based on his review, Tinto (1975) formulated a model that could describe the longitudinal process of drop out, postulating that there was a process of integration occurring when a student entered and studied within a higher education institution. Tinto compared the lack of Integration demonstrated by drop out students to the social withdrawal displayed by people who were considering taking their own lives, described by Durkheim (1961). Durkheim “argue[d] that suicide rates increase[d] as religious, family, and political integration decrease[d]” (Breault, 1986, p. 629). Tinto (1975) described that the lack of acceptance by the person contemplating suicide and the lack of their acceptance by members of their social group was very similar situation to the one being felt by students in higher education institutions, especially those contemplating dropping out. His view, based upon the work of Spady (1970), was that college could be viewed as a special type of social setting with its own social structures and expectations.

Within the notion of Integration, Tinto (1975) identified two separate but overlapping forms that impacted upon a student’s decision to maintain their studies, these being Social Integration and Academic Integration. Social Integration related to the social fit of the student, how they related to their peers as well as the staff of the institution. Academic Integration related directly to the level of success in meeting the standards required by an institution (subject results) as well as how strongly a person identified with “the norms of the academic system” (Tinto, 1975, p. 104). Tinto also contended that Social and Academic Integration were affected by interactions outside the walls of the institutions, within the family homes, between friends, and in the broader community.

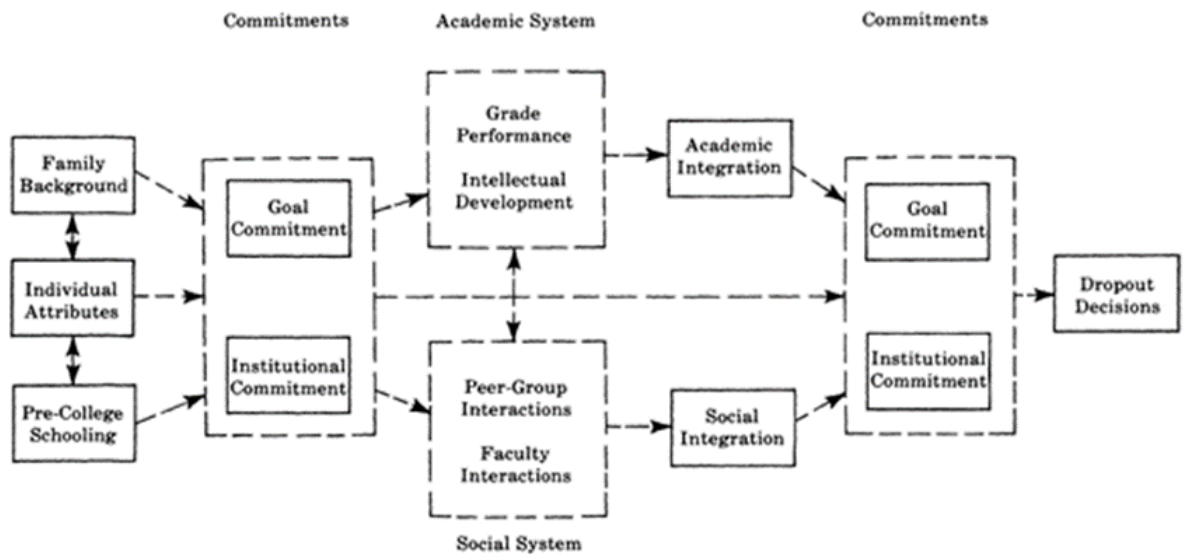


Figure 1. Tinto's Conceptual schema for Dropout from College (Tinto, 1975, p. 95)

Tinto (1975) summarised his ‘Model of Integration’ in a diagram (as shown in Figure 1) drawing together the characteristics of the student including their background, personal attributes, and past school experiences, and theorising that these aspects shape the student’s commitment to achieving their academic goals and their connection to a specific higher educational setting. It is this commitment that is the foundation for academic and social success. Whilst enrolled the students successfully or unsuccessfully integrate (academically and socially) into the world of the higher education institution (enhancing or diminishing their commitment) which affects their decision making processes to continue their studies or to drop out.

Pascarella and Ternezini (1980) conducted research to test whether the key elements of Tinto’s model were effective in identifying students’ likelihood to drop out. Within a sample of 1905 first year students they found Tinto’s model to have a 78.5% success rate in identifying students who would persist or drop out, after controlling variables associated with student background characteristics and goal commitments. Based on this result, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980, p. 61) “generally support[ed] the predictive validity of the major dimensions of the Tinto model” and thus that Integration was effective in describing the student drop out phenomena. The evidence from this study also highlighted the importance of student-faculty relationships as a strong contributor to the difference between persisters and drop outs.

While viewed by many researchers as the dominant frame or paradigm (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Karp, 2011; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; McKeown et al., 1993; Whittaker, 2008) used by researchers in the study of student success and persistence, Tinto's model has been noted as having a range of shortcomings. Firstly, Darden and Kuhn (1985) argue that the comparison of the process of dropping out to that of humans contemplating suicide is not reasonable. The difficulty that people with suicidal tendencies might have with connecting with 'most' people is not necessarily an issue faced by students commencing university study. Secondly, the assumption that students have to abandon their communities to integrate into the university setting is also questioned (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Thirdly, Tinto's model is thought to only account for students who complete 4 year degrees and live on campus (Karp, 2011). Thus students studying at different types of institutions or living in different locations may not be accounted for (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Finally, although a range of Tinto's integration constructs have been empirically validated, researchers describe these results as offering modest or uneven support (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Kuh et al., 2006; Zepke et al., 2011). Berger and Millem (1999) noted a major weakness of the studies was that they did not measure actual student behaviours.

Tinto himself has, in more recent times, acknowledged some of the limitations described previously. He has accepted that breaking away from their home communities is not always the best option for students and that remaining connected "is essential to their persistence" (Tinto, 2006-2007, p. 4).

Even given the limitations of Tinto's original theory, researchers such as Krause (2005b, p. 57) argue that it "provides a useful framework for identifying the factors which potentially contribute to student departure from higher education". Wolf-Wendel *et al.* (2009) provide support for this position adding that Tinto's theory highlights the key role higher education institutions play in shaping the student experience, a role that previously had not been acknowledged.

2.2.2 Student Involvement

Astin (1984), upon reviewing the research, theories and models already in existence relating to student persistence and development (such as Tinto’s Model of Integration), as well as his own longitudinal study of college drop outs (1975), identified that the existing theories were too complex in nature and that a simpler more easily measured construct was required. Based on this premise, Astin (1984, p. 518) formulated the Student Involvement Theory that he described as “quite simply ... the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience”. The academic experience was deemed to have dual foci, the attainment of course grades, and the personal development of the student as a result of their interactions whilst being a student. Astin (1984, p. 519) explained that previous theories and models treated students as a “black box” and only focussed on the inputs (policies, student characteristics etc.) and outputs (student results) not what the students were actually doing as a result of these inputs. Diagrammatically Astin identified that previous research focussed on line C as per Figure 2, and that there needed to be more of a focus on the College Environment itself and its effect on the behaviours of the students (1970, p. 225). To maintain the focus on the Environment (E) individual student characteristics were controlled so that student outcomes could be specifically associated with involvement in College activities.

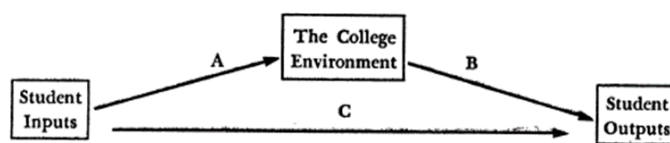


Figure 2. Astin’s Input – Environments – Outcomes Model (1993, p. 18)

Astin (1984), in drawing upon his previous research, identified a range of key behaviours that he associated with involved or not involved students. These included:

- Living on campus,
- Membership of Honors [sic] classes,
- Academic Involvement (hours studying, study habits etc.),
- Interaction with Faculty staff,
- Extra-curricular involvement and
- Student government involvement.

In identifying these behaviours Astin detailed *measurable quantities* that could be used to identify students at risk of dropping out, and also provide a means for institutions to assess the effectiveness of their policies and practices. The belief being that by facilitating and enhancing these behaviours (those listed above), student involvement should be increased, resulting in higher completion rates. A key issue being that “educators are competing with other forces in the student’s life for a share of [their] finite time and energy” (1984, p. 523).

Astin also noted that if Involvement was the key to enhancing student retention and their individual educational outcomes, then this had ramifications for the manner in which classes were taught. For students to be involved in the classroom they needed to be exerting physical and psychological energy – thus the use of student-centred pedagogies would be recommended. These pedagogies would also support the social development of the students, the other key component identified by Astin as forming a successful student experience.

Similar to Tinto’s (1975) Theory of Student Departure, Astin’s (1984) theory was based on research findings of ‘traditional’ students, those who moved directly from secondary school to university and lived on campus whilst studying (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). This being the case, a limitation of Astin’s (1984) theory is that it is not inclusive of the full range of student background characteristics. Barefoot (2000), although acknowledging the benefits for students arising from their involvement in on campus activities, also raised the issue that involvement had become more and more problematic due to the decreasing amount of time students were spending on campus.

Another limitation of Astin's (1984) theory arises due to the difficulties faced by researchers in measurement of the Involvement construct. While it is relatively straight forward to measure the amount of time students spend being 'involved' in campus activities (physical energy), there is much more difficulty in measuring the intensity of this involvement (psychological energy) (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

2.2.3 The Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

In 1985 Chickering and Gamson identified the need to list key principles that could be used to guide the efforts of institutions to improve undergraduate education (Gamson, 1991, p. 6). They facilitated meetings with key stakeholders and researchers to ensure the principles would "represent the collective wisdom of colleagues who were knowledgeable about the research literature on the college experience" (Gamson, 1991, p. 6). The target group for the list of principles was teaching faculty, as this group were believed to have the final responsibility for the improvement of undergraduate education. Following many meetings and revisions, Chickering and Gamson (1987) published a list of practices viewed as being representative of those exhibited by effective higher education institutions or those that these institutions should aspire to. It was stated that good practice in undergraduate education:

- encourages contact between students and faculty,
- develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
- encourages active learning,
- gives prompt feedback,
- emphasizes time on task,
- communicates high expectations, and
- respects diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 3).

This list of indicators has been the starting point for a wide range of research projects as well as being instrumental in the development of large National surveys (such as the National Survey of Student Engagement(NSSE)) related to the student experience in higher education. Links to both Tinto (1975) and Astin's (1984) theories are evident as the practices relate to social and academic skills (integration) as well as specific behaviours (involvement) of the students and the academics they interact with.

Following the release of the ‘Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education’, Sorcinelli (1991) set out to identify whether current research supported these principles. Each of the principles was found to have substantive support from contemporary research. For example, contact between students and faculty and its positive effect on student perceptions was identified as being supported by the findings of Wilson (1975) and Pascarella (1980). Following her review, Sorcinelli (1991, p. 22) noted that Chickering and Gamson’s Principles “provided substantive research-based advice that can enrich our understanding and practice”.

2.2.4 Student Engagement

In 1999 George Kuh published a review of the literature related to the “Quality of the Undergraduate Experience” where his goal was to answer two questions (1) Was the quality of student outcomes resulting from their undergraduate experience in the 1990s lower than that of previous cohorts?; and (2) Were the reforms that were implemented in the 1980’s effective in improving student outcomes? To enable this comparison Kuh used data obtained from similarly worded items from questionnaires that existed across the period 1969 to 1998. The questionnaires involved were those first constructed and used by Pace (1974), and a later version of this questionnaire called the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). The questions that were analysed related to (1) the time and energy the students devoted to specific activities during the year, activities supported by research as enhancing student outcomes, (2) the achievement of what experts agree are the most important goals associated with studying at a higher education institution, and (3) student perceptions of the college environment. A finding from Kuh’s (1999) study was that the quality of the 1990s undergraduate experience in the United States should be given a C grade (Pass / Satisfactory), with students and the institutions they attended, also were given a C for their effort. Kuh also noted that there had been some minor improvement since the 1980’s higher education reforms, but there was much still to do to improve the undergraduate experience. A key implication from Kuh’s study was there were no existing means of measuring the quality of the student experience and benchmarking higher education institutions.

At the same time as Kuh was conducting his study, The Pew Charitable Trust in the United States formed a group of scholars (including Kuh) with the goal of creating “a short survey instrument focussed on the extent to which students engage in

good educational practices”, those that are “strongly associated with high levels of learning and personal development” (Kuh, 2001, p. 12). The ‘good practices’ were those strongly supported by contemporary student development literature, for example “active learning, involvement in enriching educational experiences, seeking guidance from staff or working collaboratively with other students” (Coates, 2004, p. 26). The resulting survey instrument, with strong connections to the work of Pace (1984), Astin (1984) and Chickering and Gamson (1987), was named The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The goal of the survey being to provide higher education institutions with actionable data, data that could guide them to improve their retention of students and enhance student outcomes (Kuh, 2001; McInnis, 2004).

What Matters to Student Success

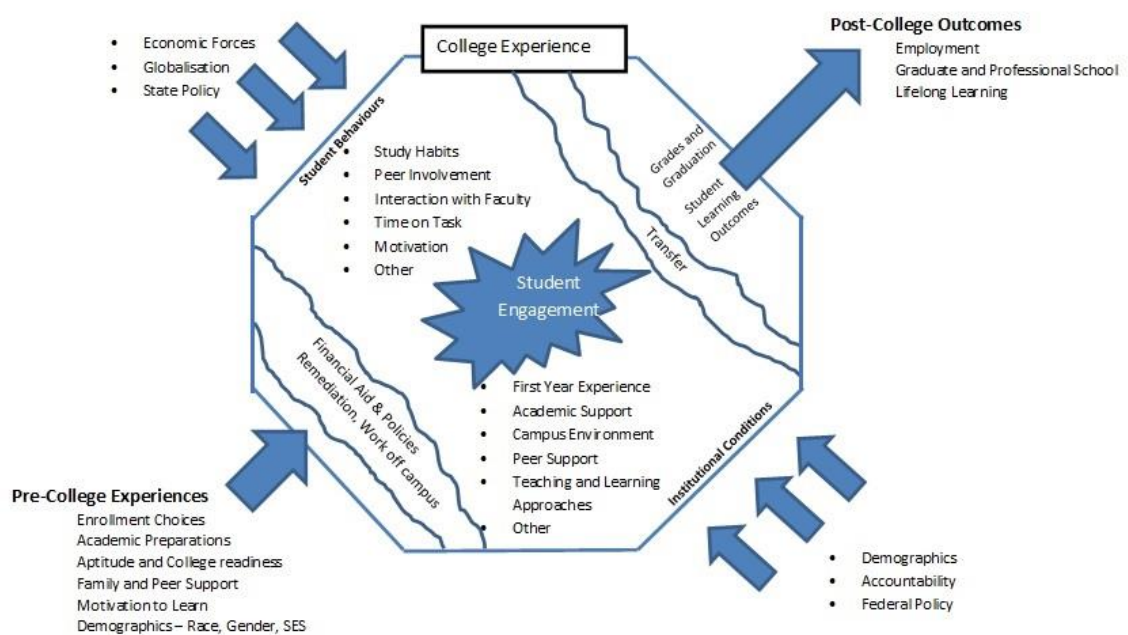


Figure 3. Framework for student success (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 8)

In 2006 Kuh *et al.* (2006, p. 8) further clarified how they defined Student Engagement by publishing their “framework for student success”. Student Engagement was pictured as the intersection or interplay of student behaviours (studying, working with peers, interacting with staff etc.) and institutional conditions (availability of academic support, effective teaching approaches etc.) while the student was studying. The key point being that student engagement included those aspects of the student experience that colleges or universities could do something about. Kuh

(2009, p. 15) provides some important advice about the use of the student engagement construct stating that “we must be ever vigilant to be sure we are interpreting and using engagement data appropriately and continue to learn more about what forms of engagement work best under what circumstances for different groups of students”.

As with the Integration and Involvement constructs, a concern raised in regard to Engagement “is the extent to which [it] fails to represent the experiences of students historically underrepresented in higher education” (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 422). This position provided further support for McInnis (2004) and Strage (1999) who noted that many of the assumptions that formed the basis for studies of the student experience are no longer sustainable due to the changing demographics of the student body.

Bryson, Hardy and Hand (2009) identify another possible flaw in the Engagement construct that diminishes its effectiveness. They believe that by isolating the student behaviours and the institutional conditions from the complete student experience may provide some useful information but “does not offer much clarity in really explaining how the student experiences education” (Bryson et al., 2009, p. 2). Kahu (2013, p. 760) notes that by focusing on only a select group of aspects that are under the control of the institution “a wide range of other explanatory variables” may not become apparent. Axelson and Flick (2010) warn that just by favouring certain aspects of the student experience (those perceived to be under the control of the institution) this can lead to a perception that other aspects are of lesser importance.

Kuh *et al.* (2006, p. 11), argued that student engagement is a very useful construct that can be used by higher education institutions to improve their practices, were also aware that one construct was insufficient, stating that “no one theoretical perspective is comprehensive enough to account for all the factors that influence student success”.

2.3 The Australian Context

In a similar vein to researchers in the United States, Australian researchers have been committed to learning more about the student experience in higher education settings and to providing guidance to these institutions to improve their performance and increase retention rates. Three large scale research projects, the Course Experience

Questionnaire (CEQ), the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), and the First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) will be described and analysed to provide the reader with an understanding of some of the more significant research efforts being utilised in the Australian context.

2.3.1 Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)

The CEQ was developed for the Australian context by Ramsden (1991) based on an earlier instrument developed by Ramsden and Entwistle (1981). The purpose of the CEQ was to quantify the perceptions students held regarding the quality of the instruction they were receiving in the subjects they were studying (Chalmers, 2007). Specifically graduating students were asked to rate “the extent to which they were being exposed to the kind of teaching that ...is likely to generate deep learning” (Coates, 2004, p. 29). Student perceptions were felt to be the most suitable measures of teaching quality due to the students experiencing a range of teaching situations and the belief that learners are in the best position to identify if their learning needs are being met (Ramsden, 1991). Ramsden’s (1991) goal was to harvest data that could be used to rank order the teaching quality of individual teaching units within the university setting, enabling institutions to investigate ways in which they could improve their performance. At this same time the CEQ could be used as a source of information to meet the accountability agenda of government bodies. After intensive trialling the CEQ was released nationally in 1993.

The CEQ originally consisted of 5 scales: Good Teaching (8 items), Clear Goals and Standards (5 items), Appropriate Workload (5 items), Appropriate Assessment (6 items), and Emphasis on Independence (6 items) (Ramsden, 1991). Following concerns being raised that the CEQ was missing some key dimensions of the student experience, McInnis, Griffin, James and Coates (2001) were commissioned to investigate these concerns and to formulate new items and scales that would enhance the existing CEQ. The new version of the CEQ which included a new Generic Skills scale and an Overall Satisfaction measure was introduced in 2002 (McInnis et al., 2001).

The validity and reliability of the CEQ have both been extensively tested over time (McInnis et al., 2001; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; K. Wilson, Lizzio, & Ramsden, 1997) and it has been found to be effective in “measuring constructs directly relevant

to students' reported approaches to, satisfaction with, and outcomes of, their learning in university contexts" (K. Wilson et al., 1997, p. 47).

While contemporary literature supports the veracity of the CEQ, some authors identify weaknesses that they feel limits its effectiveness and also its generalisability. Coates (2004) identified that the CEQ's focus on teaching and not on learning is a concern for those supporting a constructivist view of education. Also, as the focus of the CEQ is on teaching in formal instructional settings (physical classrooms), the data may not be representative of the varied ways in which students are now studying (including online), meaning the universities are not getting actionable data. Chalmers (2007) also questioned the effectiveness of the CEQ due to its simplicity, with only a small number of questions about student learning trying to elicit data that describes a very complex process. Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010, p. 112) note a concern with accepting CEQ results due to the theoretical base on which it is built stating that "there is no universally accepted definition of effective university teaching". McInnis *et al.* (2001) remind readers that the CEQ has a specific purpose and is not meant to measure the depth and breadth of the full student experience.

2.3.2 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)

In 2007, the year prior to the release of the Bradley Report (Australian Government, 2008), the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) was officially released and completed by 25 higher education institutions (ACER, 2010a). AUSSE has grown over time and is now "the largest cross-institutional survey of first-year students yet conducted in Australia" (ACER, 2010a, p. 1).

The student engagement construct being measured by the AUSSE was defined as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning" (ACER, 2008a, p. 9). Given this accepted definition of student engagement it was not surprising that the structure of the AUSSE survey instrument, The Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), was very similar to that of the National Survey of Student Engagement survey instrument used to measure student engagement in the United States. Not only were the instruments similar but most of the SEQ items were the same or very similar to those found on the NSSE reflecting the close working relationship (since 2006) between NSSE staff and the AUSSE project team (Coates & Ransom, 2011).

The SEQ measures “six specific areas of student’s engagement that are important and otherwise untapped areas of Australasian university education” (ACER, 2010c, p. iv). The six areas reported to be measured by the SEQ include:

- Academic Challenge (the extent that expectations and assessments challenged students to learn),
- Active Learning (students’ efforts to actively construct their knowledge),
- Student and Staff Interactions (the level and nature of students’ contact with teaching staff),
- Enriching Educational Experiences (participation in broadening educational activities),
- Supportive Learning Environment (students’ feelings of legitimation within the university community), and
- Work Integrated Learning (Chalmers, 2007, p. 45).

Five of the six measures are very much the same as those measured by the NSSE, with one being specific to the Australasian context (Work Integrated Learning).

The SEQ contains “around 150 items that operationalize the concept of student engagement” (Coates, 2011, p. 2). It is available in either paper or online form and is expected to be completed by students in less than 15 minutes (ACER, 2010c). Students in their first year or third year of study in an undergraduate degree are selected to complete the SEQ with the managers of the SEQ aiming for a 20% response rate (ACER, 2010c). “The focus for the survey is the individual institutions for within institutional use, but it is intended that it will be generalisable for benchmarking purposes” (Chalmers, 2007, p. 45).

Preceding the introduction of the AUSSE, researchers such as Coates (2004) were identifying that there was “very little student-level and process- or outcomes-focused data available that could be used to inform higher education institutions their effectiveness and also would provide advice on what they might need to do” (ACER, 2010c, p. 4). According to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), AUSSE is a “validated and established collection of data from first- and later-year students” that “collects real-time evidence of behaviour and support” (ACER, 2010c, p. iv). It provides a “learner centred, whole-of-institution’ perspective, and gives an index of students’ involvement in both study and other relevant activities” (ACER,

2010c, p. iv). A stated strength of AUSSE is the ability to compare Australasian data with that of the United States and other countries. Another strength being that AUSSE “does not measure student happiness but the deeper notion of educational engagement” (Coates, 2011, p. 2).

A range of findings specific to the Australasian context have been unearthed following the implementation of AUSSE. In 2009 approximately one third of students reported having had thoughts of leaving their institution. Coates and Ransom (2011) have since reported that this proportion had decreased for first year students whilst increasing for latter year students.

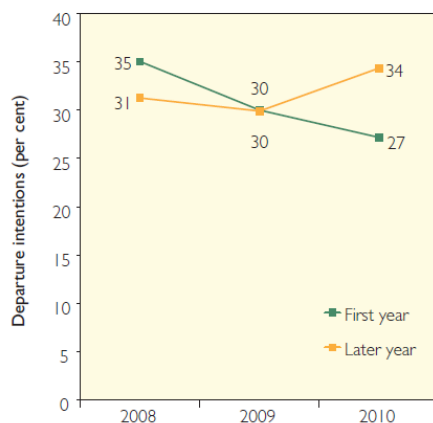


Figure 4. Student departure intentions AUSSE 2009 (Coates & Ransom, 2011, p. 3)

Coates and Ransom (2011, p. 3) provide a note of caution interpreting this change, stating that although “these trends are informative, the reasons behind them are less clear”, and that the “first-year rate may reflect a Counter cyclical engagement with higher education as a result of adverse economic conditions”. Within the group that have considered departing, students from provincial or remote areas were “somewhat more likely” to have these thoughts (ACER, 2010c, p. xi).

Levels of engagement have also been identified as worthy of mention. In 2009, the two most important factors (identified by AUSSE) affecting first year students that relate to engagement were “support in gaining basic study skills and the ways in which subjects are taught” (ACER, 2010a, p. 11). A difference was noted between how male and female students spend their time, with males spending more time on campus overall, more time relaxing and socialising whilst females spent more time looking after dependents, preparing for class, working for pay and managing their

personal business (ACER, 2010a). Not surprisingly, “a higher proportion of female first-year students cite difficulties balancing university studies with personal commitments and work, and the need to work more hours to support themselves or their dependents” (ACER, 2010a, p. 11). Being first in family to attend higher education was found to have minimal impact on educational engagement, although this result was not analysed further to establish any correlation with higher education institution location or student background of low SES or rural or remote origin (ACER, 2010a). Students that entered higher education after a break from high school were found to report being more engaged than those students transitioning directly from high school (ACER, 2010c).

Not only levels of engagement but also types of engagement have been reported. ACER (2010a, p. 1) stated that “first-year students are more likely to remain at university and continue to subsequent years if they are able to have regular contact with teaching staff and if they feel supported by their university”. Coates and Ransom (2011, p. 14) further stated that “the impact of poor relationships with ... teaching staff is particularly notable”.

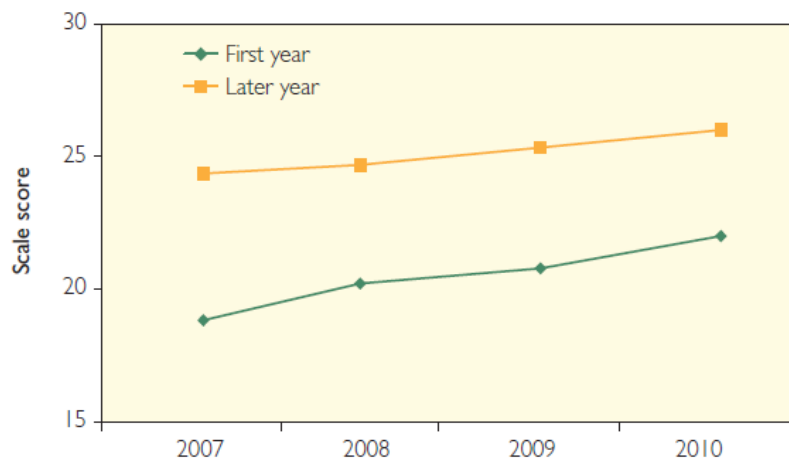


Figure 5. Level of student contact with staff AUSSE 2009 (Coates & Ransom, 2011, p. 15)

Data from the 2012 AUSSE also offers some new insights. Students spent (on average), “11 hours preparing for class and studying every week, with 15% of students spending more than 20 hours each week on study”, with 73% of students reporting they were keeping up with their studies most of the time, whilst 8% reported “never completing assignments or preparing for class” (ACER, 2013, p. 1). In relation to work commitments of students, 67% of Australasian students work for pay, and

working students work an average of two hours each week on-campus and 17 hours each week off-campus. This is consistent with the 2007 data that identified that two thirds of students were employed (ACER, 2008a).

The AUSSE provides a wealth of information about the student experience which can be used by higher education institutions to guide improvement of their offerings and practices (Hagel et al., 2011). At this same time the AUSSE results focus the attention of academics on how students are perceiving their education and to the changing backgrounds and needs of these same students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). While the AUSSE is seen as being very useful in describing some aspects of the student engagement construct, some authors have identified concerns and issues they feel limit the generalisability of these findings. Brogt and Comer (2012), and Hagel *et al.* (2011) question the ability of the AUSSE to capture the essence of the student experience in an Australian setting due to its basis on the NSSE constructed for the United States context. Bryson *et al.* (2009) identified concerns that only those student perspectives that match the AUSSE items actually get a voice or get to tell their story. Hagel *et al.* (2011) identify a range of key skills (such as reflection and autonomy) and activities (such as feedback from non-teaching sources and non-written forms of assessment) that are not presently included in the AUSSE that they feel diminishes its use in improving practices in higher education institutions. Kahu (2013, p. 760) notes that the form of the AUSSE, being a survey instrument makes the measurement of student engagement difficult as it is a “single wide-angled snapshot ... misses the complexity of the construct” and is ineffective due to the nature of engagement being “dynamic and situational”. This position is supported by Kuh (2003, p. 31) who stated that “there is much more to learn about student engagement and institutional effectiveness than one intentionally short, highly focussed student survey can tell”.

2.3.3 The First Year Experience Questionnaire

The First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) is a 5-yearly survey instrument which forms a major part of a research project commissioned by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching with the goal of “explor[ing] the nature of the initial experiences of first year students and the extent and impact of diversity in student backgrounds” (McInnis, James, & McNaught, 1995, p. 8). The FYEQ was first administered in 1994 to a stratified sample of first year students

attending 7 universities, increasing to 9 universities in 2004 and subsequent years. The participating universities were identified as being representative of the university system as a whole and ones that accepted an invitation from the researchers to participate in the study. A key feature of the longitudinal nature of the FYEQ was its contribution to the development of a national database that could assist in the monitoring and improvement of educational offerings in Australian universities (Krause, 2005b).

The structure of the 1994 FYEQ was heavily influenced by the work of Williams (1982) who studied first year students' background characteristics and how these impacted on the students' first year experience. The satisfaction measures included in the FYEQ were drawn largely from the existing CEQ survey instrument (Ramsden, 1991). Successive FYEQ's have been adapted and updated to ensure they offer the best chance of answering the changing research questions. While the earlier versions of the FYEQ were mailed out to the first year students, in recent times the survey has been in an online format with students advised of the survey by means of their university email accounts (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015).

Following each FYEQ survey in-depth reports have been written detailing key findings that could assist universities to review and improve their first year practices, the latest being that of Baik *et al.* (p. 1) which "provides an analysis of trends over a twenty year period". A range of measures were reported as showing improvement over time (at least since the 2009 survey), including:

- Student preparation for the transition to university,
- Belief the final year of school prepared them well for university,
- The number of students who had contemplated withdrawing,
- Student satisfaction with the quality of teaching, and
- Level of interaction between students and academic staff.

While these are positive results, the results also included aspects of the student experience that were concerning. Baik *et al.* (2015) described classroom engagement and engagement with peers as remaining challenging with around one third of students reporting not asking questions and 1/10 admitting to skipping classes. Approximately one quarter of students stated they never worked with classmates outside of class, on projects, or studied together. In 2014, less than half the students who completed the

FYEQ reported feeling like they belonged at the university and one third had not made at least one university friend by that time in the year (August/September).

When specific subgroups within the sample of students were studied it was found that students from low SES backgrounds (classified in this report as having neither parent holding a tertiary qualification) faced larger hurdles in 2014 when compared to 2009. These students described being less academically prepared, suffering financial stress, and having their studies affected by their work commitments, more so than students from middle or high SES backgrounds. Students who originated from regional and remote backgrounds (as classified by their postcode) also were noted as facing a range of difficulties. They were more likely to have considered withdrawing, faced more financial stress, and had their studies severely interfered with by their work commitments than their peers.

As the FYEQ has similarities to the CEQ it may be reasonable to presume that similar limitations would apply given the difficulty in describing the student experience and satisfaction given the varying theoretical viewpoints of experts in the field. A key limitation of the FYEQ is raised by Baik *et al.* (2015), this being that the survey was administered over half way through the student's first year of study and thus those students who might have faced acute difficulties may already have withdrawn from their studies. The low response rates ranging from 7% to 21% across the participating universities also may call some of the findings into question.

2.4 Why is there a need to conduct further study into students' experiences in higher education?

Since the release of the Bradley Report (Australian Government, 2008), the higher education student body has become more diverse due to government policies being implemented to increase participation of previously underrepresented groups such as those with low SES backgrounds and regional or remote areas (Baik *et al.*, 2015). With this change in demographics comes an added challenge for higher education institutions to meet the needs of these students, needs that may be significantly different to those exhibited by the traditional students of the past (Axelson & Flick, 2010; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; McPhail *et al.*, 2009). As the proportion of students from these backgrounds increases so too does the proportion of students whose families have limited experience with higher education settings. This group

requires in-depth study as “One would expect that persons from cultural backgrounds and or home communities with low rates of higher education participation may face particularly severe handicaps in attempting to complete higher education degree programs” (Tinto, 1993, p. 62) and especially so because “Loss rates are ... higher among low-income and historically underrepresented students” (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006, p. 150). While there has been Australian research which has targeted these non-traditional students and their needs and outcomes (such as AUSSE and FYEQ), a range of authors view this research as being insufficient (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011) and that the student experience for these subgroups is not yet fully visible or understood in all their implications (Zepke et al., 2011). In the Australian setting, Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005, p. v) invite further investigation stating “there is strong evidence of demographic subgroup differences that warrants close monitoring and further investigation”.

At the same time as the student demographic is becoming more diverse, the complexity of the student experience is also increasing. Given the complexity of the student experience (Hackman & Dysinger, 1970), that academic development is not the only goal of higher education (Brennan & Osborne, 2008), and that “there is no first year experience: there is a multiplicity of first year experiences” (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006, p. iv) it is clear that a more holistic understanding of the student experience is needed (Coates, 2004). This means that there is a need to look broader than engagement (Kantanis, 2000) and to look beyond the influences that reside under the purview of the higher education institutions (Krause, 2006; Krause & Coates, 2008b). Vinson *et al.* (2010, p. 131) support this need for a broader view of the student experience stating “the literature suggests research should also identify students’ social and personal journeys as well as academic transitions into higher education”. Also in support of looking beyond the academic transition is the finding of Kuh *et al.* (2006) that most of the students who dropout from higher education do so for non-academic reasons. Baird and Gordon (2009, p. 1) “suggest that the most comprehensive way to consider the student experience is as the experience of people whilst in their identities as students, recognising the interconnectedness of academic and other developmental experiences”.

Another aspect that is being questioned is the emphasis on student behaviours associated with the engagement construct. Student perceptions are seen as critical in

relation to the student experience as “Individual’s own perceptions ... are the predominant influences on their decision to stay or leave” (Nevill & Rhodes, 2006, p. 181). Thus research identifies both behaviours and perceptions would be more appropriate for measuring the student experience and warrants further investigation. Hagel *et al.* (2011) support conducting research from different ideological perspectives as without this we are limiting the chances of fully understanding how engagement relates to student learning, progression and retention.

With the change in demographics of the students entering higher education, shortcomings with the existing theories and models (such as Integration, Involvement and Engagement) could be expected to become more pronounced. Karp (2011, p. 3) described that these dominant paradigms “do little to account for the experiences of many part-time, commuter, and underrepresented minority students” and as such we “need to develop an alternative theoretical perspective”. Stage and Hossler (2000) add further caution explaining that the use of existing models can result in organisational and research complacency, meaning an over reliance on these theories and a belief they fully explain a phenomena and thus should not be questioned.

Over the last two decades researchers studying student retention and the student experience have identified issues related to the assumptions upon which research is planned and implemented. Reason *et al.* (2007, p. 293) identify that “although research on students’ first year experience abounds only a few studies have attempted to assess other factors that may also shape [the] student experiences”. Thus pre-existing assumptions may be hindering the development of a more in depth understanding of the student experience. Rausch and Hamilton (2006, p. 318) support an effort to look beyond currently accepted views stating that “more malleable predictors of attrition need to be investigated to create interventions that may help prevent attrition and increase resiliency. McInnis (2004, p. 383) also supports this view that “many of the assumptions about student life that underpin earlier studies are no longer sustainable”. One way to move forward and to counteract the hindrance of researcher assumptions is to “begin with an effort to discover what [is] of importance to students” (McKeown *et al.*, 1993, p. 72). Thus a constructivist research methodology could counter the weaknesses described previously.

Finally Porter (2011, p. 60) identifies another key assumption that needs to be addressed, this being that “students can accurately recall and report the frequency of

events” even after large periods of time; “this assumption is the most fundamental theoretical flaw of the NSSE and other college student surveys”. Research methods which can tap into key student experiences when they are current and of importance to the student would address this ‘recall’ issue.

While the fact that the student body is becoming more diverse, their university experience more complex, and the possibility that researchers’ understanding of the student experience may be flawed, another important reason why further study into the student experience in higher education is vital relates to the personal costs to the individual and the negative impacts on society in general.

Typically the need to focus upon the students’ experience has been highlighted due to the number of students deciding to withdraw from their studies (ACER, 2008b; Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2008; McInnis, 2001; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Rausch & Hamilton, 2006; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). While the evidence from the 2014 FYEQ identified a minority of first year students had seriously contemplated withdrawing (19% of first year students surveyed) this may be an understatement due to the relative timing of the data collection, after some students had already withdrawn (Baik et al., 2015). When extrapolated to the 2014 FYEQ results to the broader first year student intake, there would seem to be a large number of Australian students who would be ‘at risk’. The contemplation of dropping out and possible withdrawal has consequences not only for the student but also the institutions as well as the communities in which they live (McInnis, 2001).

High dropout rates can be associated with high financial consequences as higher levels of education are associated with greater financial rewards. In the United States it is estimated that median wages for men and women aged 25 to 34, holding a Bachelor’s Degree or higher, is more than 70% higher than those having only completed a high school diploma; with this gap increasing over the last 10 years (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Studies in Australia have also identified the financial benefits of obtaining a Bachelor’s Degree as being significant. Daly, Lewis, Corliss and Heaslip (2011, p. 10) represent this difference graphically as shown in Figure 6.

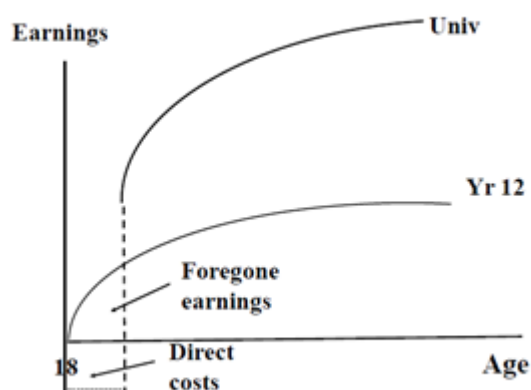


Figure 6. Age Earnings Profiles Australia (Daly et al., 2011, p. 10)

Leigh (2008, p. xiii), when studying the rate of return due to education in Australia, found that “Bachelor degrees are associated with a 32-35 percent increase in hourly wages, and a 45-50 percent increase in annual earnings” compared to students who finish year 12.

The economic cost to communities due to student dropout is also substantial. According to the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2012, p. 37), there will be an undersupply of staff holding higher qualifications of between 45 000 and 280 000 by the year 2025, thus any student dropout will make it more difficult to fill the new positions as they are created.

Whilst the financial benefits of tertiary study can be estimated, the costs to communities related to the social development that may be lost by students dropping out before completing their studies is less understood and harder to quantify (Murray, 2009). The Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) (2006, p. 2) identify that “development of a knowing and active citizenry can deliver greater corporate and community responsibility ... [drive] social cohesion and social change, generate informed debate on issues of significance to communities and it can improve their quality of life”. Bynner, Schuller and Feinstein (2003) are in agreement with AUCEA, but also add that participation in higher education can lead to higher levels of racial tolerance, lower levels of political cynicism, more likely to vote and more likely to be members of voluntary and community organisations. So the costs to society can be high if students don’t enter higher education or withdraw early.

2.5 Why is there a need to specifically study the first year experience?

As noted by Pitkethly and Rosser (2001, p. 198) “the issue of the first year experience is one which is enduring” and “we will never get the first year experience right”. Thus, it is only reasonable to assume that continued research in this area is warranted if we are aiming to enhance student outcomes, and as a community, reap the benefits associated with well-educated and socially responsible citizens.

2.5.1 First year is a foundation for further studies/success

The consistent message espoused by student experience literature is that the first year of study is the most critical in shaping their decision making as to whether to continue their studies or to withdraw (Astin, 1993; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Kantanis, 2000; Nevill & Rhodes, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). This is even more critical as Tinto (1995), and van der Meer, Jansen and Torenbeek (2010), noted that many decisions to withdraw during second or third year were also based on experiences during the student’s first year of study. At this same time first year experiences are pivotal in “influencing their attitudes and approaches to learning” (Trotter & Roberts, 2006, p. 372). Thus if we want students to approach their studies in a meaningful way we must invest time, resources and influence during this important period (Krause, 2005b; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). Some researchers signify that completing the first year is “half the battle in persistence to course completion” (ACER, 2008b, p. 1). Crissman-Ishler and Upcraft (2005) provide a reason why this might be the case as students who successfully complete their first year would have made a range of “profound academic, social, and emotional adaptations”.

2.5.2 Highest levels of withdrawal occur in first year

As discussed earlier, the consequences of students’ withdrawal is extensive for both them and the communities in which they live (Evans, 2000). This being the case the fact that the highest levels of withdrawal occur during the first year of study in higher education highlights the importance of further study of the first year student experience (ACER, 2008b; Crissman-Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Tinto, 1993). Kuh’s (2009) findings point to the very early experiences of the students,

those in the first days and weeks, as being very important. Raush and Hamilton (2006, p. 332) highlighted that early feelings of “frustration and alienation” were key reasons for students deciding to withdraw in their first year.

2.5.3 A wide variety of difficulties are faced by first year students during their transition to higher education

Rayle and Chung’s (2007) study found that college counsellors described regularly being confronted by first year students with “unique and demanding academic, financial, and relational challenges” during their first year of study at university. These challenges are not only faced by the students whilst on campus. Hillman (2005) noted that students transitioning from their previous lives to that of first year students are especially vulnerable to a range of external forces. The troubles students face also have a marked effect on people other than the student with Evans (2000, p. 1) noting that “transition problems can be devastating for individuals and their families”. Not only do *some* students face transition difficulties but a *significant number* have neither a satisfying nor a successful first year of study (Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosenstreich, & Dobson, 2013).

Clearly the issues faced by students entering higher education can be many and varied.

The latest FYEQ completed in 2014 identified that 38% of first year students thought that the standard of university work was much higher than they expected, while 50% of students felt that they had not been adequately prepared by their secondary schools for university study (Baik et al., 2015). Although these results have improved steadily since 1994, still it would seem, a large number of first year students feel they are not adequately prepared for university study. Identifying the reasons why first year students perceive themselves as being ill-prepared, especially students from non-traditional backgrounds, can assist higher education authorities in planning interventions to alleviate/moderate this concern.

An issue first year students often face is one of feeling overwhelmed with the workload associated with their studies (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Drew, 2001; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; van der Meer et al., 2010). There are a range of contributing factors identified in the literature as possible causes for this feeling, with Bowyer (2012, p. 243) highlighting the student’s “prior knowledge, life situation, self-

efficacy” as well as the “lecturer’s pedagogical knowledge” as being significant. Haggis and Pouget’s (2002) study found that even though students stated they knew they had to work hard they did not really know what this meant. The not knowing what to do also caused the students to become frustrated and anxious about their subjects. Van der Meer *et al.* (2010) found in their research that students were surprised they were asked to do so little, they expected to be given tasks to complete in the same fashion as they had experienced in secondary school. McPhail *et al.* (2009, p. 2) offer support for this position explaining that first year students struggle with the “level of autonomy and flexibility” that exists in higher education settings.

Karjalainen, Alha and Jutila (2006) described consequences associated with the students’ feelings of being overwhelmed by the workload, stating these students learn inefficiently, meaning learning tasks take longer than for other students, further exacerbating their situation. Another consequence can be that the overwhelmed students resort to a surface approach to learning, which is the antithesis of what is expected by the academic staff (Kember & Leung, 1998; Kolari, Savander-Ranne, & Viskari, 2006).

Students from low SES and first in family backgrounds have been found to be especially susceptible to problems associated with the academic workload of a university student. Firstly, Byrd and MacDonald (2005) hypothesised that students with first in family backgrounds may have developed a subconscious view that they were deficient in areas required to be successful in university. This may cause added stress and thus negatively impact on their perception of workload (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Secondly, Krause *et al.* (2005b) detailed that students with low SES backgrounds are more likely to report that have difficulty understanding course material and struggle to adjust to the pedagogies frequently used in higher education settings. Both of these difficulties have the potential to increase the time needed by student to complete their required academic tasks and thus compound any feelings of being overwhelmed by the workload. Thirdly, students from low SES and first in family backgrounds are more reliant on their teachers for clarifying course content and assessment requirements than are other traditional university students (Devlin & O’Shea, 2012). With limited access to teachers, much less than what they may have been used to in secondary school, getting the information

they require can be more difficult causing interruptions to their studies and making them less efficient, resulting in greater workload pressures.

As research tells us that first year students’ perceptions of workload are fundamental to their feelings of stress (academic and emotional), research that may identify aspects of their experience which ‘create’ these perceptions would be highly beneficial.

The benefits accrued by first year students due to their feelings of belonging are substantial. Krause (2005b, p. 61) states that “belonging and involvement in the life of the university is a critical feature of the successful first year experience”. Without this connection students may not have access to important support structures when they face difficulties (Kuh et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, if students do not feel they belong there is a greater chance they will not be satisfied with their university experience and it may even inhibit their chances of academic success (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Morda, Sonn, Ali, & Ohtsuka, 2007; Vinson et al., 2010). Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins and McMillan (2009, p. 316) detailed that students who are “deprived of belongingness are more likely to experience diminished self-esteem, increased stress and anxiety, depression and a decrease in general well-being”.

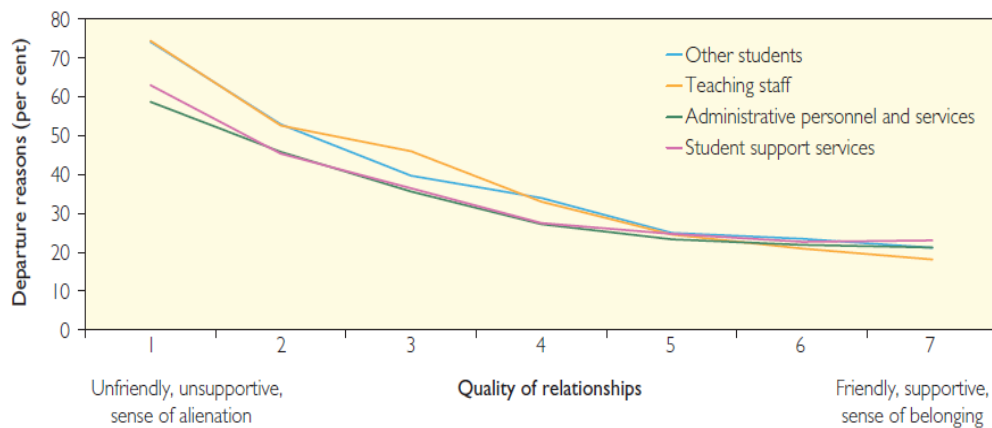


Figure 7. Departure intentions by the supportiveness of relationships AUSSE 2010 (Coates & Ransom, 2011, p. 13).

Belonging is also strongly associated with students’ choices to continue or withdraw from their studies. Coates and Ransom (2011) reported results from the 2010 AUSSE survey that showed that students who felt like they belonged and were

supported were approximately three times less likely to indicate an intention to withdraw than students who felt alienated.

Of special significance is the student-faculty relationship, its effect on the students' feelings of belonging and support, and its impact on student outcomes. Mearns, Meyer and Bharadwaj (2007) note that if a teacher is seen to be approachable, well-prepared, listens to and supports students in times of need, then these same students are more committed to learn and are more likely to succeed. Thus positive student-faculty interactions can result in "extremely profound, even life-altering experiences" for the students. (Vinson et al., 2010, p. 132). While the relationship between students and their teachers has been highlighted, other members of staff, such as tutors, academic advisers, first year advisors and older students can assist in the development of belonging for the students (Engle, 2007; Yule, 2011).

While a first year student's feeling of belonging to higher education community and perceiving there is support available from this community when they face difficulties, is seen as being very important, research has identified this is of even greater importance for non-traditional students. First in family students have been found to be more likely to be reticent in their new environment (the university), unaware of what is available and of what questions to ask (Terenzini et al., 1996). These same students have been found to be more likely to view faculty as less supportive and less concerned about their welfare (Engle, 2007), and require more personal contact than other students (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012). Rendon *et al.* (2000) explain that non-traditional students (e.g. low SES and first in family) expect staff to take a more proactive role in supporting their needs, not waiting for the student to raise the concern or to ask for help.

As the cohort of students studying at university becomes more diverse, and their time on campus continues to decrease, identification of aspects of the first year student experience that students perceive to enhance feelings of belonging becomes even more critical.

When students enter their first year of study in a higher education institution they are confronted by conflicting priorities associated with [their] academic, family, social,

and paid employment responsibilities” (Crisp, Palmer, Turnbull, Nettelbeck, & Ward, 2009, p. 13).

Children, no matter what age, generally look upon their parents as their first support system (Savage, 2008). This situation does not cease once a student enters their first year of university (Savage, 2008; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). The ability of students to share their concerns with their parents has been linked to better student adjustment to university (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000). For some students though, the transition to university places them in a ‘betwixt place’, suspended between home and university, making parental support more difficult. (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). Students’ connection to their parents can be put at risk during transition times as they face increased stress due to issues such as lack of time and forgoing sleep (Robotham & Julian, 2006; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007).

While family support is clearly important, some family backgrounds have been found to inhibit the support that is available to students in their times of need. Collier and Morgan (2008) described students from first in family backgrounds as not being able to rely on their parents for advice as they had not experienced university study and didn’t understand university expectations. These same parents may also expect their students to work to support themselves thus putting more pressure on the ability of the student to meet their study obligations (Engle, 2007). For students who continue to live at home when they commence their university studies this can cause a “major disjunction in family patterns, relationships, and life”, putting relationships under stress with associated decreases in perceived support (Engle, 2007, p. 36). James, Jennings and Krause (2010) also noted that students from low SES backgrounds were very sensitive to the fact that their parents were making a significant financial commitment in supporting their studies and this added to all the other pressures they faced during their transition to university.

Students turn to friends for support when they confront stressful situations (Brooks, 2007). University friends are looked to when support is needed related to the content of courses and university rules and regulations, while outside friends are sought to discuss generic issues related to being a student (such as workload and deadlines) (Brooks, 2007). For younger students, those transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, there is an increased reliance on friends for support (Bokhorst, Sumter,

& Westenberg, 2010). Taking all these factors into consideration it is clear that developing a friendship network is critical if students are to adjust to their new life as a university student (Kantanis, 2000).

In the early stages of their first year of study, students are in a very vulnerable situation as their friendship network develops and evolves (Fowler & Zimitat, 2008; Gibney, Moore, Murphy, & O'Sullivan, 2011). Crissman-Ishler and Schreiber (2002) describe students as experiencing a 'friendsickness' during this period due to losing pre-existing friends and not having yet made new university friends. Morosanu, Handley and O'Donovan (2010) identify that commencing first year students may not have any 'known' contacts, those who were helpful in the past, to guide them in their new life. They also note that these students may lack the day to day confirmation that they have made a good decision to study and are progressing well.

While difficulties with friends and lack of support are issues for all students, students from families with low SES backgrounds may be less involved socially on campus (Rubin, 2012), "lose their friends at home as their interests change" (L. Thomas, 2002, p. 436), are prone to frequently feeling lonely (Rayle & Chung, 2007), and increased levels of stress (Engle, 2007; Fowler & Zimitat, 2008; Morosanu et al., 2010).

Further research into the sources of support students choose to use (such as friends on and off campus) is strongly supported in current first year experience literature (Morosanu et al., 2010), as too is the need for higher education institutions to "develop programs and practices which facilitate student interaction with peers" (Krause, 2005b, p. 65).

Working and studying at the same time can be detrimental to higher education students' academic, social and emotional development (Callender, 2008; Carney, McNeish, & McColl, 2005; Curtis & Shani, 2002; Gibney et al., 2011; Hunt, Lincoln, & Walker, 2004; James et al., 2010). The more hours the students work the less time they spend preparing for class (Kulm & Cramer, 2006), the higher the likelihood they will skip classes (Lingard, 2012), the more they suffer from stress (Barron & Anastasiadou, 2009), increased possibility they perceive their university workload as excessive (Kyndt, Berghmans, Dochy, & Bulckens, 2013), having less time to

socialise (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005), and are “more likely to consider withdrawing from their studies (Krause, 2005b).

As the 21st century progresses, Australian university students are spending more time in the workplace (Gibney et al., 2011) to the point where the number of work hours is roughly the same as the number of hours they spend on campus (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Lingard (2012, p. 46) advises that higher education institutions “need to recognise that paid work is a reality for students” and it is not likely to diminish as the cost of studying increases. This being the case, having a positive supportive relationship with their employers is becoming more and more important for working students. While some students are in the enviable position of having regular work hours and having the ability to negotiate these hours when their studies required it, most students are not (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Watts and Pickering’s (2000) study found that conflict between the student and their employer can arise when flexibility is not demonstrated by one or both parties, and can lead to feelings of pressure and stress for the student. With a positive working relationship the attitude of the employer can assist students’ transition to university (Kember, 1999).

Hillman (2005) identified that juggling work and study was a difficulty reported by one in every two of the first year students who participated in his study. Baik *et al.* (2015) recently reported FYEQ results that the number of students worrying about their ability to balance their commitments (including working) had improved, but was still close to the level stated by Hillman (50%). These difficulties are especially associated with students from low SES backgrounds as they are more likely to undertake work during the term than other economic subgroups (Hunt et al., 2004). Students from first in family backgrounds have also been identified as facing more difficulties with their part time work. Collier and Morgan (2008) found that even when these students were advised to decrease their working hours they still tended to overcommit. This was not a situation that was described by traditional students.

2.5.4 Dearth of studies that describe the variability of the first year student experience as the year progresses.

“In general there is a dearth of longitudinal studies of student engagement in any of the domains to which that term applies” (Trowler & Trowler, 2010, p. 5)

The need for longitudinal studies of the student experience has been highlighted regularly in the research literature (McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 1975, 1988) but is still not common place (Pascarella et al., 2006; Tinto, 1988; Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

Researchers such as Wilcox *et al.* (2005, p. 710) identify that as students’ progress through their first year of study in a higher education institution “different factors assume priority at different points” whilst Morda *et al.* (2007, p. 9) state that during this time as students become more competent “their transition needs also change”. Given this change over time it is clear that one off ‘snapshot’ studies may not be appropriate and that “what is needed is uniform data collected at regular intervals – it is only by the regular gathering of data in this way that trends can be detected” (Williams & Pepe, 1982, p. 132). Astin and Lee (2003, p. 659) warn that even though this need for longitudinal studies is well understood “research evidence gathered over the past 50–60 years has undisputedly shown the importance of longitudinal assessments in determining institutional quality, it seems clear that such warnings are being flagrantly ignored”. Further Kift (2008b, p. 6) identifies the value of “institutional approaches to monitoring for student (dis)engagement and progression during the currency of an existing enrolment period... to enable for timely intervention and support” thus the research can benefit the students whilst they are progressing through their first year when they are vulnerable to outside influences. The use of a regular checks at much shorter intervals also addresses a problem that the NSSE and other surveys encounter, that of the students being able to recall and report experiences that occurred weeks or even months before the survey was completed (Porter, 2011).

As noted by McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) students from different social and cultural backgrounds bring with them different needs and academic potential. They also may hold different expectations of their higher education experience (Australian Government, 2008). For example, studies have found that students from

regional areas are more likely to consider withdrawing (ACER, 2010b), and less likely to say their final year of schooling prepared them well for university (James et al., 2010). There is strong evidence that researching subgroups, such as students studying in regional areas or originating from these areas, is warranted (Axelson & Flick, 2010; James et al., 2010; Krause et al., 2005). At this same time authors such as Kuh *et al.* (2006) highlight the need to research what enhances the student experience at different types of post-secondary settings. Crissman Ishler and Upcraft (2005) provide further support for this position explaining that student persistence is strongly influenced by the type of institution the student attends. More recently Kahu (2013, p. 769) has once more drawn researcher attention to the study of student subgroups in differing settings stating that “there is a need for projects to focus on narrower populations, including single institutions, ... as a broad generalisation of the student experience is ill-advised”.

The student experience literature suggests that a study of students attending a regional university, students with previously under-represented backgrounds would be useful in extended what is already known about the first year student experience in Australian contexts.

2.6 Why is a new creative method of student experience research needed if we aim to improve student outcomes?

While the use of quantitative research methods has unearthed much of what we know today about the first year university student experience, there are calls for more creative and inclusive methods to extend our knowledge even further (Harper & Kuh, 2007; Kahu, 2013; McInnis, 2004; Pascarella, 2006; Reason et al., 2007).

Bowles *et al.* (2013) reported that student perceptions of the factors that impacted upon their first year student journey had not received significant attention. This is seen as a weakness by some authors with Harvey and Drew (2006, p. viii) stating that “it is important to take first year student perspectives seriously” and McKeown *et al.* (1993, p. 76) highlighting that in order to understand the actions of “students and other players in the university” we “should begin with an effort to grasp the meanings these elements have for the students”. Research that specifically

investigates the student's own understanding of their experiences is very limited at this point in time (Karp, 2011).

Coates (2004) identified that recent research had challenged the idea that what occurred within the university classroom had the most influence on the student experience, going on to say that a holistic understanding, one inclusive of all aspects of the student experience was required. This call for more holistic research was supported by Harvey and Drew (2006, p. viii) who noted that only by looking more holistically can we capture the "complexity of the student experience". More recently Kahu (2013, p. 766) has added her voice to this call explaining that only by embedding the student experience within the wider social context can we get a clearer picture of the "unique nature of the individual experience".

Thus developing a new research method whereby student experiences both within the university context and in the wider community can be identified and their effects on the student journey studied is called for.

While the use of quantitative research methods have been prevalent in studies of the first year student experience, there is a wide spread call for the inclusion of more qualitative methods (Chalmers, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008a; Krause et al., 2005; Pascarella, 2006; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007).

Krause *et al.* (2005) state that the use of qualitative methods will allow researchers to understand the students' reasons and motives for responding to surveys in the way they do, and thus gain a broader understanding of the full student experience. Pascarella (2006, p. 516) offers further support for the effectiveness of qualitative methods in capturing the essence of the student experience explaining that they are "more sensitive to the nuances of student academic and non-academic experiences". Chalmers (2007) warns that without the use of multiple sources of data, both quantitative and qualitative, interpretations could be erroneous, thus suggestions as to how the quality of higher education can be improved will be flawed. Harper and Kuh (2007, p. 7) make a key point in supporting the use of qualitative research methods noting that if only quantitative methods are used, "the measures of central tendency often reported to depict the experiences of various groups of students actually represent no person".

One aspect of the student first year experience that has not been consistently addressed is its dynamic nature (Kahu, 2013). Research has shown that “different factors assume priority at different points in the academic year” (Wilcox et al., 2005, p. 710), and “does not occur in discrete pieces or in isolation from other components” (Reason et al., 2007, p. 10). Not only does the individual student’s journey have its ebbs and flows but it is unique when compared to other first year students. Harvey and Drew (2006) highlight this situation stating that there is “a multiplicity of first year experience”. From this perspective there is a need for a research method that monitors the students’ experience throughout the their full first year of study, a method sensitive to the variability of issues the students may be confronting at different points in time. Given this situation there would seem to be strong support for longitudinal qualitative studies, ones which have numerous touch points throughout the students’ first year of study (Krause & Coates, 2008a).

Investigation of the construction and implementation of a research method able to capture the dynamic nature of the first year university experience would appear to be priority if we are to further our understanding (Christie et al., 2014). Pascarella (2006, p. 510) provides strong support for this position noting: “if scholars put as much emphasis on collecting such longitudinal data as they currently do on applying sophisticated statistical techniques to data ... it will lead to a major improvement in the evidence on college impact”.

One of the ongoing issues confronting researchers using quantitative measures to investigate the first year experience is decreasing response rates (Baik et al., 2015; Nair, Adams, & Mertova, 2008). One strategy that has been found to improve response rates of survey instruments measuring aspects of the student experience has been the use multiple contacts (Coates, Tilbrook, Guthrie, & Bryant, 2006). Nair *et al.* (2008) found that 50% of the students who had not yet responded to a Graduate survey instrument were favourably persuaded to participate when personal contact was made asking them for their assistance.

Given the valuable data that can arise from survey instruments related to the first year student experience further investigation as to strategies which may enhance response rates would be advisable.

2.7 Formulation of the study's research questions

Following an intensive search of national and international literature associated with the first year student experience in higher education it is clear that there is a recognition that research of this phenomena must be ongoing and nuanced to the factors relevant to the students at that point in time. Changes to the backgrounds of students, including larger numbers of first in family, low SES, and those working while studying, have been noted, as too has the need to investigate their specific first year experiences. This need arises as the experiences of students with these backgrounds may be considerably different to those of the 'traditional students' on whom much of the substantive theory had been modelled. In this same vein, it would seem prudent to acknowledge that the factors that shape those individual's perceptions of their first year student journey would be critical, providing the opportunity to identify factors that are most pertinent to their situation.

Thus, based on the literature presented in this Chapter, the following research question appears warranted and worthy of study:

RQ#1: How do pre-service students perceive their first year experience on a small regional university campus?

While there may be great value in identifying key factors that impact the students' first year experience, especially those highlighted by students from diverse backgrounds, the unique nature of each individual student's experience also needs to be addressed if we are to enhance student outcomes. Research clearly identifies that the student experience is dynamic in nature, changes over time, with varying factors compounding and influencing the student's perceptions of their journey. An investigation of how the student experience varies across their first year of university study would be highly valuable and assist all members of the university community to better understand the issues students are facing and provide impetus for developing strategies to better support their needs. Therefore the following research question has strong support:

RQ#2: How does the student experience vary over time throughout the first year of study?

With the focus of the first 2 questions being the perceptions of the students regarding their first year experience and how this experience may vary across their first year of university study, the need for a research method that includes both qualitative and quantitative measures is warranted. The ability of the method to prompt regular student reflection, maintain student involvement over an extended period of time (a full academic year), and to not negatively impact on the time students have available for activities they deem to be important, calls for the development of a new coordinated strategy. While primarily the use of the method to harvest appropriate data to answer the first 2 research questions is of greatest importance, there is also the opportunity to learn more about which research methods are most suited to investigating first year student experiences and sustaining quality student involvement in the research process. The researcher felt justified in identifying a third research question to be investigated in this study, namely:

RQ#3: How effective is the Experience Sampling Methodology* in the collection of data associated with the student first year experience?

* The Experience Sampling Methodology was chosen by the researcher as being most appropriate for the purposes of this study. Full details of what this methodology entails and the reasons behind its choice are described in Chapter 3, the Methodology chapter.

2.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has highlighted the contemporary theories and models that have shaped and are still shaping much of the research effort in developing an improved understanding of students' first year university experience. Following this discussion the Australian university context was described taking note of the large scale research studies that have been employed to monitor and report on factors that have previously been identified in the literature as having a significant effect on the students' learning journey.

After setting the scene for this present study, both nationally and internationally, current first year student experience literature was used to argue the case for continued and expanded research in this area. Evidence was provided to support the argument that not only was further research into the first year student experience warranted but that students' perceptions should be the focus of this study.

At this same time the changing demographics of those students entering their first year of university study were identified as being an issue of special significance. Finally the need for a research method that to date has not been applied to the study of the first year student experience in tertiary education, one able to capture individual students' first year journeys, was discussed and supported through the use of contemporary literature.

In Chapter 3 (Methodology) the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this study will be discussed, as too will be how these positions have shaped the research methods chosen and implemented in this study. The process used by the researcher to analyse and synthesise the research data to answer the three research questions outlined in this chapter is explained in detail with the goal of substantiating the trustworthiness of the study's results and findings.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

In Chapter 2 the need for research into the first year experience of university students on a regional university campus was justified as was the need to investigate different methods for the collection of data related to their experience. This chapter will detail the research paradigm (with associated ontological and epistemological positions), and align this with the decision making process employed in planning for effective collection of data to answer the research questions. The specific research methods used (demographic survey, student experience survey and semi-structured interview) will be detailed, as will the inherent strengths and limitations of these approaches. The trustworthiness of the research process will be addressed highlighting the key strategies used by the researcher to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the results and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally the ethical treatment of participants, their artefacts, and how it was achieved will be discussed.

3.2 Research Design

According to Cheek (2008, p. 761) the key components of a research design include the theoretical foundations, the methods to be used within the study and the ethical considerations arising from the decisions and actions of the researcher: these components being “broadly connected and interdependent” in nature.

3.2.1 Theoretical Foundations

While all elements are important for an effective research project, the choice and clarification of the researcher’s research paradigm, “congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality” (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2008, p. 26), “sets down the intent, motivation and expectations for the research” (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006, p. 2). Guba and Lincoln (1994b, p. 108) note that the researcher’s paradigm illuminates where they position themselves ontologically and epistemologically, allowing outsiders to judge what matches or does not match this position. A researcher’s paradigm can be described by answering three fundamental questions related to their ontology, epistemology and preferred methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994b).

The Ontology Question: “What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994a, p. 108)

Reality, within the context of this study, is the perceptions of the first year university students regarding their experiences as a student at a regional campus. This being the case, the reality is a human construct based on their individual experiences and interactions with persons both within and outside the physical setting of the university. Each student holds a different view of the reality of being a first year university student and so there is no one reality independent of the person fulfilling the role of *student*. Thus a relativist ontological position is most appropriate as “human beings do not passively react to an external reality but ... actively create their [own] realities” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 636). Guba and Lincoln (1989) staunchly support this relativist position explaining that for a researcher to act in any other way would be unnatural.

The Epistemology Question: “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994a, p. 108)

Based on a relativist ontological position, an objective epistemological position is untenable in this study. From an objectivist position researchers should distance themselves from what they are studying to ensure there can be no biases or effects due to their interaction, also the aspect of the study under investigation should be able to be accurately measured to answer the research questions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14). Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 4) dispute this position stating that “what is discovered about reality cannot be divorced from the operative perspective of the knower which enters silently into his or her search for and ultimate conclusions about some event”. The researcher’s position mirrors that of Appleton and King (2002, p. 643) who promote the view that it is only through continual social interaction that a deep understanding can be developed. The subjectivist epistemological stance of the researcher gives prominence to the position of the participants in the study meaning they “have agency in the research process and are co-creators of the study” (Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1321), and the researcher acts as an interpreter of the participants’ stories, sharing these time and context specific stories with outsiders (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

The Methodology Question: “How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994a, p. 108).

The process and methods used by a researcher when investigating a phenomenon arise from their core beliefs and enquiry (Annells, 1996). Given the researcher’s ontological and epistemological positions and a commitment to uncover the personal and individual perceptions of the participants’ experience as first year students, close involvement is essential (Bryman, 1984). This close involvement between researcher and participant is further supported due to the students’ perceptions being context and time specific. The ability to act as an accurate interpreter of the participants’ stories requires the researcher to hold a deep understanding of the setting in which they are portrayed. Use of a qualitative methodology is relevant to this present study given that its focus is to study the ‘normal’ lives of first year university students with the hope of developing a holistic understanding of the factors impacting these lives (Rist, 1982).

Through providing answers to Guba and Lincoln’s (1994a) three fundamental questions, the researcher has positioned himself within an interpretivist research paradigm, more specifically a constructivist paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1989) view a constructivist paradigm as being the most effective when conducting a human inquiry. Clarifying this position further, they detail key elements that are indicative of a constructivist paradigm, which align very closely to characteristics of this study.

Requirement #1: The study should be pursued in a natural setting with “the study being carried out in the same time/context frame that the inquirer seeks to understand” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 174). The present study was conducted on the regional university campus attended by the participants with communications and data collected face-to-face or through the use of student university email accounts, throughout the participants’ first year of study.

Requirement #2: The researcher must not assume that they know everything before the commencement of the study, thus having fixed questions and not being flexible to adapt as new information arises (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). “What is needed is a highly adaptable instrument that can enter a context without prior programming, but that can,

after a short period, begin to discern what is salient and then focus on that” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 175). Within this study the research questions, stated previously, were tentative in nature and open for adaptation or expansion depending on what was learnt during the data collection process. The semi-structured interview questions and survey instrument (Student Experience Scale) questions were both broad in nature allowing for the students to identify the aspects of their experience that they deemed most important.

Requirement #3: “The human is the instrument of choice for the constructivist” and thus the use of qualitative research methods is most appropriate (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 176). Semi-structured interviews were used in this study which aligns with the qualitative methods promoted by Guba and Lincoln. These interviews were the central data gathering mechanisms but were supported by other quantitative measures (i.e., Student Experience Scale and Demographic Survey). This position is supported by Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), and Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), who stressed that a researcher’s paradigm does not preclude them from using qualitative and/or quantitative methods.

Requirement #4: “The use of the researcher’s tacit knowledge in the study is promoted / essential for the co-construction of meaning for the participants and the researcher” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 176). The researcher had previous experience working with first year education students on a regional university Campus. While fulfilling the role of First Year Coordinator the researcher conducted weekly 1 hour Common Time sessions to deal with issues and concerns specific to the first year cohort, and also met individually with students at their request to provide support. The knowledge gleaned from these meetings as well as the researcher’s engagement with literature related to the first year experience informed the questions used during the semi-structured interviews. The participants, in answering the interview questions related specifically to their experiences, reflected on their current position as a higher education student and drew personal meaning from this discussion. During this reflection, the researcher’s implicit knowledge was used to provide supplementary questions when student responses included new and or surprising perspectives.

3.2.2 Methods

As defined by Carter and Little (2007, p. 1325) “methods are the nuts and bolts of research practice” with the study’s research questions dictating which methods are most appropriate (Bryman, 1984). As a constructivist paradigm was employed in this study, the decision to use Qualitative Methods was strongly supported (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Wiersma & Jurs, 2008).

To adequately answer the research questions the researcher deemed the exclusive use of qualitative methods to limit the effectiveness of the research strategy and so Quantitative Methods were also included, meaning a mixed methods approach was deemed most appropriate. The first quantitative method applied was the collection of demographic data through the use of a survey instrument. This data enabled the researcher to clearly describe the context and allow for deeper analysis of the data obtained through the semi-structured interviews. A second quantitative method, application of a Student Experience Scale (SES), allowed the researcher to collect data at regular intervals reflecting the student’s relative experiences and provided data for the selection of students to participate in the interviews. Support for this stance comes from authors such as Mackenzie and Knipe (2006, p. 195) who advise that quantitative data may be used to enhance qualitative data thus enabling a richer and deeper description. Silverman and Marvasti (2008) go further warning against limiting oneself to one form of research methods as it may limit the effectiveness of collecting accurate actionable data.

3.2.3 The researcher and the research participants

Within this section the choice of participants for the study, the manner in which they were recruited, as well as the position of the researcher as an insider in the study will be addressed.

3.2.3.1 Choosing participants

The research questions investigated in this study focussed on the first year experience of pre-service education students on a small regional university campus. The cohort of students chosen for the study were enrolled in 2012, their first year of study in a face to face on campus mode on a small regional campus of a Queensland, Australian university. The choice of this group reflects the researcher’s use of both

purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling is defined as “samples ... selected to serve an investigative purpose rather than to be statistically representative of a population” (Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1318). The common characteristic of this group matches exactly what is required by the research questions. The sample was also ‘convenient’ given that the researcher had ready access to the pre-service education students for the recruitment and the conduct of the semi-structured interviews due to also working on this campus and undertaking the role as First Year Coordinator (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The researcher did not choose to use theoretical sampling as the goal was to identify new knowledge associated with the first year experience and not to test current theories (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 80).

3.2.3.2 Recruitment of participants

All sixty-eight pre-service education students commencing their first year of study on the small campus of a regional university in 2012 were approached to participate in the study to ensure a wide range of student backgrounds and experiences. This decision was based on the researcher’s belief that including as many students as possible would (1) provide the best opportunity to unearth the important factors perceived by students as shaping their first year experience, (2) optimise the diversity in student backgrounds, and (3) counter the expected withdrawal of students from the study.

Students were advised of the purposes of the study and the responsibilities associated with their choice to be involved in the study, firstly through a short ten minute presentation by the researcher during an Orientation Week workshop and in a follow up email sent through their university email account. Following this communication the participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A) and a Consent Form (see Appendix B). Forty-eight students initially identified they were willing to participate in the study, signed the Consent Form and returned it to the researcher. This represented 69.6% of the 2012 first year cohort.

3.2.3.3 The position of the researcher within the study

Within the study the researcher was called upon to position himself either as an insider, an outsider, or somewhere in-between, dependent on the situation or activity (Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Merton, 1972; Trowler, 2011). No matter where on the continuum between insider and outsider a researcher positions

themselves, they have a responsibility to reflect on this position and to identify how this may affect the research process and its outcomes (Serrant-Green, 2002).

The nature of the study, and the constructivist paradigm of the researcher necessitated an insider position as he was an actor “immersed in a local situation, generating contextually embedded knowledge that emerge[d] from experience” (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 60). The researcher was investigating the education students’ perceptions of their first year of university study thus requiring a close working relationship to facilitate “seeing through the eyes” of these students (Bryman, 1984, p. 78). Guba and Lincoln (1989) view the position of the researcher as an insider as inevitable describing that even if the researcher wanted to, they couldn’t separate themselves from the participants.

The researcher was immersed in the local situation and had a close working relationship with the students due to holding the position of First Year Coordinator (FYC) for the education students on the campus in 2012 (and the preceding 5 years). This role required the FYC to mentor students throughout their first year of study, to conduct weekly 1 hour workshops to develop their academic skills, and to be the first point of contact if they had any questions or concerns. Prior to explaining the research project to prospective participants the researcher had welcomed students into their program of study through email communication and led two workshops as part of their Orientation Week activities.

There are a range of benefits associated with being an insider researcher. McConnell-Henry, James, Chapman and Francis (2010) noted that a pre-existing relationship can result in the stages of rapport building being escalated, meaning that the harvesting of rich data from the participants can occur more quickly. Kerstetter (2012) identified that trust is critical in creating and sustaining successful research partnerships, and can be more easily developed by an insider. Being an insider researcher not only leverages an existing intimacy (rapport and trust) between the researcher and the participants, it places the researcher in a position where they can develop a greater understanding of the culture of the setting and do this without unnecessarily altering the flow of social interaction (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

While the benefits of being an insider researcher are significant, so too are the difficulties that may arise due to this position. Mercer (2007, p. 7) warns that “conducting insider research is like wielding a double edged sword”, with Kanuha (2000, p. 443) describing the insider’s knowledge being “both an asset and a liability”. One of the significant issues that an insider researcher may face is a blurring of the boundaries between their role as a researcher and their ‘other’ role in the context being studied (Asselin, 2003; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Kanuha, 2000; McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014; Unluer, 2012). The blurring may be due to the participants expecting support even though this is not a stated component of the study (Beaver, Luker, & Woods, 1999). This may result in the participants providing information that requires the researcher to change roles to support their needs (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010; McDermid et al., 2014) or compromise the researcher’s ability to maintain research focus (Breen, 2007; Kanuha, 2000). For this study the researcher decided that if this situation arose the data collection (i.e., the semi-structured interview) would be suspended or deferred until the participant’s concerns had been addressed. This reflected the “Principle of Beneficence”, of doing good, described by McDermid *et al.* (2014, p. 29). As this ‘concern’ formed an important part of the students’ perceptions of their first year experience, the issues would be revisited at a rescheduled time.

Another significant issue that may arise is the accuracy of data provided by participants to the insider researcher. As there is an existing relationship this can cause the participants to share what they think the researcher would like to hear, or confirm what they perceive to be the researcher’s perspective (Mercer, 2007). Due to this same relationship, the researcher may also feel pressured to share personal information which unwittingly may direct the participants’ attention and guide their responses (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). To minimise this concern the researcher chose to follow Asselin’s (2003) guidance and make a conscious choice to assume he had no previous knowledge of the issue at hand, and Kahuna’s (2000, p. 443) advice to focus on getting the participants’ stories “just for the record” so an outsider could get an idea of the issues at hand.

If a participant views the researcher as an insider, this can lead to the assumption that some aspects of their story need not be shared as it is already known and understood (Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This situation can be

compounded if the researcher finishes the participant's sentences or leaves them uncompleted (Kanuha, 2000). To counteract this situation the researcher reminded the participants at the beginning of the semi-structured interviews that the focus of the study was the student's individual unique stories and that extensive detail was required if a rich description was to result. The use of the 'just for the record' strategy was also applied as the need arose. This was kept at the forefront of the researcher's mind by reviewing the interview recordings to check on the frequency of comments left incomplete or finished by the researcher.

Assuming an insider researcher role can pose ethical dilemmas for the conduct of a study. Although the information provided to prospective participants may detail specific data collection methods, they may provide information relevant to the study outside of these avenues (Barnes, 1979; Kerstetter, 2012). In this study the researcher decided that ethically this information would not be recorded, but if the opportunity arose, it would be discussed at a subsequent semi-structured interview. In this way the information would be recorded in the official interview transcripts and able to be included in the data analysis.

While the positioning of the researcher as an insider dominates the data collection process, analysis of the data required the researcher to act more in the role of an outsider. This decision was a conscious choice by the researcher in the hope of addressing the possible biases resulting from the previous insider role. Unluer (2012) warns that an insider position can result in a loss of objectivity due to familiarity, while Serrant-Green (2002) highlights the need to separate the researcher's personal experiences from those of the participants. To maximise the objectivity of the data analysis the researcher chose to only include the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, and the survey data, and not researcher notes made during the process. While this may limit the richness of the researcher-participant interaction, it maintained the focus on the students' perceptions of their journey. Compilation of Chapter 2 (the Literature Review) also assisted the researcher in confronting personal assumptions related to the students' first year experience. The identification that individual student journeys are unique, their backgrounds are becoming more diverse, the pressures they are facing are changing with time, and that significant improvements to the first year experience are hard to come by focussed the researcher's attention on

the present and not the past. The researcher also followed Kanuha's (2000, p. 443) advice to not assume that having worked as an insider researcher meant having a deep understanding of the experiences of all participants and to "rigorously pursue the exceptions".

3.2.4 Data collection

Three sources of data were used in this study, two quantitative measures and one qualitative measure. The quantitative measures consisted of a demographic survey and Student Experience Scale (SES), whilst the qualitative measure was semi-structured interviews. A description of each of these instruments, the decisions made by the researcher in their construction and the manner that they were applied follows.

3.2.4.1 *The demographic survey instrument*

Within the Literature Review key characteristics of students that were over-represented in those who withdrew from university study were identified. These characteristics included age, cultural background, work commitments, family history of tertiary study and proximity to the university campus. These characteristics formed the main dimension of the demographic survey with another key aspect, caregiver responsibilities, being added to the instrument following discussions with the researcher's doctoral supervisors. A copy of the instrument can be found in Appendix C. The data from the demographic survey has been included in Chapter 3 to assist the reader to understand the backgrounds of the students who agreed to participate in this study. This data also provides evidence that the cohort under investigation include 'non-traditional' students such as those from first in family and/or low SES backgrounds.

The demographic survey was delivered to participants following their completion of the Consent Form. Students who attended the weekly workshops conducted by the researcher were given a hard copy of the survey, whilst students not in attendance were emailed the survey using their university email account. Students who had given consent to participate in the study and who did not return the survey were contacted by email and reminded to submit the survey to ensure the largest completion rate possible. Following this reminder, those students who did not return the demographic survey were eliminated from the study. This decision was made by

the researcher to ensure that no student felt coerced to participate in the study (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010; Unluer, 2012).

3.2.4.2 Student Experience Scale (SES) instrument

To answer the second research question related to how the student experience varies over time, a data collection mechanism was required that could provide regular snapshots of how students were ‘feeling’ about their experiences. The researcher decided to apply an Experience Sampling Method (ESM) to enable this process to occur.

The present form of the Experience Sampling Method is credited to Csikszentmihalyi, Larson and Prescott (1977) and their studies, including the investigation of adolescents in their natural environments (Hormuth, 1986; Scollon, Kim-Prieto, & Diener, 2003). Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1987, p. 526) state that ESM is effective when a researcher wishes “to study the subjective experience of persons interacting in natural environments” and its variation over time.

Wheeler and Reis (1991) identify three forms of ESM, these being interval-contingent, signal-contingent and event-contingent methods. Interval-contingent recording requires participants to provide data on their personal experiences at regular predetermined time intervals, while signal-contingent recording requires the same personal data but returned when signalled by the researcher. Event-contingent recording occurs following the occurrence of some specified event (Scollon et al., 2003). All three of these forms of ESM provide the opportunity to study the “stream of thought or behaviour” and through their implementation in natural settings increases ecological validity (Hormuth, 1986, p. 262).

Within this present study the researcher chose to use a method most closely aligned with an interval-contingent process as this was deemed most appropriate for the specific context of the study (Alliger & Williams, 1993). Participants were emailed on a regular basis, usually fortnightly, and asked to complete the Student Experience Scale. The choice of this method required the researcher to consciously address some issues that could have been detrimental to its implementation. Christensen, Barrett, Bliss-Moreau, Lebo and Kashub (2003) highlight three challenges faced by researchers using an ESM method, these being difficulty in:

1. recruiting participants for an extensive involvement,
2. keeping the participants motivated sufficiently to continue their involvement,
and
3. ensuring participants consistently complete the required tasks.

Alliger and Williams (1993, p. 530) contend that “compliance is likely to be based on subjects' trust that the study is important and worthwhile”. The value in developing a “research alliance” is critical to the success of an ESM strategy (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987, p. 529). This figured strongly in the actions of the researcher where he carefully explained the focus of the study in the Orientation Week workshop and reiterated the importance and value of the participants’ contributions during weekly workshops held throughout the academic year. The constructions of email communications also were carefully considered to build on this ‘trust’ and valuing their contributions (see Appendix D).

The length of responses required from participants and the number of responses were key considerations in maintaining the involvement of the participants. The structure of the Student Experience Scale (see Appendix E) was limited to include seven questions, each requiring a score of a number between 1 and 10, with 1 representing a very poor rating while 10 was excellent. The wording of the questions was short and concise to ensure clarity of expectation and also to minimise the time required reading the statements. This decision was supported by Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) who successfully used 1-7 and 1-10 point scales in their study of Happiness, and Hormuth (1986) who cautioned against the use of open-ended questions due to their disruption to the normal activities of the participants.

The researcher’s requirement of participants to provide responses on a fortnightly basis was in an effort to minimise the student workload associated with their participation in the study while still obtaining sufficient data to answer the research questions. Following Scollon *et al.*’s (2003) advice that pilot studies should be conducted before commencing long studies with actual participants, the ESM process was trialled in 2011 to evaluate its efficiency. Feedback from the 2011 cohort was positive both on the frequency of application of the ESM (e.g., fortnightly) and the time taken to complete each individual SES survey. While the results supported the

planned process, the researcher was aware of the advice of Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1987) that the longer the ESM process, the more burdensome it may become for participants. The researcher chose to monitor the burden placed on the students due to their involvement in the study by seeking student feedback during the semi-structured interviews. As there was no adverse feedback the process was continued in its same format for the full academic year.

The structure of the Student Experience Scale (SES) consisted of 7 dimensions (or questions). Each dimension required the student to allocate a relative score from 1 to 10, with 1 representing 'Very Bad' and '10' representing 'Excellent'. The dimensions of the SES were as follows:

1. Overall, how do you feel about being a university student?
2. How do you feel about your chances of successfully completing the courses you are studying?
3. How do you feel about your relationship with the lecturers, admin staff and other students?
4. How do you feel about the resources (such as computers, library, cafe) provided by the university?
5. How do you feel about your ability to balance study, work, family and friends now you are a university student?
6. How are your relationships with people NOT associated with the university (family, friends, work mates, employers etc)?
7. How do you feel about the support you are getting in relation to being a University student?

Following an analysis of current literature (discussed in Chapter 2) the researcher identified key dimensions to include in the SES to allow participants the broadest possible opportunity to share their perceptions of the most important factors affecting their first year university experience. Specifically, students should have the opportunity to comment on their:

1. academic and social integration (Tinto, 1988)
2. interactions with and support from university staff, and access to physical resources/support (Kuh, 1999)
3. academic progress (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1999)

4. experiences, both inside and outside of the university context (Baird & Gordon, 2009; Kahu, 2013)
5. relationships with friends, family and work colleagues (Crisp et al., 2009; Fowler & Zimitat, 2008; Gibney et al., 2011; Lingard, 2012)
6. personal perceptions of what they are experiencing (Hagel et al., 2011; Nevill & Rhodes, 2006; Ramsden, 1991)
7. overall impression of being a university student (Harvey & Drew, 2006).

The SES questions were constructed in a manner whereby these aspects would be available but also allow for students to raise any issues they deemed relevant but may not have been previously identified in the literature.

The questions were trialled with the 2011 student cohort, with this group of students providing feedback that all substantive settings were included in the set of questions. The 2012 cohort were also asked to confirm during the semi-structured interviews if the SES dimensions addressed all possible aspects of their lives.

The final application of the Student Experience Scale in 2012 varied from all those previous to that time in that the students were required to look back over the entire first year and to select a score that represented their ‘overall feeling’ for each dimension for the whole of their first year of university study.

The data received from the students were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet with graphs constructed to graphically represent the student’s responses to the seven dimensions of the Student Experience Scale.

3.2.4.3 *Semi-structured Interviews*

To answer the first research question related to how university students ‘perceive’ their first year experience, the decision was made by the researcher to use a form of qualitative interview in conjunction with the SES. Denzin (2001, p. 25) defines a qualitative interview as a means of allowing subjects to share their personal stories, with Bogdan and Biklen (1982) adding that as a result of the interview, the researcher can develop an understanding of how subjects interpret the world around them. Another characteristic of the qualitative interview is that it has the ability to uncover

aspects of the interviewee's world that may remain hidden when other methods are applied (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Qualitative interviews can take many forms but are usually categorised as being, unstructured, semi-structured, or structured, in nature (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 1994). The researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews in this study as it was deemed most suited to put the participants at ease and allow them to share their perceptions in their own words (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview to allow the researcher to “modify the style, pace and ordering of questions to evoke the fullest responses from the interviewee” also figured strongly in the researcher's decision (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246).

Semi-structured interviews are usually structured around a set of open-ended questions that can be asked in any order, with the order of the questions based on the responses from the interviewees (Horton, Macve, & Struyven, 2004). Prompt questions were included in the interview and were used to elicit more detailed information (Whiting, 2008). The proposed open ended questions and possible prompt questions (or probes) are included in an interview guide or protocol (Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). The interview guide used by the researcher in the present study can be found in Appendix F). The main focus of the questions used in the interviews was to obtain student explanations as to why they assigned specific scores to the different questions in the Student Experience Scale and to explain how and why their perceptions may have changed over time. Along with these questions the students were asked to share their perceptions of their experience of being a subject in this study and the usefulness of the methods used for future cohorts of students.

A key aspect of the semi-structured interview approach is that of sensitivity. Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 32) define sensitivity as “having insight, being tuned into, being able to pick up on relevant issues, events, and happenings in data”. The researcher's ‘sensitivity’ was used in the adaptation of the interview guide where what was gleaned from one interview (i.e., new insights and issues) shaped the future interviews (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Aiding in this process was the trialling of the interview guide with members of the 2011 cohort of students, the clarity and responses of students were used to rephrase the open ended and prompt questions as well as “redefining the original research problem, question, and/or hypotheses during the

research process” (Maso, 1989, p. 162). Specifically Research Question 3 was added to the study as issues related to the accuracy of student responses to survey style data collection instruments arose during the 2011 pilot interviews.

The selection of students for the semi-structured interviews was once again representative of both purposive and convenience sampling methods with 30 students in total being interviewed, 14 of these being interviewed twice. Students participating in the study were contacted by email to organise meetings for times when they would most likely be on campus and this coincided with times when the researcher would be available to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The number of students who were approached varied due to the availability of the researcher, with the number of students accepting the invitation also varying due to their commitments. The researcher also monitored data obtained from the Student Experience Scales to identify any student whose responses in one or more dimensions of the SES had changed markedly (plus or minus 3 points or more) from their previous response. These students were approached for interviews so they could explain why their scores had changed – thus assisting in answering the first research question. An overview of the timings of the semi-structured interviews is located in Appendix G. The semi-structured interviews were completed in the researcher’s office of the regional university campus. This site was chosen as according to Horton *et al.* (2004), participants need to feel at ease if they are to share with the researcher what they really think, and as a consequence of the researcher’s concurrent role as FYC, the students were not uncomfortable visiting this office on a regular basis for support. Students were invited to participate in the interviews by using their university email accounts and asked to provide a time that was most suitable for the interview to be completed, this usually occurred before or straight after a scheduled class lecture or tutorial to minimise disruption to the students’ other responsibilities. The interviews were usually ten to fifteen minutes in duration and were recorded using a digital recorder.

The interview process followed the process detailed by Harrell and Bradley (2009), whereby the researcher introduced himself, described the nature of the study, the time required to complete the study, why the student was selected and their ability to stop their involvement in the interview at any time without repercussions. The students were also asked if they were happy to continue with the interview given

this information and whether audio recording of the discussion would be acceptable (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Preceding the discussion of the details of the interview the researcher allocated time to build rapport with the student as “engaging in general conversation before the interview can induce a more relaxed atmosphere” (Whiting, 2008, p. 37).

3.2.5 Data management

With the collection of a large quantity of research data in multiple forms, there was a need to accurately and efficiently store this material.

3.2.5.1 Demographic Survey

The data provided by the students on the Demographic Survey was entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 22 software package for collation and reporting of key student demographic characteristics. The SPSS data was transferred into the NVivo Version 10 software package for use during the analysis of the semi-structured interview data (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2012).

3.2.5.2 Student Experience Scales

The data received from the students were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet with graphs constructed to graphically represent the students’ changing responses to the 7 dimensions in the Student Experience Scale. Each student’s identity was preserved by using a number for each student as opposed to their name.

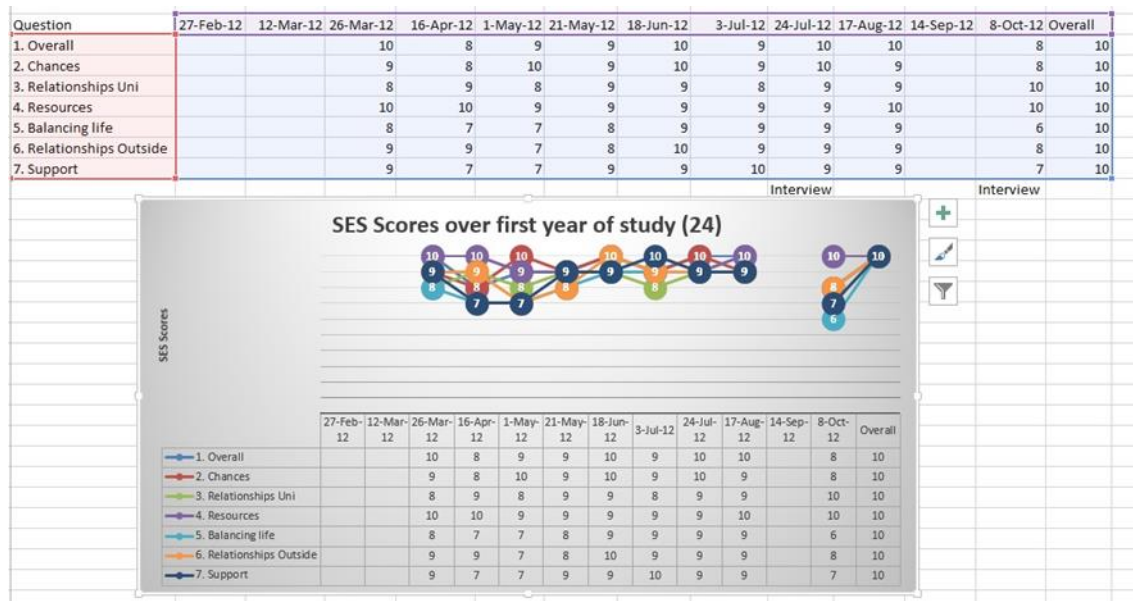


Figure 8. Example of SES data recorded in an Excel spreadsheet.

3.2.5.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Before the collection of data through the use of semi-structured interviews, key decisions were made regarding the most relevant information needed to meet the study’s research goals, what format it should take to allow efficient analysis, and how the information would be reported to those that might read the reports. The decision was made to record the interviews using a digital audio recorder as this would allow the researcher to interact more freely with the participants, as well as providing a very detailed record of the participant’s voice that could be referred back to regularly as needed (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). As the information was to be coded during the analysis phase, the construction of a transcript in written form was deemed most appropriate. The transcript was viewed as complementing the audio recording, rather than a substitute for it (Kowal & O’Connell, 2004; Tessier, 2012). Following Kvale’s (2007) advice that transcripts are ‘interpretive constructions’ and the process used to create them must be included in any reports which use this data, what follows is the thought process used by the researcher when transcribing the participants’ interviews in the study.

(1) Who will transcribe the semi-structured interview data?

The researcher chose to complete all transcribing duties personally. This decision was based on a range of key considerations. Firstly, the belief that it is important for the researcher to be close to the data (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006;

Lapadat, 2000) and enable an “in depth memorisation of the interviews” (Wellard & McKenna, 2001, p. 182). Secondly, the transcription is acknowledged as the start of the data analysis phase (Bailey, 2008; Mondada, 2007; Sandelowski, 1995; Tessier, 2012), allowing the initial tentative coding of data (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). And finally, the researcher had the responsibility for representing the interviewee’s voice accurately (Bird, 2005), thus improving the trustworthiness of the data (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000; Poland, 1995). The researcher’s decision to be the transcriber also allowed for reflection on the effectiveness of the interview process, adaptation and improvement of this process, and the identification of question prompts following interesting lines of enquiry as they arose.

(2) What form will the transcription take?

Based on the premise that transcripts “can never wholly replicate the original research contact” (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 373), and are “representations of selected aspects of the behaviour of individuals” (Kowal & O’Connell, 2004, p. 248), the decision was made to record the words as spoken by the interviewee including slang, incomplete sentences, but to not include elements of speech such as stutters, pauses, and non-verbal communications (Davidson, 2009). In Sandelowski’s (1995, p. 373) words the “raw data is already partly cooked”. The resulting transcript was viewed as being suitable for answering the study’s research questions (McLellan, MacQueen, & Neidig, 2003; Sandelowski, 1994), and not containing too much information that may inhibit the data analysis phase (Bloom, 1993; Ochs, 1979).

(3) How will the transcription be carried out?

The digital audio-recordings (mp3) of the semi-structured interviews were uploaded into the NVivo 10 software program for transcription. The decision to use NVivo 10 was made as it allowed the researcher to play the recording at varying speeds to allow more accurate transcription of the recorded voices, synchronising the transcript with the recording, and facilitating the manual coding process used to identify key themes and subthemes amongst the data.

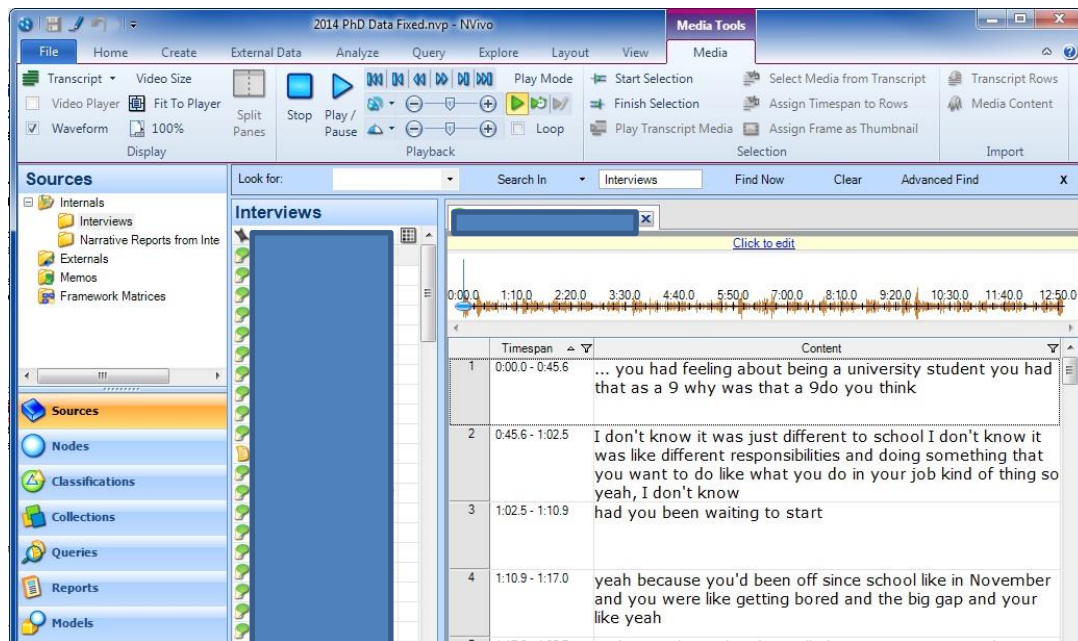


Figure 9. Example of semi-structured interview data recorded and transcribed in NVivo 10 software program.

(4) What process will be used to ensure accuracy of the transcription?

The transcribing of audio material into written form is not perfect. Even the most accurate of transcribers can miss a word or two, or record phrases that are different from the spoken word (McLellan et al., 2003), or “misinterpretation of content, class and cultural differences” (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006, p. 40). With this in mind the researcher took a similar view to Mondada (2007) that the transcription was an ongoing work in progress. Following each interview the researcher constructed a first draft of the transcription, this was followed by re-listening to the audio recording and correcting errors as they were identified. During the formal coding phase (QUAGOL) of the study the audio recording and transcript were used in unison wherever possible, with the correction of errors continuing as the need arose.

(5) Reporting comments to other parties

When choosing the format for the reporting of comments in the results the decision was made to retain, where possible, the exact words used by the students in the study. The inclusion of correct grammar and spelling was used to assist the reader to better grasp the meaning of what was said, given they were not privy to the original conversations and the researcher’s view that the direct transcription may be misinterpreted (Sandelowski, 1994).

3.2.6 Analysis of the semi-structured interview data (QUAGOL)

The analysis of the interview data was conducted using very similar procedures to the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven (QUAGOL) method proposed by Dierckx de Casterle *et al.* (2012). This method was chosen as its processes required ongoing interaction with the participants' stories, not just words that had been stripped from their context, and was thought to guard against coding information based on a preconceived framework. The 9 Stage process used in this study included the following:

3.2.6.1 Stage 1: Thorough reading of the interview transcripts

The individual transcriptions were completed using the NVivo 10 software program shortly after each interview, usually within the same week. A hard copy of the transcript was printed, read and reread, whilst listening to the recording of the interview to enable the researcher to develop a global understanding of the student's story. At this time key phrases were underlined "simply because they [made] some, though yet embryonic impression" (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012, p. 363).

3.2.6.2 Stage 2: Construction of a brief summary of the participant's story

Once the researcher felt that a global understanding of the student's story had been achieved, a 1 to 2 page summary was constructed from each interview transcript that included key quotations or paraphrased comments.

3.2.6.3 Stage 3: Identification of concepts within the brief summaries

The goal of this section of the process was to identify tentative 'concepts' which may guide the coding process in the future. This stage represented a change of focus from the individual lived experience to concepts that may exist across students. The brief summaries were read and as concepts appeared they were noted in the margins. This process was commenced after the completion of the first 20 semi-structured interviews. Once completed, stages 1, 2 and 3 were repeated using the data contained in the remaining interviews.

3.2.6.4 Stage 4: Checking of concepts against the original transcripts and audio recordings

Following the construction of tentative concepts in Stage 3, they were then checked against the original transcripts. Once again the audio recordings were played whilst the transcript was read, this time annotations were made whenever a tentative concept appeared. This “represents the first forward-backward movement” in the data analysis of the semi-structured interview data (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012, p. 366).

3.2.6.5 Stage 5: Within-case and across-case analysis to identify common concepts and themes

While in Stage 4 there was a checking that the tentative concepts were grounded in the words of the students, in this stage the focus was to identify those that were common across multiple students’ stories. When new concepts appeared, the previous interviews were checked to identify whether they had existed but had not been evident to the researcher at that time. During this time the researcher began to formulate tentative groupings of concepts into themes.

3.2.6.6 Stage 6: Concepts entered into NVivo 10

To enable future coding to be conducted the confirmed concepts, those that had been checked against the original interview transcripts, were entered into the NVivo 10 software program as nodes. While having been confirmed in stage 5, they were still deemed as being ‘preliminary codes’ following Dierckx de Casterle et al’s (2012, p. 367) advice that “premature hierarchical organisation of the codes risks imposing a structure in the data that is not supported by them”.

3.2.6.7 Stage 7: Coding of the interview transcripts

In this stage the individual interview transcripts were manually coded using the NVivo 10 software program. Significant passages from the transcripts were ‘dragged and dropped’ into the nodes that were constructed in Stage 6. During this process concepts (nodes) were confirmed, added, compressed or eliminated as dictated by the data and the researcher’s synthesis of this information.

3.2.6.8 Stage 8: Checking of final list of concepts and finalisation of themes

Once the coding process was complete each node was printed and read to check for accuracy of coding, and to identify themes that represented collections of these concepts.

3.2.6.9 Stage 9: Final check against interview recordings

As a final check to ensure the ‘essence’ of the students’ narratives had not been lost due to the analysis process that had been employed, the interview recordings were reviewed for a last time. Close attention was paid to whether key elements of these narratives had been captured and whether they had been represented reasonably.

3.2.7 Integrity of the Data

“How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

This much quoted question formed the basis upon which all the methodological and analytical decisions within this study were founded. While this was viewed as being critical, so too was the need to clearly articulate these decisions, and the reasoning behind them, so the reader could make an informed judgement for themselves on the trustworthiness of the findings (Easton et al., 2000; Mantzoukas, 2004; Sandelowski, 1993). Lincoln and Guba (1986) identified 4 criteria that they purported to be useful in evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative studies, these being: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Each of these criteria will be addressed separately in the discussion that follows. Detailed within the discussion will be the identification of specific strategies employed by the researcher with the goal of ensuring the research process, its results, and the findings emanating from these, are deemed as being trustworthy.

3.2.7.1.1 Credibility

Tracy (2010) defines credibility as the belief that the information is strong enough to be acted upon. Leininger (1994) associates credibility with the believability of the findings. For the results and findings of the study to be believed and acted upon, the reader must trust the processes the researcher employed and the inferences they made from the data. A key strategy used in this study was the inclusion of “rich and

thick description” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 244). This rich and thick description can be found throughout the research report. Firstly, the method of transcription of the semi-structured interview data was described in detail and the resulting transcript used the words that were spoken by the students in the study (Becker, 1970). Secondly, the identification of key concepts and themes during the analysis of the data included numerous student quotes so that the reader could confirm whether they agreed or not with the meaning that the researcher drew from these comments. These efforts were deemed by the researcher as successfully providing “enough detail that readers may come to their own conclusions about the scene” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

The credibility of the researcher can also be enhanced in so far as they have engaged with the research context for sufficient time to harvest the collective voice of the participants and to identify the key aspects of what was said (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Tracy, 2010). As this study was conducted over the full first year of the students’ study, sufficient time to develop these key understandings is believed to have been afforded.

3.2.7.1.2 Transferability

The transferability of findings to new settings is dependent on the reader’s assessment as to the similarity or congruence between this study’s context and that of their own (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). To assist the reader in making this decision the context of the study and its participants were described in detail, thus enabling the reader to judge if they are relevant to their own settings (Harper & Kuh, 2007). Both the demographic and geographic boundaries of this study have been described (E. Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Dependability

According to Baxter and Eyles (1997, p. 516), dependability is “largely concerned with documenting the research context”, with Patton (2002, p. 546) defining it as “a systematic process systematically followed”. The researcher paid special attention to addressing ‘dependability’ by describing in detail the process used to analyse the semi-structured interview data. The form of QUAGOL used in this study was clearly described and carefully followed with the researcher providing examples of the narrative interview reports, interim concept development, and constant

comparison with the recorded interviews. This same process could be readily followed by another researcher, if they so wished.

Many decisions were made during the conduct of this study which shaped the research process and the reporting of findings. Following the advice of Thomas and Magilvy (2011) that the level of dependability is aligned with the ease with which another researcher can follow the thought processes used in a study, this report included: (1) a clear description of the purpose of the study, (2) an explanation of the selection process used to identify participants, (3) a very detailed description of the data collection and analysis process, and (4) the steps taken to address problems that may have arisen due to the researcher being an insider.

3.2.7.1.3 Confirmability

Thomas and Magilvy (2011) associate confirmability with the notion of objectivity within quantitative research designs. They contend that by addressing credibility, transferability and dependability the researcher provides evidence that they are reflective, aware, and sensitive to the research process. Thus the research findings can be trusted because the researcher is viewed as being competent (Harper & Kuh, 2007). Within this study the researcher continued to reflect on the efficiency of the data collection instruments (SES and semi-structured interviews) and the data collection process (ESM) to optimise his effectiveness. At this same time the data that were collected was reflected upon to unearth patterns, surprises, and inconsistencies that were used to tailor the future activities to better answer the research questions. The researcher was also sensitive to the needs of the participants to ensure they were not put at risk due to their involvement in the study.

3.2.8 Ethical Considerations

Before the commencement of this study approval was sought from the Dean of the Faculty of Education for access to students studying within their first year in the pre-service education degree program. Once written approval was obtained from the Dean, a formal application to the University Ethics Committee was submitted that detailed the purpose of the study, the data collection process, and the manner in which the interests of the participant's would be protected. Formal approval from the Ethics Committee was received before the study commenced.

All students studying in the first year of the pre-service education program on the small campus of a regional university were invited to participate in the study. The details of the purpose of the study and the expectations of students who chose to be involved were clearly explained by the researcher to the students during Orientation Week at the start of the academic year. The students who did not attend Orientation Week were contacted by email and provided with this same information. All students who participated completed a written informed consent form before the commencement of the study.

To ensure the anonymity of the participants, no names were used in the reporting of the data or findings. Where quotes were provided no information that would make the participant easily identifiable was provided. All data obtained from the participants were securely stored either in a locked filing cabinet in the secure office of the researcher or on a password protected computer within this same office.

Due to the ongoing nature of the Experience Sampling Methodology and the understanding that this may become a burden over time, participants were regularly reminded (when the SES was emailed or before the start of the semi-structured interviews) that they could withdraw without penalty at any time.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the researcher's office, a position easily accessible to the students. The timing of the interviews was negotiated with the students so that it coincided with when they were attending the campus and did not require attendance beyond those times. At the commencement of the interview students were reminded of the purpose of the study, the manner their data would be used, the anonymity of their responses, and their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Permission to audio record the interviews was sought from the participants before it commenced.

At all times the interests of the participants were at the forefront of the researcher's mind and all care was taken to ensure they were treated in an ethical and respectful manner.

3.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter has identified the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher and how this shaped and guided the research methods used in this study. The strengths and weaknesses of the chosen participant-researcher role have been discussed, as too have the strategies used by the researcher to mitigate any possible concerns. A rich and deep description of the decision making process used by the researcher throughout the study has been provided to enable the reader to evaluate the trustworthiness of the data, its analysis, and the applicability of findings to broader settings. The ethical treatment of the participants in the study and the methods used by the researcher to ensure their voices were accurately heard have also been addressed.

The following three chapters have been constructed so that each of the three research questions are addressed individually. This structure was determined to be the most effective means of comprehensively informing the reader of the study's findings and their link to the literature described in Chapter 2. Each chapter is structured in a similar manner with the results presented followed by a discussion of these results in light of current literature, and concluding with the researcher's global interpretation and identification of implications.

Chapter 4. How do pre-service students perceive their first year experience on a small regional university campus? (RQ#1)

4.1 Chapter Introduction

The key themes were extracted using the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven (QUAGOL) process that was detailed fully in Chapter 3: Methodology. As a result of this analytical process a detailed understanding of the First Year Student Experience of pre-service teachers at a regional campus was developed. This chapter, and the two that follow, will systematically address each of the three research questions in turn. Each chapter will comprise both a description of the student experience associated with each research question based on the data analysis, as well as a discussion where these results are compared and contrasted with the contemporary literature associated with the first year experience in higher education, as described in Chapter 2. It was decided to frame the results and discussion sections of the study in this way, rather than a more traditional two-chapter approach, in order to more comprehensively address the study's findings in relation to each of the research questions. This structure provides a more comprehensive picture of the First Year students' experience and therefore more coherently frames the issues of concern to the students and the implications for the university. The final chapter in the dissertation will combine the results from the three individual research questions and present a relational understanding of the first year experience of students on a small regional university campus, as identified in this study.

This chapter specifically reports the results and discussion of those results with respect to the first research question (RQ#1):

“How do pre-service education students perceive their first year experience on a small regional university campus?”

The data extracted to answer this question was primarily sourced from the semi-structured interviews. The SES scores were used to prompt students to remember episodes of their experience and aided the identification of factors which influenced their perceptions of being a first year university student.

To commence Chapter 4 details of the students' backgrounds are described to enable the reader to draw conclusions as to whether these factors may have impacted the students' first year experience. A brief description of the geographic area in which the small campus is located is also provided for the reader's benefit.

4.2 Background information of the students and the university campus

Of the 48 students who completed Consent Forms to participate, 39 provided data (SES and/or Interview) that was included within the analysis used to answer the three research questions which formed the basis for this study. Nine students withdrew from their studies during the data collection phase of this study, their data was included in the analysis. The students in the study were predominantly female (30/39) and did not identify as being from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family background (37/39). The mean age for the students at the commencement of the study was 21.9 years with the majority being aged 21 or younger (30/39).

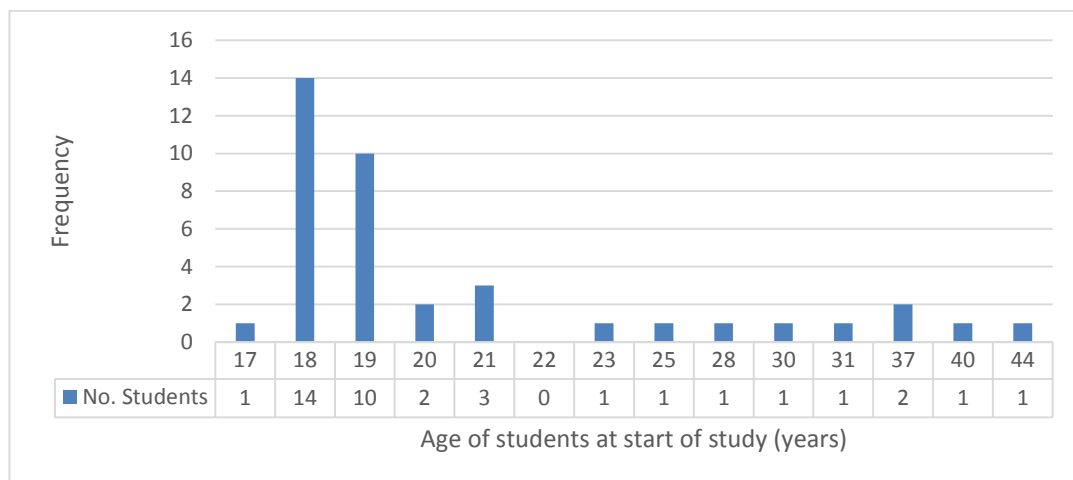


Figure 10. Distribution of students' ages as reported at the commencement of the study.

The majority of students (31/39) reported they did not have formal responsibility for the care of a family member (parent, sibling, or child).

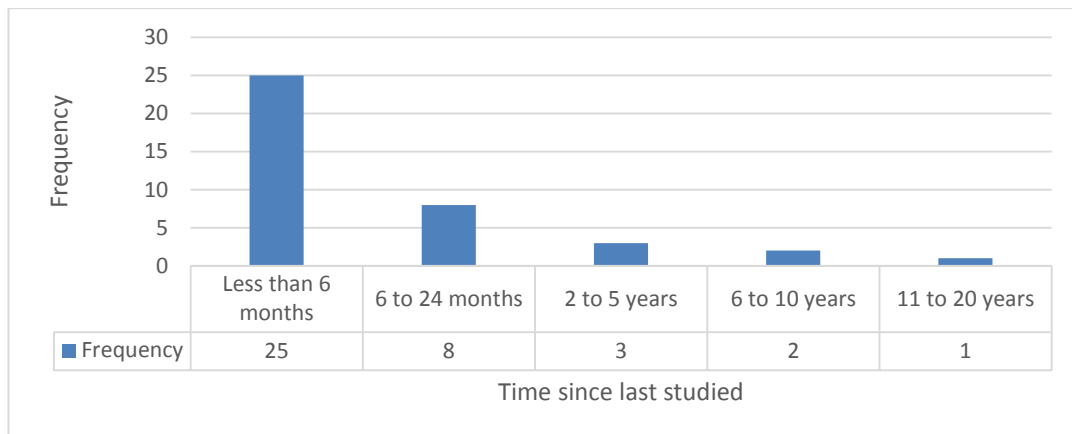


Figure 11. Period of time since last studying in an educational institution.

The students in this study had continued their studies after a relatively short break (less than 2 years), with most progressing directly from Year 12 to university (25/39).

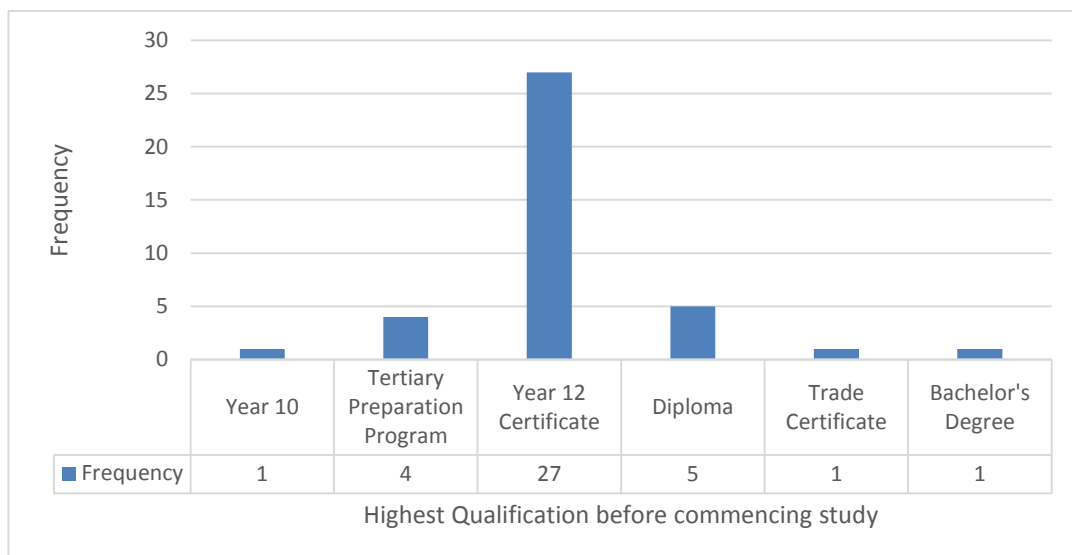


Figure 12. Highest educational qualification held before commencing first year of pre-service teacher degree.

Given the relatively short period of time since they last studied, and their age profile, it is not surprising that the highest qualification held by most of the students was a Year 12 Certificate.

Of the 39 students who provided SES survey, or semi-structured interview data, 18 were studying in the same location as they had lived before commencing, while only 7 students had lived more than 50 km away previously. Thus, the cohort contained students who were predominantly ‘local’ to the small campus.

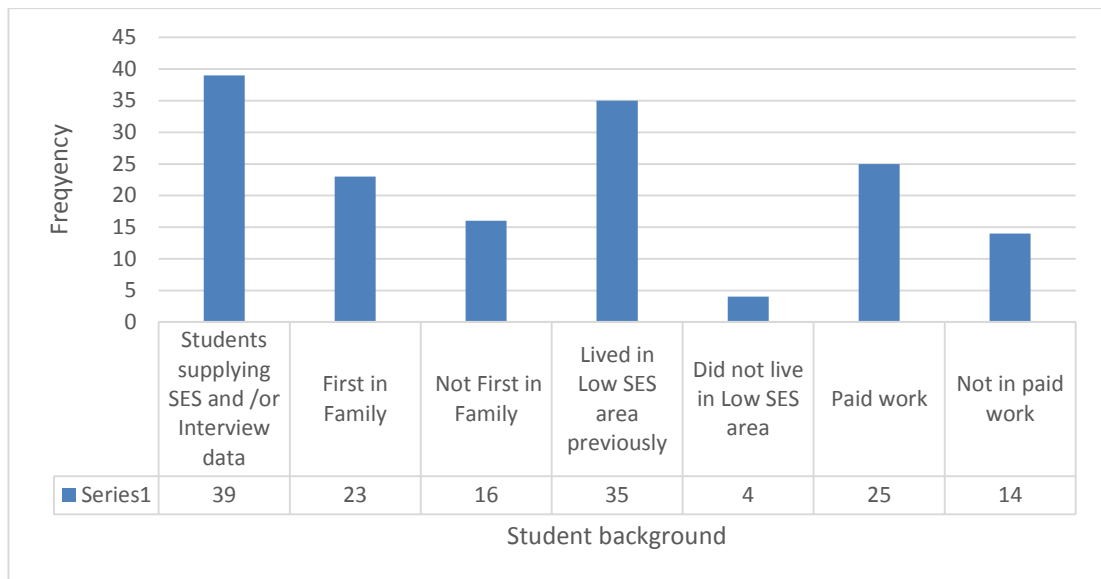


Figure 13. Numbers of students participating in the study from non-traditional backgrounds.

Twenty-three students reported that they were the first person in their close family (parents, siblings, and children) that had attended university, and were thus classified as being first in family. Based on the students’ postcodes in which they lived before commencing their studies, 35 students came from areas in the 17th percentile or lower on the Australian Index of Socio-economic Advantage and disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b). Thus, before commencing their studies, 35 of the 39 students who provided SES survey or semi-structured interview data previously lived in areas that could be classified as holding low socio-economic status (low SES). At the commencement of their studies, 25 /39 students reported being employed in paid work. This number may have varied as the year progressed. Specific details of the demographic backgrounds of individual students can be found in Appendix H.

The ‘small campus of a regional university’ is located approximately 4 hours drive from the ‘Main Campus’ and a similar distance to the State’s capital. The present site of the campus was opened in 1997 but had been present in the local area since 1988 (Humphreys & Cooper, 1998). The campus promotes itself as offering significant benefits for students, smaller class sizes, close contact with lecturers, lower cost of living expenses and great sporting and recreational facilities. The campus is small in size, consisting of three buildings with a total of 898 students studying on campus in 2012. Of this number, 335 commenced their first year of study. The curriculum offerings of the campus included subjects from the Faculties of Education, Science, Business and Arts.

The local regional council covers an area of over 7 000 km² and services a population of approximately 99 000. In 2011, 6.1% of the residents held a Bachelor Degree (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2012a). The largest employers in this Local Government Area were found in the Health Care and Social Assistance (16.2%), Retail Trade (12.6%), Construction (8.8%) and Education and Training (8.8%) industries.

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews that relate directly to RQ#1, and these were broadly identified as relating to:

1. *Academic Requirements of a First Year student,*
2. *Relationships with significant others while a First Year student, and*
3. *Balancing key components of a student's life.*

These broad themes will be defined and addressed individually in this chapter, including descriptions of the various concepts that are embedded within each theme. The student voice will be foregrounded through the provision of specific quotations that provide further clarification of each theme's implications and significance to the students in this study. To enhance the readers understanding of the breadth of themes that emerged from the data the following summary table is provided:

Table 1

List of Themes and Subthemes associated with Research Question #1.

Theme	Subtheme	Label
<i>Theme 1</i>		<i>Academic Requirements of a First Year student</i>
	Subtheme 1.1	Feelings and expectations of being a university student
	Subtheme 1.2	Workload associated with studying in First Year
	Subtheme 1.3	Issues related to Formal Assessments in First Year
	Subtheme 1.4	Support received to complete Academic Requirements
<i>Theme 2</i>		<i>Relationships with significant others whilst a First Year student</i>
	Subtheme 2.1	Relationship with close family (parents, siblings, partners)
	Subtheme 2.2	Relationship with friends
	Subtheme 2.3	Relationships with university staff
	Subtheme 2.4	Relationship with employers
<i>Theme 3</i>		<i>Balancing key components of a student's life</i>
	Subtheme 3.1	Lack of previous experience in a university setting
	Subtheme 3.2	Difficulties prioritising activities
	Subtheme 3.3	Commitments varying over time
	Subtheme 3.4	Other factors affecting student ability to achieve balance
	Subtheme 3.5	Consequences of inability to find balance

The intention of the analyses presented here is to provide evidence for the construction of each theme and the ultimate interpretation of the data that evolved from the QUAGOL process. There is no intention to characterise the interpretations presented here as exhaustive of the First Year Student Experience beyond this study. Every effort has been made to describe the participants' experience, and as the participants in this study accounted for 57.4% (39/68) of the first year cohort on the campus, there is a strong case to argue that the experiences presented are representative of this campus. The reader needs to determine the trustworthiness of the results presented based on the evidence provided, as well as the transferability of the results to other first year cohorts and campuses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

At the end of each Subtheme the results will be interpreted in light of the characteristics of the student cohort and specific implications and possible interventions will be highlighted.

4.3 Theme 1. Academic Requirements of a First Year student

As discussed in Chapter 2, the efforts by students to meet the academic requirements of their studies is seen as a key factor impacting on the First Year Student Experience (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 2009). All the students (30/30) who were interviewed provided statements addressing their experiences in meeting the academic requirements of their subjects.

4.3.1 Subtheme 1.1 Expectations and preparedness for study in first year

The students were not asked during the semi-structured interviews what specific feelings and expectations they held about studying at university prior to their commencement of their studies. However, whilst providing explanations of their scores to the 7 dimensions of the Student Experience Scale (SES), all 30 students discussed details in relation to:

- (1) feelings and expectation of being a university student (30 students), and
- (2) inaccurate sources of information on what students might expect (4 students).

Each of these aspects will be addressed individually including discussion of possible interpretations of these results and their associated implications.

4.3.1.1 Feelings and expectations of being a university student.

The majority of students were excited or very happy to be starting their university studies with 23 of the 30 students provided responses reflecting this view:

I was super excited, just being at the Uni was like a 9. I was feeling pretty great.
Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

The proportion of students within the cohort who provided similar comments aligns closely with the findings of Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger and Alisat (2000, p. 38) who found that the majority of students about to enter university do so with feelings of “joy and anticipation”. Further, the comments also reflected the “naive, enthusiastic and boundless idealism” of beginning students identified by Stern (1966, p. 411) for example:

I was excited. It was like I was a big girl now doing something with my life.
Student 16 (F, 18, FinF)

The remaining 7 students provided responses that included descriptions of feelings such as being proud, anxious or scared about commencing their studies.

I was really nervous. I'd had 6 months off where I was doing nothing.
Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

Of the 14 students who volunteered comments regarding their *expectations*, 13 responses strongly reflected a lack of understanding of what was expected of them as university students. An illustrative example of comments categorised during the analysis phase is:

I didn't know sort of what to expect ... it was new and somewhere I'd never gone before.
Student 19 (M, 18, FinF)

Only one student advised that what they were experiencing was what they thought university might be like.

It was about what I expected. Student 23 (M, 8, FinF).

Two of the three students who had taken a GAP year from their studies or had not studied for 2 years or more were not only unsure of what to expect but also added concerns that they had lost their ability to be successful.

I was freaking out ... I didn't know how I would go getting back into study after having a break for a year. Student 30 (F, 19, FinF)

Clearly a substantial number of students (13/30) were displaying feelings of anxiety and held unclear expectations with regards to their studies. For these students transitioning to university could well have been an eye opener as described by Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordstrom (2009). Students faced new surroundings, unfamiliar people, and expectations that were not clear in their mind (Brinkworth et al., 2009). Their uncertainty may be explained by an examination of the personal backgrounds of the students. Using the same criteria as developed by Devlin and O'Shea (2012), 21 out of the 30 students interviewed were classified as 'likely' to have a low socio-economic status (LSES) background due to residing in postcodes associated with LSES (Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Education and Occupation), and first in family (FinF), having no close family member having experienced study at university. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that students with an LSES background did not generally have ready access to accurate and up to date information as their family members had no first-hand knowledge, and limited anecdotal knowledge of what studying at university entailed. A 2010 survey of over 3000 first year university students studying in South Australia conducted by Luzeckyj, *et al.* (2011) found that students from first in family backgrounds were usually more likely to make late enrolment decisions. Thus, if this study's results are generalizable to the broader Australian first year student cohort, first in family students may have less time to access knowledgeable members of the community to get accurate information about university study and the life of a university student.

4.3.1.2 *Inaccurate sources of information on what students might expect.*

An issue that arose in the student responses was that of misinformation provided by individuals that the students had trusted in the past to offer guidance. Two students indicated that information they received whilst at High School had led them to have inaccurate expectations.

I was so stressed out. It wasn't like school. There was so much more I had to do. The teachers told us we are getting you ready for Uni, but it was nothing like it. Student 16 (F, 18, FinF)

I initially thought the lecturers were like robots and they wouldn't help you as much in terms of your assignments as the teachers did at school. It's all up to you

– my teachers put out a lot of misconceptions about them.

Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

Another student noted that friends provided advice about the potential difficulty of his study program that he found to be inaccurate:

When I enrolled for teaching a lot of people went well that will be good, it will be easy. I had no idea what I was in for really. Student 11 (Male, 21, FinF)

Without family history of involvement in tertiary study, the students rely heavily on advice from High School staff, materials supplied by the universities, and information provided on university websites, more so than students whose close family have attended university (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke Da Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011, p. 11). The inability to rely on parental advice to help identify and resolve problems, or to help them understand expectations, may put these students at a disadvantage when compared to students who are not first in family to study at university (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 442). Unrealistic expectations make adjustment to the realities of university more difficult (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000).

Interestingly a Headstart student stated:

I've really understood the level of work you need to put into university and how everything goes at university compared to school. Student 15 (M, 17, notFinF).

It is reasonable to assume that this student had reliable and accurate sources of information on which to base his expectations which may be attributable to his access to family members who had previously completed university studies. However, as this student completed a subject at university while he was still at school, that provided him with direct entry to the education course after he completed Year 12, it is more logical to assume that he gained his knowledge from his experiences in the Headstart subject he completed. The data obtained in this study adds weight to the argument that FinF students may be at a disadvantage when developing accurate expectations of their university experience.

4.3.1.3 An interpretation of the Subtheme 1.1 results and their associated implications

The results outlined above, highlight the vulnerability of the first year students in this study to stress and anxiety at the commencement of their studies given their excitement but also their general lack of understanding of academic requirements, and no clear understanding whether they have the academic skills required to be successful (Gibney et al., 2011; James et al., 2010; Pancer et al., 2000). This vulnerability to stress and anxiety puts the students at higher risk of less than optimum educational outcomes or possible withdrawal from their program (Evans, 2000; Kantanis, 2000; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). The possibility of feeling disconnected from the university would be heightened if their experiences within the first few weeks confirm that they had limited or inaccurate understanding of what they were required to do as a university student (Vinson et al., 2010, p. 133). The initial excitement about commencing their studies could very well be “replaced by feelings that are more negative” if their expectations are not met (Pancer et al., 2000, p. 39). Given these results and possible consequences, it is reasonable to recommend that regular (perhaps monthly) monitoring of student academic progress be undertaken from the commencement of their studies, in order to identify negative feelings and clarify expectations. With the very real possibility of heightened stress and anxiety as demonstrated by these results, and as the students may “have not yet developed the coping mechanisms used by [latter year students] to deal with college stress” (Misra & McKean, 2000, p. 49), first year students could potentially benefit from being taught coping strategies, and where possible, from regular meetings with a mentor or guide who can monitor their stress level and provide advice as necessary.

As it appears from these results, the students are uncertain that they understand the expectations the university holds for them, this lack of certainty should be addressed. Similar to Ozga and Sukhnandan’s (1998, p. 321) findings, it would be reasonable to conclude that these students may have been dependent on “inadequate sources of information”, sources who were not aware of the contemporary university setting, or held biased or inaccurate views of university study. With this being the case, the importance of university staff filling this void with correct information is critical. The concern that students may face is which source of information to use and trust, those used before entry to university, or those from the university. Morosanu *et al.*

(2010, p. 674) have identified that first year students rely on contacts who have provided accurate and valuable guidance in the past until they develop relationships with university staff or peers and see them as valuable reference points. This raises the issue of whether universities need to not only inform students as soon as possible, and perhaps prior to enrolment, of their expectations but also make this information available to the broader community with which the student engages so that their support/advice aligns with current university perspectives and requirements.

These results highlight the importance of ensuring the student's community is aware of university expectations. This finding may be affected by the nature of the cohort of students in this study, as they were predominantly first in family, although students who were not first in family also provided advice that they were unaware of what was expected of them. Educating the community about what universities do and the role students' play should lessen the mystique that presently exists and the inaccurate information that is provided to students by their trusted community members. School teachers and Career staff also need to be better informed as they too have been highlighted by this study's students as providing inaccurate information about university life. This may be due to the length of time since they completed their own studies or perhaps their individual experience was different to that of the majority of university students and not the norm. Whatever the reason for the misinformation that is provided to students, this study's findings support activity on the part of the university to provide accurate information to students prior to their enrolment.

4.3.2 Subtheme 1.2: Volume of academic work associated with first year of study

Throughout the interviews recurring comments were provided by students related to:

- (1) the feelings of the students regarding the workload required of them (17 students),
- (2) the activities that took substantial amounts of their time (10 students), and
- (3) Academic skills of the students affecting perceived workload (14 students).

Each of these subthemes will be addressed individually in the following discussion. Similar to Subtheme 1.1, students were not asked specific questions that engendered

these subthemes, but their voluntary responses indicated that these subthemes were of importance to them.

4.3.2.1 *The feelings of the students regarding the workload required of them*

Seventeen students provided comment on the workload associated with the academic requirements of their studies, with the most common feelings best described as being ‘overwhelmed’ (7/17 responses):

I was talking to ‘P’ and said I don’t know if I can do this anymore. It was just that stressful. Student 7 (F, 17, notFinF)

or ‘pressured/stressed’ (3/17 responses):

I am still happy being a Uni student but I was like ‘oh crap’ I can’t do this. Student 18 (F, 17, notFinF)

A further 5 of the student responses described the workload as being heavy or a lot harder than expected.

Another aspect highlighted by the students was the uneven distribution of workload among subjects of equal weighting/credit and how this added stress and thus compounded the feeling of being overwhelmed. Three students drew attention specifically to one of the four subjects they were studying in first semester as being problematic providing comments such as:

The amount of content for that one specific subject is huge. In all honesty, the other three subjects aren’t getting the attention they need, not the amount they need at this stage. Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

The results of this study support Tinto’s (1993) findings that workload is a problem faced by first year students in higher education institutions, although the proportion of students experiencing these feelings is greater within this present cohort of students with 88% (15/17) of the students reporting this problem compared to the 25% noted by Tinto. The consequence of these feelings may be that the students lose confidence and are less motivated (Nevill & Rhodes, 2006) or these feelings result in significantly poorer grades due to the student anxiety (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Although the students identified their studies as responsible for the feelings of being overwhelmed, pressured, or stressed, there could be other hidden contributing factors

as well. Kolari *et al.* (2006, p. 500) state that perceptions of workload “include all kinds of stresses and disturbances that students feel”. These pressures may well have come from illness, family difficulties (E. Chambers, 1992), gaps in foundational knowledge, poor study habits, or even lack of learning skills (Karjalainen *et al.*, 2006). The issues related to illness and family difficulties will be discussed in later themes.

4.3.2.2 *The activities that took substantial amounts of their time*

The most common reason attributed to finding the workload excessive or difficult to handle was the quantity of reading required in their studies, with 10 of the 17 responses containing comments such as:

The reading was overwhelming. Just the amount to cover, and me having a little bit of OCD.
Student 8 (M, 20, notFinF)

It kind of shocked me how much reading I had to do. It was like a massive hit.
Student 10 (F, 18 FinF)

Students found the volume of reading was excessive both in number and length. The issue was compounded by the students’ inability to choose which readings to focus on and which readings were of less importance or value. The ability to prioritise the readings was noted as a turning point for students and subsequently made their workload more manageable.

This sounds so silly. I got on the bus and I read my textbook. I got home and I read my textbook. Then about week 4, I worked out that I didn’t have to read half of it.
Student 26 (F, 17, notFinF)

Three students noted that they felt underprepared as the reading requirements were very different from what they experienced at school.

It was really different to school, at school you didn’t have to do a lot of readings and then I’ve seen all the readings I have to do and gone Oh God.
Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

The findings discussed here support those of Maguire, Evans and Dyas (2001) who found that the inability to complete set readings can cause a significant decrease in confidence, and an increase in feelings of pressure and being overwhelmed by their workload. The inability to complete all the required readings may be due to the lack of clarity in expectations communicated by the lecturers, specifically that optional or supplementary readings are not required readings (van der Meer *et al.*, 2010). Another possibility is the lack of understanding of the purpose of the reading, whether it is

‘supplementary’ (read once to support what has been taught) or used for ‘assessment’ purposes (read a minimum of three times to ensure understanding) (Karjalainen et al., 2006, p. 54). Not only does the purpose of the text affect the workload students feel but so too does the number of resources the students have to read during a certain period of time (E. Chambers, 1992). Karjalainen *et al.* (2006) provide guidance on another possible reason for the abundance of readings citing that lecturers struggle with keeping their materials up to date, they are comfortable adding newer references but are reticent to remove resources for fear it may decrease the quality of their subjects. Unfortunately for the students in this study, struggling to complete the readings has been shown to encourage surface approaches to learning and not the deep approaches expected of university students (E. Chambers, 1992), thus putting pressure on their successful completion of subjects and deepening the feeling of being overwhelmed (Kember & Leung, 1998).

4.3.2.3 Academic skills of the students affecting perceived workload

Of the 30 students who were interviewed, 14 identified lack of academic skills, or academic inefficiency, as issues impacting the workload they were experiencing. The most common aspect raised (6 students) was the difficulties students faced in identifying the most important points in the lectures or readings (Analysing and Evaluating) and difficulty in understanding or assimilating this new information.

I felt like chucking my books across the room because I wasn't absorbing the text. Student 13 (F, 19 notFinF)

While this was a difficulty faced by a range of students, one student with a Learning Disability expressed added concern.

It takes me twice the time it would take a normal student to get it in there, take it in and keep it in. Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

Other academic skills raised as concerns by the students included:

- Ability to locate electronic reference materials using library databases (three students)
- Ability to write academically (two students)
- Ability to access subject materials from the Electronic Learning Management System (Moodle) (three students)
- Adapting to the teaching style of the lecturers (two students)

The lack of these skills might reasonably mean that required tasks would take longer than for those students who were more skilled in these areas and thus lead to increased workload, higher pressure, and stress for the students who expressed these concerns.

Of the eight students interviewed who had not studied in the previous 12 months or longer, three students specifically identified concerns about their lack of confidence in relation to their study skills. The following comment is representative of their responses:

[Study] was something I hadn't done for 17 years. It was mostly because of the technology side of things. It was worrying me whether I could cut the mustard.
Student 27 (37, M, notFinF)

Whilst most of the students' comments previously discussed identified concerns they faced that impacted on their workload and their ability to complete all required tasks, a range of students identified access to electronic resources and support, as assisting them greatly which in turn liberated them from some of the pressure they faced. Of the 11 students who referred to the online resources, three of them identified the weekly subject structure as being highly beneficial:

Online they've got their specific subject structure, this is what you are tackling today, week 1 and week 2, I myself personally like that sort of format. I like to go well today you're doing this objective. Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

The view of these three students supports the findings of Ditcher and Tetley (1999) that students perceive well-structured learning activities as being highly important for their academic success (rated as the third most important factor). Two students described the ability to access online resources as beneficial when the on campus material was unclear or the lecture content was found to be difficult to follow.

We got to the stage where we didn't turn up to her class because we couldn't understand it, it was better doing it online. Student 7 (F, 17, notFinF)

Another student noted the ability to access resources before the start of semester was highly beneficial.

When I started we had stuff from weeks in advance, I thought wow this is awesome, because I like to be ahead and know where I am going.
Student 24 (F, 25, FinF)

Three students highlighted that access to quick responses to questions was also seen as highly valuable and eased their worries.

4.3.2.4 An interpretation of the Subtheme 1.2 results and their associated implications

Building on the vulnerability of the students when they commenced their studies, the results described above highlight that the stress and pressure they felt initially continues well beyond the first few weeks of study as students confront university academic expectations. The 10 students in this study who responded that their workload was overwhelming or associated with feelings of stress or pressure is substantial (from this cohort) and therefore concerning. Although the perception of workload is individual to the student (including the stated workload and factors affecting the ability of the student to meet personal academic objectives), the high proportion of students experiencing difficulties from this small group leads to the conclusion that there are institutional factors strongly contributing to these perceptions. One factor that may be at play is the differing views held by the students and academic staff of the time needed for students to complete all the academic requirements in a subject.

Chambers (1992) identified that a common expectation among academic staff was that a full time student should commit to approximately 40 hours per week for their studies. This is substantially different to reported actions of the students identified by researchers in the field. James *et al.* (2010) found the average weekly subject contact for students was 15 hours, and Crisp, Palmer and Turnbull (2009) found the majority of students (67% of respondents) expected to expend approximately 11 hours on private/independent study. Using these figures there would seem to be a deficit of 14 hours (on average) between the academic staff expectations and what students actually do. This differential in expected hours of study might lead students to think that they will not meet subject requirements which in turn leads to stress and thus feelings of being overwhelmed by the workload. This situation underpins the possible need for a renegotiation of the workload in and across subjects, as the academic staff may be associating the required workload with the 'ideal' student ("mature, motivated, articulate and dedicated") whereas students are more inclined to prioritise family and other commitments (Killen, 1994, p. 207). Kember and Leung (1998, p. 294) support this renegotiation stating that "it is the student's perception ... which should be taken into account". Not only should there be renegotiation but careful monitoring of student perceptions of workload would also be beneficial as different activities (teaching

strategies, group work, assessments etc.) require different workloads if they are to encourage deep approaches to learning as articulated in university objectives (Karjalainen et al., 2006).

The allocation of workload within subjects based on the notion of students being “mature, motivated, articulate and dedicated” would also appear to be problematic (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). This view would suggest that the students are skilled in independent learning strategies including self-motivation, high level literacy skills (reading, writing, analysis etc.) and able to manage their time effectively. This position is not supported by contemporary literature. Byrd and MacDonald’s (2005) found that students may need to be taught time-management, goal focus and self-advocacy skills; Drew (2001) advocates setting students immediate or intermediate targets; van der Meer *et al.* (2010) promote reminders of due assessments, whilst Kyndt *et al.* (2013) support teaching the students how to set priorities. As students have identified that they feel overwhelmed by the workload they face it would be unacceptable to add to this by offering additional workshops to assist them to develop the required skills. It would also be problematic to address these skills during Orientation week activities prior to students commencing study (Burnett & Larmar, 2011; Krause, 2006). The obvious embedding of these activities into the core curriculum would appear to be the most suitable option (Kift et al., 2010), as well as the offer of individual academic support by university staff.

Whilst discussing student perceptions of workload generally, there is also a need to address the most common difficulty identified by the students in this present study – namely reading overload. A range of questions arise from the results – (1) Are students lacking reading and research skills? (2) Are the academic staff requiring too large a volume of reading within their subjects? (3) Are the academic staff aware of the workload associated with the different forms of reading they are requiring? The need for a ‘Reading Audit’ for each subject appears warranted given the issues the students face, their perceptions and the problems associated with perceived academic workload. Elements of the Reading Audit to be addressed might include aspects such as the number, length, purpose and complexity of readings as well as the thinking skills required of the students and the time required to ‘understand’ the reading given its academic purpose. With the production of such an audit, the sharing of this information

with students could be a high priority, as could the teaching of how to read for understanding. Providing information to students on how best to manage their reading load, including the purpose of the reading, its complexity, the estimated time that should be allocated to them, as well as the thinking skills expected to be used, may assist students to view their workload as more manageable.

Finally, the students' 'perceived' workload issues need to be highlighted too, and monitored by, the academic staff if these staff are to effectively support the students and address the academic stress resulting from these student perceptions. The sharing of comments from students, such as those identifying one subject as taking all their time to the detriment of others, would also be useful for the academic staff so they could reflect on their expectations and work together to manage the workload across the suite of subjects the first year students are undertaking. Thus a regular monitoring process measuring student perceived workload or stress, using the SES instrument and regular meetings of the first year academic teaching team to discuss the data, would appear to be highly recommended. To ensure the academic staff have the background to assess the planned workload of the students, professional development for these staff where they refresh their understanding of workload associated with specific learning tasks may also be required.

4.3.3 Subtheme 1.3: Issues related to formal assessments in first year

During the interviews 23/30 students made comments that related to the assessments they had completed or were about to complete. The most common aspects identified within the student comments were:

- (1) their level of academic self-efficacy (17 students), and
- (2) their management of assessment tasks (14 students).

Each of these aspects will be addressed individually along with discussion of what the results mean and implications drawn from the meanings. The other aspects highlighted by students including, stress, illness, support, and group interactions, are addressed in previous or future Subthemes.

4.3.3.1 *Student academic self-efficacy.*

Issues related to self-efficacy were by far the most common feature of the student comments with 17 of the 23 students providing comments that were categorised within this subtheme. Thirteen students described how positive assessment results produced positive changes in their academic self-efficacy with comments such as:

You know I sort of didn't have a high opinion of me passing everything so when I passed certain subjects I was like yay and I rang people to let them know.

Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

Four students highlighted a negative impact on their self-efficacy with comments such as:

When the assignments come out I burst into tears, and thought I can't do this.

Student 7 (F, 17, notFinF)

I was going into it really confident and when I sat down and started it [online quiz], it blew my mind.

Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

One student noted confusion on receiving her marks back for an assignment:

I spent weeks on this assignment and I got 2 marks over a pass. I thought I was going to get a HD (High Distinction) for that one. The other one I didn't try hard in, I got a HD so I was like, this is so confusing.

Student 9 (F, 19, FinF)

Another comment from this same student described how after losing confidence in her ability to complete the required tasks she put off doing what was required until the last moment:

I walked downstairs. I dyed my hair. I took care of the lawn. I did everything but the assignment. I didn't even want to look at it.

Student 9 (F, 19, FinF)

Preceding the assessments students held mixed feelings about their ability to complete the tasks successfully. Seven students noted feelings of stress or doubt whilst three students described confidence in their abilities.

The results of this study, support Boud, Cohen and Sampson's (1999, p. 418) assertion that assessment "exerts a backwash effect" that influences how students approach future assessments. The student comments reflect that a significant number were not confident in their ability to successfully complete the required tasks to the

standard that they hoped to achieve, and thus, also reflect a possible stressful situation for the students as they “face new and higher expectations for academic work” (Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 24). These findings support those discussed in Subtheme 1.2, raising concerns for the cohort of students, as increased stress associated with the assessments could also increase feelings of work overload (Robotham & Julian, 2006) leading to surface approaches to learning (Entwistle, Hanley, & Hounsell, 1979; Entwistle, McCune, & Walker, 2001; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2003) such as ROTE learning (Diseth, 2011). Diseth (2011) also identifies that the increase in academic stress could result in an increase in avoidance behaviours (as described by Student 9), decreasing student’s time to complete the requirements and putting them at risk of diminished academic outcomes and possible failure. As “all teachers say they teach for understanding” (Biggs, 1996, p. 351) and want their students to use deep approaches to learning (Struyven et al., 2003), the concerns raised by this cohort of students requires attention. Inclusion of activities into the ‘normal’ on campus activities in subjects is called for. Yorke (2005) advocates for the use of small achievable assessments early in the academic year to enhance the student’s self-efficacy, as well as providing early student feedback on how they were progressing academically. It may be appropriate to restructure a number of the first year assessments so that the students are taught how to read marker feedback and implement this feedback in future assessments. A useful strategy could be to mark an assessment in 2 sections, pre and post marker feedback, to assist the students to learn how to make the improvements advised in the feedback. At this same time there would appear to be a need to inform all parties (students, markers and academic staff) of the characteristics of good feedback so there is a shared understanding of its uses and limitations (Wiggins, 2012).

4.3.3.2 Student management of assessment tasks.

Of the 23 students who provided responses related directly to the management of assessment tasks, 14 students described how effective they were in planning and completing these required tasks. Eight students provided positive comments describing how they had effectively met the requirements to submit an assessment on time and to a reasonable standard.

I've looked at the assignments and I've gone through them step by step to understand what I am meant to do. I've gotten started and now got the majority of assignments done. Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

Ten students provided examples of the difficulties they had faced to complete their assessment tasks. Four students noted lack of time-management skills as impeding their progress with comments such as:

I'm probably a bit worried because I don't really have good time-management skills and we've got assignment after assignment. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

The clash of due dates for assessments was described by four students as an issue of concern making managing their time more difficult. Two students described that managing their time meant withdrawing from other aspects of their life to focus on their assignments:

In those few weeks I was probably isolated from everyone because I was concentrating on getting the assignments done. Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

Not only was personal time management an issue identified by the students but so too was the difficulty in working with others on group projects. Of the four students who provided comments, three raised major issues with personal relationships within the group and reasonable sharing of workload:

I had lots of issues with the group assignment, I sort of didn't want to do it. The group just didn't work and I had to end up complaining. Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

I just felt let down because they didn't do any of the work but were still getting the marks. Student 22 (F, 40, FinF)

Time-management is frequently described in current literature as a major issue for first year students, especially those students coming directly from High School or from first in family backgrounds (Drew, 2001; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Smedley, 2007; Tinto, 2009). Not only is it an issue but "this cluster of behaviours are deemed to facilitate productivity and alleviate stress" (Lay & Schouwenburg, 1993, cited in Misra & McKean, 2000, p. 42) with students lacking these skills having lesser ability to lower their academic stress levels. Given the previous findings of this study, that the majority of students struggled with being 'overwhelmed' by the academic workload, lack of time management skills is a factor that would be beneficially addressed for this cohort of students.

The results of this study also align with reports in current literature of the difficulties students perceive whilst completing group assessments, such as free-riders getting credit for work they didn't do (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Davies, 2009), and students having personality clashes or lacking social capital (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012).

The results support Boud et al's (1999, p. 417) position that assessment can, if not planned carefully, and monitored regularly, inhibit the learning process that it is supposed to enhance. The difficulties described by the students may be due to their perception of not being adequately prepared for this style of assessment (Colbeck et al., 2000, p. 61) or due to the allocation of group marks as opposed to individual marks (Hassanien, 2006). The results of this study identify that group assessments can be problematic, leading to student feelings of frustration and even conflict. As researchers studying this phenomenon have found group assessments to be an effective learning and teaching tool (Gatfield, 1999) for its use to be continued the students must be prepared for this style of assessment (Hassanien, 2006).

4.3.3.3 *An interpretation of the Subtheme 1.3 results and their associated implications*

The results of this study identify that assessment related issues are perceived by the students as having a major impact on their first year university experience. While some students received positive marks resulting in enhanced feelings of self-efficacy, a smaller but still substantial group experienced loss of confidence. Thus, it would seem much is being done by the academic staff which is viewed in a positive light but there are other aspects that could be improved so that more students developed the skills and confidence required for successful university study. Specifically the issues of clarity of expectations, guidance and monitoring of student progress, quality of student feedback, the use of feedback to improve performance, and the effect of these on the student's self-efficacy, all need to be addressed.

The results of this study have identified that students frequently enter their degree without a clear understanding of what will be expected of them academically, and once confronted by the workload involved, experience stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. In subtheme 1.3 the student responses highlighted the effect of positive assessment experiences on their academic self-efficacy, which may result in lowering

of academic stress (Richardson et al., 2012). Thus, the inclusion of a carefully structured, clearly defined assessment item within the first three or four weeks of the semester (Kift, 2008b) may be an effective strategy to enhance the students' academic self-efficacy and minimise "early negative experiences, frustrations, or alienation" that could lead to student withdrawal (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006, p. 332) or diminished educational performance in the future (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). The structure of the proposed assessment would have a dual foci, one being addressing the content objective of the subject in which it is embedded, and the other the development of student study skills. The design of the assessment task would be critical as research has identified that not all assessment strategies lead to deep approaches to learning (Struyven et al., 2003), or require the high level study skills expected by academic staff.

With one focus of the assessment task supporting the development of effective student study skills, the inclusion of academic readings, with clearly identified purposes - supplementing what has been taught or for critical examination would seem highly appropriate (Karjalainen et al., 2006). Not only would the purpose of the reading need to be identified but the students would need instruction on how to critically analyse these texts.

When implementing this strategy there is still a danger that the "backwash" from other assessments required of the students at the same time may diminish its effectiveness (Boud et al., 1999, p. 418). To optimise the effectiveness of this strategy a cooperative approach would be required of the academic staff teaching the first year subjects to ensure that there was no overlap of assessments and that the perceived workload of the students was not 'overwhelming'. While the idea of implementing an early, well-structured assessment in the first year of study seems suitable, it alone will not address the issues perceived by the students throughout their first year of study. As students confront different assessment strategies they will require support to develop different study skills throughout their first year of study (Krause, 2005b; Terenzini et al., 1996).

The key study skill of effective time management was identified by 7 students as a concern and something that could hinder their academic progress. The number of students facing this issue may even be greater as other students may not be aware that

their time management skills are lacking (Goldfinch & Hughes, 2007). Although an important study skill, time management by itself is ineffective without students having a goal focus and personal self-advocacy skills (Allan & Clarke, 2007; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Harvey & Drew, 2006; Jansen, 2004; Zimmerman, 2008). To manage time effectively students need to identify short term, challenging but attainable goals (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). As the cohort of first year students were not sure of what was expected of them, these goals would appear to require collaboration with a member of the academic staff to be 'achievable'. Also given the nature of the cohort, the setting of goals associated with "seeking assistance from teachers, avoiding procrastination, or establishing study routines" would be appropriate (Richardson et al., 2012, p. 375). The development of the time management, goal setting and self-advocacy skills are all important as students' progress towards the desired state as independent or self-regulated learners (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2014; Zimmerman, 2008). Even more so for the students designated as first in family as Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 442) state they have "less capacity to build their knowledge into genuine expertise" and Field, Duffy and Huggins' (2014, p. 3) believe that these "students should not be left to independently learn how to become independent learners".

Student feedback was seen as an area that was problematic, with some students providing comments reflecting enhanced self-efficacy, while others reflected loss of self-efficacy. This variability could be associated with the students, academic staff, and markers, holding different understandings of the role of feedback in the learning process. Authors such as Wiggins (2012) and Hounsell, Boud and Falchikov (2007) provide guidance as to the structure and composition of effective feedback for learning, which may be used to develop the required shared understanding.

Finally academic self-efficacy related to formal assessments is highlighted as being a weakness or area of uncertainty with the cohort under study. As high levels of academic self-efficacy are associated with improved academic performance, integration of strategies such as those described by Bandura (Bandura, 1994b, p. 72) including structuring activities to ensure early success (mastery experiences), sharing the success of peers on similar tasks (vicarious experiences), providing positive realistic feedback (social persuasion), and training on how to handle stressful

situations (affective arousal), into classroom activities (including assessments) with the students would be strongly justified. These too would build on any successes the students may experience due to the early structured assessment described previously.

4.3.4 Subtheme 1.4: Support received to complete academic requirements in first year.

Twenty-six students out of 30 provided comments during the semi-structured interviews that were categorised as relating to the level of support they received to complete the academic requirements of their studies. The most common aspects identified within the student comments related to:

- (1) interactions with academic staff (24 students),
- (2) lack of social capital (five students), and
- (3) support for students with special needs (four students).

Each of these aspects will be addressed in a similar fashion to the previous subthemes including discussion of possible interpretations of these results and their associated implications.

4.3.4.1 Interactions with academic staff related to academic activities

Of the 24 students who discussed interactions with an academic staff member there were 14 students who provided detail of positive interactions. Five of these students described the assistance they received from an academic member of staff when facing adversity associated with conflict during group assessments and support when impacted by health issues (personal or family related).

My History lecturer was the first person I contacted. She asked about what was going on. She called me a couple of times and organised everything. (Assignment extension).
Student 19 (M, 18, FinF)

Six students identified ease of access and availability to discuss questions in person as having a positive impact on their feelings of support, with 5 students highlighting the positive attitude of the staff member as being important.

Just the way they came across with the material. They were always eager and told us if you've got a problem come see us. That was good.
Student 2 (M, 44 FinF)

All my lecturers, they are so accepting, they are generous and understand things. They are willing to help at the push of a button. Student 29 (F, 18 FinF)

Five students studying online subjects made specific mention of the positive support received from email communication with lecturers.

I discovered the online forums. Some of the lecturers are really good with responses within like an hour. They were really helpful.

Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

In contrast one student provided comments detailing problems with obtaining support online:

Face to face is a lot better. I was emailing a lecturer in an external subject about an assignment and I got late feedback and couldn't use it to improve my assignment.

Student 8 (M, 20 notFinF)

There were, in contrast, 13 students who provided details of negative experiences with staff in relation to academic activities. Seven students made mention of lack of guidance and information not being provided when requested.

When you have a lot of questions about assignments and you go to some teachers and they are sort of a bit 'iffie' about giving you certain bits of information. That's disappointing

Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

I was sort of very confused and asking questions and not getting answers. I wasn't the only one, a lot of people in that subject were left gobsmacked. Who knows what was required of us.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Five students noted that the support had dropped off over time and that support to plan their assessments was not being offered, neither was time in class to work on these assessments.

The lecturers, they kind of went back into their shells. They stopped helping us.

Student 4 (M, 19, FinF)

Five students noted feelings of being unwanted or disrespected by the academic staff.

There was some trouble with some lecturers, I felt really unwanted as a Uni student, and it was terrible.

Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

I feel just being out of High School I get treated like a child a bit, just the way I get spoken to sometimes.

Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

The results of this study strongly support Kuh et al's (2006) and Crisp et al's (2009) position that interactions with academic staff have a major impact on the First Year Student Experience. The positive comments provided by the 14 students could mean these students were more likely to continue to subsequent years (ACER, 2010a), be positively influenced by the academic staff (Pascarella, 1980), have greater access to academic staff outside of formal contact hours (Sorcinelli, 1991), integrate into the academic life of the university more effectively (Wilcox et al., 2005) and have

improved academic results (Reason et al., 2006; Zepke et al., 2011). The converse of this may also be true. As 13 students provided responses indicating the interactions were negative or less effective than they might wish, these students may be at risk as negative interactions with staff “has a powerful negative impact on student outcomes” (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 644).

While interactions with staff are normally presumed to be face to face in nature, the accessibility of academic staff by electronic means (email and forum posts) was a key feature of 5 students’ responses. This result aligns with the findings of Kyndt, *et al.* (2013) with students valuing ready electronic access to staff to answer their questions. Whittaker (2008, p. 21) found this to be especially true for younger students as they tend to “require immediacy in addressing academic issues”.

Given that “developing a sense of belonging ... is a critical feature of [a] successful first year experience” (Krause, 2005b, p. 61), the comments of students suggesting they felt unwanted, degraded or treated like a child could distinguish these students as facing difficulties with social integration (Tinto, 1999), lesser commitment to the university’s goals (Morda et al., 2007) and increased self-consciousness (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Each of these difficulties being associated with increased levels of student withdrawal or lower academic performance (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Tinto, 1997). The background of these students as being first in family, residing in low SES locations, and possibly having less access to informed support from family and friends, may also have impacted on their perceptions as Collier and Morgan (2008) note these students as having heightened sensitivity to the level of approachability displayed by academic staff.

4.3.4.2 Lack of social capital

Five students provided responses that were categorised as relating to lack of social capital in their interactions with academic staff. All these comments were provided by students transitioning directly from, or still attending, secondary school (i.e. a Headstart student).

I didn't know how to approach people, how to be able to talk to people about stuff in classes or around. Student 15 (M, 17, notFinF)

I was really nervous to talk to the lecturers. If I had a problem I would just ask a student about it. I wouldn't want to go to them (academic staff). Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

The responses from 2 of the mature age students, were in contrast to these statements and reflected the confidence they had to seek assistance from the lecturers.

I felt quite comfortable in seeking support or getting support. The lecturers and tutors were really good. When I asked for more support they were forthcoming. Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

The mature age students also provided comments that indicated that support from the younger students was less forthcoming.

People tend to be in their own little groups. On the occasion I come into class late I usually sit by myself. I've just found there is not much peer support there for each other. Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

Student 20, a younger student, stated that although she was not confident in seeking support from face to face encounters with her lecturers, she successfully sought and received support from her online lecturers and tutors (as described earlier).

4.3.4.3 Support for students with special needs

There were 4 students registered with Special Needs who provided comments associated with the support they received to complete their academic activities. Three of these students made specific comment that the interactions with support staff before commencing their studies positively impacted on their confidence to seek academic support in the future.

Before the start of semester I needed to get my stuff organised with my disability and the support I needed for it. They were very willing to help. I knew they were going to help me instead of letting me go off and get confused over stuff. Student 13 (F, 19, notFiF)

One student with Special Needs commented on her reluctance to seek support as she was used to other people 'seeing' she was needing help.

I just don't know I have issues asking for support and I'm so used to when I get to those points, just the people around me knowing, and it's a different situation at the Uni. Student 21 (F, 30, notFiF)

These statements highlight there may be a difference between the younger and older students' attitudes towards seeking assistance from academic staff. In line with Whittaker's (2008) findings, the mature aged students reported preferring to ask questions of the academic staff whereas the younger students utilised peer support more frequently. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) associate this preference with the older students having had more life experiences and the ability and confidence to advise staff of their difficulties and needs. Younger students may face difficulties approaching academic staff as they are used to having their work closely monitored having recently spent 12 years studying in a "carefully controlled and structured system" and are now confronted with a system that is very unfamiliar (Surgenor, 2013, p. 289). The inability of students to ask questions of the academic staff and relying on their peers, family or friends is a concern as the information they receive may not be accurate, lead to increased workload (or the perception of), and lead to increases in academic stress. These same students may not feel that they are receiving the support they require from university staff and may be less likely to gain in academic competence (Reason et al., 2006). Without having confidence to seek help, these students would be "lacking in the ability to be assertive" and thus limit their access to available support, hindering their academic development and possibly inhibiting their attainment of economic capital (Bowl, 2001, p. 153).

The comments provided by the students with Special Needs identify the powerful effect of the first interaction with support staff on their academic self-efficacy. Three students commented they felt supported following discussion with staff about their Special Needs and this gave them confidence that their needs would be met in the future, thus increasing their academic self-efficacy. The experience of the students with Special Needs that were also first in family, matches the findings of Collier and Morgan (2008) that the language and tone used by a lecturer directly influenced how comfortable students felt about asking for help. For the student with a Special Need who expected those around her to notice when she needed support, the

need to develop social capital sufficient to negotiate her support with the academic staff would seem critical.

4.3.4.4 *An interpretation of the Subtheme 1.4 results and their associated implications*

It is clear from the results of this study that interactions with academic staff affect the first year student experience given the number of students (26/30) volunteering comments about these interactions. It is not clear from the data, whether the academic stress associated with a perceived overload of academic work (subtheme 1.2) or unclear expectations (subtheme 1.1) have influenced the comments provided by the students. It might be reasonable to expect though, that the converse may be true; the ease or difficulty students experienced in getting answers to their questions may affect academic stress, perceived academic workload and possibly their approach to learning (shallow or deep). Thus ensuring student questions are asked and answered should be a high priority for first year students in particular.

As students provided comments in Subtheme 1.3 of positive online interactions, it would seem reasonable to offer students online access to academic staff, whether the students are studying on campus, externally or online. With this availability comes a requirement that the questions are asked in an appropriate fashion and answered in a timely supportive manner. The students would need to be instructed on the required online communication protocols, practise these, and receive feedback from peers and academic staff. It would also seem appropriate to inservice academic staff in the perceptions students take away from online communications and how to phrase replies in a supportive manner. Expectations of the 'turnaround time' for replies would also need to be negotiated and explained, to ensure the needs of both students and academic staff were being met and were not causing excessive difficulty. This negotiation is especially important given the fact that students tend "to have a zero tolerance for delay, along with a 24/7 mentality" (Frاند, 2000 cited in Krause, 2006, p. 3). The use of 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQ) facilities and instruction of students on how to search these, may also be warranted, to ease the load on the academic staff and also to initially support those students lacking in confidence to pose individual questions. Each of these strategies have the capacity to lower students' perceptions of workload and thus decrease academic stress (Topping, 2005).

Students from first in family backgrounds do not have ready access to knowledgeable family or friends who can provide academic advice, but still approach these people when they require support, be it academic or social in nature (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). The results of this study support the notion of extending the role of academic staff to include not only academic support but also support for other issues the students confront in their everyday lives, to develop the trust (similar to family and friends) required to give students confidence in seeking assistance (Drew, 2001). As the students have regular contact with academic staff, these staff could develop the trust by serving the role as first point of contact when students are unsure what university support may be available, as without this the students can feel “unsupported and lost” (Kantanis, 2000, p. 6). This could result in other improvements within the classroom as any improvements in the nature of the student-lecturer interaction is likely to improve the quality of teaching and learning (McInnis et al., 1995). The experiences of the students with Special Needs described earlier reflecting case management from the commencement of their studies, may also warrant investigation for the broader student body given its success, including consultation before commencement and ongoing monitoring of progress. Its success would most likely depend on the expertise of the case managers as those interacting with the Special Needs students are likely to be trained professionals.

As discussed in earlier subthemes, the need for academic staff to monitor student perceptions throughout the first year is once again supported by the results of this study. Student perceptions of decreased frequency of academic staff answering questions, impact of negative interactions with academic staff, and feelings of worthlessness, are cause for concern given their well-researched effects on student attitudes and approaches to learning. Also what is highlighted is that an efficient (time and cost) and effective means of monitoring student progress throughout the first year of their studies, similar to those employed in this study, would identify issues as they arose and allow them to be dealt with in a timely fashion.

4.4 Theme 2: Relationships with significant others whilst a First Year student

The relationships that students form after they commence their studies as well as the pre-existing relationships they bring with them shape their experiences as a first year student (Kuh et al., 2006). During the semi-structured interviews students were asked to describe the reasons behind the scores they supplied for the *Relationships with university staff/ students dimension* and the *Relationships with people outside the university dimension* of the SES.

4.4.1 Subtheme 2.1: Relationship with close family during the first year of study

During the analysis of the semi-structured interview data, recurring comments were provided by students related to:

- (1) Family support for being a university student (16 students), and
- (2) Conflict with family members and lack of understanding (9 students).

Similar to Theme 1, each of these key aspects will be discussed separately and followed by a discussion of the results.

Sixteen students provided comments that were categorised as describing close family (parents, spouses, siblings, grandparents, and partners) as being very supportive. The support ranged from comments of being proud, provision of study materials, assistance with home duties, and understanding when they were stressed due to their studies.

It was really good because with 5 kids, I'm the only one in Uni. My parents were like yay we have a Uni kid. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

I even had my parents support me to get textbooks and their support in other things as well. They're definitely behind me. Student 8 (M, 20, notFinF)

If I had something on my parents would say you don't have to do the washing now, you can make it up next week. Because I don't pay board I have to help instead. Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

While the feeling of being supported by close family was very common among the students, at the same time relationships were put under pressure due to the requirements of being a university student. Nine students described changes in their roles within the family that impacted on their relationships. Four mature aged students

commented on the added responsibilities of their spouse or immediate family and the effect this had.

I have had to change roles. My wife is working full time, the little one is in childcare. If anyone is suffering it is my wife. Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

Three of the younger students detailed increased family responsibilities due to their parents seeing them at home more often than when they were at school.

Mum just told me I had to take all the responsibility for my younger siblings and I have to look after them. Now how am I going to juggle all this?
Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

The lack of understanding of what being a university student entails came out strongly in the comments of 6 students.

My parents didn't know about the difference between Uni and school. My Dad particularly didn't understand that once I am not on campus I still need to do things.
Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

The results of this study indicate that the interactions the students have with their parents and close family during their first year of study impact on their student experience. This finding is not surprising given the backgrounds of the students within the cohort studied. The reliance of students on family support as identified in the results aligns with the findings of Benson, Hewitt, Devos, Crosling and Heagney (2009, p. 548), that family were one of the “primary sources of support” of first year students, especially those from backgrounds such as first in family and low socio-economic status. Earlier research by Hackman and Dysinger (1970) established that family background and homelife contributed greatly to how students reacted to their university experiences, and Whittaker’s (2008) findings that low SES, first in family and mature students have lower levels of support than students from other backgrounds.

The effect of family interactions on the perceived student experience could be either positive or negative. Thus, the student’s transition could be enhanced or hindered by the relationships with parents, partners, siblings or children (Engle, 2007). For the 16 students detailing positive experiences a range of benefits may ensue as support from family is an important predictor of student retention, academic success (James et al., 2010; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001), improved self-efficacy (Pajares & Schunk, 2001) and can help students ward off potential academic stressors” (Rayle

& Chung, 2007). On the contrary, perceptions of lack of support from home could make the students more vulnerable to difficulties transitioning into their new lives that includes being a first year university student.

With changes in family dynamics associated with the student's role as a first year university student, relationships were put under pressure not only due to family expectations but also due to the academic stresses the students were experiencing. Nine students (8 female and 1 male) described conflict with family members due to their studies.

I'm starting to get stressed, I'm disagreeing with my family more and just being a bit more moody. Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

I find that because they haven't been to Uni they don't understand how it works and I get stressed and the relationship sort of dwindled. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

Four female students described issues they faced with their boyfriends/partners due to their studies.

My boyfriend was like out of his wits end because he didn't have time with me, I was studying all the time. Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

One student noted that not having any family around made things easier.

I don't have a lot of family around so that's a little bit easier, I don't have to go and visit. Student 25 (F, 21, FinF)

An issue students faced that strained relationships with close family was that of withdrawing from family activities due to their university studies. Five students described this action with comments such as:

I am so used to being around my boyfriend and my Mum and Dad, whereas for a long time I really didn't talk to them, I was just doing assignments. Student 16 (F, 18, FinF)

I was so focussed on Uni, I had no time for my family. I just thought I will catch up with you on holidays. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

While the majority of students experienced positive support for their commencement of university study, 2 mature-aged students had a different experience, noting lack of support from a parent.

My father was pretty sceptical, I could see it and hear it, and he didn't have to say anything. It still matters what your old man thinks doesn't it!

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

Even my own mother has said I don't know why you bother. Why are you doing it? I think you are mad. It does play on your head. Student 22 (F, 40, FinF)

The number of student comments in this study describing negative interactions with parents is of concern. The perceived lack of understanding by family members of what is required of a first year student was closely associated with conflict. The backgrounds of the students once again may shed light on why this might be the case. Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010) found that parents of first in family students tended to feel that they were losing contact with their child due to the decrease in time the student spent at home, or the extra time needed to complete their study activities. Engle (2007) further noted these changes could cause tension as they affected usual family patterns of behaviour and thus put all members of the family out of their usual routine. These tensions although possibly being 'normal' for adolescents as they move towards adulthood would be exacerbated by the extra responsibilities associated with study in a higher education setting (Gerdes, 1994).

A link between high levels of academic stress and conflict in the family setting was evident in the student comments in this study. It is not clear from the data whether academic stress caused conflict with family members or conflict with family members increased academic stress. There is some support of a possible link with Robotham and Julian (2006) identifying that stress experienced by university students can cause issues such as anxiety, depression, crying, irritability as well as health issues. They also note that new responsibilities, workload, meeting new people, and parental pressure contribute to student feelings of stress.

Interestingly while the younger students described conflict with their parents so too did some of the older students even though they were not living with their parents. These older students may be more at risk than their younger peers due to the stress associated with the "daily negotiation of time spent with family, classes and work" (Savage, 2008, p. 2) and lack of parental support.

As in Theme 1, a source of student stress have been identified, specifically stress related to conflict with their parents or close family due to the requirements of studying at university. As personal stress is closely associated with increased academic

stress and lower levels of academic performance, implementing strategies to decrease student stress would be highly beneficial (Rayle & Chung, 2007). The results described in this subtheme support Briggs *et al.*'s (2012, p. 6) position that "support is needed on both sides of the transition bridge to enable students to adjust to university" and there is also a need to assist close families of the students to also adjust to the changing lives of the students, especially when the student continues to live at home. As Evans (2000) noted, transition problems can be devastating not just for the students but also their close families as their relationships encounter a period of rapid and sustained change.

The results of this study support the position that close family have a role to play in the ongoing support of first year university students especially as they are the "primary sources of support" (Benson et al., 2009, p. 548). Although this seems obvious, there is only limited evidence that close family have been involved in university processes previously. While there is evidence in the literature of family involvement in Induction Programs (Evans, 2000; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), Perna and Titus (2005) contend that within these programs parents and family are on the periphery and not actively involved. The results of this study call for a greater and ongoing involvement of close family to meet the needs of university students across their first year of study. Savage (2008) provides guidance for what may be possible identifying 4 key ways that parents can be more prominently involved to support not just their student but also the institution, by (1) being aware of what the student experience might entail and knowing what resources are available to the student, (2) understanding and supporting the institutional goals, (3) knowing when to become involved and when to 'empower' their student and lastly (4) participating in campus events and supporting other families. For this to occur universities would need to allocate sufficient resources to provide ongoing family support through activities such as Tertiary Preparation Programs for Families, family updates on university activities, networking and social events to allow families to support each other. Scott and Daniel (2001, p. 84) take this even further in stating that families might need a freestanding family office situated on the campus to provide a place for these activities to occur whilst also making it obvious that parents (and family) are acknowledged as being important partners in the education process.

Conflict between students and their close families is not a one-sided issue. While working with the parents and close families to make them aware of the issues facing their students it is also important that the students themselves are aware of the difficulties their families are facing during their transition to university. As discussed in Theme 1, it may be best if this topic (families transitioning to having their student attend university) was imbedded within the curriculum and not standing alone as an optional activity (Kift, 2008b; Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2011). Its relevance to all students irrespective of age would make it suitable for inclusion in first semester subjects that focussed on the development of research skills, or the preparation of students for involvement in later cooperative learning activities.

As the issue of family support and conflict during the student's transition to university can have a marked effect on the student's welfare, perceptions of workload, stress levels and academic achievement, it would also be highly appropriate for academic staff to be made aware of the issues that their students might be confronting. Given this information academic staff would be in a better position to offer support and guidance for their students which would hopefully improve the student's chances of achieving the expected educational outcomes of the subject, and also to lessen the likelihood students will withdraw from their studies.

4.4.2 Subtheme 2.2: Relationship with friends during the first year of study

Twenty-nine students provided comments that were categorised as describing their relationships with friends (university and beyond) in their first year of study.

The comments described:

- (1) changes in friendship groups and difficulty making new friends (16 students),
- (2) changing priorities and resulting difficulties with friends (10 students), and
- (3) support provided by friends (22 students).

Nine students mentioned that over time their friendship group changed to be almost exclusively students who were studying with them at university.

I am now friends with people that do Uni as well as others. It can make life easier because they understand Uni and because they have the same free time as you do.

Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

I don't talk to anyone who does not go to Uni, I have had spats with almost all of my old friends, and I don't see them anymore.

Student 9 (F, 19, FinF)

Sixteen students reported that they maintained friendships both within the university setting and in the broader community.

Difficulty forming friendships with other university students was evident in the comments provided by 16 students. Being too busy studying (7 students), students sticking to who they already knew (6 students), and being shy or not confident (5 students), were the most common reasons cited for these difficulties.

I worked out my times for lectures, readings and study and this filled up my week. I really didn't have time for friends or a social life.

Student 12 (M, 20, FinF)

I came into Uni with a friend from High School so I think having that was kind of stopping me from trying to meet new people.

Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

I am not good at making friends, I'm shy, I'm not the sort of person to just walk up and say Hi.

Student 29 (F, 18, FinF)

Three mature-aged students made specific mention of the younger students forming 'clicks' and being unwilling to make contact.

It is very clicky when you first come here to university. The younger people tend to be in their own little groups.

Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

Five students made mention they had formed friendships with other students very quickly as a result of working in groups during classroom activities.

I found a group of friends in the first tutorial. We sat down in a group where we discussed ourselves. Student 12 (M, 20, FinF)

A strong feature of the student comments was that of the changing nature of the relationships. Eleven students mentioned school friends either moving away to study or themselves having moved away from friends to study, which caused difficulty in maintaining their friendships. Initially efforts were made to keep in regular contact but over time this communication dropped off.

It's a bit awkward, they come back on holidays and you haven't seen them for ages. Then you meet up, and you were such good friends, but now things are awkward. I know they've changed but I'm guessing I have changed too. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

She lives on campus and is really close to her roommate. It is hard to stay close with her when she prioritises her Uni friends. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

This change in friendships was a difficult time for the students.

I think it has been really hard with all of my friends moving away. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

It is clear from the results of this study that students faced difficulties either maintaining their existing friendships or making new friendships once they start their university studies. One reason why this might be the case is put forward by Elkins, Braxton and James (2000) who found that some students believed that when they commenced university they were supposed to disassociate themselves from their past lives, suddenly become different people, and would not be able to relate to their old friends. What students are looking for in their friends may be changing, with university friendships believed to be “closer, based on deeper knowledge of others, more mature and serious and more equal” than those developed in secondary school (Brooks, 2007, p. 696).

The frequency of this difficulty making new friends (16/30) aligns with Tinto's (1993) finding that this is a common experience for students from first in family backgrounds, and Yorke and Langdon's (2008) finding that this is also the case for students still living at home. Problems making friends amongst their university peers can result in feelings of grief (Palmer et al., 2009), 'friendsickness' (Crissman-Ishler

& Upcraft, 2005), anonymity, isolation (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006), and worthlessness (Rayle & Chung, 2007). These feelings can be a source of stress, negatively affecting academic performance (Morosanu et al., 2010; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Rubin, 2012), even leading to withdrawal from their studies (Misra, McKean, West, & Russo, 2000). Krause (2005b, p. 60) states that “making one or two friends at university is [a] powerful predictor of students’ intention to stay” so difficulty making friends would appear to indicate these students face added difficulties over those students who quickly make new friends. There could also be detrimental effects on the students’ physical and mental wellbeing associated with higher likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours (Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003). An interesting result from the interview data was that older students wanted to make friends just like their younger counterparts but felt shut out. They felt the younger students tried to stick together (were “clicky”) and were not open to their advances to forming friendships. So students of all ages faced the problem of making or keeping friends.

No matter what the cause, conflict with pre-existing friends and/or difficulty making new university friends is a concern, as it has the potential to diminish the social support network available to the student.

Seven students who stayed at home to study locally, also faced issues with the friendships that existed before they commenced their university studies. Three students highlighted that their priorities were now different as they were focussed on their future career.

Everyone is at different stages in their lives, I am now focussed on becoming a teacher. Some of my friends don’t understand this. You find out a lot about people. It has been a real eye-opener. Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

Another three students stated the time they would normally have spent with friends now needed to be used for their studies.

A lot of the girls text me and say do you want to hang out and I say I just can’t. We’ve sort of got into a little bit of a fight about it. I said to them you know I can’t do it I’m studying. Student 7 (F, 17, notFinF)

Although under stress some friendships remained resilient and even after being strained the issues were resolved.

You don't get that pressure [now] saying let's do this now, they understand that it's Uni and you can't do it all the time. Student 25 (F, 21, FinF).

For those students who wished to maintain their old friendships, this too caused difficulties. Rendon *et al.* (2000) describe this situation as being like the students existed in two worlds, one their world before commencing study and the other the university world. Students faced difficulties with friends, especially at the start, because they were not fully accepted in either world, they were doing things that their old friends were not able to and had not met new friends on campus who they could trust (Rendon, 1992). While these difficulties with friendships are common for most students, those students from first in family backgrounds have been found to face added difficulties in this regard (Terenzini et al., 1996). Similarly, younger students have been found to face greater difficulties maintaining old friendships in this time of change as it coincides with their progression from adolescence to adulthood (Trotter & Roberts, 2006) and a time where they have extra responsibilities, ones they may not be ready to handle (Kantanis, 2000).

Twenty-two students provided comments related to feeling (or not feeling) supported by their friends. Of these nineteen students described positive experiences such as:

My friends are supportive and I'm supportive of them.
Student 6 (F, 17 FinF)

with three students noting negative experiences:

I have a couple of friends that work and they always ask how I am going. I work with one on Saturdays and she always asks how is Uni going? How is that assignment going?
Student 3 (F, 18 FinF)

The three students who described lack of support from their friends noted not being asked to attend social events (two students) or friends making negative comments about leaving young children to study (one student).

Friends would stop asking you to places. You would see things on Facebook and they would already be somewhere and you didn't get asked because of Uni.
Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

I had some people telling me that it is more important to be home spending all my time with the kids.
Student 24 (F, 25, FinF)

The majority of students that provided comments related to the support provided by their friends described positive experiences (19/22). This result, similar to the findings of Scutter *et al.* (2011), reflects the important role that friends can fill supporting the first year students in their times of need. Stuart (2006, p. 181) highlights how important this support is for students from first in family backgrounds noting that friends “can drive students away from study but they can equally offer a bridge for students” who don’t have other forms of support available. For those students whose pre-existing friends were perceived as not being supportive, the need to develop new friendships that could offer support would be very important.

The results of this study confirm that student friendships are in a state of flux when students first start their studies at university, with this upheaval continuing for an extended period of time. These findings align with those of Kantanis (2000, p. 3) who found that some students may not have made any substantive friendships even before the end of Semester One. Facing difficulties with finding friends or maintaining good relations with existing friends is an important issue as these people form an important support network for the students during the difficult times they face when transitioning to university (Morosanu *et al.*, 2010; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2003). At this same time the friends who the students have provide a very important support network when they are facing difficulties, whether these be associated with the content of their subjects or relationships with family, friends, employers or university staff.

A range of researchers have found that the different friendship groups (inside or outside university) can offer different forms of support. Wilcox *et al.* (2005, p. 713) state that “in the early stages before students establish new friendships ... family and friends can act as a buffer against the stress of feeling alone in a strange environment” supporting Terenzini *et al.*’s (1993) finding that pre-existing friends performed a bridge function till they developed new friends. These same friends can offer social support when the students face general problems with their study (Kantanis, 2000), while their new university friends can offer support with issues specific to the content of the subjects they are studying (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). The powerful effect the ‘new’ friends have on the student experience is also highlighted in the research findings, as they are the primary source of support rather than the official support services supplied by the university (Benson *et al.*, 2009; Kantanis, 2000; Morosanu *et al.*, 2010; Ozga &

Sukhnandan, 1998). Kember (2004) also noted that these same new friends can help to “mitigate perceptions of heavy workload” that negatively impacts the first year experience as described by the students in this study.

Given the importance of friends in shaping the student experience, the findings of this study support the notion that universities should continue to enhance the support provided to students for the development of new friendships and the maintenance of existing supportive friendships with members of the wider community (L. Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1993). There have been many examples of efforts by universities to provide opportunities for students to meet new friends including the inclusion of social activities within Orientation Week and throughout the year, adoption of social learning activities within the classroom and use of group assessments, with varying levels of success (Kuh et al., 2006). What has not been so evident in university practices (i.e. was not found in the current literature) is the support for students to maintain pre-existing friendships, which has in some cases been seen to hinder the ‘social integration’ of students into the university setting (Elkins et al., 2000). Strategies that promote students to bring their friends onto campus, to involve friends in providing information for assessments/research, to inform friends what the students might be experiencing or required to do, would all seem useful and in need of further investigation by universities wishing to enhance the success of first year students. For the cohort of students within this study, support from the university to provide opportunities to develop new friends would be important as they are all ‘commuters’ (i.e. not living on campus) and have strong connections to their existing friends (Fowler & Zimitat, 2008; Kuh et al., 2006; Rubin, 2012; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Whatever the strategies that may be chosen to support student friendships, the need for them to occur very early in the year is highlighted as “the start of the first year of university is a particularly anxious time for personal as well as academic reasons” (Gibney et al., 2011, p. 354). Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006), while supporting the need to provide opportunities for students to connect and make friendships with their peers at the start of the year, also note that this should continue throughout the first year of study as different issues arise at different times of the year. The need for ongoing attention to connecting students to their peers is also supported by Kantanis’

(2000) finding that many students had still not formed any substantive friendships with their university peers by the end of their first semester of study

4.4.3 Subtheme 2.3: Relationship with university staff during the first year of study

Although the interaction of university staff with students related to assessments has been previously discussed in subtheme 1.4, the personal relationships that developed between the students and these staff also need to be addressed. During the semi-structured interviews 29 students' volunteered comments that were categorised as describing their interaction with university staff without direct reference to academic requirements of their study. Twenty-three students provided details of positive interactions with 11 students describing negative interactions.

The positive comments provided by the students covered a range of attributes of the academic staff and a variety of descriptions of how the interactions made the students feel. Eleven students described the staff as helpful, with three students associating this with the size of the campus.

At the start everyone was really helpful. I think that is because it is a smaller Uni and you have smaller classes. Student 1 (F, 19, FinF)

Thirteen students described positive personal attitudes of university staff as shaping their rating of relationships, such as being happy, friendly and enthusiastic, identifying these staff as being approachable.

I think the lecturers were very positive right at the start and you could see that enthusiasm. Student 22 (F, 40 FinF)

'S' was really good. She walked into the classroom and was bright and bubbly and I like that. Student 28 (F, 18, FinF)

Another key feature of the student comments was that the university staff were providing support to meet their needs, with 13 responses categorised in this manner. Of these comments, four students with special needs highlighted how their interaction with staff put their minds at ease.

It made you feel at ease because at times you get worried and think what if I can't do this? Someone was always there saying just ask us, just ask us. Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

Five students made special mention of the positive relationship the students developed with the First Year Coordinator through their weekly meetings stating this impacted markedly on their experience.

I didn't know any of the teachers but I remember when I first started out I first met 'T' [the First Year Coordinator], I was like, I love this guy. It just felt like 'T' knew what we were going through. Student 7 (F, 17, notFinF)

There were a further four students who agreed with Student 7 that staff understanding what the students were going through was important.

Like the teachers here are fantastic. A lot of them understand because they have been students, that it is very hard. Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

Interactions with staff during Orientation Week were noted by 5 students as being very positive experiences and assisting them to develop positive relationships with staff.

When I first rocked up for O Week and met all the teachers, there was just so many people, and everyone's asking if we need any help. You feel supported. Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

A student who missed Orientation Week described difficulties she faced:

I don't know if you remember I was in Hong Kong and Mum had to organise it all for me and I came here and I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know where anything was I was just I don't know, scared. Like everyone had been here for O Week and knew where everything was. Student 16 (F, 18, FinF)

While all the preceding student comments described positive relationships with staff, a range of students noted some relationships as being ineffective or detrimental to their student experience. Six students identified that the relationships with staff varied considerably with 5 describing staff as being unhelpful,

I was having trouble with one of my lecturers. She wasn't very helpful. I still had good relationships with everyone else though. Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

Three students stated examples of staff being beyond unhelpful to the point of making them feel degraded or disrespected.

I get treated like a child a bit. Just the way I get spoken to sometimes. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

I've got an issue with something that was said in a lecture. I felt a bit disrespected. Student 22 (F, 40, FinF)

The development of positive relationships with staff was made more difficult due to the students being nervous about talking to staff (four students) or even scared (one student).

I was initially just too scared and too quiet to talk to them.

Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

I was so used to having familiar faces around me. It was a bit daunting all the new lecturers.

Student 29 (F, 18, FinF)

Given that 29 students provided responses describing their interactions with academic staff, both positive and negative, it would seem that the results (and those in subtheme 2.2) support Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991, p. 620) position that "a large part of the impact of college is determined by the extent and content of one's interactions with major agents of socialization on campus, namely, faculty members and student peers". The proportion of students identifying positive interactions (23/29) would lead us to believe that the majority of students were developing feelings of 'belongingness' within the university setting (Hausmann et al., 2007; Morda et al., 2007). If this is the case these students would be expected to be less susceptible to exhibiting stress, anxiety, depression (Pretty, McCarthy, & Catano, 1992), "greater levels of academic stress" (Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 23), or the possibility of withdrawing from their studies (ACER, 2010a; Heirdsfield et al., 2008). While this situation was advantageous for those students, the 11 students noting negative interactions could be at risk of feeling isolated within the university context, and at risk of added stress, lower academic performance or withdrawal. For these students, the university may be failing in their efforts to assist their transition into their first year of study, as "universities should assist students with the transition to university life by creating a sense of belonging" (Heirdsfield et al., 2008, p. 2).

Another key aspect of the results is the prevalence of comments that can be directly linked to student feelings of being 'supported'. Thirteen students identified that staff were exhibiting attitudes that made them appear approachable, with a further 11 students describing academic staff as helpful. This characteristic would mean that these staff may have been seen as "available and willing to find the time to support students" (Taylor, Robinson, Su, & Wood, 2012, p. 150). This result also aligns with the 13 students who specifically stated incidences of support from academic staff. These students could be expected to display satisfaction with their university

experience as “the single best predictor of student satisfaction is the degree to which they perceive the college environment to be supportive of their academic and social needs” (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 40). Not only would these students have feelings of satisfaction but they may be less likely to withdraw (ACER, 2010a; Wilcox et al., 2005), and more likely to be successful in their studies (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). The perception of being supported could also have increased the student’s social capital allowing them to more freely access support from academic staff (Morosanu et al., 2010). For the students who described unhelpful interactions with staff, or even feelings of being degraded or disrespected, they may feel dissatisfied with their student experience, and even uncomfortable in seeking support from academic staff (McInnis et al., 1995). It is clear that the effect of the perceived lecturer’s “behaviours, beliefs and attitudes [had] a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement” (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005, p. 173).

The backgrounds of the students within this study may again explain some of the lack of belonging or disconnection from academic staff and its associated perception of lower levels of support. Briggs *et al.* (2012) noted that students who were first generation (first in family) or from disadvantaged backgrounds (such as low SES) may feel isolated or frustrated due to feelings of not fitting in. Collier and Morgan (Collier & Morgan, 2008) found that first in family students were sensitive to how academic staff portrayed themselves, especially the perceived approachability of staff. First in family students are also more likely to view the academic staff as less supportive than other students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). The proportion of younger students in the cohort may also have impacted on the results as “problems with social integration with others [are] experienced by younger rather than older students” (Zepke et al., 2011, p. 230).

It is clear from the comments of the students in this study that the interaction with university staff forms part of the university’s ‘social climate’ and as such could affect their success and retention (Kuh et al., 2006; Scott G., 2008). The results of this study support McInnis, James and McNaught’s (McInnis et al., 1995, p. 47) finding that “some students attach a great deal of significance to the interest staff take in their progress”. This would mean that during the time when students are most vulnerable,

their first year of study, staff with specific attributes, expectations and attitudes that meet these students' needs would be called for (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012).

The academic staff working in first year subjects should be made aware of the major issues facing first year students and fulfil a role broader than just achieving subject specific content goals. Ideally, they would have added responsibilities for student support and advocacy (Benson et al., 2009; Drew, 2001; Vinson et al., 2010; Wilcox et al., 2005). This view is not held by all academic staff with some promoting a “sink or swim notion of university education” (McInnis et al., 1995, p. xv). To feel supported, the students would require regular in-class interactions with the academic staff (ACER, 2010a; Crisp et al., 2009). These in-class interactions are critical since the students in the study's cohort commute to the university and would be expected to spend limited out of class time on campus (Briggs et al., 2012). This focus on in-class interactions has marked implications for class sizes (ACER, 2010a) and the pedagogy employed by the academic (Kantanis, 2000; Kuh et al., 2006). The students would benefit from the use of teaching strategies that enhance their feelings of belonging or mattering (Annand, 2011), that actively engage them in the learning process (Krause, 2005b; Kuh et al., 2006), and at the same time allow the staff to speak individually with students during the class. These activities are usually associated with smaller class sizes and not lecture halls (ACER, 2010a). The ability of staff to proactively approach students to ask how they are progressing and to offer advice as to what support is available from the university would be highly beneficial (Benson et al., 2009; Field et al., 2014; Morosanu et al., 2010; Ozga & Sukhmandan, 1998). Rendon (1994, p. 44) supports this proactive approach for low SES or first in family students as she found that “non-traditional students do not perceive involvement as them taking the initiative. They perceive it when someone takes an active role in assisting them”. Not only will the development of this ‘feeling of being supported’ assist students with accessing university resources, it is also associated with gains in academic confidence (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010), positive learner identity (Briggs et al., 2012) and increases in social capital (Bowl, 2001) which could lower perceived levels of academic stress (Bowyer, 2012; Rayle & Chung, 2007). If the academic staff do not assist in the development of students' feelings of belonging they may withdraw from the classroom interactions, decide not to attend classes and not have access to the support they require (Fowler & Zimitat, 2008; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Similarly if

the needs of students are not being obviously catered for by the academic staff then they may not feel like they belong or matter (Drew, 2001; Karjalainen et al., 2006; Killen, 1994).

A key feature of the student comments was the importance they placed on the academic staff 'understanding' what they were experiencing and the difficulties they were facing. Special mention was made of the First Year Coordinator (FYC) and his role in making the students feel like they belonged and were understood. The continuation of this role in the future appears warranted as it provides an opportunity for students to interact with at least one member of staff outside the classroom and also allows students to have access to a person knowledgeable about the resources available to them. Whittaker (2008, p. 26) stated that "support services need to be visible and normalised, so that accessing them is seen by all students as part of their normal experience". The value of the FYC or its equivalent (First Year Advisors or Tutors) is also supported by Zepke and Leach (2005) who stated that contact with a personal tutor who "show[ed] commitment to [the] students' total well-being" improved their sense of belonging with delivered benefits to the students. The importance of having a key staff member who provides strong consistent support for students is also one of the "important predictors of student retention and academic success" (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001, p. 23). Therefore the selection of the FYC must be based on their knowledge of the first year experience, the way in which they engage with the students and building trust, as well as the ability to communicate with staff working with the first year students (Westlake, 2008). The alignment of the FYC with a weekly meeting time (or Common Time) to assist students to meet each other, to answer any questions causing them concerns, and to develop their study skills is also supported by Fowler and Zimitat (2008).

The need for interventions that target the development of positive relationships between academic staff and students at the commencement of a program has been highlighted consistently in the literature focussed on the student experience (Pascarella, 1980; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Rausch & Hamilton, 2006; Richardson et al., 2012). The success of the Orientation Week activities undertaken on the campus were identified by 5 students as setting the scene for a successful start to their studies and assisting in developing their feelings of

belonging and support. The continuation of Orientation Week activities is supported by the results of this study. While Orientation Week has a key role to play, it is insufficient by itself and a “more sustained and program-driven activity which provide[s] “just-in-time” information is needed for successful transition” (Burnett & Larmar, 2011, p. 25). It should also be acknowledged that the needs of the students change over time (Morda et al., 2007). Thus, Orientation Week should be the start of an ongoing coordinated approach to developing and maintaining positive student-staff relations using vehicles such as weekly meetings or ‘Common Times’. The integration of support activities to include in-class and out of class activities has widespread support (Kift, 2008b; Kuh, 2007; Wingate, 2007).

4.4.4 Subtheme 2.4: Relationship with employers

Twelve students in this study identified another key relationship that affected their first year university experience, the one they developed and maintained with their employer.

Positive support received from employers was described by 9 students. Three students noted their employer allowing them to cut back their hours due to study commitments with another 5 students describing how their employer rearranged work schedules to fit their timetables.

Like at work I told them I had Uni and they were really good, yeah and they know I only do about 10 hours now. Student 1 (F, 19, FinF)

Four students also made special mention of other forms of support from their employers:

Even my boss was sitting there one day saying it’s all good, it’s all good. He was giving me this list of things I could try [with my assignments]. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Like at work, at the start they told me Uni won’t be too bad. Whereas now they know how stressed I get. Now they understand that Uni is full on. Student 16 (F, 18, FinF)

Not all employers were supportive of the student’s studies and limited times available to work. Four students detailed conflicts with their employer due to their employer pressuring them to work more hours than they wanted to.

I get stressed and work is not good, they have abused me majorly. Once I turned 18 he started putting me on night shifts by myself. I get home from work at 10 PM and the next day I don't want to do study. Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

I have had to lie. I've told my boss I have Uni 5 days a week so I can get some time for myself. He is really strict and would roster me on if he knew I had Friday off. Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

The four students who stated they were experiencing conflict with their employer is approximately the same proportion of students identified by the Australian Council for Educational Research's (ACER, 2008b) findings that ¼ of university students struggle to manage their work and study commitments. These students described issues that have been highlighted in current literature including working longer hours (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Watts & Pickering, 2000) and inflexibility in work conditions (Hunt et al., 2004; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Although many researchers have identified major issues associated with working part time while being a full time student (Carney et al., 2005; Gibney et al., 2011; Hunt et al., 2004; Krause, 2005b), the cohort of students in this study noted many more examples of positive support from their employers than difficulties. This lack of student comments associated with interactions with their employers is very different to what might be expected as students with a low SES background have been found to report more difficulties than any other group (Hillman, 2005), and those low SES students who work part time are more likely to withdraw from study (Krause, 2005b). A larger number of negative interactions may also have been expected due to the cohort being first year university students having limited understanding of the balance required to sustain both work and study (McPhail et al., 2009). The results may have been influenced due to the students having long term relationships with their employer continuing on from their time in High School, because they are living in the same area to where they completed secondary school, meaning issues associated with time off for exams and assignments or other school activities could have already been more sympathetically addressed.

The student responses paint a positive picture of the relationships students have with their employers although four students (out of 12) noted problems. For these four students the pressure to complete extra hours at work puts them at risk of high levels of academic stress (Bowyer, 2012; Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Lingard, 2012; Watts & Pickering, 2000). To support these students a range of strategies could be made

available. Firstly, as working part-time is seen as being almost inevitable for the majority of students (Carney et al., 2005; James et al., 2010), they should be made aware of the possible impact that this work may have on their academic performance (Callender, 2008; Watts & Pickering, 2000), interaction with friends (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tinto, 1993) and even their health (Carney et al., 2005; Lingard, 2012). This awareness raising should be part of the integrated approach to support for first year students being employed by the university and could constitute an activity within a subject or a topic for discussion in weekly meetings with a First Year Coordinator or equivalent. Trotter and Roberts (2006, p. 374) support this style of approach as “helping students deal with personal problems or crises, and supporting them through this period of personal and intellectual growth, should be an integral rather than ancillary feature of [higher education]”. Other strategies that could be employed to assist students who are employed outside of university include, out of hours access to university resources such as libraries and support staff (Barron & Anastasiadou, 2009; Lingard, 2012), Induction Programs (Crisp et al., 2009), the teaching of time management skills (Carney et al., 2005) and not changing timetabled classes once published (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

As the cohort of students in this study is predominantly from low SES or first in family backgrounds there is a higher likelihood that they will report more difficulties associated with their part-time work than will other groups (Hillman, 2005; Hunt et al., 2004). The age of the students may also increase the likelihood of concerns with part-time work as younger students initially don't think there will be a problem balancing work and study (Crisp et al., 2009; McPhail et al., 2009) or even when advised of the possible issues, still overcommit (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Given this possible situation it would be important to ensure that the academic staff are aware of the issues that these students may face and the possible impacts on their academic performance. The need for academic staff to be made aware of what their students may confront could be due to these staff having had a very different experience when they were students themselves (Watts & Pickering, 2000) or even holding a view that the part-time work is unnecessary (Curtis & Shani, 2002). Moreau and Leathwood (2006) found that the “images of student life as one of leisure, socialising and drinking” were not accurate and students replaced their social life with part-time work. Other research has found that working did not mean more money for socialising, and for

approximately 2/3 of students they needed the added income to buy basics such as food (James et al., 2010; Manthei & Gilmore, 2005). Having an awareness of the needs of students is important but also too is acting on, and being seen to act on this information.

The other group that need to be made aware of possible issues that may arise is the employers. It would seem highly appropriate to provide employers with information on what is required of the students to successfully complete their studies and also to detail what actions they might take to support the dual lives of their staff (Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Warren, LePore, & Mare, 2000). As the majority of students reported positive experiences it may be reasonable to implement university awards to employers who use student friendly methods and to promote these awards in the community. In this way not only will the employers be acknowledged but it would also provide information to other employers who may be considering employing university students in part-time positions. Another associated strategy that may support students in choosing a workplace supportive of their needs would be for the university to maintain a record of 'preferred employers' that students could access when considering taking up part-time employment. Finally, for the employers to be able to cater for the needs of the students they too would require regular information from the university (Watts & Pickering, 2000). Details of Examination Blocks, semester breaks, and sharing of successful partnerships between employers and the university would prove beneficial for employers' planning, as would opportunities to visit campuses or attend ceremonies where their employees are participating (e.g. graduation, scholarship ceremonies).

4.5 Theme 3: Balancing key components of a student's life.

In Themes 1 and 2 the interactions of the students with the academic requirements of their program and with significant others were discussed. While all the factors identified in these themes could be viewed as affecting the experience of the individual, there are also other factors at play. In Theme 3 these factors will be identified and described. As in the previous themes, at the conclusion interpretation of the results, and implications and suggested actions which may meet the needs of future students with similar backgrounds to those in this study, will be discussed.

During the semi-structured interviews, the students were asked to explain their scoring for the dimension ‘*Balancing their lives as a student*’ that formed part of the Student Experience Scales. All 30 students provided responses.

4.5.1 Subtheme 3.1: Lack of previous experience in a university setting

One issue clearly evident in the responses (14 students) was that the students were trying to manage their time and balance their lives but did not have a good idea of what was required of them academically. Ten students who had entered the university directly from secondary school noted the heavier workload they faced, compared with their previous studies made balancing their lives very difficult (described in Subtheme 1.2). Three students stated they did not know how they could everything fit everything into the time they had available. One student highlighted that she was used to starting slowly and then building up her studies and was not prepared to start at full speed.

How could you do 40 hours per week and still have a life? You need to eat and sleep and you need to live. Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

It didn’t really hit me that I actually had to start doing things straight away and I couldn’t just ease into it. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Other than the workload required, the students also identified:

- lack of awareness ‘of the system’ (four students),
- relying on the directions of their lecturers (two students),and
- not having efficient study skills (three students)

as issues they had faced that hindered their ability to balance their lives, at least initially.

4.5.2 Subtheme 3.2: Difficulties prioritising activities

While the student awareness of university requirements may have improved as the semester progressed, the ability to allocate sufficient time to each of the activities deemed important by the student, was seen as problematic. Twelve students described difficulties with prioritising activities in their lives with comments such as:

I was starting to go I don’t get it, I don’t get it, and I was actually working too much and doing too many things. Student 18 (F, 17 notFinF)

Seven students were aware that changes needed to be made to get a reasonable life balance and that their time management skills were lacking.

No I think my balance needs to change definitely. I think my time management is a big issue. Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

A number of students (7/12) described that their priorities had changed since the start of their university studies and they were now committed to achieving their career goal. This commitment had meant they had a stronger focus on their studies and they prioritised their studies over other activities.

It's stressful but I am determined to do it. This is what I want to do. I don't have time for the social life and things like that. I know you have to be prepared to lose that. Student 7 (F, 17 notFinF)

You've just got to find a balance. I am at Uni, it's what I've got to do for the next 4 years, and it's what I want to do. I have just got to deal with it. Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

4.5.3 Subtheme 3.3: Commitments varying over time

Another issue faced by the students which hindered their ability to develop a 'balanced life' was that their commitments, and the times required to meet these commitments, were not stable. Eighteen students provided comments that highlighted how their 'commitments' changed while they were studying, with 7 students mentioning that this change was something they experienced on an ongoing basis.

Some weeks I feel really on top of everything, other weeks I feel below the radar. Student 29 (F, 18, FinF)

My rating for this is constantly changing. Some days I'm like I can't do this, and other days like I've got it, I've got it under control. It's always changing, like a daily thing. Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

The commitments that students identified as regularly changing included the hours they were required to work in their part-time jobs (five students), their partner's work hours (two students), their responsibilities for the care of children or siblings (four students) and their varying subject workloads (two students).

Work hours are changing so I didn't really know if I was working the same hours this week as I did last week. Student 18 (F, 17, notFinF)

I've got a partner and we have been together for 3 years. So it depends on what he is doing at work as well. Student 25 (F, 21, FinF)

I am like I have got to study, this is my study time, I have told you this but Mum says I have to look after my sister and stuff like that.

Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

Interestingly, another activity that was seen as disturbing the students' life balance was the semester break (or recess). Four students noted that the semester breaks disturbed their balance forcing them to re-establish their routines and refocus on their studies when they restarted lectures.

You're just getting used to it and then you are back on holidays again. If I could just keep going I reckon I would be better organised. Student 7 (F, 17 notFinF)

I really got distracted over the holidays, watched way too many movies, and too many TV shows. I came back to Uni and I struggled to get back into it.

Student6 (F, 17, FinF)

While some students found the semester breaks to be a hindrance, 6 students noted that the breaks allowed them to 'catch up' on their studies and helped them to get their lives back in balance.

Getting assignments done over Easter in that break was good. You can get things done without having to be on campus. Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

I'll be able to play catch up - Easter is coming along. Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

4.5.4 Subtheme 3.4: Other factors affecting student ability to achieve balance

Health issues faced by the students during the semester were identified by the students as negatively impacting on their ability to achieve a balanced life. Eleven students provided responses related to health issues with 9 students describing difficulties associated with their own health and 5 students mentioning health issues of other members of their families. Three students mentioned issues for both themselves and their families.

I have been really stressing about these last few assignments. I've been sick and it's been so much more difficult to get everything done. I have just be comatose for an entire week. Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

I was supposed to be taking mum to hospital for visits and that sort of thing. I was finding it really hard to balance Uni. I knew I had assessments and stuff due but I had to take Mum to her appointments. Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

While illness was seen as causing problems for the students in having a balanced life, one student associated her overburdened life with prolonging her illness.

It has been hanging around [her sickness], I think it might be due to my tiredness. I have just been exhausted. Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

For younger students the transition towards being an independent adult was noted as a concern for four students in this cohort as they tried to achieve a satisfactory life balance. These students experienced more freedom to socialise, a need to have their own money to do the activities they wished, and not wanting to be a financial burden on their parents.

I am just turning 18 and am wanting to become more independent. I only have time for a part time job so I find that's really hard not having the money to do things with my friends. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

I don't have my Ps but everyone else does so I just drive around with them. I guess my Mum was a bit more open to the idea of me doing stuff now I'm at Uni. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

4.5.5 Subtheme 3.5: Consequences of inability to find balance

The students in this study linked their difficulties in finding a reasonable life balance with a range of consequences. Twelve students noted that not having their lives in balance led to feelings of being stressed and tired, with 6 students explaining that their tiredness increased as the semester progressed.

I was really so stressed out because, I don't know, I've always been able to balance myself so that I could have certain days off but now I can't. Student 18 (F, 17, notFinF)

I had gotten to the point where I said to my partner I am so exhausted and I am so over it. I am burning myself out I need to rest. Student 22 (F, 40, FinF)

At the start of the year all I did was study and work. I just worked so so so hard and wasn't getting it. I'm tired all the time and then I'm rushing the assignments. Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

As discussed in Themes 1 and 2, the stress the students faced could have consequences, such as perceptions of being overwhelmed with their studies, causing conflicts with friends and families, or withdrawal from social activities. Further consequences the students described were: (1) falling behind in their studies (seven students), (2)

choosing to skip lectures (five students), and (3) seeking shortcuts to their academic requirements (three students).

I was like, I will catch this up online, but everything else got in the way.
Student 9 (F, 19, FinF)

I was skipping the lectures to go to work. I tried to organise it so it was one week work and one week Uni but that didn't work. Student 28 (F, 18, FinF)

I honestly panicked. I was really starting to miss things. I was rushing to catch up.
Student 19 (M, 18, FinF)

While there were a range of difficulties that the students faced to develop a balanced life, the majority of students (20/30) described that their balancing of important activities had improved over time, supplying comments such as:

I didn't know what the heck I was doing 5 weeks ago. Now I have an idea what I have to do, how to allocate my time.
Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

Six students described how their families had helped them to better balance their lives.

At the start of the year Mum was like Oh God you are working so hard, come watch a movie. Recently Mum was like, do some work, put away those movies.
Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

The importance of leading a balanced life was not lost on one student who stated:

If you don't have balance you are not going to enjoy yourself and just get more stressed. It makes it easier if you have a balance. Student 1 (F, 19, FinF)

The students in this study described a range of strategies that helped them to achieve a reasonable balance in their lives. Planning was a key point that was highlighted in the comments of 10 students. Four students provided more detail on what this meant describing detailed weekly plans that outlined the activities they needed to get completed. To make these weekly plans more effective three students planned rewards for themselves if they met their targets.

Halfway through I found a way of doing Uni. I would do Uni during the week, work on Saturday and go out on Saturday night, then have Sunday for myself. Sunday was a reward for getting through everything for the week.
Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

Six students detailed how they planned their semester break to catch up on their studies, complete assessments, and also have time for themselves to socialise and do activities they enjoyed.

I used my holidays not just to study but I would take 2 or 3 days and just go alright let's go to the beach, or let's go shopping. Then in the second week I did the same. Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

Three other students planned time for themselves during the semester and found this to be very effective.

On the orientation day I mapped out my study. I knew what I was doing when. I had my free time to go out and do swimming and that sort of thing. I try to have time for me. I try and walk the dog for 10 or 15 minutes. I need that time for myself. Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

Other strategies students identified as helping achieve a satisfactory life balance included:

- Cutting back the hours worked in a part time job (six students)
- Negotiating set working hours with their employer (one student)
- Being flexible with their plans and able to rearrange activities (two students)
- Negotiating time to meet and socialise with family and friends (five students)
- Finding a quiet place on campus to study (three students)
- Only working on weekends and not at night (one student)
- Having 1 or 2 big days on campus to get the majority of work completed (one student), and
- Focussing on the assessments in a subject (one student) and not working only on the subject that has an assessment due (one student).

Finally 1 student made special mention of seeing others balancing their lives well as having a profound effect on her balancing life.

I started doing a lot more stuff after seeing other people all do stuff. I was like if they can make time, I can make time. Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

The results described in Subtheme 3.1, and also previously discussed in Themes 1 and 2, support the findings of a range of researchers that student life is very complex in nature (Crisp et al., 2009; Gerdes, 1994; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). With such complexity it is reasonable to expect that a substantive number of students will face difficulties achieving a satisfactory balance. For the cohort of students in this study, similar numbers of students faced difficulty balancing to those in Hillman's

(2005) study with approximately half of the students expressing concerns about balancing their lives. It is also clear that there are a range of activities keeping the students busy, they are not just busy due to their university studies (ACER, 2013). Given this situation it is difficult to describe students as being full time as they are fulfilling multiple roles (Holmes, 2008) and existing in multiple worlds (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). The difficulties students had balancing their lives can also be associated with their first year students status. Research tells us these students are most vulnerable to external pressures during their transition to university (McInnis, 2001; McPhail et al., 2009; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). McInnis (2003) described first year students as their own species with their own special learning needs, with Rayle and Chung (2007, p. 22) detailing they face “unique and demanding ... challenges”, and Briggs *et al.* (2012) proposing the students take on a new identity when they start their studies at university.

The student comments describing difficulty fitting in all the required activities could have a range of causes. Collier and Morgan (2008) found in their study that when students commenced their studies they attempted to add their study load to the activities they already had in place, not making allowances that something had to change. They also found that the students could face difficulties due to not understanding the expectations of their lecturers and thinking they needed to do more than was really required. Van der Meer *et al.* (2010) found that this problem may also be associated with the students not understanding the requirements due to the attitude of the lecturer to sharing this information. The assumption by academic staff that the students are independent learners and thus self-directed and not requiring guidance could also be a plausible reason for the difficulties faced by the students (E. Chambers, 1992; Conley, 2007; Killen, 1994; Watts & Pickering, 2000; Wingate, 2007). Kuh *et al.* (2006) confirm that lack of guidance causes difficulties for students as they need expectations clarified ‘early and often’.

Prioritising was identified as an issue that the students were struggling with when looking to balance their lives. The very notion of prioritising seems problematic for this cohort of students as it assumes one activity having equal or greater importance than others (Benson et al., 2009). While the academic staff may view the student’s university studies as the main priority (Karjalainen et al., 2006; Kember, 1999; Savage,

2008), and actively share this view with their students, the responses from the students in this study reflect a range of differing views towards what is most important in their lives. The students identified part-time work, caring for family members, personal health issues, and social lives as being key priorities in their lives. The prominence of work in the students' decision making processes (priorities) is supported by much recent research, with findings that more students are relying on part-time work to survive (Callender, 2008), on campus contact hours being very similar to the quantity of time students are working (Curtis & Shani, 2002), work is the greatest competitor for study time (Kember, 1999), and even students reporting that work was of equal or greater importance than their studies (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Unfortunately holding a part time job could also lead to less time for socialising and family, less time for sleep, feelings of being overloaded and stressed (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005), and insufficient time to complete readings and assignments (Watts & Pickering, 2000). Given that 22 of the 30 students interviewed had part-time employment, it is reasonable that balancing work and study would be a substantive issue for this cohort.

While prioritising was an issue that caused concern for students, the clarification of, and commitment to a clear career goal, was viewed by some students as ensuring they put a priority on their university studies and also helped them be more resilient and determined to achieve this goal. This result aligns with those of Krause (2006) that the effort students extended to their studies was influenced by their career goals and also those of Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons (1992, p. 664) that "goals increase people's cognitive and affective reactions". While career goals positively affected the students' ability to balance their lives, being able to formulate short term goals and planning how to achieve these was also important for the students in this study. Fortunately, the majority of the students in this study appear to have either brought these skills with them to university or were able to learn them, as 20 students described having developed a satisfactory life balance. The critical importance of developing these skills is supported by current literature (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Carney et al., 2005; Goldfinch & Hughes, 2007; Kyndt et al., 2013). For the cohort of students in this study it would be expected that lack of time-management skills would be quite a common problem as students with first in family (Kuh et al., 2006), or low SES backgrounds (Mulvey, 2009), as well as students

straight from school (Jansen, 2004) are factors that have been associated with lesser developed time-management skills.

With approximately one third of the students interviewed stating that their own health issues, or those of a close relative, negatively impacted on their ability to maintain a satisfactory life balance, this factor appears to require further consideration. One of the possible reasons for the personal health issues is the combination of full-time study and part-time employment. Research conducted in the United Kingdom by Carney et al. (2005, p. 307), found that students who were combining full-time study with part-time work had “6 out of 7 areas of health significantly poorer than those in the general population”. Lingard (2012) also noted higher levels of stress in Australian students associated with combining work and study. Just as working may lead to health concerns, so too can stress associated with other aspects of the student’s life. Robotham and Juian (2006) identified factors such as time demands, financial pressures, and increased university workload as other issues leading to student feelings of stress. With higher levels of stress comes significantly higher levels of physical health problems (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). While some students may struggle with their own health issues, the characteristic of the students in this study as coming predominantly from low SES backgrounds may contribute to the prevalence of family health issues (Begg, Vos, & Barker, 2008).

Finally, although students face the biggest problems with balancing their lives at the start of the year (Friedlander et al., 2007; Gibney et al., 2011), these issues do not disappear quickly. Savage (2008) found that the time students had available for activities was negotiated daily, balancing changing priorities, while Maguire *et al.* (2001) noted that student issues revolved around what was immediate in their lives. This aligns with the findings of this study that some students face ongoing problems as their commitments change regularly. While this is the case, the majority of students found ways to manage this change by planning, organising activities such as work to have regular hours and being more flexible.

4.5.6 An interpretation of the Theme 3 results and their associated implications

If we agree with Chickering and Gamson (1987, p. 3) that “an undergraduate degree should prepare students to understand and deal intelligently with modern life”, then the results described in Subtheme 3.1 have a range of important implications for first year university students and higher education authorities. Firstly, the assumption held by some academic staff that full-time students have a singular focus on their university studies is challenged, given the information provided by the students in this present study and the findings of researchers in this field (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Karjalainen et al., 2006; McInnis, 2004). The majority of students are clearly balancing study, work, family and personal issues, which could be seen as paralleling what is happening in the wider community with an emphasis on Lifelong Learning. If this is the reality in modern life, then universities have a role to play in preparing their students to be able to successfully ‘balance’ the commitments in their lives.

To manage their lives, the students identified the need to have time management skills, which clearly some students did not feel they had when they commenced their university studies. This highlights the need for universities to assist students in developing these important skills (Zimmerman et al., 1992). While it is possible to offer students ‘extra’ programs that can help them to do this, the extra time commitment and workload may not be suited to students similar to those in this study as they perceive they are already time poor. Given this situation the imbedding of up-skilling activities within the curriculum would seem most appropriate. As with any addition of content to the curriculum there would also need to be some ‘pruning’ of content to ensure there is no increase in perceived workload (see Theme 1 for more detail). For this embedding to occur there is also a need for the academic staff to have the skills to be able to facilitate the development of the student’s time management skills.

For students to time manage effectively they need to be aware of what each activity requires time wise, and also the effect one activity may have on the other activities in their lives. The students in this study identified a lack of understanding of what academic activities they were required to complete. This highlights the need for

academic staff to not only clearly articulate their expectations but also the need to check that students understand these expectations and requirements (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The student comments reported in previous themes identified that the academic staff were perceived to be providing less guidance as the semester progressed or failed to provide guidance in the second semester. Thus staff would need to be made aware that the needs of some students extend well beyond the start of the first semester and possibly for the duration of the entire first year (or longer) (Cook & Leckey, 1999). While providing clear guidance about their expectations, it would also be important that academic staff are aware of the other issues (e.g. work, family, health) in the student's lives which may be conflicting with these expectations, and be flexible enough to cater, where possible, for these issues (Kember, 1999; Killen, 1994; Lowe & Gayle, 2007; Vinson et al., 2010). Chambers (2010, p. 9) provides some support for this stance stating that "no educational experience is static nor is it divorced from other dynamics occurring in student life". Bowyer (2012) also provides some advice here, explaining that these 'other issues' can cause the students study to be inefficient and thus inhibit their achievement of the objectives of their subjects or program.

While teaching the students effective time management skills is important, and so too is the academic staff clearly communicating their expectations, this is not sufficient, with Crisp *et al.* (2009) and Misra *et al.* (2000) warning that although the students know they need to balance their responsibilities, a range of them still don't. Thus, monitoring the student's progress is once again called for (Krause, 2005b). Caution needs to be taken here though, as the monitoring (via surveys, emails, interviews etc.) could be perceived by the students as increasing their workload, leading to increased feelings of stress and further difficulties in achieving a satisfactory life balance (Kyndt et al., 2013). With monitoring comes the responsibility of providing appropriate support when the students are encountering major difficulty (Coates & Ransom, 2011). To optimise the effectiveness of the available support Trotter and Roberts (2006) advise that academic staff can't wait for the students to ask for help as the majority of students may be reticent to do so, with Rayle and Chung (2007) adding that the students need to feel they matter to the person before they will approach them for support. Rendon *et al.* (2000) identify that this is especially the case for students from non-traditional backgrounds. This advice once again supports the need for the academic staff to take a role in the pastoral care of their students and to

act as a facilitator between the student and the support available through university processes (Benson et al., 2009; Ozga & Sukhmandan, 1998). This may be problematic as not all staff see “pastoral work and retention as part of their academic role” (Wilcox et al., 2005, p. 719). As identified earlier, the need for staff with specific knowledge, skills and attitudes supportive of the unique needs of first year students and of diverse groups within these cohorts is highlighted. This is especially the case as a key responsibility of the staff would be developing a sense of belonging in the students and a feeling that they matter. Rode *et al.* (2005, p. 430) describe an academic staff member filling this role as being a “life satisfaction friendly instructor”.

A major turning point identified by 7 students in this study was that of making a commitment to their career goal, resulting in a clearer focus and determination to achieve their goal. While this constitutes only approximately ¼ of the students who were interviewed, it is still viewed as being important as interviewees were not directly asked to supply information on this topic. The positive effect of commitment to a career on the students’ ability to achieve a satisfactory life balance was marked in the student comments and provides support for Diseth’s (2011) and Krause’s (2006) findings that student’s goals shape the student experience. By extension the results also align with Bowyer’s (2012) assertion that lack of motivation is cited as a common reason for finding sufficient time to study.

These results and current literature support the possible inclusion of authentic experiences in the first year curriculum designed to give students an understanding of the true nature of the career that will result from completion of their university studies. They also identify that students who may be struggling to find focus could benefit from career guidance to clarify their goals (Gerdes, 1994). Not surprisingly the role of academic staff in monitoring student progress is once again called for given the relationship they hold with the students and the proactive facilitation role they could take to link the students with available support.

Along with time management skills and clear career goals, students in this cohort identified issues related to working part time as being detrimental to their ability to balance life. The prevalence of students working part-time within the group completing the semi-structured interviews (22/30) is consistent with the findings of researchers not only in Australia but also in the United Kingdom and the United States

and is seen as a feature of the 'new student' enrolled in university studies today (Laing, Robinson, & Johnston, 2005). It would be reasonable to expect that awareness of the costs and benefits of part-time work would be critical for students when they are making time-management decisions and also for academic staff when seeking to best meet the needs of their students. As discussed in Theme 1, student perceptions that they are overwhelmed by the workload is a common experience. A contributing factor to this perception may be working part-time, and this additional commitment results in higher stress levels and anxiety for students. Stress and anxiety can lead to negative health issues and possible strategies for coping with them or minimising their effects should be highlighted to students.

While it is quite easy to allocate responsibility for teaching, monitoring and supporting students to the academic staff, the students in this study were able to articulate a range of strategies that worked for them in their efforts to balance their lives and noted that seeing other students successfully balance their lives gave them confidence they could do the same (vicarious experiences). These results support a role for students in assisting their peers to achieve a satisfactory life balance. For students to be able to provide support, they need to have a voice, meaning they need to have the opportunity to share their experiences safely and the opportunity to develop confidence and trust in their peers. Current literature advises that students coming from low SES and first in family backgrounds usually spend limited time out of class on the physical campus at which they are studying due to their other commitments (Callender, 2008; Curtis & Shani, 2002; Lingard, 2012; Manthei & Gilmore, 2005). Therefore, the development of the student voice would need to occur within the on campus classroom setting, sharing stories on what works or does not work would need to occur during class time.

With this in mind, the pedagogies employed within classes appear critical (Vinson et al., 2010). Haggis and Pouget (2002, p. 332) argue that "teaching that engages in explicit discussion and modelling of desired approaches ... could ease the pressure on the perceived need for support by dealing with students confusion and disorientation in ... specific subjects". Active discussion in the classroom is also supported by Kantanis (2000) who noted that limited contact between students does not allow them to see that others are experiencing the same anxieties, with Wintre and

Yaffe (2000) advising that institutions need to avoid situations in lectures and seminars where students don't engage with their peers. The need to support student discussion makes the sole use of lectures and other teacher-centred pedagogies problematic. The use of student-centred pedagogies (requiring student discussion) in class time could meet the identified need. Another possible strategy that could be investigated, which may enhance the connection students feel with their peers and the academic staff, would be the formation of tutorial groups that lasted for the whole year and not just a single semester or tutorial groups that existed for multiple subjects within the one semester. The inclusion of a weekly 'Common Time', if structured as a compulsory activity, may also be effective. While these strategies may be suited to students studying on campus they could also be provided to online students through the provision of synchronous online class tutorials.

Along with academic staff and students, family members (specifically parents) were identified by 6 students in this study as instrumental in assisting them to develop and maintain a satisfactory life balance. It would seem highly appropriate to investigate how best to harness and empower this support group and integrate them into a cohesive support network. For this to occur the families would need to be made aware of the issues that their students may face in achieving a satisfactory life balance, possible strategies that could be useful to support them, and also information on how they could regulate their support so the students develop independence. As the cohort of students were predominantly first in family (22/30) and/or living in close proximity to their parents (25/30), this awareness raising could be critical given the families may not have direct experience of what constitutes the life of a full-time university student, yet they are very accessible to the students. While this seems quite straightforward, much thought would be required to clearly articulate protocols for the involvement of parents in student support, negotiated between university staff and the students. A key focus would be on empowering the students and giving them the opportunity to identify the support structures they deem most appropriate to their situation. Historically there has been very limited parent involvement in university activities (Perna & Titus, 2005).

The curriculum and pedagogical changes put forward as possible strategies to meet the needs of students similar to those in this study, are substantive and would

require a coordinated approach by all members of the university community. Kift *et al.* (2010, p. 11) strongly support this integrated approach stating that an “optimal [first year experience] should be framed around intentional first year curriculum design that carefully scaffolds, mediates and supports first year learning for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts”. While the focus of this statement is improved student learning, it could also be extended to include opportunities for university staff, parents and friends to learn more about how universities work, the difficulties the students may face whilst studying, and what each could do to support the students. While the curriculum design is critical, it will not be effective without key staff implementing this plan. There would appear to be strong support for Westlake’s (2008) position that the staff who might best cater for the specific needs of first year university students should have specialised knowledge, a student-focused attitude and approach, and make themselves accessible to their students.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has reported the results associated with Research Question #1:

“How do pre-service education students perceive their first year experience on a small regional university campus?”

The student’s voices (quotations) were used extensively to highlight their personal perspectives and to offer the reader the opportunity to evaluate the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations. The major factors that were perceived by students as shaping their first year experience were described in detail and compared with contemporary relevant literature. The goal being to provide the reader with a rich understanding of the issues faced by first year university students studying on a small regional university campus. Following this discussion, specific implications and possible interventions were highlighted for consideration by the reader.

The next chapter is structured in a similar fashion to Chapter 4 and focuses on answering Research Question #2:

“How does the student experience vary over time throughout the first year of study?”

Chapter 5. How does the student experience vary over time throughout the first year of study? (RQ#2).

5.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter specifically reports and discusses the results extracted from the data with respect to the second research question (RQ#2):

“How does the student experience vary over time throughout the first year of study?”

To answer this question both the SES data and semi-structured interview data will be used in tandem. The SES data will be used to identify any recurring patterns in the scores provided by the students, whereas the semi-structured interview data will be used to identify if specific factors affecting the student perceptions of their university experience take precedence at specific times of year.

Throughout the year students were asked to regularly complete the Student Experience Scale (SES) every 2-4 weeks. The mean number of completions for the 38 students in the first year cohort studied was 6.8 (Min 1, Max 13). Twenty-eight students maintained their enrolment for the full first year with a further 10 students studying in Semester 1 but not continuing their enrolment in Semester 2. For the 28 continuing students the mean number of SES completions was 8.1 completions (Min 1, Max 13). Therefore, data were collected from the majority of students in the cohort at multiple points across the whole first year of their university experience. Each time a student completed and submitted their SES data it was analysed to identify students whose score on any dimension changed markedly from previous submissions. A marked change was defined as a decrease or increase of 3 or more points in one or more dimensions of the SES. Students who demonstrated a marked change in any dimension were asked to attend a 10 minute semi-structured interview with the researcher. At the interview their SES survey data were provided to them for their comment. Students were asked to interpret all their existing SES scores with special attention drawn to providing an explanation for the change reported in their most recent SES survey. Some students were surprised that they had reported a change, however the majority were able to provide an explanation for their altered score. While

the students who provided SES scores that dropped or rose by 3 points or more were specifically targeted for semi-structured interviews, the other students in this study were also invited to participate and provide information on their experiences. This choice was made to ensure significant disturbances, those not meeting the specified criteria, could also be identified during the interview process.

This chapter predominantly uses the SES survey data generated at multiple points throughout the year to highlight the variability in the student experience for this cohort of first year university students across the entire first year of their university enrolment. The study therefore provides a holistic view rather than a single point in time measure. A visual representation of the students' first year experience (unique to this study) is provided through individual graphs that record the SES scores against the time of year the SES was completed. Of the 38 students who did complete the surveys, all were invited to interviews, with 29 being interviewed at least once during the year. Twelve students were interviewed on two occasions. After viewing the SES data and reviewing the semi-structured interview recordings, occurrences were identified that were deemed as causing a substantial disturbance to the student's first year experience. A 'substantial disturbance' to the student's first year experience was defined as being a SES score on 1 or more dimensions falling to 5 or less as well as being acknowledged by the student's interview data as causing distress. On occasions, students' SES scores did not drop to 5 or lower but their interview data indicated that a specific incident or experience had caused them significant distress. These occasions were also tagged as substantial disturbances based on the student interview data. Once the classification was completed the students' SES ratings were categorised into three main groups as follows:

1. Students with a consistent first year experience with 0 or only minor disturbances
 2. Students with a reasonably consistent first year experience with 1 or 2 major disturbances
 3. Students with 3 or more major disturbances during their first year experience
- A 4th group was included for those students whose first year enrolment was *interrupted*, as they were deemed to be a special case. A student who interrupted their

first year enrolment was one who did not enrol in Semester 2, changed from their original degree to another, or withdrew from the university totally.

No predictions of probable SES scores were made for the occasions when the students did not provide SES responses and they were not included in the counting of the number of substantial disturbances.

Results for each of the four groups described above will be provided separately. Discussion of how the results compare to current literature related to the first year experience will be provided after the descriptions of the results obtained. The results will also be compared to the final SES scores where the students were asked to rate their 'overall' first year student experience.

Following these results and discussion, an analysis of the time of year in which the disruptions occurred will be provided. The aim is to provide the reader with information about the times when students most frequently experienced substantial disruptions to their first year experience. The results will be discussed in relation to the provision of university support services that would be beneficial in meeting the needs of first year students.

Similar to Chapter 4, after the results have been reported and discussed, the results will be interpreted in light of the characteristics of the student cohort and specific implications and possible interventions will be highlighted.

5.2 The Overall Student Experience

5.2.1 SES results reflecting a consistent first year experience for the student with 0 or only minor disturbances

Of the 38 students who provided at least 1 set of SES scores, 10 students' ratings reflected a consistent first year experience with no or only minor disturbances affecting their experience. This decision was based on the researcher's observation that the scores for each of the dimensions of the SES did not vary markedly across the year (i.e., SES dimensions each had a range of 3 or less = consistent) and/or the student semi-structured interview data did not highlight any incidents or experiences that caused them significant distress.

An example of one student's ratings classified as a consistent first year experience with 0 or minor disturbances is provided in Figure 14. Following Figure 14 a commentary has been provided that details the analytical approach used by the researcher that led to the final classification.

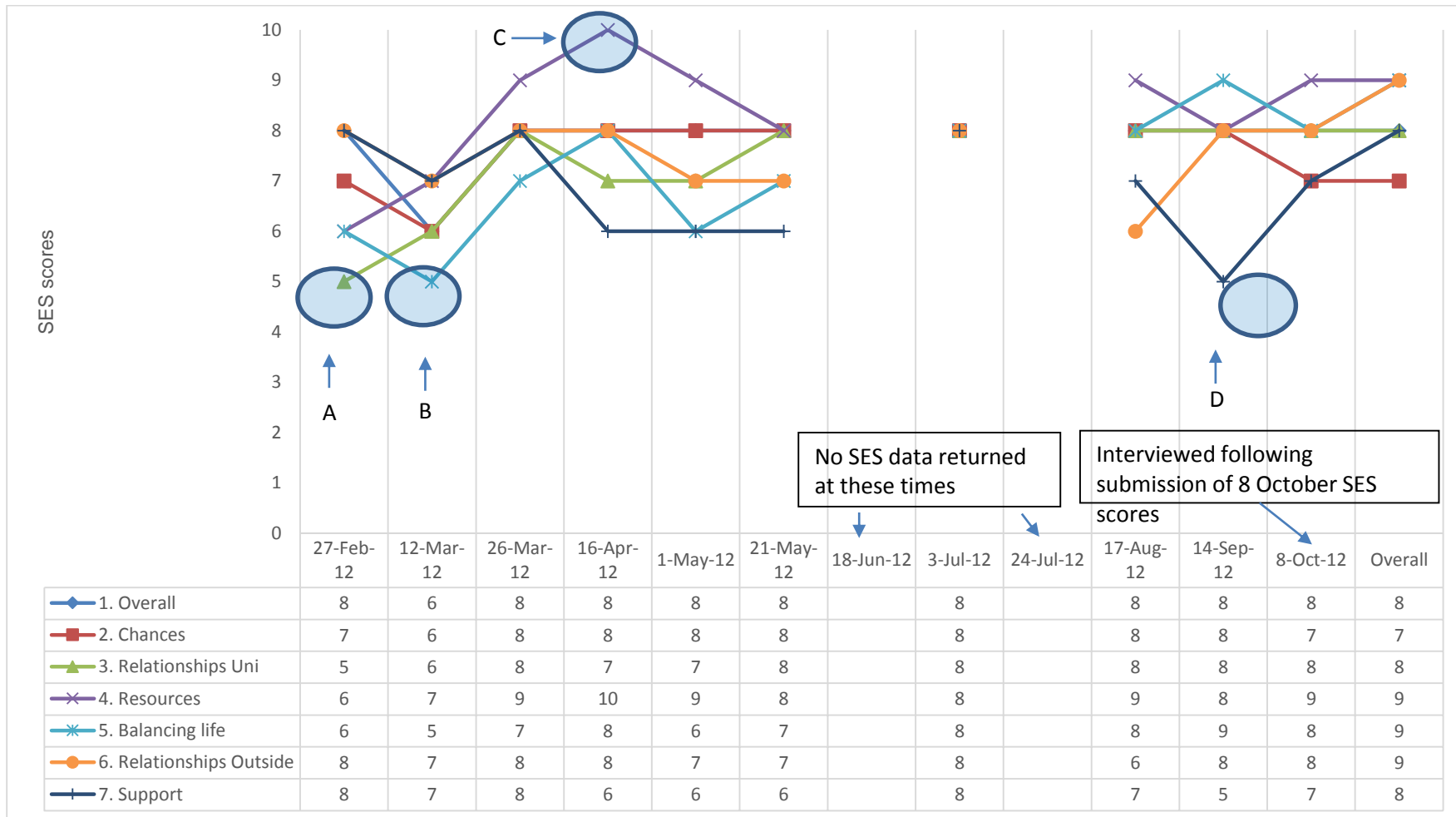


Figure 14. Student SES scores across the first year of university study (Student 10). This graph illustrates a student with a consistent first year experience with 0 or only minor disturbances, defined as SES dimensions with scores <5 and/or significant distress.

Three points were identified on Figure 14 for investigation as they included at least one dimension of the SES having a score of 5 or less points (Points A, B, and D). One further point (C) was included for more specific attention as it was associated with a substantial change in one dimension of the SES over a short period of time (an increase of 3 points across two SES surveys). The inclusion of this point was deemed by the researcher to be warranted to minimise the possibility that a ‘disturbance’ may be hidden within the SES data.

Student 10 explained that at the start of her first semester (Point A) she was excited to get started (*Overall feeling of being a university student* =8), but was a little unsure of herself as she did not know many other people who were starting university at the same time (*Relationships with university people* = 5).

I think it was because I was so excited about being a Uni student. It was something totally new and different. Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

You know different people it is hard to warm to someone you don't really know. There were a lot of people I didn't know. Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

She had not at that stage needed to use the library or any other resources and so provided a score of 6 to the *Resources dimension* of the SES, a score she felt represented a “borderline” situation.

I didn't know the place (university) enough to judge it. I didn't go to the library and I didn't use their facilities. Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

The other dimension that Student 10 scored as a 6 was related to how she was feeling about the *Balancing life as a university student dimension*. She accounted for this score by saying once again that she was not sure what she was getting herself into.

I didn't really know what I was getting myself into and after high school I wanted to be super organised. Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

It was determined, based on the interview data that the student survey data did not support the classification of Point A as a substantial disturbance to the student’s first year experience.

Point B on Figure 14 was then investigated with the student at the interview. Student 10 described that her scores dropped a little as she was getting into her studies and was required to read a lot more.

It was really different from high school ... how much reading I had to do.
Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

She noted that after 3 months of holidays it took her a little while to get back into the study routine.

After having so many months off it's a big shock to go straight back into researching and that kind of stuff.
Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

With this extra workload she found she had less time for socialising compared to her holidays and thus a little less time for friends. Student 10 did not describe this as a major issue for her but explained that she quickly got into a routine, sorted out her work hours and started to make friends. Her scores for the 26 March 2012 SES reflected this quick improvement.

You just learn I guess what you've got to do and what you've got to balance.
Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

The decision was made, based on this additional interview explanation, to classify Point B as representing a *minor disturbance*.

The 16 April 2012 SES scores displayed changes to the *Resources dimension* and *Support dimension* (Point C), with the score for resources indicating a more positive attitude to this dimension and the score associated with support decreasing, though by only 2 points. Student 10 explained that she was working on her assignments at that stage and started to use the library to research. She found the library to be an effective place for her to study.

When it [my score] was around the 10 and the 9, I was doing assignments in the library and just the environment I felt really comfortable, you know working in there, it was quiet, it was like my own space and I had time to think.
Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

Her score for this dimension stayed quite consistent throughout the year, she explained that the score changed when she was working on assignments and so used the library more. When quizzed about the drop in the score associated with the *Support dimension* of the SES, Student 10 did not know what might have caused this to occur.

Not really sure, I don't really know why I put a 6. Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

Therefore, based on these analyses, Point C was categorised as representing a *minor disturbance*.

While the SES scores appeared to be quite consistent for the latter period of the year, Point D was investigated further as the score met one of the criteria for being a substantial disruption, the score for the *Support dimension* had dropped to a 5, and also there had been a change in the *Relationships outside university dimension*. Student 10 explained that at this time she had felt not supported by one lecturer. When she had asked a question she felt she was treated disrespectfully.

Just some trouble with some lecturers that you know I felt really unwanted as a Uni student it was terrible, but you can't dwell on it forever.

Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

While this was a concern she noted that you can't dwell on it, this attitude was reflected in her subsequent scores for the *Support dimension*, that increased following the incident. When questioned about the change in the *Relationships outside university dimension*, Student 10 was unsure why she may have scored this as a 6. Based on the semi-structured interview data, Point D was also classified as a *minor disruption* for this student.

As the student experience for Student 10 contained no major disruptions, she was placed into Group 1 as a student with a demonstrably consistent first year experience with 0 or only minor disturbances. Nine other students were similarly classified using the same analytical criteria as Student 10.

5.2.2 SES results reflecting a consistent first year experience for the student but including 1 or 2 substantial disturbances

Following confirmation from the semi-structured interview data, 15 students' ratings were categorised as displaying 1 or 2 *major disturbances* to their first year experience. The SES data for two students, representative of this group, have been provided along with a visual representation of the students' first year experience to assist the reader to better understand why students were classified in this manner. Each figure is followed by a commentary describing the researcher's thought process combined with student comments that justified the judgement made.

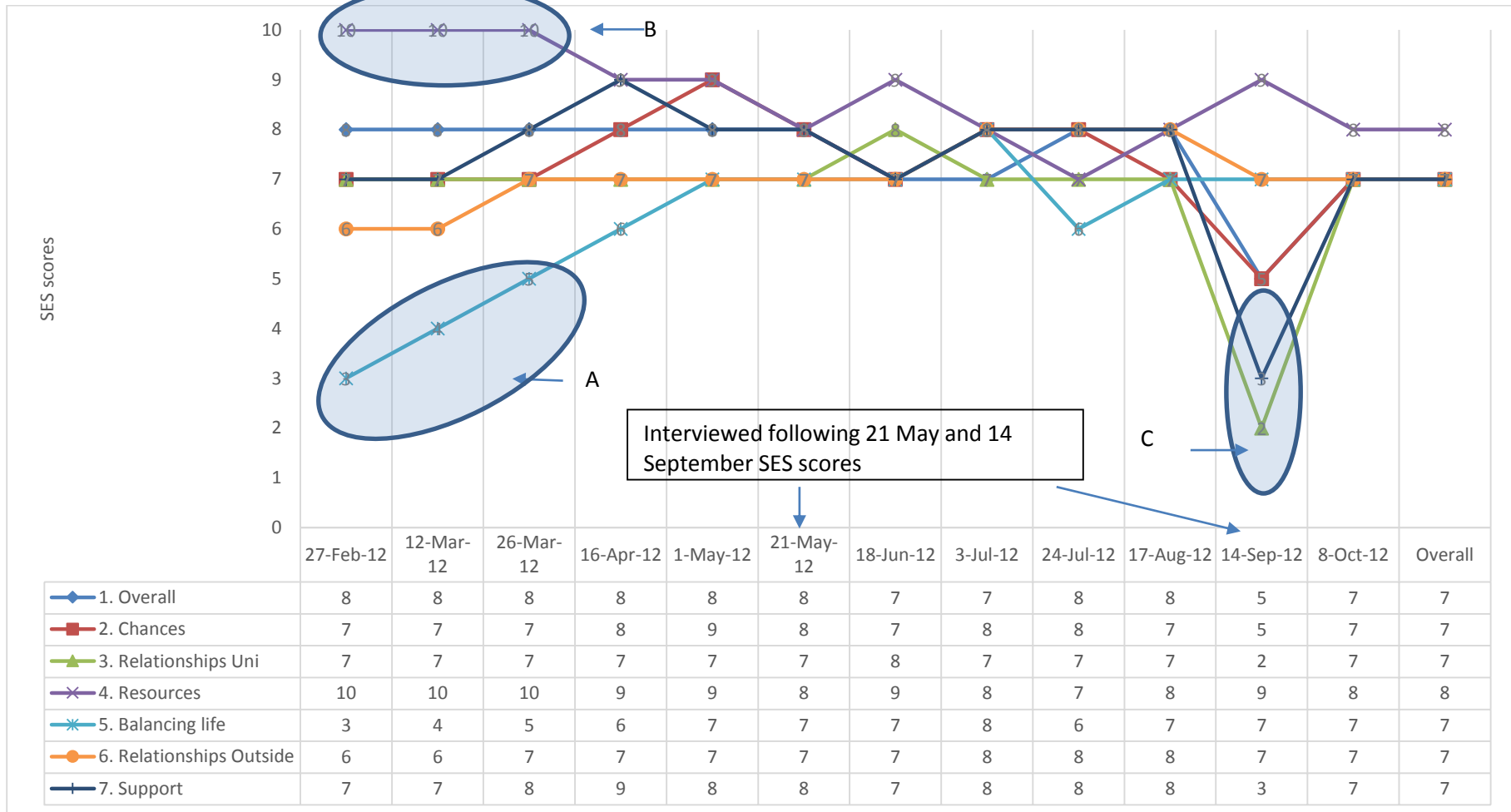


Figure 15. Student SES scores across the first year of university study (Student 27). This graph illustrates a student with a reasonably consistent first year experience with 1 or 2 major disturbances, defined as SES dimensions with scores <5 and/or significant distress identified in the interview.

The three instances when Student 27 was identified as possibly experiencing substantial disturbances are labelled as A, B, and C, on Graph 2. Point A on Graph 2 was seen as worthy of investigation as the scores for the *Balancing Life dimension* were 5 or less in magnitude. The student described Point A as resulting from moving to a new town to commence studies, difficulties with adapting to new family roles and responsibilities, and his spouse's commencement of full-time employment.

We'd moved 4 times in a year nearly, and changing careers, and 2 children under 3, and trying to work out day-care, and keeping the other half happy, and I think at the time of the 3 we might have been having trouble there.

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

At this same time the student's parents and friends questioned his decision to give up a previously successful career that impacted on his relationship with people outside the university.

I had put 20 years into my other [career] and some people invested a lot of time and money into it too as well and they were like probably wondering [about my decision to study].

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

Figure 15 identifies that the SES scores associated with the *Balancing Life dimension* changed from a 3 to a 5 over this period suggesting that this concern diminished as the semester progressed.

The 5 meant that at that time it could still go either way. It could get better or worse. That was usually revolving mainly around family situation and whether my wife would be happy with the situation.

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

The researcher classified Point A as a *major disturbance* as the student described the issues he faced as causing distress, and that the issues continued for an extended period of time.

Point B on Figure 15 was investigated as the SES scores for the *Resources dimension* were higher than those for the other dimensions. Student 27 explained that he was very happy with the resources available to him especially since this was much different to his past workplace.

Pretty much everything that I think I've needed, or any help I've ever needed, has been available to me. I've come from a place where it was basically a dog eat dog situation, here everyone wants to do everything for you, which to me is a 10.

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

The student could not explain why his score had dropped after this initial period. As there was no specific incident or experience that could be associated with this change in SES score Point B was deemed to be a *minor disturbance* to the student's first year experience based on the condition that the change in SES score must be with significant student distress during the semi-structured interview.

The third possible *major disturbance* (Point C) was identified because four of the SES dimensions received a rating of 5 or less. Student 27 associated receiving a poor mark on an assessment item, and feeling disrespected by a lecturer when the mark was questioned, to the drop in SES scores.

After receiving a mark recently, which I think was unfair, it just made me realise that things were not as rosy as I had thought. If it doesn't improve, if the situation is not fixed, I'll have to think about whether I continue or not.

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

I was made to feel below the person, below the lecturer.

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

The SES scores reflect that this experience adversely affected the student's relationship with university people (staff), attitude towards being a university student, and confidence in his ability to successfully complete assessments.

I've had this recent experience and when I wrote those scores and sent them back to you it was at the time I was most upset by the situation.

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

The researcher categorised Point C as a *substantial disturbance* following confirmation from the semi-structured interview data.

Following the submission of the 14 September 2012 SES scores, the researcher contacted Student 27 for a semi-structured interview. At the conclusion of the interview the researcher swapped roles to that of First Year Coordinator to support the student and to avail him of the university support available to meet his needs. The subsequent set of SES scores for Student 27 (8 October) reflected an improved outlook with all dimensions being rated at 7 or above.

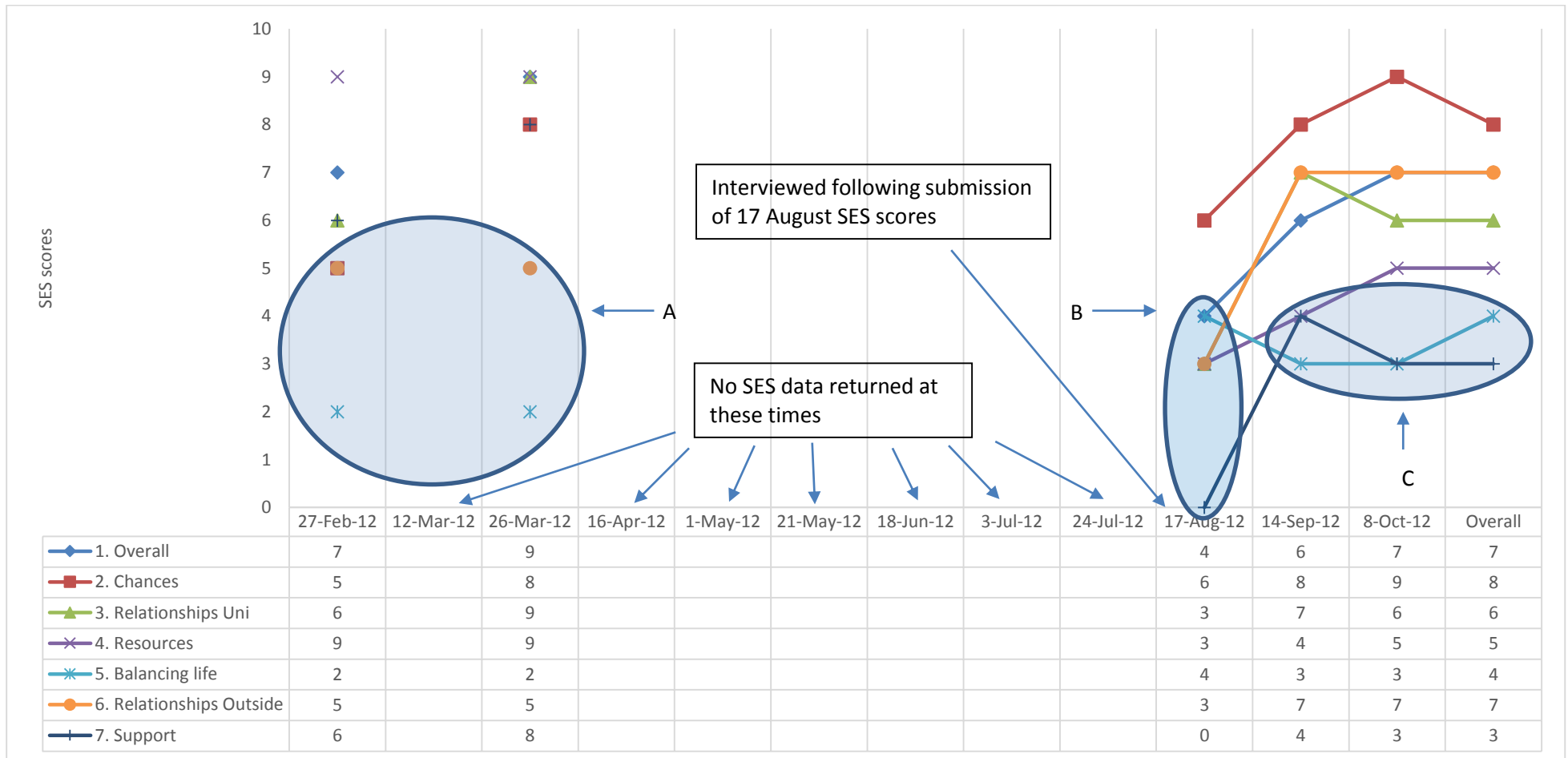


Figure 16. Student SES scores across their first year of university study (Student 17). This graph illustrates a student with a reasonably consistent first year experience with 1 or 2 major disturbances, defined as SES dimensions with scores <5 and/or significant distress identified in the interview.

The second example of a student's experience categorised as being reasonably consistent but displaying 1 or 2 *major disturbances* to their first year experience is that of Student 17 (Figure 16). Point A was viewed by the researcher as requiring further investigation as the SES scores for the *Chances of being successful*, *Balancing Life*, and *Relationships outside the university dimensions* all received scores of 5 or less in the 27 February 2012 survey. At the start of her studies Student 17 struggled to balance her time due to being unsure of what was required of her by the university. She felt that she was not good at time management and had trouble fitting university into her life.

I didn't know, it could go 50/50 because I didn't know how good I was going to be coping at Uni and how hard the assignments were going to be.

Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

I've always been really bad with time management and just balancing everything out. I think at the start I was scared that I wouldn't have enough time for Uni.

Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

Student 17 prioritised her studies to the point where she withdrew from other aspects of her life. At this same time the majority of her friends moved away to study and made new friends, causing to her feel isolated.

Uni is my priority so I didn't know whether I was going to be able to keep up my relationships outside of Uni.

Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

I was missing my friends that had moved away to study.

Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

As Student 17 had made a point that these issues were a continuing worry for her and the scores did not show improvement, Point A was classified as being a *major disturbance* to her first year student experience.

The 17 August 2012 SES scores were identified by the researcher as requiring investigation due to six of the seven dimensions receiving ratings below 5 (Point B). The decrease in ratings in 4 of the SES dimensions (*Overall feeling of being a university student*, *Relationships with university people*, *Resources*, and *Support*) by 3 or more points since the last submission of SES scores also made this a point of interest. When the interview data were analysed the reason cited by Student 17 for the sizeable decrease in her SES scores was due to lack of finances to meet her needs.

I can't get any financial support from anywhere. I am not eligible for any of the scholarships but my parents still find it hard to chip in. Beside the money I spend on fuel I am saving almost a 100% of it for bills for next year for like my rego and insurance and stuff like that. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

Student 17 tried to be financially independent and felt guilty when she asked her parents for help.

I want to have the money to support myself, and when I do need things, I am more reluctant to ask my parents for them. I just go without. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

Student 17's financial concerns not only had an effect on her ability to meet her living expenses, but also impacted on her ability to be 'a normal 18 year old'. She felt she was missing out on opportunities (like trips to New Zealand) because she did not have sufficient funds. Student 17 thought by doing more part-time work she could afford to do the things she wanted, but her studies meant this was not an option. Student 17 described this as a very frustrating time and she did not have any idea as to how it could be remedied.

I am just turning 18. I am wanting to become more independent and I only have time for a part time job so I find that's really hard not having the money. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

While Student 17 was struggling for her independence and wishing to be treated as an adult, she also identified that the lecturer's attitude towards the students in her classes caused her concern.

Sometimes I feel like just because I am fresh out of high school I get treated like a child. Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

The student comments highlighted that Point B was a major concern and one that continued right through till the end of her first year of university study. Based on the combination of the SES data and the interview information provided by the student, the researcher classified Point B as being a *major disturbance* for Student 17.

Point C was the final section of Student 17's SES data that was investigated due to SES dimensions receiving scores of 5 or less. As there was no semi-structured interview data to confirm the level of concern the student was experiencing at that time, Point C could not be classified as a *major disturbance*. This was a logical classification as it appears from the SES data that Student 17's concerns about

Balancing life and *Support* as indicated in Point C are a continuation of her concerns raised in the previous discussion of Points A and B above.

5.2.3 SES results reflecting 3 or more substantial disturbances to the student's first year experience

While the majority of the students who provided SES data (25/38) experienced 2 or less *major disturbances* to their first year student experience, a group of four students were found to have faced more situations that caused them concern. The SES data for two of these students has been provided to assist the reader to develop an understanding of the difficulties students in Group 3 confronted during their first year of study. As described previously, the SES data were used to identify possible *major disturbances* that were then followed up in the semi-structured interviews for clarification and possible confirmation.

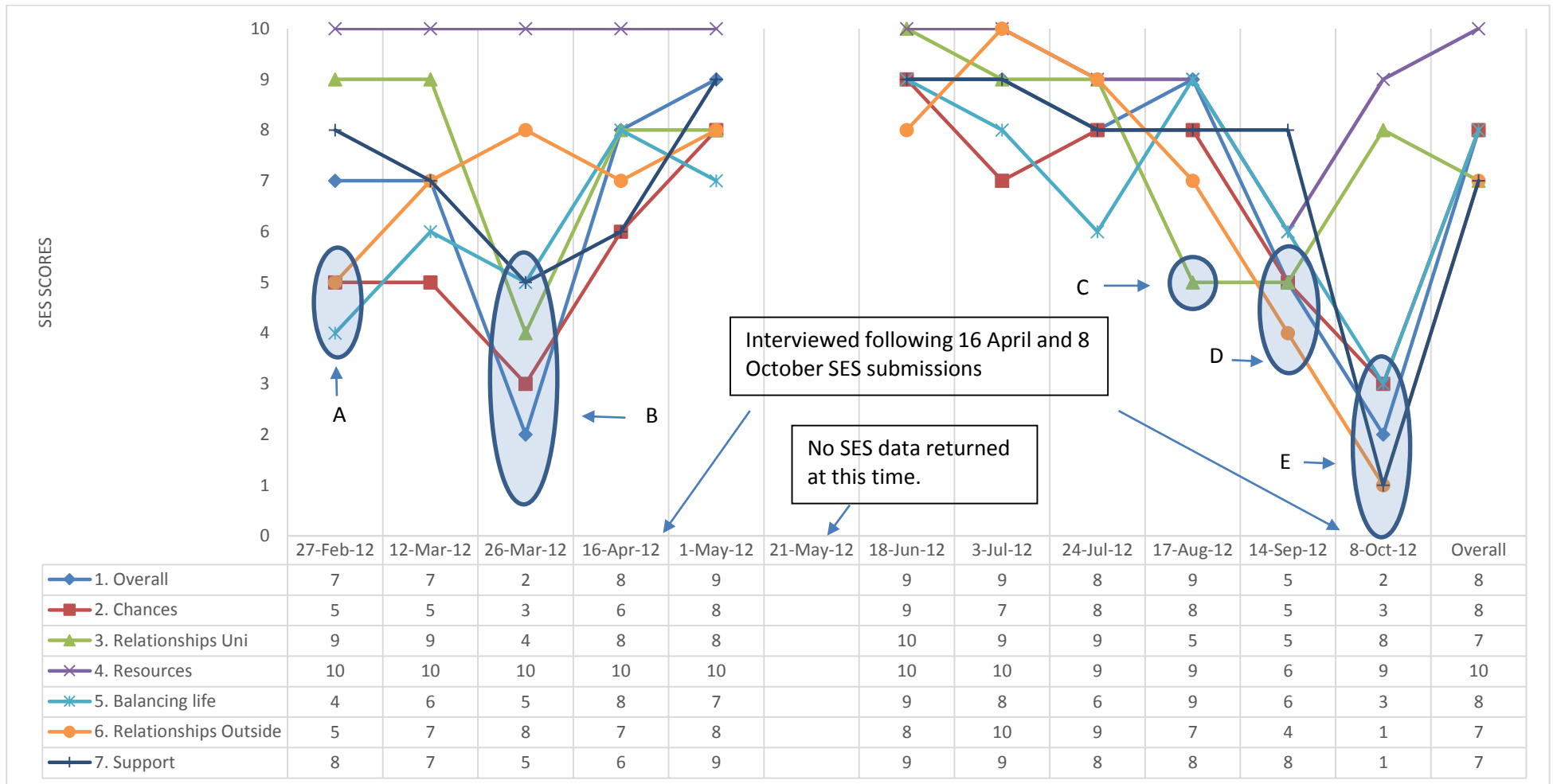


Figure 17. Student SES scores across their first year of university study (Student 26). This graph illustrates a student with 3 or more major disturbances to their first year experience, defined as SES dimensions with scores <5 and/or significant distress identified in the interview.

The five sections of the student's first year experience that were identified by the researcher as possibly representing *major disturbances* are labelled on Figure 17 by the Points A to E. At the very start of her first semester of study (Point A), Student 26 returned scores for three dimensions of the SES, of 5 or less. When asked why she rated the *Chances of being successful dimension* as a 5, Student 26 explained that she was unsure of the assessments that were to come in the future.

I got well above average grades at school but I wasn't sure if I could do it at university. That's why I put it right bang in the middle.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Not only was she unsure of what was still to come but Student 26 had also started a new part-time job. As she had not been employed during her years in secondary school it was a new experience and she was finding that there was not enough hours to continue doing what she had in the past. These changes appear to have impacted on her *Balancing Life* score.

Having Uni and work is mind blowing.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

My family and I are still fairly close although I haven't really spent too much time at home.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

I think at the start it was really hard to keep that social interaction with those people outside Uni.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

These same reasons were described as accounting for the score of 5 for the *Relationships outside university dimension*. Although these issues were a concern the scores on the following SES increased and the student interview data supported that Student 26 was learning to cope with these changes.

I found the balance between studying and other things.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Point A was classified as representing a *minor disturbance*.

The 26 March 2012 SES scores, labelled as Point B, were investigated by the researcher as five of the SES dimensions were rated with scores of 5 or less, with substantial decreases associated with the *Overall feelings about being a university student dimension*, and *Relationships with university people dimensions* (decreasing by 5 points). Student 26 explained that she was struggling to understand the assessment

requirements and did not feel comfortable in asking the lecturers for assistance. Some of this difficulty was associated with her disability (hearing loss).

I didn't understand what the lecturers wanted. For me it is harder to understand because of my hearing loss. I was getting all this information about the assignments thrown at me during class but in my brain they were contradicting each other. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Student 26 did not associate the decrease in her *Relationships with university people dimension* with the efforts or attitudes of the lecturers but more so with her belief that she was not allowed to ask for help.

I felt really stupid for not understanding. I just cut that bridge. My lecturers asked me how I was going with the work and asked if I had any questions, but I was like Oh good, it's all good. It was like, oh they don't want to hear this, and they have already had to explain it a 100 times. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

When asked about her scores for the *Support dimension* of the SES, Student 26 described that she was stressing over her assessments and this was causing concerns at home as her parents were worried about her. They tried to get her to do less study and be more involved in family activities. Student 26 interpreted this as providing less support.

My family is still supportive. They don't like that I tend to stress a lot. I guess they think that I am taking Uni too seriously. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

This same score was affected by her lack of time to meet up with friends due to working on assignments.

A lot of friends from school got really ticked off at me because I didn't have time to go to the movies every day. I told them I don't have time to go out and spend with you every day, I actually have to do things now. It's not like high school where you can do an assignment the night before. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Although the SES scores for the following survey improved in nearly all dimensions, Point B was classified as a *major disturbance* due to the many and varied issues the student faced, the substantial drop in SES scores, and the strength of the student comments in the semi-structured interview. When the 26 March SES scores were submitted the student was invited to meet for an interview but the semi-structured interview was postponed to a later date. The original meeting time was changed to a support session with the researcher reverting to the role of First Year Coordinator as this was deemed to meet the student's immediate needs for support and guidance.

Over the next few months the student's SES scores were relatively consistent until there was a substantial decrease in the score associated with the *Relationship with university people dimension*, identified as Point C. Student 26 explained that this score was due to an interaction with a lecturer where she felt her questions were not answered respectfully.

One of the lecturers I asked for assistance would give me any help. She said the assessment information is on the task sheet so you should know it. Well I didn't.
Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Point C was an upsetting experience for Student 26 but was classified as a *minor disturbance* due to the student stating:

I got over it, submitted the assignment, and now I don't have anything to do with her.
Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Later in the year Student 26 again faced concerns that impacted negatively on her experience as a first year university student (Point D) 4 SES dimensions were rated as 5 or less and five dimensions reflected a decrease of 3 points or more. Student 26 explained that the score of 5 on the *Overall feeling about being a university student dimension* was due to growing doubts about the appropriateness of her career choice.

I didn't know if I really wanted to be a teacher anymore and I didn't want anyone convincing me otherwise.
Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

At this same time Student 26 identified that there was conflict with her parents due to her withdrawal from family activities.

That was the time where everything started to happen again and I couldn't study at home I couldn't do anything at home.
Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

With these career doubts came doubts about her ability to meet the university's expectations. Student 26 also made mention that she was experiencing some difficulties with her lecturers again.

I was sort of very confused and asking questions and not getting the answers. I wasn't the only one, a lot of people in that course were left gobsmacked.
Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Point D was classified by the researcher as representing a *major disturbance*. There were many factors at play at the same time, the SES scores across the dimensions were low, and there had been significant decreases in the SES scores (across numerous dimensions) since the last survey.

Following the emailing of the 8 October 2012 SES survey, Student 26 submitted her lowest scores for the entire year (Point E) with the SES scores for 5 dimensions being rated at 3 or lower. The decrease in the score for the *Support dimension* changed from an 8 to a 1. Student 26 was invited to participate in another semi-structured interview and this proceeded on 19 October 2012. The main reason identified for the low scores was a heavy increase in family expectations to do housework and look after siblings.

She thinks that because it is the end of semester that I am going to have loads of time on my hands. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

The heavy assessment workload at the end of Semester 2 was also noted as causing issues with her relationship with friends.

I don't know whether it is the difference between TAFE and Uni but she doesn't have as many assignments or anything. I'm like, well sorry I can't hang out, I've got like 3 assignments due this week. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Student 26 continued to have difficulty with finding a quiet place to study and access to a computer to access course materials. This was described by her as being the cause for the significant drop in score for the *Support dimension* of the SES (from 8 down to 1). A key point reflecting the lack of support that Student 26 was experiencing at this time is reflected in her statement that:

I have to walk home tonight. I am not going to get picked up because I should just fit in with their daily schedule. Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

Point E was classified as representing a *major disturbance* to the first year experience of Student 26. Of the 5 possible major disturbances, three were classified as major in nature, thus Student 26 was placed in Group 3 – students with 3 or more major disturbances during their first year experience.

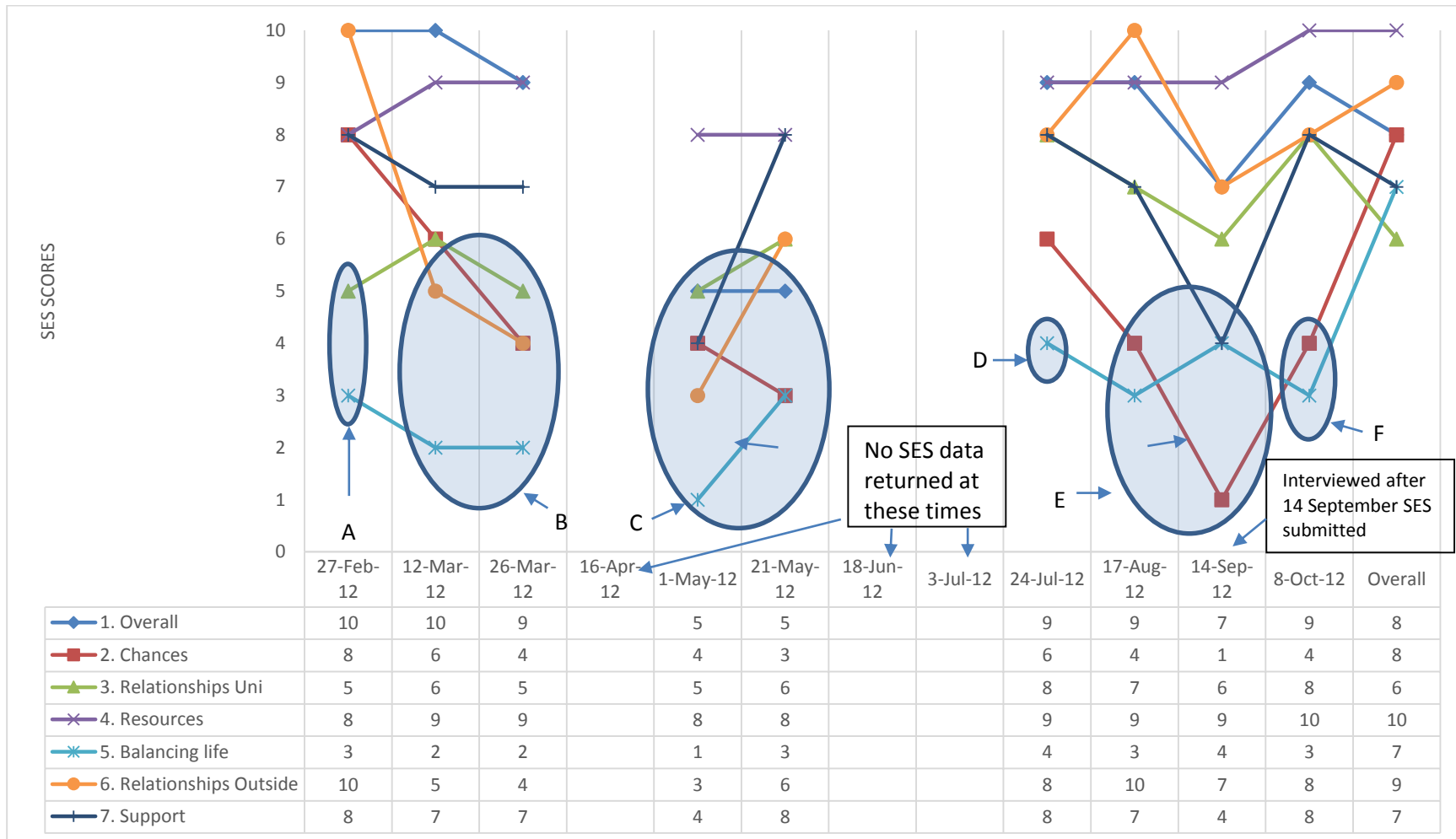


Figure 18. Student SES scores across their first year of university study (Student 28). This graph illustrates a student with 3 or more major disturbances to their first year experience, defined as SES dimensions with scores <5 and/or significant distress identified in the interview.

Six possible major disturbances were identified by the researcher for further investigation when analysing Student 28's SES survey data. The semi-structured interview data were analysed to identify the reasons why Student 28 associated scores of 5 or lower for the dimensions of the SES. Student 28 explained that initially (Point A) she was struggling to get used to the change in expectations from High School to university. The heavy workload was the main issue at this time.

I just felt that maybe it wasn't the best choice. I was like I preferred to be a high school student back then because it was a little bit easier.

Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

While this issue was a concern at the start for Student 28, it was not associated with any of the following scores for the SES dimensions and she still felt confident she would be able to successfully complete her studies (*Chances of being successful dimension* = 8). Point A was classified as a *minor disturbance*.

In the following SES survey (12 March 2012), Student 28's SES score for the *Relationships outside university dimension* decreased markedly from a 10 to a 5, and her score for the *Balancing life dimension* moved even lower from a 3 to a 2 (Point B). When asked about the circumstances behind this change, Student 28 explained that her father had incurred a major injury meaning he was incapacitated, could not work, and could not care for the younger children in the family. As Student 28's parents were separated, she was required to take on added responsibilities for the care of her father and younger siblings

A lot of stuff happened with dad's leg because it wasn't healing properly.

Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

With the added responsibilities and needing to be her father's carer, Student 28 was unable to attend on-campus classes regularly resulting in increased doubt about whether she could satisfactorily complete her assessments.

Point B was classified by the researcher as representing a *major disturbance* to Student 28's first year experience, as she reported that she was disengaged from the university staff and students, lost confidence in her ability to be successful, and was very concerned about not being able to balance her life. This issue was also not short-lived and continued for an extended period of time. Student 28 was interviewed on 15 March 2012 and this was followed by a support session where the researcher changed role to

that of First Year Coordinator to provide support to the student. Notwithstanding, the scores for the subsequent SES surveys continued to decrease or maintain their previous levels.

After Student 28 submitted her 1 May 2012 SES scores (Point C), the researcher noted that six dimensions were scored at 5 points or lower, and there had been a substantive decrease in the *Overall feeling about being a university student dimension*. Student 28 explained that her father's health and the need for her to care for him and her siblings was still a major issue. Also she was looking for support from her lecturers to get extensions and was finding this difficult.

At school it was easier to get an extension. If you were away teachers offered them and asked how they could help. I just felt there was so much pressure with being a Uni student. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

Student 28 also described conflict with her mother at this time and feeling like she was not getting enough help to look after her siblings. This affected her score for the *Support dimension*. Point C was classified as a *major disturbance* due to the number of SES dimensions being rated at 5 or lower, the significant drop in the student's rating for their *Overall feeling of being a university student* and the pattern of low scores preceding this disturbance.

Although the 24 July 2012 SES scores submitted by Student 28 displayed a marked improvement (Point D) from those that preceded this time, the researcher chose to analyse the interview data regarding the score of 4 for the *Balancing life dimension*, and also to identify what may have caused this change in perspective. The student associated the change in her SES scores to receiving positive assessment results, a marked improvement in her father's health, and commencing a part-time job that she enjoyed.

Things just slowly started to come together. I was getting interviewed to be a group leader and I was really happy because I was working with kids. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

I had that break and I came back with a new perspective. I got really good marks. I think I got a Distinction and 2 Credits. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

Dad got better so he could take on more chores. It was just one less stress that I had to think of. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

At this same time Student 28 had met her new lecturers and found their positive attitude really helped her be positive too.

S was really good, she walked into the classroom and was bright and bubbly. I like that. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

The score of 4 for the *Balancing life dimension* was described by Student 28 as an improvement, and she started to see that she could manage all her responsibilities.

I was starting to balance things better. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

Point D was classified as a *minor disturbance* as there was only one dimension of the SES rated at 5 or below and there had not been any substantial decreases in the dimensions.

The following two sets of SES scores (Point E), reflected a marked decrease in how Student 28 perceived her student experience, with the *Chances of being successful* and *Support dimensions* reflecting the greatest decrease (decreasing by 3 points). When the student interview data were analysed the reasons for the changes in the SES scores were explained as being due to ill health. Student 28's comments also reflect how she continued to struggle with university expectations.

I was sick and you know in high school when you are sick the teachers just take all that work away and say don't worry about it. At Uni they don't take that work away, it's still there. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

The drop in score for the *Chances of being successful dimension* on the 14 September 2012 SES was interrogated further. Student 28 described that she had received a low mark on an assessment and this had upset her. She perceived that the information she had been provided before the assessment had been flawed.

I just failed my whole assignment because what they teach here and what the actual curriculum is are 2 different things. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

During the time Student 28 was unwell, she did not attend classes regularly and also missed work sessions at her part-time job. This was described as resulting in feelings of being alone and unsupported.

I just felt as if I was closed off from the world. I was in bed for 2 weeks. I hardly spoke to anyone, it just felt as if I was all alone. Student 28(F, 18, FinF)

Point E was classified as a *major disturbance* to Student 28's first year experience, due to the range of issues she faced, the level of concern she associated with this experience (low SES scores), and the period of time the student was affected by these concerns.

The final section of Student 28's first year experience that was identified as possibly reflecting a major disturbance is labelled as Point F on Figure 18. Although there was an improvement in the SES scores compared to the 14 September 2012 survey, two dimensions still received scores below 5. This set of SES scores followed the completion of the semi-structured interview with Student 28 and as such, the reasons why these scores were applied and the significance of these reasons to the student could not be confirmed. Point F was classified as a *minor disturbance* based on this lack of substantiating information as well as the reasonably high scores for the other dimensions.

Overall the researcher identified 3 major disturbances to Student 28's first year experience and so placed this student into Group 3 - Students with 3 or more major disturbances during their first year experience.

5.2.4 Student's whose first year enrolment was interrupted

Of the 38 students that supplied one or more SES scores, nine chose to discontinue their studies before the end of their first year of study and were classified in Group 4 - student's whose first year enrolment was interrupted. Six of the students did not re-enrol in Semester 2, one student changed to a different degree program, one withdrew before the end of Semester 1, and one completed their Headstart program. All students within this group were contacted and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to identify the underlying causes for the issues they were facing due to supplying SES scores with at least one dimension being rated at 5 or lower. Only two students completed a formal semi-structured interview. Three students held phone conversations with the researcher to discuss their issues but at these times the researcher took on the role of First Year Coordinator as the student's need was deemed to be most important. The remaining four students were emailed invitations to participate in semi-structured interviews but did not reply to the request.

The SES data for two students deemed as being representative of Group 4, has been provided, as too are pictorial representations of each of these student's first year experience over time. A commentary describing key aspects of these journeys has been included in a fashion similar to those provided for Groups 1 to 3.

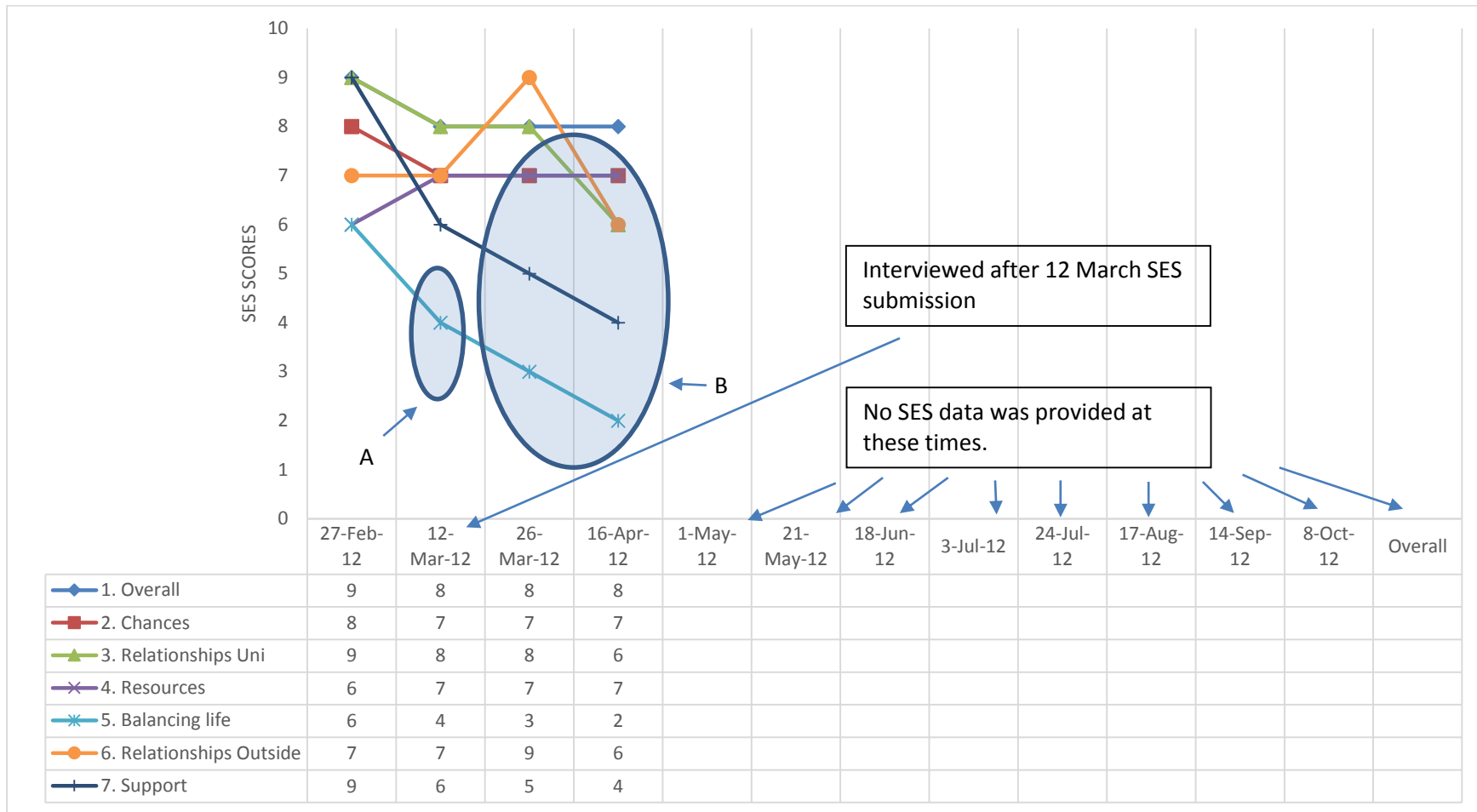


Figure 19. Student SES scores across their first year of university study (Student 2). This graph illustrates a student whose first year enrolment was interrupted, defined as not enrolled in Semester 2

Student 2 was invited to attend a semi-structured interview after he submitted his 12 March 2012 SES scores (Point A) due to there being a decrease of 3 points in the *Support dimension* and a score below 5 for the *Balancing life dimension*. He described being very focused on his studies.

It's about me trying to accomplish something for myself. An opportunity of getting out of the rut of the jobs which I have had for the last 20 years. I am running out of time.
Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

When asked why the score for the *Balancing life dimension* was a 4, Student 2 noted a range of contributing factors. Firstly he was struggling to complete the readings required for one subject. Student 2 felt this was affecting not just his other subjects but also limited the time he had for himself. He described that he weathered this storm and moved on.

The amount of reading and the amount of web time that I am doing, and the amount of note taking I am doing is huge. I felt like I was chucked in the deep end and that was overwhelming. Having said that, this week however, I am on top of it now.
Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

I just thought, oh my gosh its coming up to week 4, should I drop this course, should I go and see if I could do it in semester three. I just went to myself, no just get over it, suck it up and deal with it.
Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

Student 2 noted that he had a full life and this meant he did not have any free time to himself.

I do work full time, I do have a young family and I do have university.
Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

I don't watch any TV, which is probably not that good a thing anyway, but I don't have any time.
Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

When quizzed about the decrease in the score for the *Support dimension*, Student 2 explained that it was associated with uncertainty as to whether he could keep up with his studies or need to drop a subject.

I think that was probably a little bit of anxiety on my own part, being swamped thinking oh god I've got to get this done. I looked at my study schedule and saw I had till week 4 to drop a subject. I was thinking maybe I need to drop a subject.
Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

He explained that he had support from his friends and family for doing his studies but also worried he was not supporting his wife sufficiently to meet her needs.

If anyone's suffering it's probably my wife not getting enough time but I make sure I am getting time with the children. Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

Point A was classified as a *minor disturbance* based on the student's comment that he had faced his difficulties and come out the other side. It can be seen from the data that Student 2's rating for the *Balancing life dimension* of the SES continued to decrease in the following surveys. As there were no subsequent semi-structured interviews to substantiate the reasons and depth of difficulties associated with the SES scores, it was not be classified as a *major disturbance*.

After student 2 submitted his 26 March 2012 and 16 April 2012 SES scores he was invited to attend semi-structured interviews but these invitations were not accepted. The researcher, in his role as First Year Coordinator, contacted the student to offer support during this time and directed the student to university support staff. At the end of Semester 1 the student chose not to enrol in Semester 2. The reason for this change was explained as taking up a highly paid work position within the Mining sector. Based on this information Point B could be classified as a *major disturbance* leading to the withdrawal of the student.

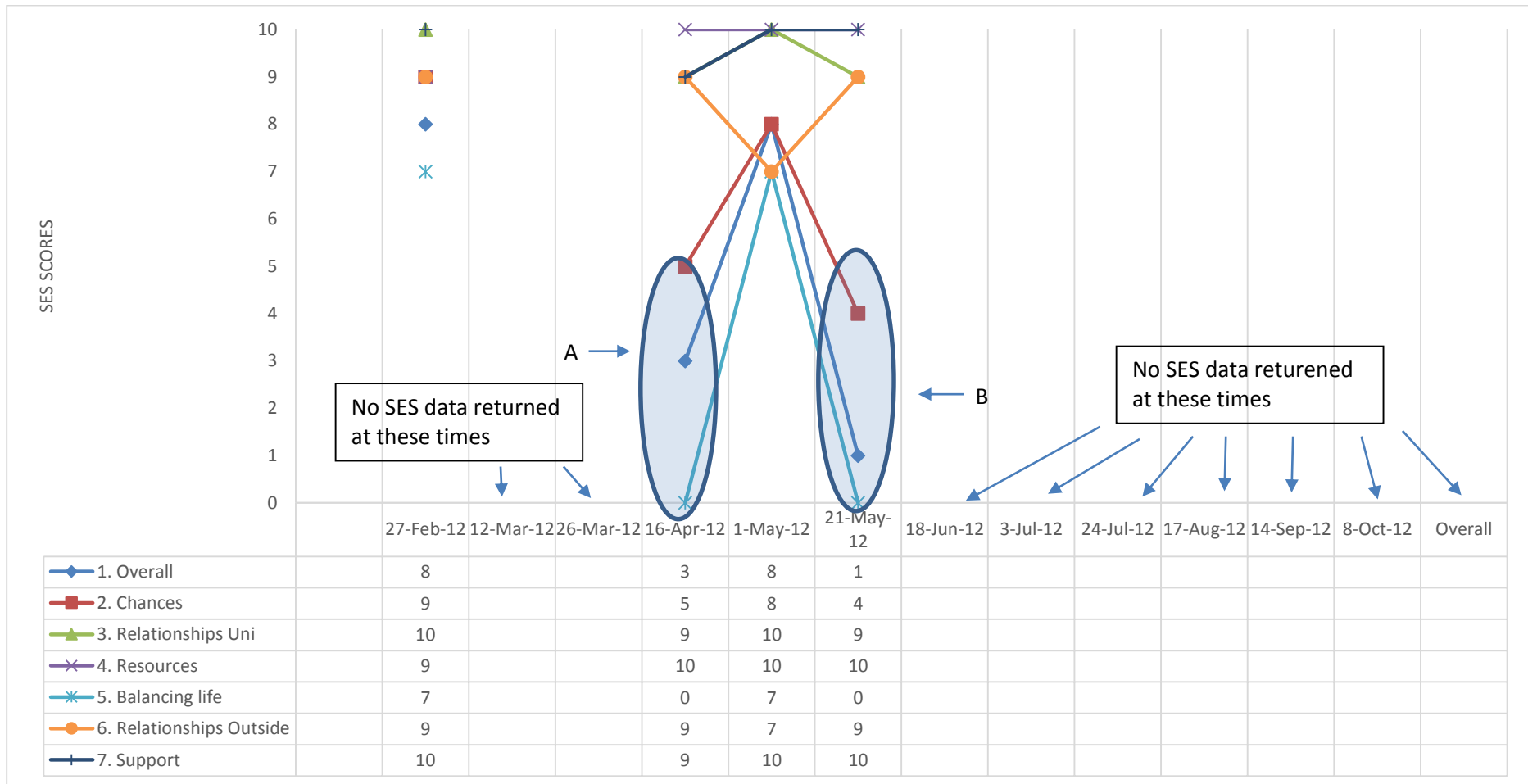


Figure 20. Student SES scores across their first year of university study (Student 36). This graph illustrates a student whose first year enrolment was interrupted, defined as not enrolled in Semester 2.

Following the submission of the 16 April 2012 SES scores, Student 36 was contacted with the goal of organising a semi-structured interview to discuss the decrease in SES scores (Point A). During the phone calls with the student to organise the meeting, the researcher was called on to offer guidance about university support available to her given her situation. The issues the student faced were balancing her part-time job, her lack of commitment to her career goal, and her need for a break from study. Student 36 also noted her awareness that supplying scores that were very low would result in being contacted by the researcher (who was also the First Year Coordinator) to discuss issues she was facing at that time. The SES data and the information provided during the phone conversations confirm that Point A could be classified as a *major disturbance*. Further, the student triggered the request for an interview intentionally as a way of receiving support from the First Year Coordinator.

The next SES scores submitted by Student 36 showed a marked improvement. Later in Semester 1 the student submitted SES scores similar to when she was previously facing significant difficulties (Point B). Once again the student was contacted by the researcher and invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. This offer was not taken up by the student. Student 36 made phone contact with the researcher and identified a need for support from university staff. The researcher swapped roles (in the same manner as earlier in the semester) and discussed the assistance available to her and the options she had if she decided to discontinue her studies. The student chose to withdraw from her studies and did not re-enrol in Semester 2. Based on this information Point B was classified as representing a *major disturbance*.

In summary, within the cohort of students who completed at least 1 SES score, 28 out of 38 students (74%) were classified as having experienced 1 or more major disturbances to their first year experience, with the other 10 out of 38 (26%) were categorised as displaying a consistent first year experience without major disturbances. Based on these data it is clear that the majority of students in this cohort were in need of some form of support at some stage during their first year of study. Unfortunately, as discussed previously, research tells us that these same students may be uncomfortable in asking for help when it is needed. For the students who were classified as experiencing a consistent first year without major disturbances it may

have been that they were “able to shield their studying from competing behaviours or distractions, and maintain high levels of engagement” (Gersten 1998, cited in Gettinger, 2002, p. 353).

Students from first in family or low SES backgrounds have been regularly identified as facing more difficulties than students whose families had experience with university study or resided within a geographic area containing larger proportions of professional workers (workers requiring higher level skills and knowledge) (Baum et al., 2010; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Devlin, 2013; Kuh et al., 2006). In this present study, 18/25 (72%) of students with first in family backgrounds and 10/13 (77%) of students who were not first in family experienced at least 1 major disturbance to their first year experience. Thus, it would seem that first in family background did not affect the students’ university experience when compared to the students who were not classified as first in family. This result, on first inspection, aligns with the results of the 2009 AUSSE survey that stated that “being first in family to participate in higher education has almost no impact on key facets of engagement or on outcomes” (ACER, 2010a, p. 3). When viewed more closely though, the AUSSE result reflects only those activities that are seen as directly influencing academic outcomes and learning and do not include aspects of the student’s life outside their studies. With this in mind, another plausible reason for this result may be that the students who were not first in family were influenced by the majority views of their first in family peers who they interact with at university. It could possibly be the case that the powerful guiding influence of family who have experienced university study is tempered by the large proportion of students in this study who do not have this same understanding. It may also be the case that the information provided to the students who are not first in family is out-dated or not relevant for students studying today.

Not only are the types of disturbances and the reasons behind these disturbances important to ascertain but also when the disturbances are occurring needs to be considered. Figures 15-20, identify that the major disturbances are not exclusively confined to the first few weeks on the student’s first year of study, but occur at varying times across the year. This clearly supplies further support for the targeted and timely access to support and service provision for first year students across the whole of their first year of study (Kift, 2008a).

When the range of SES dimensions are studied, the researcher found that a low score in one of these dimensions, or across many dimensions, can equally represent a *major disturbance*. The breadth of the SES survey dimensions would seem to have been very effective in offering student's the opportunity to express their concerns on a broad range of contextual dimensions that impact on them during their first year of study. The global dimension, *Overall feeling about being a university student*, would seem, on first appearances, to be able to identify students who are in need of support as it could be assumed that this dimension is affected by any disturbance in the other dimensions. The SES data does not support this assumption. For example Figure 15 shows that even while Student 27 was experiencing great difficulty balancing his life and relationships with his family he still felt positive about being a university student. Similarly, Figure 19 displays Student 2's positive perspective for *Overall feeling about being a university student* while he was also struggling in the same manner as Student 27.

5.2.5 An interpretation of the frequency of major disturbances results and their associated implications

The number of students classified as having experienced at least 1 major disturbance in their first year of university study supports the position that facing a major difficulty is more the norm than having a reasonably easy and successful transition. Based on this information it is clear that the support structures employed by the university must be ongoing and nuanced to specific difficulties individuals within the cohort is facing. For this to occur, regular and accurate information needs to be available to the staff responsible for the First Year Experience and the support agencies they endorse. The Experience Sampling Method used in this study appears to have been successful in meeting this need. With 12 checkpoints spread throughout the year the collection of substantive amounts of data was possible. The collection of SES survey data, while effective in identifying students who may require support, is insufficient to clearly identify the root causes and level of impact of each identified concern. It is clear that the semi-structured interviews add the depth of information that is required to accurately identify the severity of the impact of the concerning dimension/s and the type and level of intervention/support required by the individual student. Interestingly when the students who returned low SES scores were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, this seemed to open the door for the

researcher to fulfil his role as First Year Coordinator and to facilitate access to the broader university services.

I broke down in our last interview. Just having that conversation with you and getting the reassurance there are people here to help and directing people to those people makes a big difference. Even reminding me to go see 'J' [Student Counsellor].
Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

The dual roles of researcher and First Year Coordinator would also seem to have been very effective in catering for the needs of the students in this study. The researcher role justified the regular contact with students to collect the SES data and also made the invitation to participate in the semi-structured interviews less daunting as the student was there to help the researcher and not vice-versa. These opportunities allowed the student to participate on their own terms and also to learn more about the researcher/First Year Coordinator. On numerous occasions the semi-structured interviews were extended to include support from the Coordinator or in some cases the semi-structured interviews were totally replaced with a support session depending on the urgency of the student's needs. For many students in this study, the SES became a support mechanism in itself (e.g. Student 36). Further the semi-structured interviews allowed the First Year Coordinator to build a relationship with the students in the study, which possibly helped the students to perceive they were known by someone, belonged at university, and had a person they could approach if they were in need.

5.3 Timing of major disturbances during first year of study

Following the classification of the students' SES data as representing, or not representing major disturbances, the time of year that the students faced major disturbances was investigated. An analysis of this aspect of the student first year experience was thought warranted as it may provide evidence of when support interventions would be most appropriate and what issues these interventions may need to address.

5.3.1 Frequency of student SES responses including one or more dimensions with a score of 5 or less.

As used previously, a score of 5 or lower on any dimension of the SES was interpreted by the researcher as representing an issue that would require further investigation and may represent the need for support. Table 2 presents the frequency of student SES responses which included at least one score of 5 or lower, across the students' first year of study.

Table 2

Frequency of SES containing a score of 5 or less for 1 or more dimensions

Time of Year	Semester	Week	Student SES Responses with score ≤ 5	Total Student SES Responses	% Student Responses including score ≤ 5
27-Feb-12	1	1	18	30	60%
12-Mar-12	1	3	16	26	62%
26-Mar-12	1	5 Mid-Semester recess	11	23	48%
16-Apr-12	1	8	7	20	35%
1-May-12	1	10	6	22	27%
21-May-12	1	13	6	19	32%
18-Jun-12	1	17 Semester 1 Exam Block	0	10	0%
3-Jul-12		Semester Recess	1	10	10%
24-Jul-12	2	2	4	14	29%
17-Aug-12	2	5	5	15	33%
14-Sep-12	2	9	8	15	53%
8-Oct-12	2	13 Mid-Semester recess	14	27	52%

The data in Table 2 clearly displays the need for targeted support of students at the start of their first year of study with at least 48% of the students providing responses allocating a 5 or lower to at least 1 dimension for the first 3 SES surveys. The frequency of responses decreases over time throughout the first semester, decreasing to approximately one third of the responses by week 13 (2 weeks before the end of teaching for Semester 1). The data clearly supports the need to maintain support structures well beyond the start of the semester and continuing till the end of Semester One.

When the SES data from Semester 2 is interrogated the pattern in the frequency of SES scores for 5 or lower is the opposite of Semester One, with the frequency increasing as the semester progresses. From week 2 to week 13 the percentage of student responses including at least 1 score of 5 increased from 29% to 52%. The data supports the need for intentional support being provided to the students throughout Semester 2 as well as Semester 1.

5.3.2 Issues cited as causing major disturbances to the student first year experience.

While a score of 5 or lower, for 1 or more dimensions of the SES was used to identify students possibly facing issues detrimental to their first year experience, the checking of this score against the student semi-structured interview data enabled the researcher to evaluate the level of ‘disturbance’ to their first year as a university student. Table 3 records reasons cited by students for the disturbance they experienced aligned to the specific SES survey where this disturbance was recorded.

Table 3*Reasons stated by students in semi-structured interviews that resulted in low SES scores*

SES date	SES Number	No. of students experiencing a major disturbance	Reasons cited for major disturbance
27-Feb-12	1	2	Family health issues, family expectations, family responsibilities
12-Mar-12	2	7	University workload, stress, family conflict, missing school friends, family responsibilities
26-Mar-12	3	6	University workload, stress, family conflict, excessive part-time work, financial concerns, lack of clarity of assessments
16-Apr-12	4	3	University workload, stress, family health issues, personal health issues, family responsibilities
1-May-12	5	3	Family health issues(x3), family responsibilities.
21-May-12	6	2	Family health issues (x2)
18-Jun-12	7	2	Difficulties with friends
3-Jul-12	8	1	Difficulties with friends
24-Jul-12	9	2	University workload, part-time work issues
17-Aug-12	10	5	Personal health issues (x2), family conflict, financial concerns, relationship with lecturers
14-Sep-12	11	9	Personal health issues (x2), financial concerns, family responsibilities, assessment issues, relationship issues with lecturers, questioning career choice
8-Oct-12	12	10	Personal health issues (x3), assessment issues, relationship issues with lecturers, financial issues, family responsibilities, lack of time for friends, questioning career choice.

The data in Table 3 displays an ongoing need for university staff to monitor the progress of students throughout their full first year of study. There appears to be no decrease in student concerns when they move from Semester 1 to Semester 2, with time management, and maintaining positive relationships with friends and family, remaining ongoing issues for the students across the whole first year. Difficulties with the workload associated with studying at university was more prominent at the start of the academic year but was still an issue for some students in the latter parts of Semester 2. Interestingly, personal health concerns was noted as causing *major disturbances* near the end of Semester 2 but were not identified as a major concern in Semester 1.

Some surprising aspects come to light within the Table 3 data. Firstly, doubts about career choices would have been thought to be more prominent in Semester 1 than Semester 2 but this was not the case for this cohort of first year students. This may be accounted for by the positioning of the student's first practical placement in schools in September of 2012. This real life experience where students gained first-hand experience of what their future career entailed may have prompted these career choice concerns. Secondly, it was very common for students to confront more than one issue at the same time. For example Student 28 faced her father's ill health, her own sickness, the need to supervise her siblings, and almost failing an assessment, simultaneously during the Semester 2 recess. Thirdly, an assumption, though based on these data, a flawed assumption, is that the frequency of student concerns will decrease as the first year of study progresses due to an improved understanding of what was expected of them, the development of the skills needed to complete their university requirements, and getting their lives organised. The data in Table 3 highlights that for this cohort of students the identified issues continue well into Semester 2 and possibly continue beyond this time, though this would need further research to confirm. Finally, and most obviously and importantly, the data highlights that it is not the difficulty level of the subjects (not identified as a major or common issue in the SES data and semi-structured interviews) that is a significant cause of concern but more so the change in their life dynamics due to taking time out from their 'normal lives' to commit to their studies.

5.3.3 An interpretation of the timing of major disturbances results and their associated implications

The data in Tables 2 and 3 support the findings in Chapter 4 that academic concerns and difficulties arising from relationships with family and friends, are the 2 key factors impacting on the students' first year experience. Firstly, the data provides evidence of the importance of checking, monitoring, and enhancing the student's academic skills from the start of the academic year. Issues associated with university workload issues feature strongly in the first 2 months of the students' academic year. Secondly, the student's relationship with family and friends is highlighted as a contributing factor for major disruptions to the students' first year experience and appears consistently across the full year. The need for a process that informs the student, their families and friends of the issues that may arise and possible strategies to diminish the impact of these issues on their studies is highlighted.

With the identified major disruptions is associated heightened levels of stress which could contribute to physical health concerns for the students, witnessed in this cohort towards the end of Semester 2. The data supports the need to inform students of their susceptibility to feelings of stress as they learn how to cope with their new role as a university student, and to advise them of the support available from a range of university staff if they face difficulties with stress. Whilst the support may be available the need for first year staff to also be aware of the university and community resources available to students and to act as facilitators is critical. As the students in this study predominantly are working part time and/or looking after families, and thus spend limited time on campus, facilitating student access to university support is a key responsibility of the university teaching staff. The need to assign specific staff to teach into first year subjects, staff with a specialised skill set and belief that their role is broader than assisting students to achieve subject objectives, but also includes the pastoral care of the students in their classes, is advised.

5.4 Comparison of Interim SES scores to Final Overall Rating for First Year Experience.

When the final Student Experience Scale (SES) survey was emailed to the students in November they were asked to provide scores that reflected their ‘*overall*’ student experience for their whole first year of study. The goal in requesting this assessment was to allow the researcher to investigate whether the ‘*overall*’ scores aligned with the ‘*interim*’ scores provided by the students on a 2-4 weekly basis throughout the year. Initially the researcher calculated mean scores for each dimension of the SES sets of scores provided by the students. These means were then compared to overall scores to identify possible patterns within the data. Tables 4, 7 and 11 display the results when the mean dimension score was subtracted from the overall dimension score. For example the mean of Student 1’s interim SES scores for the first dimension (*Overall feeling about being a university student*) was 8.9. Her overall rating for dimension 1 was 10. Therefore the difference between these was calculated as $10 - 8.9 = + 1.1$. The data were collated for the same 3 groups as discussed earlier in this chapter:

1. Students with a consistent first year experience with 0 or only minor disturbances
2. Students with a reasonably consistent first year experience with 1 or 2 major disturbances
3. Students with 3 or more major disturbances during their first year experience

5.4.1 Interim versus Overall scores for Group 1

Of the 10 students who were categorized as displaying a consistent first year experience with 0 or only minor disturbances, two students did not submit the final overall SES scores and so were omitted from this analysis.

Table 4

Calculated difference between 'overall' dimension scores and mean of the 'interim' dimension scores (Group 1)

Student	No. Interim surveys	Dim 1: Overall	Dim 2: Success	Dim 3: Relationships university	Dim 4: Resources	Dim 5: Balancing life	Dim 6: Relationships outside university	Dim 7: Support
1	11	+ 1.1	0.0	+ 0.5	+ 0.2	- 0.5	+ 0.3	0.0
8	12	+ 0.2	+ 0.2	+ 0.7	+ 0.1	+ 1.0	+ 0.2	+ 0.2
10	10	+ 0.2	- 0.6	+ 0.7	+ 0.7	+ 1.8	+ 1.5	+ 1.2
13	8	+ 0.2	+ 2.1	- 0.1	- 0.9	+ 2.2	- 0.5	- 0.1
16	3	+ 0.3	+ 1.7	+ 1.0	+ 0.7	+ 1.7	+ 1.3	+ 2.3
22	8	0.0	+ 0.1	- 0.4	- 0.3	+ 0.5	+ 0.1	- 0.3
23	2	0.0	0.0	+ 0.5	0.0	- 0.5	- 1.0	- 1.5
43	3	+ 1.3	0.0	+ 2.0	+ 0.7	- 0.7	+ 1.3	+ 0.3

While no in depth statistical analyses were conducted, the results were investigated to draw conclusions as to the Face Validity of the overall SES scores, and whether they reasonably reflected the information provided by the students throughout the year. Of the 56 differences that appear in Table 4, 36 represent occasions where the overall score was higher than the mean of the interim scores (marked in green) , 13 are lower (marked in red), and 7 are the same (marked in black). On first appearances it may appear that this group of students were more likely to overstate the positive nature of their first year experience when asked to rate their whole first year. For students 16, 23 and 43, the difference between the overall and mean interim scores may be attributed to the small number of interim scores they provided (two or three only). Drawing conclusion from the limited data would not seem appropriate. When the SES and semi-structured interview data from the remaining five students was investigated, a range of reasons for the differences between the overall and mean interim scores became evident. The SES dimensional scores for Students 10 and 13, which commenced the year at 6 or lower, quickly improved to scores of 8 or higher, and maintained this level consistently for the rest of the year. For example, the SES data for Student 10 was as follows:

Table 5

Individual SES data for Student 10

Dimension	27 Feb	12 Mar	26 Mar	16 Apr	1 May	21 May	18 Jun	3 Jul	24 Jul	17 Aug	14 Sep	8 Oct	Mean Score	Overall
1. Overall	8	6	8	8	8	8	No SES data returned	8	No SES data returned	8	8	8	7.8	8
2. Chances of success	7	6	8	8	8	8		8		8	8	7	7.6	7
3. Relationships university	5	6	8	7	7	8		8		8	8	8	7.3	8
4. Resources	6	7	9	10	9	8		8		9	8	9	8.3	9
5. Balancing life	6	5	7	8	6	7		8		8	9	8	7.2	9
6. Relationships Outside	8	7	8	8	7	7		8		6	8	8	7.5	9
7. Support	8	7	8	6	6	6		8		7	5	7	6.8	8

At the start of the year Student 10 provided scores for the *Balancing Life dimension* of 6 and 5, reflecting a cautious start to balancing the activities required of her.

I didn't really know what I was getting myself into. Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

After this time issues with balancing life eased for the student and the scores rose to 8 and consistently maintained this level to the end of the year. For the *Relationships outside university dimension* the student provided scores that were most commonly 8, with three occasions being rated as a 7 and on one occasion a 6. It would seem the overall result for this dimension was higher, but not substantially higher, than the interim data might suggest. With few exceptions, a score of 8 was most prominent amongst the *Relationships with people outside the university dimension*, whereas Student 10 applied a score of 9 for her overall feeling for the year in this dimension. This same pattern was evident in the SES data for Student 13.

The final three students in Group 1 appeared to have provided overall scores that were in close alignment with the scores provided throughout the year. For example, Student 1 provided the following SES data across her first year of study:

Table 6*Individual SES data for Student 1*

Dimension	27 Feb	12 Mar	26 Mar	16 Apr	1 May	21 May	18 Jun	3 Jul	24 Jul	17 Aug	14 Sep	8 Oct	Mean Score	Overall	
1. Overall	9	9	8	9	9	9	9	No SES data returned	9	9	9	9	8.9	10	
2. Chances success	10	10	10	10	10	10	10		10	10	10	10	10	10	
3. Relationships university	8	8	8	8.5	9	8	8		9	9	9	9	9	8.5	9
4. Resources	9	9	9	9	8	8.5	8.5		9	9	9	9	9	8.8	9
5. Balancing life	9	9	9	9	9	9	9		9	9	9	9	8.5	9	8.5
6. Relationships Outside	8	8	8	8	8	8	8		8	9	8.5	8.5	8.5	8.2	8.5
7. Support	10	9	9	9	9	8	9		9	9	9	9	9.5	9	9

Further analysis was completed by the researcher to gauge whether any dimensions appeared to be treated more, or less favourable by the students in Group 1. No distinguishable pattern was noted in this regard. Thus the appearance that the individual students in Group 1 may have overstated the positive nature of their first year experience is not supported.

5.4.2 Interim versus Overall scores for Group 2

Of the 15 students who were categorised as having experienced a relatively consistent first year but faced 1 or 2 major disturbances, 10 provided at least half of the possible interim SES scores (six or more) and were included in the analysis. The SES data for these 10 students was investigated in a similar fashion to Group 1, to ascertain whether the final overall SES scores were a valid reflection of the full year experience of the first year students.

Table 7

Calculated difference between 'overall' dimension scores and mean of the 'interim' dimension scores (Group 2)

Student	No. Interim surveys	Dim 1: Overall	Dim 2: Success	Dim 3: Relationships university	Dim 4: Resources	Dim 5: Balancing life	Dim 6: Relationships outside	Dim 7: Support
4	8	+ 1.1	+ 2.1	+ 0.1	+ 2.0	+ 0.6	+ 0.9	- 0.5
5	9	+ 0.3	+ 1.3	- 0.6	- 1.0	+ 1.2	+ 0.6	+ 0.8
7	5	+ 2.4	+ 1.8	0.0	- 1.0	+ 2.2	+ 2.0	+ 2.4
9	1	0.0	+ 7.0	0.0	0.0	+ 2.0	+ 6.0	+ 4.0
11	8	- 0.9	- 7.3	+ 0.2	- 0.9	- 2.9	+ 0.9	- 1.3
12	9	+ 0.4	+ 1.9	+ 1.9	+ 1.0	+ 2.1	+ 0.5	+ 2.0
14	9	- 1.4	- 0.1	- 0.9	+ 0.3	+ 2.6	+ 1.1	+ 0.6
17	5	+ 0.4	+ 0.8	- 0.2	- 1.0	+ 1.2	+ 1.6	- 1.2
18	6	+ 0.5	+ 0.5	+ 0.7	0.0	+ 1.3	+ 0.8	+ 0.2
19	8	- 0.9	+ 0.6	- 0.3	+ 0.2	+ 0.1	+ 0.1	+ 1.0
20	1	+ 1.0	+ 1.0	- 1.0	- 1.0	+ 5.0	+ 4.0	+ 1.0
21	8	+ 0.1	+ 0.1	+ 0.9	+ 1.5	+ 0.6	+ 1.7	- 0.6
24	9	+ 0.8	+ 0.9	+ 1.2	+ 0.6	+ 2.0	+ 1.3	+ 1.6
27	12	- 0.5	- 0.3	+ 0.3	- 0.8	+ 0.8	- 0.2	- 0.4
30	4	- 0.3	+ 0.2	+ 1.2	- 0.5	+ 1.2	- 0.3	- 0.3

Similar to the Group 1 data, but even more so for the Group 2's data, it would seem on first inspection that the students consistently provided final overall SES scores that were higher than what is represented by the interim SES mean scores. Table 7 includes 71 differences labelled with a **green** font highlighting that the overall SES dimensional score is above the calculated mean interim SES score, with only 29 values being below the calculated mean interim SES score (**red** font). When the students who completed less than half the interim SES scores were excluded from the analysis, 50 values remained which represented overall scores above the calculated mean interim SES scores, with 19 below the calculated mean.

Of the 10 students in Group 2 whose data were analysed the researcher identified 7 who provided overall dimensional scores, that on face value, appeared to inaccurately reflect the full first year experience. Of these seven students, six appeared to provide higher overall SES scores than the data from across the year warranted, with one student understating their experience.

An example of a student providing scores which would seem to be higher than what is reflected in the interim SES scores is that of Student 14.

Table 8

Individual SES data for Student 14

Dimension	27 Feb	12 Mar	26 Mar	16 Apr	1 May	21 May	18 Jun	3 Jul	24 Jul	17 Aug	14 Sep	8 Oct	Mean Score	Overall
1.Overall	10	7	9	No SES data returned	8	9	No SES data returned	No SES data returned	9	8	7	9	8.4	7
2.Chances success	6	6	7		7	6			8	4	3	8	6.1	6
3.Relationships university	8	9	9		8	7			7	7	8	8	7.9	7
4.Resources	8	9	9		9	8			8	9	9	9	8.7	9
5.Balancing life	5	5	7		7	6			6	3	2	8	5.4	8
6.Relationships Outside	9	8	8		8	8			8	7	9	6	7.9	9
7.Support	9	9	8		8	9			8	8	9	8	8.4	9

The first 2 scores for the *Balancing life dimension* were both 5. The reason for this score was attributed by Student 14 to lack of confidence in her time management skills. These scores improved in the 26 March 2012 SES survey to 7.

I knew where my classes were and when I could have time to study.
Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

While these early scores could be discounted in the overall full year experience of the student, the scores for the period 21 May 2012 to 14 September 2012 were very low (6, 6, 3, 2) compared to the overall score of 8 for the *Balancing life dimension*. It is reasonable to assume that an overall final score of 8 for this dimension means the student believed she was successful in balancing most aspects of her life well across her first year of study.

I have a lot of birthdays around now like my birthday is on Tuesday, and I had my little sister's birthday yesterday. My Dad's birthday is soon and Mum just told me that I have to take all this responsibility for my younger siblings. I have to look after them, I have to do more around the house. I'm like, Oh No, how am I going to juggle all this?
Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

Student 14 was deemed by the researcher as providing an overall score for a dimension or dimensions of the SES that was not truly representative of the full first year experience.

Table 9

Individual SES data for student 12

Dimension	27 Feb	12 Mar	26 Mar	16 Apr	1 May	21 May	18 Jun	3 Jul	24 Jul	17 Aug	14 Sep	8 Oct	Mean Score	Overall
1. Overall	7	10	8	No SES data returned	9	9	No SES data returned	No SES data returned	8	8	9	9	8.6	9
2. Chances success	6	6	5		6	5			6	7	7	7	6.1	8
3. Relationships university	5	9	7		10	8			7	9	8	10	8.1	10
4. Resources	8	9	9		8	8			9	10	10	10	9	10
5. Balancing life	5	5	6		7	6			5	6	6	7	5.9	8
6. Relationships Outside	7	7	6		8	7			6	8	9	5	7	7.5
7. Support	8	7	7		8	8			8	8	10	8	8	10

When the *Chances of being successful*, *Balancing life*, and *Support* dimensions were analysed, doubts were raised on the accuracy of the final end of year overall score to reflect the true first year experience for Student 12. While the student appeared to feel like he was well supported throughout the whole year, the scores were all 8's or 7's except for the 14 September 2012 score that was a 10 before dropping back to an 8. The final end of year overall score of 10 for the Support dimension could be reasonably interpreted as a feeling of very high levels of support consistently across the year. The interim scores do not accurately reflect this perspective however. When the student semi-structured interview data were analysed regarding the score of 10 on the 14 September 2012 SES survey, Student 12 was able to identify why it was different to previous scores thus acknowledging that his perception of the level of support had changed to what he had experienced previously.

It was just having the relationship with the lecturers and being able to talk to them. Also when we were on prac we were helped by our mentors. We also had access to a liaison officer that came in checking up on me. They were always checking up on me and seeing how I was going. Student 12 (M, 20, FinF)

Similarly, the end of year overall scores for the *Chances of being successful* and *Balancing life* dimensions could be questioned for Student 12.

In contrast to the six students who could be viewed as providing overall dimension scores higher than that reflected in the interim scores, Student 11 supplied scores which appear to be substantially lower.

Table 10

Individual SES data for Student 11

Dimension	27 Feb	12 Mar	26 Mar	16 Apr	1 May	21 May	18 Jun	3 Jul	24 Jul	17 Aug	14 Sep	8 Oct	Mean Score	Overall
1. Overall	10	9		10		9		9		8	9	7	8.9	8
2. Chances success	10	9	No SES data returned	9	No SES data returned	8	No SES data returned	9	No SES data returned	8	9	4	8.3	1
3. Relationships university	10	10		9	No SES data returned	8	No SES data returned	9		8	9	7	8.8	9
4. Resources	10	10	No SES data returned	10	No SES data returned	10	No SES data returned	10	No SES data returned	10	10	9	9.9	9
5. Balancing life	10	8	No SES data returned	8	No SES data returned	9	No SES data returned	9	No SES data returned	7	6	6	7.9	5
6. Relationships Outside	8	8	No SES data returned	9	No SES data returned	9	No SES data returned	9	No SES data returned	8	6	8	8.1	9
7. Support	10	9		10		10		9		9	9	8	9.3	8

The overall score of 1 for the *Chances of being successful dimension* of the SES could be reasonably interpreted as reflecting the student having major issues with the assessment items he faced across the whole first year. Of the eight interim scores provided by the student in this dimension, seven were rated at 8 or 9, with only one score falling below 5, down to 4. The interim data led the researcher to the view that the student had reasonably high expectations that they would successfully complete the assessments with doubts surfacing very late in the academic year. Serious doubts appear warranted about the accuracy of the overall score in reflecting Student 11's experience in the *Chances of being successful dimension* of the SES. When the SES scores for the Balancing life dimension were analysed, a similar picture arose. Student 11 rated his overall feelings about his ability to balance key aspects of his life as a 5. When the interim scores are studied, it is clear that all scores are above 5, although there had been a slow decrease in the score over the duration of the second semester. It seems reasonable to once again cast doubt on the accuracy of Student 11's final end of year overall score that was applied to the *Balancing life dimension* of the SES.

Following the analyses of individual student's overall and interim SES scores, the researcher once again investigated which dimensions, if any proved most problematic.

Of the seven student's identified who possibly provided inaccurate overall scores, six were deemed as having difficulty accurately aligning their overall score for the *Balancing life dimension* with the scores provided for this dimension across the year.

5.4.3 Interim versus Overall scores for Group 3

Four of the 38 students who provided one or more SES scores were classified into Group 3 - students with 3 or more major disturbances during their first year experience. As all the students in this group provided more than half the interim SES scores, they were all included in the analyses.

Table 11

Individual data for Group 3 – students with 3 or more major disturbances to their first year experience. Calculated difference between mean interim SES scores and Overall SES score.

Student	No. Interim surveys	Dim 1: Overall	Dim 2: Success	Dim 3: Relationships university	Dim 4: Resources	Dim 5: Balancing life	Dim 6: Relationships outside	Dim 7: Support
3	11	+0.2	-0.1	+1.2	+0.5	+0.7	+0.8	+0.6
26	11	+1.2	+1.9	-0.6	+0.6	+1.5	+0.3	-0.1
28	9	-0.1	+3.6	-0.2	+1.2	+4.2	+2.2	+0.2
29	10	-1.3	+2.8	+1.1	0.0	+0.9	-0.2	0.0

Following analysis of Student 3's SES data, it is clear that the student's overall scores are a reasonable reflection of the interim SES scores, given that the mean of the interim scores are predominantly within 1 point of the final end of year overall score.

Table 12

Individual SES data for Student 3

Dimension	27 Feb	12 Mar	26 Mar	16 Apr	1 May	21 May	18 Jun	3 Jul	24 Jul	17 Aug	14 Sep	8 Oct	Mean Score	Overall
1. Overall	5	8	8	7	9	8	No SES data returned	9	9	9	6	8	7.8	8
2. Chances success	7	7	8	8	8	6		9	7	7	6	5	7.1	7
3. Relationships university	5	7	8	8	9	9		10	9	7	6	8	7.8	9
4. Resources	7	6	8	6	8	7		7	8	9	9	7	7.5	8
5. Balancing life	5	5	6	7	7	5		9	9	9	9	9	7.2	8
6. Relationships Outside	7	5	8	8	9	9		9	9	9	9	8	8.2	9
7. Support	7	8	8	8	9	9		10	7	9	9	8	8.4	9

When the scores for the *Relationships with university people dimension* were studied, 7 of the 11 interim scores are at an 8 or above. The lower scores of 5 and 6 are well separated across the year and thus would not have a compounding effect. For the other SES dimensions the variability is even less.

The SES data for Students 26, 28 and 29, do not display this same consistency and accuracy. All 3 students have provided at least one overall SES dimensional score that could be viewed as not accurately reflecting their full first year experience. To clarify this point for the reader, the SES data for Student 28 will be discussed in more detail.

Table 13

Individual SES data for Student 28

Dimension	27 Feb	12 Mar	26 Mar	16 Apr	1 May	21 May	18 Jun	3 Jul	24 Jul	17 Aug	14 Sep	8 Oct	Mean Scores	Overall
1. Overall	10	10	9		5	5			9	9	7	9	8.1	8
2. Chances success	8	6	4	No SES data returned	4	3	No SES data returned	No SES data returned	6	4	1	4	4.4	8
3. Relationships university	5	6	5		5	6			8	7	6	8	6.2	6
4. Resources	8	9	9		8	8			9	9	9	10	8.8	10
5. Balancing life	3	2	2		1	3			4	3	4	3	2.8	7
6. Relationships Outside	10	5	4		3	6			8	10	7	8	6.8	9
7. Support	8	7	7		4	8			8	7	4	8	6.8	7

When the interim scores for the *Chances of being successful dimension* were studied, there was only 1 of the 9 scores at the same level as the overall score (8). All of the other eight interim scores are at a level of 6 or below. The researcher believes that a final end of year overall score in the range 4-6 may have been viewed as more reasonable given these data. If the interim scores for the *Balancing life dimension* are investigated, the same conclusion is arrived at. The overall score for the *Balancing life dimension* is seen as not an accurate reflection of the full year student experience. Student's 26 and 29 provided similar data.

The SES dimensions for which the students were providing possibly inaccurate end of year overall scores were also investigated in a similar fashion to that conducted with Groups 1 and 2. Although Group 3 contains only four students, three students were deemed to have provided inaccurate overall scores for 1 or more dimensions that did not support the scores they provided at various points across the first year, included the *Chances of being successful dimension*.

5.4.4 An interpretation of the Interim versus Overall score results and their associated implications

The accuracy of the one-off overall end of year SES dimension scores to closely reflect the full across the year experience of the students in this study is questioned following the analysis of the student SES data. While the students in Group 1, students with a consistent experience with 0 or minor disturbances, appeared to provide overall end of year scores that aligned reasonably closely with the interim SES scores, the majority of members of Groups 2 and 3 provided overall scores that on face value appeared inconsistent and did not support the full year experience reported by the students at several data collection points across the first year. In all but one of these cases the students provided overall end of year SES scores higher than the interim SES data would suggest reasonable. This suggests that the students who faced a major disturbance during their first year of study were more likely to provide one or more inaccurate overall SES dimensional scores than the students who experienced a consistent first year experience with 0 or minor disturbances. In general, the researcher has come to the view that a single point in time overall SES score does not achieve the goal of accurately reflecting the full year student experience. Further, more extensive investigation of these scores may be warranted.

In general, there is much support for the accuracy of student self-reports if certain conditions are met. Zepke *et al.* (2011) highlight that self-reports can be trusted if (1) students hold the information that is being asked, (2) the questions are clearly worded so the students understand them, and (3) the students feel the questions are worthy of the time required to complete them. In this study the overall end of year SES survey included the same questions as the students had completed on numerous occasions throughout the year and, for most students the questions had been discussed with the researcher during semi-structured interviews. The researcher contends that this meets

the first two conditions described by Zepke *et al.* (2011). The last condition was met by the overall SES as the student's participation was voluntary and on numerous occasions the students were reminded they could withdraw from the study without penalty. Gonyea (2005, p. 84) contends that the questions must also "refer to recent memories and events" to ensure self-reports are trustworthy and accurate. As the students had completed multiple sets of SES scores throughout the year, only the 'refer to recent memories and events' instruction was omitted for the overall SES thus students were not directed to refer to recent events and were asked to remember back across and rate the whole first year. It may be assumed that the students were not able to accurately remember incidents/disturbances that occurred several months prior. Hence, they over-rated or under-rated the whole year on one or more dimensions.

Bowman (2010) provides further strength to the argument that the overall SES was flawed due to requiring students to look back across the full first year experience to come up with a single score for each dimension. He found that first year university students are reasonably accurate when asked to rate their experience at an instant in time but struggle when they have to consider how their experiences/outcomes had changed over a substantial period of time such as a whole year. This finding is supported by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1987, p. 533) who state that "when self-reports deal with the immediate ... they have been found to be a very useful source of data". Kahu (2013) offers some reasons why students struggle to make assessments across time noting that they face difficulties with memory and recall of events especially remembering the frequency of these events.

Not only was the accuracy of the overall SES scores a concern but also too was the prevalence of scores that were substantially higher than what the interim SES scores reflected. Pike (1999) contends that first year students are susceptible to what he described as a 'halo effect', they are more likely to provide scores that give a rosier picture of how they had developed over time. Yorke (2009) describes a similar situation and explains that student data may be affected by 'acquiescence bias', where students tend to supply higher or more favourable scores. He cautions that even a relatively small level of 'acquiescence bias' (10 %) may cast doubt on the findings on large scale student experience survey instruments such as the National Survey of

Student Engagement (NSSE), Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and surveys derived from these instruments.

Based on the results of this study and the findings of researchers investigating the accuracy of self-reporting, the usefulness of a one-off student assessment of the totality of their first year experience is questionable as evidenced by the data collected from the cohort of students in this study. While the students in Group 1 were viewed as providing reasonably accurate overall SES scores, a large number of students from Groups 2 and 3 provided scores which were seen as possibly not a fair representation of the whole first year experience. Thus the results of this study support the use of one-off overall experience assessments with students who did not face major disturbances during the year, while the results question the use of such assessments with students who required support during their first year of study. As the proportion of the cohort that were classified in Groups 2 and 3 made up the majority of students (19/29) who completed their first year of study, decisions made based on the overall SES scores may not truly reflect the real experiences of the cohort across the first year of study.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has reported the results associated with Research Question #2:

“How does the student experience vary over time throughout the first year of study?”

Four groups of students were identified from the SES survey and semi-structured interview data aligned with the number of ‘substantial disturbances’ these students faced during their first year of study. Figures were provided so the reader could visualise the ups and downs experienced by the students associated with these disturbances across the full first year of study. The results were discussed in light of current literature in the field, with key implications for the students in this study being identified.

Following the identification of the ‘substantial disturbances’, the results associated with the frequency, and time of year when these disturbances were most prevalent, was described and discussed. Implications for the policies and procedures used in higher education settings were highlighted. Finally the interim SES scores were compared to the final overall full year SES scores. The results for each of the four ‘disturbance’ groups were discussed separately. In a similar fashion to the

previous two sections, the results were analysed and compared to current literature, with key implications being noted.

The next chapter is structured in a similar fashion and focuses on answering Research Question #3:

“How efficient is the Experience Sampling Methodology in the collection of data associated with the student first year experience?”*

Chapter 6. How efficient is the Experience Sampling Methodology* in the collection of data associated with the student first year experience? (RQ#3)

6.1 Chapter Introduction

Following on from Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter specifically reports the results, and the discussion of those results, with respect to the third research question (RQ#3): *“How efficient is the Experience Sampling Methodology* in the collection of data associated with the student first year experience?”*

The semi-structured interview data was used predominantly to answer this research question. The student comments provide the insights as to their feelings associated with completing the SES and involvement in the semi-structured interviews. The individual student SES scores were not used but the frequency that the students completed the scores was included in the discussion.

At the final semi-structured interview students were asked to comment on their feelings in relation to the SES survey and interviews that were conducted across their first year as a university student. The questions encompassed a broad range of aspects of the process employed including the structure of the SES, its ease of use, the effect of knowing the researcher on their attitude towards the SES and interviews, and whether there were any personal outcomes for the student as a result of their involvement in this study (see Appendix F). The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and uploaded into the NVivo 10 software program for transcription and analysis (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2012).

Similar to RQ#1, key themes in the data provided by students during the semi-structured interviews were identified using the QUAGOL process detailed in Chapter 3. To assist the readers understanding of the breadth of themes that emerged from the data the following summary table is provided:

Table 14

Chapter 6 Themes

Theme	Label
<i>Theme 1</i>	<i>Structure and distribution of the SES</i>
<i>Theme 2</i>	<i>Completing the SES</i>
<i>Theme 3</i>	<i>Relationship with the Researcher</i>
<i>Theme 4</i>	<i>Outcomes for the students</i>

Following the discussion of each of these four Themes, results related to the response rate for the students in this study will be described.

Finally, at the conclusion of this chapter the results will be interpreted in light of the characteristics of the student cohort and specific implications and possible interventions will be highlighted, following the pattern established in Chapters 4 and 5.

6.2 Theme 1. The structure of the Student Experience Scale (SES) and its distribution (delivery and timing)

Twenty-seven students who completed the semi-structured interviews provided responses that specifically related to the structure of the Student Experience Scale instrument (SES), the frequency of its application, and the way the SES was distributed to students. The questions put to the students were adapted over time based on new insights as they were extracted from each interview round, and as a result, not all students provided responses to all questions. Further, some responses were not able to be classified into specific themes or subthemes. Of the 44 students who agreed to complete the SES scores, six did not return any of the 13 SES responses. Three students who did not return responses were interviewed in the hope of identifying the reasons why they chose not to be involved.

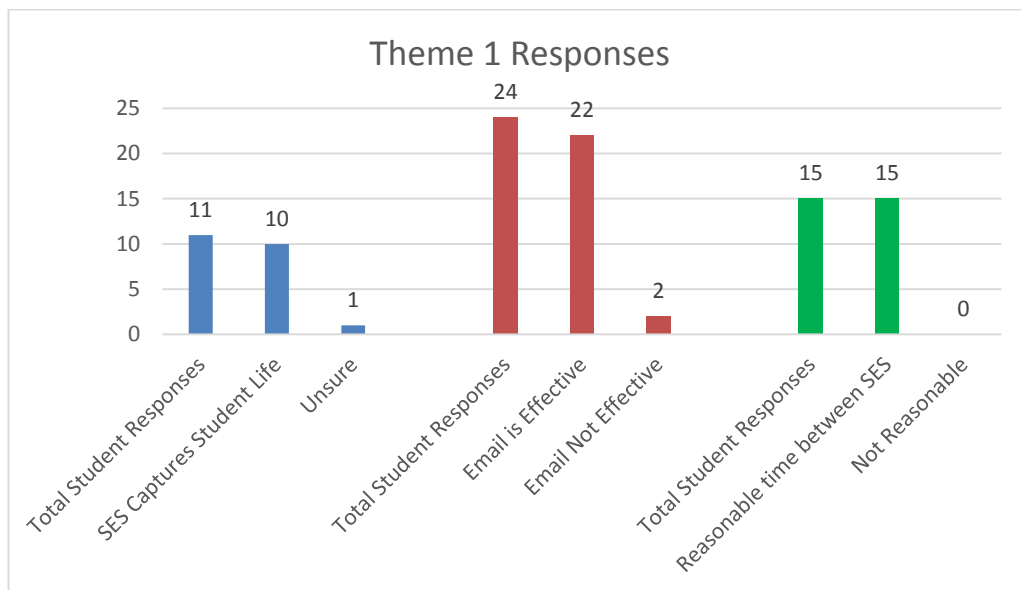


Figure 21. Structure of SES (Breadth, Delivery, and Timing).

Eleven students in total provided responses relating to the power of the Student Experience Scales to capture and report on significant dimensions of their first year university experience. Ten students provided comments that indicated they supported the use of the SES to provide them with a forum in which to reflect on and discuss their experiences, such as:

To get an overall understanding of how things are going, yeah definitely, it is pretty good.
Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

Basically this relates not just to Uni but to everything that you do in life.
Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

One student initially advised that there was one aspect of his university experience that was not addressed by any of the seven dimensions of the SES. On further consideration he reconsidered this position and agreed all aspects were addressed by the SES.

I probably only think one thing [is missing], the support of the student guild. I suppose the student guild are Uni people so they could be included there.
Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

Twenty-four students provided responses on the effectiveness of having the SES emailed to them for completion, of these 22 students found this to be effective.

Because I check my emails every day, it's like an easier way to do it.
Student 1 (F, 19, FinF)

Email is so much easier than having to get it mailed to you.
Student 24 (F, 25, FinF)

The two students who identified that emailing did not work for them described problems with (1) filling in the scores on a mobile phone as this is how she reads her university emails, and (2) having two separate research projects emailing surveys to be completed in the same timeframe.

The 22 students who thought emailing the scales was an effective approach, still encountered some issues. Five students described that they only check their emails once a week and this can cause them to miss the email or forget to reply.

I always just open them and read them and went, oh yeah, I have to reply and then forgot.
Student 30 (F, 19, FinF)

I didn't see the emails at the start but I saw a few in the middle.
Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

A further five students explained that the large number of emails they receive can lead them to miss the survey emails or accidentally delete them.

I might miss one [survey] because I'll go a week without checking my emails and I will go in there and there are so many emails.
Student 11 (M, 21, FinF)

I get really annoyed with the Uni mail, so I just archive all my mail.
Student 17 (F, 18, FinF)

Three students noted that having the email from a specific person and not from the university made it stand out.

I will see one from 'T' and go this will be the survey I've got to fill in.

Student 12 (M, 20, FinF)

Five students described specific strategies they use to ensure they don't miss important emails and how this accounted for their perfect (or near perfect) response rates.

I have everything colour coded. I'm just really organised. I have all the folders on the side. It comes up with different colours for different people.

Student 24 (F, 25, FinF)

Fifteen students were also asked whether the frequency they were asked to respond to the SES was appropriate or was a hindrance. All 15 students thought the 2 to 3 weeks between emails was appropriate.

I think it's fine, no bother at all. It didn't feel like 12 times at all.

Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

Three students noted how it had become part of their regular routine.

It's just like one of those things, it's like cleaning your teeth before going to bed. It's not a big deal.

Student 27 (M, 37, notFinF)

One student explained that weekly responses would be asking too much, as would requiring very quick replies to the emails.

I am not sick of doing them because they are only a fortnight thing, because it's not weekly or you have to have it done by this date, like if you had 24 hours to do it.

Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

6.2.1 An interpretation of the Theme 1 results and possible implications

A goal of the SES was to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their lives and all of its manifestations (Bryson et al., 2009) whilst studying their first year at university, and for them to provide a score that represented their level of satisfaction with this experience. The emphasis being to allow the student the opportunity to highlight what they deemed to be the most important factors, not being limited to only those suggested by current literature. The SES aimed to include the full breadth of the student experience, not just those experiences while the student was on

campus, but also including experiences while they were at home, at work, or in the company of others. The inability of students to identify any personally important aspects of their lives which were not aligned with one of the seven dimensions measured by the SES supports the assertion that the SES was successful in achieving this aim. Thus, the SES could be seen as addressing the totality of the student experience (Drew, 2001; Harvey et al., 2006).

The decision to email the SES to the students was determined to be an appropriate delivery strategy, with 22 out of 24 students supporting this approach. While this is encouraging, the number of students who described not checking their emails regularly, or not seeing the emails, is an issue that could be addressed if the strategy is adopted in the future. The question that arises is whether the students had the skills and technological tools to manage their email accounts in an effective manner sufficient to complete the SES effectively, in a timely manner. In hindsight, to counter this possible issue for students, the researcher could have (1) assessed the email skills of the students, and (2) provided information to the students on managing their email accounts before commencing the study. The assumption that all university students in the 21st Century are 'tech savvy' and efficient users of email communication cannot be relied on given the results of this study. The student responses in the semi-structured interviews provide some guidance about strategies that could be used to make the SES emails stand out more prominently for students, including colour coding emails based on the 'sender', sorting emails into folders, and using filters to sort or remove unwanted emails. Looking beyond this present study, the inference that students' email management skills may be deficient has implications for university communication more broadly. As email communication is regularly stated as being the main means of formal/official communication between the university and the students, its effectiveness should now be questioned. Further investigation is warranted in this regard, as too is the assessment and skilling of students to better management their email when they commence university.

The frequency with which the SES was emailed to students was deemed suitable by 100% of the students who provided responses in the semi-structured interviews. This, and the attitudes of some students who it became part of their usual routine, or that they were looking forward to getting the SES, supports the use of

fortnightly distribution in further studies of this type. While this may be the case, the regularity of students describing forgetting to reply does diminish the effectiveness of the experience sampling methodology employed in this study. However, as the SES was distributed on a 2-4 weekly basis throughout the year, students completed enough SES surveys to ensure that the data represented several times throughout the whole first year of their studies (mean completion rate was 6.53 for full cohort and 7.59 for students who completed the full first year). In this study the researcher sent a reminder email usually a week after the initial SES email with the hope of jogging the students' memory to increase the response rate. The efficiency of this strategy warrants further investigation as it may have the detrimental effect of adding to the volume of emails received by students or even inducing a feeling in students of being pestered and putting the research alliance at risk (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987).

6.3 Theme 2: Completing the SES

Of the 30 students who participated in the semi-structured interviews, 27 completed at least one set of the Student Experience Scales (SES) and were able to describe the time taken to complete the scale, the ease of responding to the individual questions, and the amount of thinking the items required. Data relating to the number of SES responses the students returned to the researcher and the response levels at different times of the year have also been provided to augment the analysis of the semi-structured interview data.

The majority of students (23/27) described the SES as being quick to complete, with 14 quoting times of 2 minutes or less.

It takes about 2 minutes, maybe three minutes because I do think about them. I have to think about how my study is going, how is it going when I'm not at Uni, and what am I going to do when I'm not at Uni. Student 8 (M, 20, notFinF)

The students who identified the SES would usually take around 5 minutes to complete were not worried about that this was too long a period of time, providing comments such as:

It's 5 minutes. It's not really going to affect me much by filling it out. It's not going to make me miss out on doing my assignment. Student 12 (M, 20, FinF)

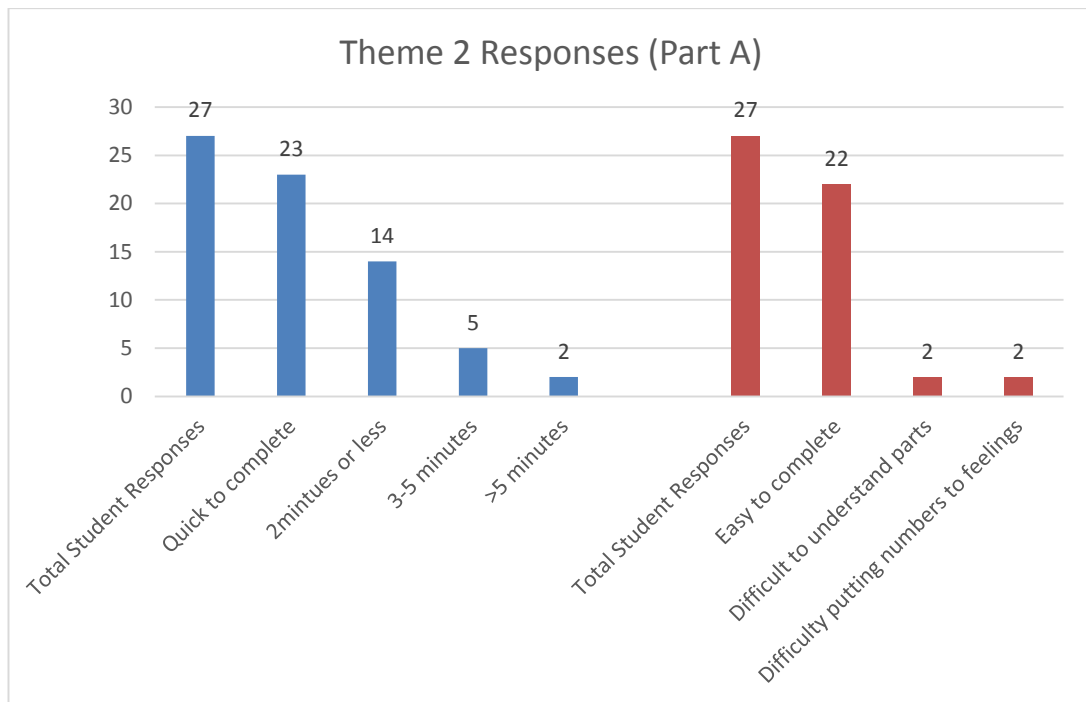


Figure 22. SES completion time and difficulty (n=27).

Only two students noted times that were longer than 5 minutes, but did not indicate that they were deterred by this.

I think about it, like it wasn't hours, it would have taken me a good 15 to 20 minutes. Student 30 (F, 19, FinF)

Beyond the physical time it took to complete the SES, 27 students were also asked to share their thoughts on the ease of responding to each item on the SES. Twenty-two students described the items as being easy to respond to. Three students thought the items were neither easy nor hard.

Because they are short and you are not wanting long answers, they are not essay questions. Student 24 (F, 25, FinF)

It's not really hard or easy, it just depends upon how you are feeling on that day. Student 5 (F, 18, notFinF)

The fact that the items that comprised the SES didn't change was highlighted by four students as making the items easier to respond to as time progressed.

It's because you got used to the questions so you knew what was coming. You didn't have to reread them or understand them. Student 4 (M, 19, FinF)

Three students expressed difficulty in understanding the items providing comments such as:

Like the first one I really had to think. I had to understand what you were wanting me to answer. Now I know the questions and have an understanding of them it's quite easy.
 Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

One student made special mention of the initial explanation of the items as making them easier to respond to.

We've discussed it before so you kind of understand the question and what it means. So when I see the questions again I know what you mean already.
 Student 12 (M, 20, FinF)

While most students seemed comfortable in providing numerical scores between 0 and 10 to describe their feelings about the seven important aspects of their lives described in the SES items, two students made a point of explaining that they found it to be very difficult.

I don't know, I don't affiliate feelings with numbers. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

I can't really put numbers to things. It was only when you were explaining it now that I could do it.
 Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

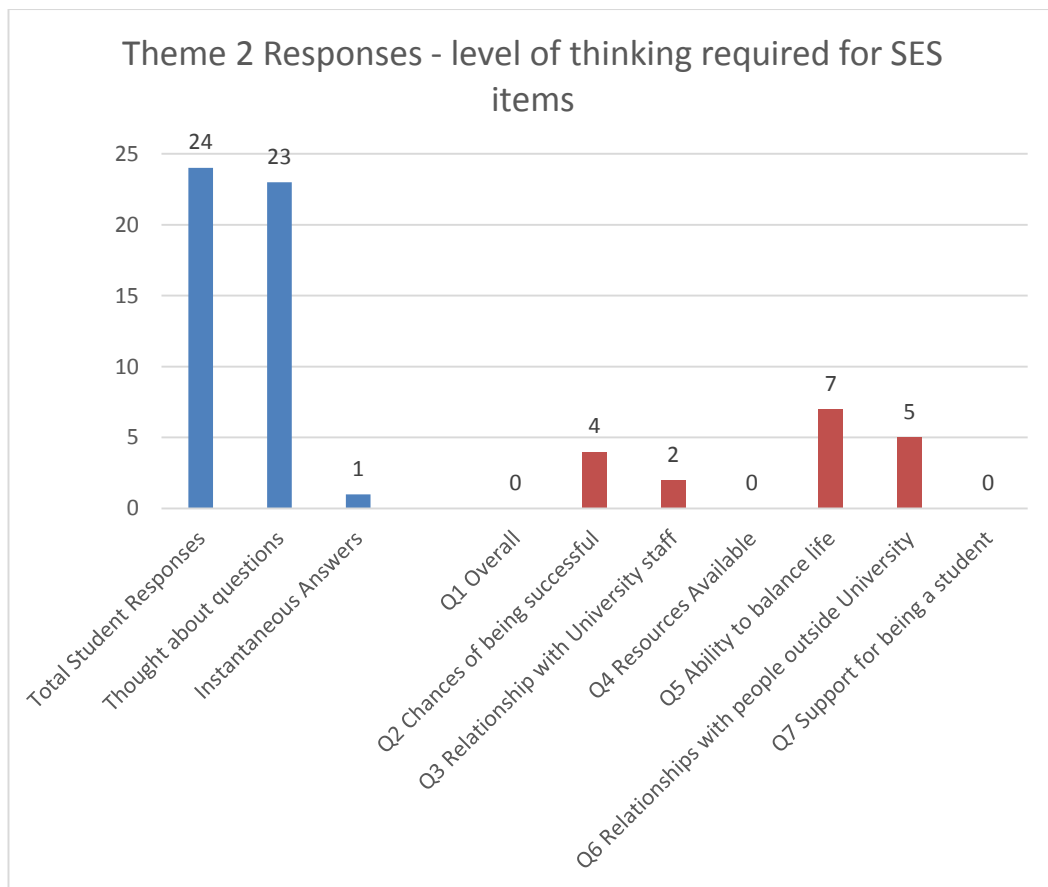


Figure 23. Thinking required to complete SES and dimensions requiring most thought (n=24).

Other than the amount of time taken to respond to the items and whether the students felt the items were easy to answer, they were also questioned on the depth of thinking they used in responding to the items. Twenty-four students provided comments that described their level of thinking, with 23 describing thinking deeply and only one student commenting she provided instantaneous answers.

Yeah [I do think about them], it helps me to be honest with myself.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

I just read it and put the first thing that comes into my mind.

Student 24 (F, 25, FinF)

While the majority of students reported thinking deeply about the items, 10 identified that certain items took more time to think about than others. The most commonly identified items that were nominated as taking additional time were related to the ability of students to balance the key aspects of their lives (seven students) and the relationships with people outside of the university (five students).

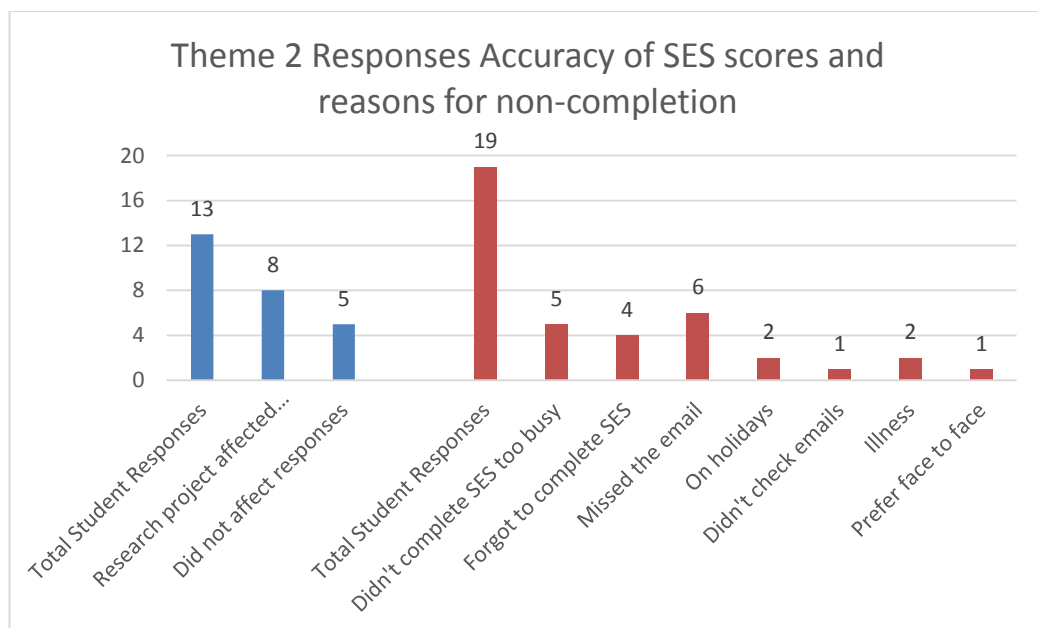


Figure 24. Knowledge of researcher and reasons for not submitting SES.

Another question posed to the students in the interview was whether knowing the SES was part of a research project had affected the manner they responded to the items. Of the 13 students who provided comments, eight students felt that knowing their answers were being used for research had made a difference.

That is why I take my time in answering them [otherwise] you are not going to get an accurate reading. I muddle around with the numbers to make it more honest. Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

Especially with things like my score of 7.5, I get a bit specific. I wouldn't want to get the data wrong or anything. Student 8 (M, 20, notFinF)

Knowing it's research, I don't mind that, it's good. Otherwise I would keep my cards close to my chest because I don't need my general information put out there. Student 2 (M, 44, FinF)

The other five students felt it did not have an effect on how they approached the questions, with 1 student stating:

I don't even really think about it [being part of your research], it's good to just think about how you are feeling. Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

When asked why they might not have returned their SES scores, 19 students provided reasons. The most common reasons cited were not seeing the email (six students) and being too busy or stressed (five students).

I must have missed that one. I thought I emailed them all in. Student 28 (F, 18, FinF)

I probably did see it but I was probably too busy and stressed to even worry about it. Student 16 (F, 18, FinF)

The results clearly reflect that the majority of students found the SES to be quick and easy to complete, and support Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter's (2003) contention that the use of 1-7 or 1-10 point scales are highly effective when used to measure participant's perceptions of key aspects of their lives, such as happiness. The results also support the researcher's choice not to use short answer questions which may have required a longer timeframe for completion. The short time students needed to complete the SES would also have minimised the impact on student academic stress (Hormuth, 1986). Unfortunately three students noted difficulties with the wording of the questions and identified this as being a concern. This could have meant that these students were at risk of increased levels of stress and increased the likelihood they may withdraw from the study.

The 23/24 students who stated that they thought deeply about the SES questions supports the view that they saw their involvement as being worthwhile and important, and also that they were working with the researcher to achieve a valuable goal (Alliger & Williams, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). This 'alliance'

with the researcher is also supported by the 8 out of 13 students who noted that they either spent more time, or thought more deeply about the SES questions to ensure the data were accurate .

The results support the validity of the students' responses as they meet Umbach and Kuh's (2006) requirements of (1) the participants having the required knowledge, (2) the questions being clearly stated and understood, (3) the questions asking for information at that instant in time, (4) the questions being seen as important, and (5) the responses are believed to be treated in confidence. The relatively small proportion of students who reported experiencing some difficulty in understanding the questions (3/27: 11%) provides additional confidence that the student responses were valid. Bowman (2010) cautions that research has shown that first year students have difficulty in estimating 'gains' in their learning and development. As the SES did not require students to estimate changes it demonstrated a strength that is not in existence in many higher education studies (Bowman, 2010).

The SES questions that students highlighted as requiring most thought are in alignment with, and support the results and findings described in Chapter 4. Specifically the key themes of Academic Requirements, Relationships and Balancing Life have been identified by two separate data gathering techniques as being key factors affecting the first year student experience. These findings also broadly align with the positions held by key theorists such as Tinto, Bean and Astin, who highlighted that the major influence on the first year experience were factors external to the university.

6.3.1 An interpretation of the Theme 2 results (completing the SES) and their associated implications

The results in Theme 2 support those reported in Theme 1 that the structure of the SES and its implementation were robust, and that the majority of students viewed the SES as effective and efficient. The SES was seen as not time consuming to complete, contained questions the students generally understood and that they were comfortable in answering, and prompted them to reflect on their experiences as a first year university student at specific points in time across the first year of study. While effective for the majority of students, a relatively small number described difficulties in understanding the questions or ascribing numbers to their feelings. The difficulty

understanding the questions could be accounted for by the students' lack of experience and knowledge (and that of their support networks) about the workings of a university, generally due to them being first in family (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Drew, 2001; Kuh et al., 2006; Luzecky et al., 2011; Padgett et al., 2012). Another possibility may be that the students were not in attendance at the weekly workshops during which the questions were fully discussed, so they may not have had the same opportunity as their peers to learn what the questions were asking. As two of the three students who noted concern with understanding also did not supply SES responses until the end of the project, this lack of response may also be an indicator of lack of understanding of the questions. In future studies the researcher may benefit from contacting those students who are not returning their surveys as requested, to clarify the meaning of the SES questions individually.

The difficulty two students stated when they were asked to provide numbers to represent their feelings, although small in number, may be an indicator that an alternative form of the SES may be needed to optimise engagement with the research project. The inclusion of a 0-10 point scale was seen as very effective by the students but the inclusion of word descriptors as well could be investigated in future to cater for a wider range of students.

The three SES dimensions that required students to think more deeply (*Balancing Life*, *Relationships outside the university*, and *Chances of Success*), or for a longer period of time, offer further support for the results described in Chapter 4, that students are balancing a range of competing priorities and are not only solely focussed on their university studies. Thus, the need to support students to develop time management skills, to make a greater commitment to their studies, and to learn how to manage the stress associated with these, is once again highlighted.

It is common practice for universities to be investigating and/or implementing programs that monitor the progress of their first year students, given the difficulties they are known to confront (Kift, 2008b; Krause, 2005a; Kuh et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2011). At this same time some institutions are embedding this strong research focus into the first year experience (Kift et al., 2010; K. Wilson, 2009). The results described above support this embedding given that 8 out of 13 (61%) respondents described that they thought more carefully about the SES questions, provided more accurate

responses, and were more inclined to participate because it was a research project. In Chapter 4, a key strategy to support the needs of the students was improving their knowledge of issues they confront during their transition to university. Thus, the sharing of first year experience research data while ensuring the confidentiality of the respondents, with the students at regular intervals would seem highly appropriate. This may also alleviate some of the students' anxiety, as first years often feel as if they are the only ones experiencing a specific difficulty (Kantanis, 2000). To take this one step further, it would also be valuable, where possible, to use the research data within the subjects the students are studying in their first year and the assessments they may be asked to complete. For example, subjects that focus on the development of students' study and research skills could use the research data as a stimulus for wider investigation of the difficulties first year students' face in their transition to university, and the identification of strategies they could use to ease some of their concerns. This would provide a structure that may reflect the integrated and effective First Year Pedagogy promoted by Kift *et al.* (2010). While supporting students to learn about the issues they confront during their first year of study is very worthwhile, the experience of working with staff on a research project may well make the transition easier (Kuh *et al.*, 2006).

6.4 Theme 3: Relationship with the Researcher

During the semi-structured interviews the students were asked a range of questions that explored how their relationship with the researcher may have impacted on the manner they engaged with the Student Experience Scales. Twenty-four students commented on the effects of knowing the researcher, with the majority also discussing the accuracy of their scores, and their openness to being contacted if their scores dropped appreciably.

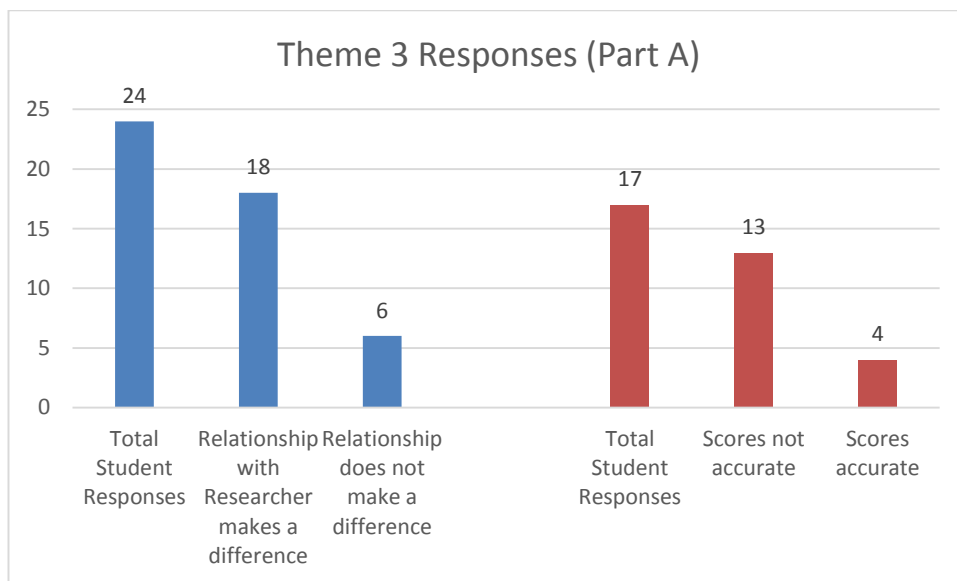


Figure 25. Effect of relationship with researcher on approach to SES and accuracy of SES scores.

Eighteen students identified that knowing the researcher was important and affected how they involved themselves in the study. Nine students made special mention of choosing not to be involved unless they knew personally who was undertaking the research.

It's just that you are familiar. If it was someone else I don't know [if I would do it]. I don't like telling people how things affect me, they might think I am stupid.
Student 30 (F, 19, FinF)

There is a lot of personal stuff that goes on. If this complete stranger emails me I'm not going to tell them I feel like a 2.
Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

While these students would not have chosen to be involved, another eight students believed they would still have participated but would have felt uncomfortable. Three students made comments that implied their scoring would not have been the same if they did not know the researcher.

I probably gave you honest answers because I know you.

Student 18 (F, 17, notFinF)

The six students who responded that their involvement would not have been affected described their previous positive involvement in research projects (two students), or that they were not providing detailed personal information (two students), and their focus was on the questions not the research (one student). One student made mention of her anonymity being a major factor.

I have done questionnaires like these before from people I didn't know. It's like, well they don't know me, so why should I worry about them judging me.

Student 14 (F, 17, FinF)

After the issue of the accuracy of the students' scores was raised, subsequent semi-structured interviews were adapted to include a question to investigate this further.

Of the 13 students who reported their scores would quite possibly not be accurate if they did not know the researcher, 8 of these described that they would have made their scores higher.

I would probably put it a bit higher and make it look as if I am going OK. Make it look better.

Student 28 (F, 18, FinF)

Like the 4 it would have been higher. It is more like a trust sort of thing. I don't always open up to everyone.

Student 30 (F, 19, FinF)

The other five students commented that they would middle the scores more, not be as honest, score them all as 10's, be more haphazard in the scoring, or make the drops smaller. Interestingly, one student described how she might alter her scores to ensure the researcher made contact to discuss her progress.

I really didn't know where to go to for support. I had an intention for one of these to answer it correctly (very low) so you would come to me and say is there a problem?

Student 9 (F, 19, FinF)

Another student explained that she wrote down a score to try to keep positive.

I don't know why I put it at an 8. I was being positive despite how I felt.

Student 24 (F, 25, FinF)

As part of the research project, the students were advised that if there was an appreciable change in the scores they supplied from the SES (up or down), they would be contacted to discuss why this may have occurred.

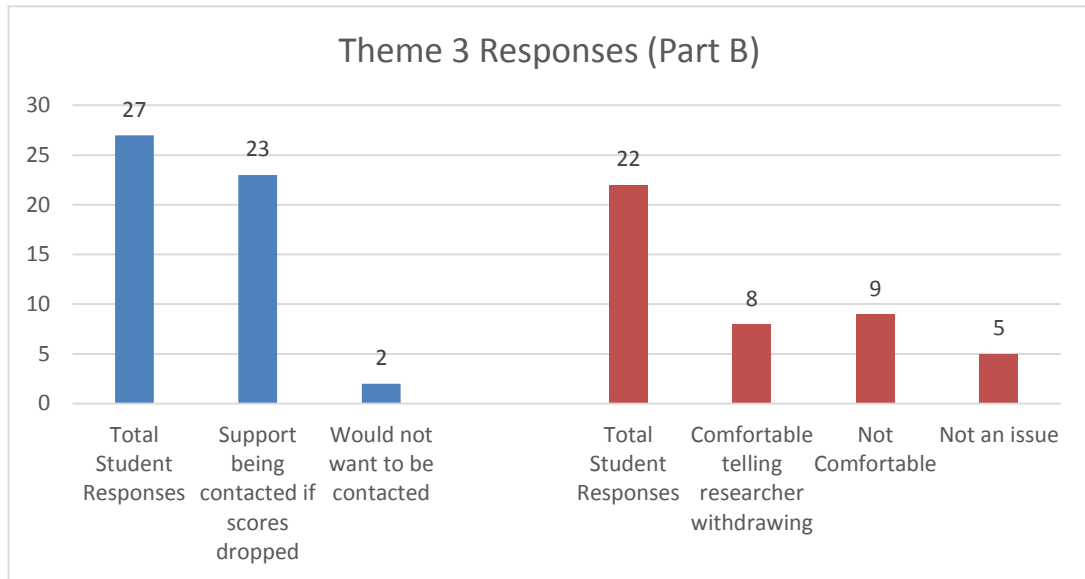


Figure 26. Contact by researcher if SES scores dropped, and notifying researcher if wish to withdraw.

The majority of the 27 students who provided responses were comfortable in being contacted by the researcher if their SES scores dropped appreciably (23 students).

That would be good because I would have something to get off my chest.
Student 18 (F, 17, notFinF)

I wouldn't mind it. It would probably get my head back on track and get my life sorted.
Student 13 (F, 19, notFinF)

Two students commented that they would not want to be contacted.

I would probably say no [to being contacted]. Not like I'm a closed book but you kind of keep what's going on with you, within your circle. Student 10 (F, 18, FinF)

I'd prefer to ask myself. Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

While one student was not sure whether being contacted would suit her, another student initially was not supportive, but after being contacted changed her mind.

Interview 1 – It might not actually mean anything [my scores dropping]. It might just have been what I was thinking at that moment. Student 1 (F, 19, FinF)

Interview 2 – Yes, [I would support being contacted], Then you would know like now that something had happened. Student 1 (F, 19, FinF)

Another four students noted value in being contacted by the researcher due to their scores dropping.

If I hadn't had the SES, I would have probably fallen off the side (withdrawn). If we hadn't had that meeting 2 days later I would have really struggled.

Student 3 (F, 18, FinF)

A key feature of the responses from five students was their reluctance to ask for help and their support for the researcher to be proactive in approaching them.

If I thought I needed help I would make sure the numbers showed I needed a chat. I don't find it easy to ask for help, so this is a way I know I can without obviously asking.

Student 7 (F, 17, notFinF)

I can say this now because I am not in that spot at the moment, but when I am, I don't have the ability to ask for help.

Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

Of the 22 students who provided comments about confidence to advise the researcher they did not wish to continue completing the SES, eight described being comfortable in doing this. Three of these students went further adding they had no reason to discontinue their involvement.

I wouldn't feel guilty telling you I didn't want to continue. But it's 2 minutes, the time I take to get a drink of water so I will keep doing them. It's helping you out, others out, and eventually it helps me out anyway.

Student 12 (M, 20, FinF)

Nine students described not being comfortable in advising the researcher they wished to stop filling in the SES scores. Seven of these students would still continue doing the scores even though they might not want to, with four students stating that when they make a commitment to do something they always try to see it through. The remaining three students felt that if the situation arose they would feel uncomfortable, but it hadn't so it was not an issue for them.

I would feel guilty. If I've committed to something I'll do it. I would just fill them in even if it was just 1 minute. But for me the scores have been awesome.

Student 8 (M, 20, notFinF)

When asked about withdrawing from completing the SES, five students advised it would not be an issue for them to consider as they don't mind doing them and have no reason to stop.

I didn't get sick of them so I don't know. They weren't an inconvenience.

Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

The results support the choice of the researcher to position himself as an insider researcher (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The overt position of the researcher as a member of the university community, and his active role in supporting first year students, appears to have been strongly supported by the students in the study. In fact, similar to Zinn's (1979) findings, the student responses identify that if the researcher was not known to the students (an insider) they would not have participated in the study nor would they have provided data which was accurate and reflective of their lived experience.

The proportion of students stating they would be comfortable being approached by the researcher (effectively the First Year Coordinator) and the proportion describing feelings of guilt if they chose to withdraw from the research project reflect that the relationship between student and researcher was enhanced during the course of the research (Delyser, 2001).

6.4.1 An interpretation of the Theme 3 (relationship with the researcher) results and their associated implications

The results clearly highlight the importance the students associate with knowing, and having developed a relationship with the researcher, without which they may not have involved themselves in the study to the degree they did, nor would they necessarily have provided data that were an accurate reflection of their feelings and experiences at each SES point in time. With knowing the researcher came a strong sense of commitment from the students as shown by the 'guilt' they would associate with not continuing their involvement in the study. This cohort of students would appear to view trust as a very important factor when sharing personal information. This is supported by the majority of students who highlighted they would feel comfortable being contacted by the researcher for semi-structured interviews to share their feelings and experiences. The role of the researcher as the First Year Coordinator, with an identified presence associated with maintaining and supporting their well-being, may have been critical in this situation. Taking Westlake's (2008) notion that specialised staff be required to work with first year students a little further, it may also be hypothesised that researchers with specialised skills, knowledge and attitudes may be required to conduct research involving first year students.

Given the results of this study another issue arises involving the accuracy of data provided to ‘unknown researchers’. Given the majority of students came from first in family or low SES backgrounds, their preference or need to know the researcher may warrant further investigation. The data does not identify if it is the fact the students are in their first year of university study or their backgrounds (first in family or low SES) that affected this result. If the accuracy of the data is open to question this may require a rethink of the research methods being employed with these groups and may call for a range of methods to ensure the data are truly representing what the first year students are feeling and experiencing (Bowman, 2010).

With the researcher also having a role as First Year Coordinator being approached when the SES scores dropped was interpreted by students as an opportunity to receive support that they might otherwise not know how to ask for. This proactive approach by the researcher / First Year Coordinator was highly valued by the students as they reported finding it difficult to ask for help, but were open to the researcher initiating contact (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). What can be inferred here is that the SES and its associated semi-structured interviews were able to accommodate the students’ lack of social capital (Morosanu et al., 2010; Padgett et al., 2012). Lacking social capital is especially prevalent in students with first in family or low SES backgrounds (Hagel et al., 2011). As a support strategy, the SES would appear to be a very valuable strategy for supporting first year university students with backgrounds similar to those of the students in this study.

6.5 Theme 4. Outcomes for the students due to their completion of the SES scores.

While completing the semi-structured interviews Student 11 provided an unsolicited comment detailing the benefits he had personally achieved from his involvement in the study. In the subsequent interviews the researcher chose to ask each participant to explain if they also had derived any benefits from their completion of the SES.

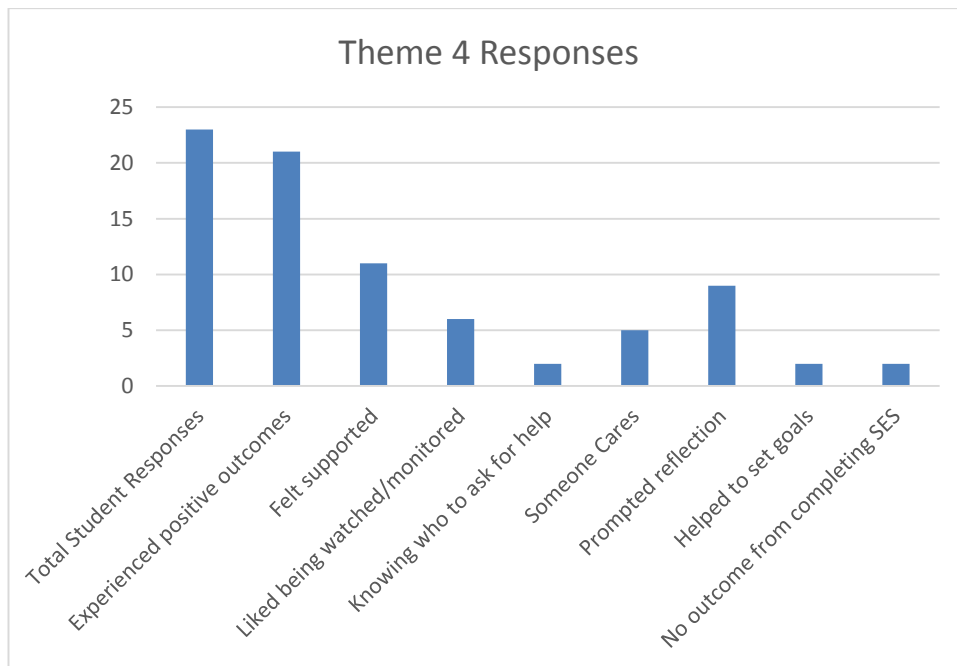


Figure 27. Student outcomes from their completion of SES.

Of the 23 students who provided responses regarding the personal outcomes they may associate with involvement in the research project, 21 described what have been categorised as positive outcomes. Eleven students provided comments that they developed a feeling of being supported due to their participation in the study. Upon further investigation, six students identified valuing having their progress ‘watched’ throughout the year, and knowing if they ran into difficulties there was support available.

It means you know someone is watching your progress and that if something goes wrong you can talk to them. Student 1 (F, 19, FinF)

I think it is really helpful, like for where it drops to know it’s going to be noticed. It is just a little lifeline that is really helpful. Student 19 (M, 18, FinF)

Another aspect referred to by two students was having one person they could make contact with who could advise what support was available from the university.

Having someone, just one person, that you can say I am having problems, can you help me, is important. Student 21 (F, 30, notFinF)

I need the support but I don’t want to go look for it because I will feel uncomfortable. Student 9 (F, 19, FinF)

While availability of support and access to a gatekeeper to this support was valued, five students made special mention of feeling that someone from the university cared about them

I got excited about it. Someone really cares about how I am going.
Student 8 (M, 20, notFinF)

It did make a difference. Like even when you sent out the first one, I was like, someone does care. Someone wants to know how I am going – it made me feel better.
Student 16 (F, 18, FinF)

The completion of the SES scores was highlighted by nine students as assisting them to reflect on their progress. Four made mention that this reflection also included thinking about how they could take action to improve their current position.

Completing the scores allowed me to be honest with myself. You know you just can't sit there and lie to everyone.
Student 26 (F, 18, notFinF)

It made me think, like especially with the relationships. I thought I could probably try to be a bit more friendly to people.
Student 29 (F, 18, FinF)

The completion of the SES scores was also useful for two students when they were looking to set their goals.

I kind of realised where I stood with everything and I kind of realised where I wanted to be.
Student 30 (F, 19, FinF)

Only two students reported not benefitting from their involvement in the research project. Interestingly, they were supportive of the continued use of the SES with future first year students.

It's good for people who bottle things up.
Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

If I was struggling with grades and stuff it would be good. They would probably feel that there is someone reaching out to them.
Student 20 (F, 18, FinF)

Three students who agreed to participate in the study but did not complete the SES were interviewed to ascertain why this may have been the case. Common to all three was their feeling they were progressing well and did not need support.

I think I can take care of most things myself. I don't need anyone, I'm OK.
Student 23 (M, 18, FinF)

While describing not needing support, one student did detail a positive outcome from her involvement in the study, as the SES reminded her to reflect on how she was progressing.

I have had a look at them. Like some of the questions, if I opened them up, I would probably think about it later, like I didn't realise that my social life is not doing well.
Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

Following the interview one student who had not previously provided SES scores responded to the final two emails.

Similar to the 'backwash effect' described by Boud (1995), where students experience academic assessments and this affects how they attempt future assessments, the results confirm that there was a backwash effect for the students in this study as a result of completing the SES scores. The student comments reflect that they developed a sense of belonging, a sense they were being cared for and supported. The importance of first year students belonging is well documented (Klem & Connell, 2004; Krause et al., 2005). This belonging may also lead to the students being satisfied with their university experience (Kuh et al., 2006), and lower levels of academic stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Beyond this, the students' involvement may even have led to enhanced growth in their academic competence (Reason et al., 2006). Thus, it would seem reasonable that the completion of the SES and semi-structured interviews could be associated with improved outcomes for the students.

Regular contact between the researcher and the students was identified by Pascarella (1980) as positively influencing the persistence of students from first in family or low SES backgrounds. It would seem that the staff-student contact through emailing the SES, may have been perceived by the students as regular contact as they have described developing a relationship with the researcher. It is not clear in the data whether the researcher role enhanced the position of the First Year Coordinator or vice versa, but what did develop was a belief that support was readily available if the student required it. Zepke and Leach (2005) provide support for this stating that a student's sense of belonging is enhanced if their holistic well-being is supported by access to a personal tutor. The researcher/First Year Coordinator could be viewed as having filled this role.

The students who identified that the SES prompted and guided their reflection provided evidence that they were likely to adjust well to the new environment they were facing (the university) and also more likely to be engaged in their studies (Krause, 2006). For the students who commented that the reflection led to action, it would seem they have learnt from their experience with the SES (Mezirow, 1990). Palmer *et al.*'s (2009) study found similar results, their students valued reflecting on their experience and advised that these reflective activities should be built into the existing curriculum.

6.5.1 An interpretation of the Theme 4 (student outcomes) results and their associated implications

Given that the students identified personal benefits from the completion of the SES it would seem that student involvement resulted in dual outcomes. One being the monitoring of student progress and identification of issues affecting their progress thus increasing awareness of the needs of this group of students, with the second being student access to an ongoing support process. The support process was perceived by the students as enhancing their feelings of belonging at university, identification as an individual, awareness of a staff member able to provide advice and support, as well as opportunities to reflect on and adapt their actions. Thus, the results provide support for the ongoing continuation of a similar program.

While the SES itself was viewed as useful by the students, the commitment of the researcher to make contact with the students if their scores were seen to drop, would seem to have added importance and value to student involvement. Of the 12 students who were contacted for interviews due to substantial decreases in their SES scores, nine students provided at least nine SES responses each, which could be interpreted as recognition that the students valued their involvement in the study.

If the SES is viewed as strictly a data gathering tool then it may seem prudent to make changes to enhance its efficiency, or to look to other possible methods of delivery to improve response rates. Looking more broadly at the positive student outcomes associated with the present form of the SES, changes in its structure and delivery may be unwise. As a result of their completion of the SES and participation in semi-structured interviews students developed feelings of belonging, an identity as an individual and made aware of a support structure specific to their needs. All of which are viewed as important indicators of a successful first year of university study

(Krause, 2005b). The results of the semi-structured interviews highlight that the goals of the researcher were narrow when compared to the actual experiences and outcomes of the students from the research study.

Given the higher levels of stress associated with the first year of study and noting the students as coming from predominantly first in family or low SES backgrounds, the response rate (% of the cohort who responded at least once) was acceptable for the first full implementation of this methodology. Previously students noted issues such as not seeing the SES email, forgetting to respond, being overwhelmed by emails, or just too busy or stressed as reasons why they did not provide responses. No student identified an unwillingness to be involved because the process was too onerous or was not relevant to them personally.

While the SES and its application appear to have been quite successful there are a range of issues to be addressed. Firstly the difficulty that some students had in understanding the SES questions is of concern. As described in Chapter 3, the students in the study were informed of the purpose and structure of the SES in Orientation Week before the start of the semester and had expectations clarified during weekly voluntary workshops (Common Time). This ‘clarification’ was occurring at the same time students identified as having their most difficulty, a time they were developing the cultural capital needed for their future success at university, times they were struggling with the new workload and with changing relationships. Thus, it seems appropriate that in future studies using this approach the researcher should not just explain what the questions entail but should also check for understanding after the students have more experience in being a university student. Second, given the background of the cohort of students in this study (first in family, low socio-economic status), their possible reliance on part-time work and limited time on campus, the clarification provided during the weekly workshops may not be sufficient to capture all students and ensure they all ‘understand’ the questions.

To be able to monitor, over time, the perceptions of students about the parts of their lives they feel are important, it is essential that the data they provide is accurate. The results of this study identify that a substantial number of students have a more focussed attitude towards providing accurate data if they know it has a greater purpose than just looking at their individual progress. The use of the data to improve the

experience of future students is seen as validating the research and validating what the student has to say. For the present cohort, and those of similar backgrounds in other institutions, it would seem advisable to align any monitoring of student perceptions with a formal research process like that described in this study. This would provide ongoing benefits for the First Year Coordinator as they would maintain a contemporary understanding of what the first year students are experiencing, thus ensuring the first year students ‘feel’ someone understands what they are going through and can provide support if required.

6.6 Student SES response rate resulting from experience sampling methodology.

One of the indicators of the efficiency of the Experience Sampling Method used in this study is the student response rate. The response rate data has been collated in Figure 28.

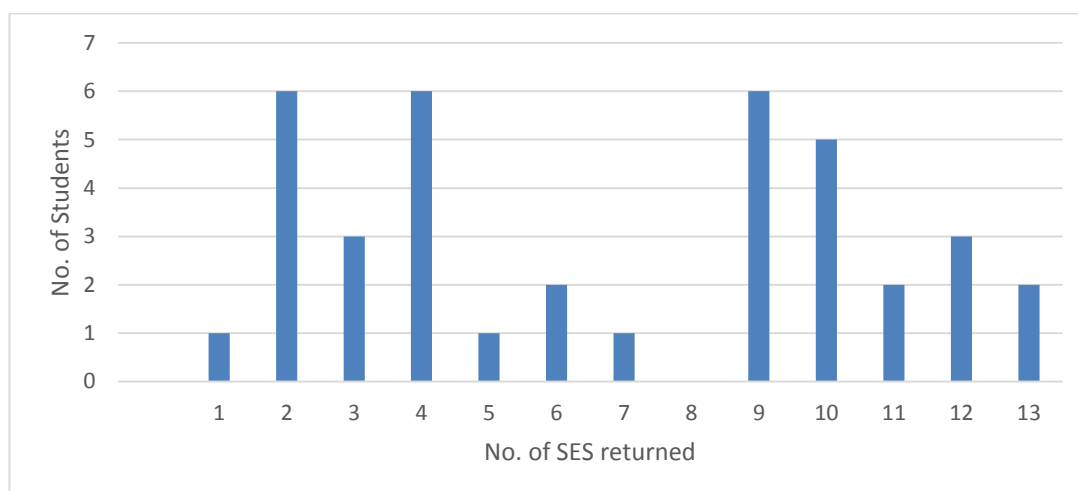


Figure 28. SES response rates.

Of the 38 students in total (% of first year cohort approached to be involved) who submitted at least one SES score, 19 (50%) submitted at least half of the possible number of responses (7 or more out of 13). Of the remaining 19 students, the majority (16 students) submitted four or less responses. However, these results are possibly skewed given that the students who chose not to continue their enrolment in Semester 2 are included, and did not therefore submit SES scores in Semester 2. The mean number of responses for the whole cohort was calculated to be 6.53, but increased to 7.59 responses when the students who did not continue their studies beyond semester 1 were removed from the calculation.

Table 15

SES response rates by first year enrolment

No. of SES returned	Continued enrolment in S2	Discontinued enrolment in S2
1	1	0
2	3	3
3	1	2 (including 1 Headstart student)
4	2	4 (including 1 who changed degree)
5	1	0
6	2	0
7	1	0
8	0	0
9	6	0
10	5	0
11	2	0
12	3	0
13	2	0

Of the 9 students who submitted SES scores and chose not to continue their studies in Semester 2, 6 submitted 3 or 4 sets of scores out of a possible seven sets. One of the students who continued throughout the full year in this study chose to only submit one set of SES scores. This student submitted these following her semi-structured interview and associated this lack of involvement with difficulty aligning scores with feelings.

I don't affiliate feelings and numbers... I don't know like I just can't.
Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

For this student discussing the questions first before scoring was viewed as the best process to use.

I think it is best if I have the discussion and think about it like now, and then give the answer. That works best for me.
Student 6 (F, 17, FinF)

Table 16*SES response rate by date*

Date of SES	Semester	Week	No. of SES Returned	Other Information
27-February	1	1	30	
12-March	1	3	26	
26-March	1	5	23	
16-April	1	8	20	After Mid-semester recess
1-May	1	10	22	
21-May	1	13	19	
18-June	1	17	10	During Exam Block
3-July	Recess	Recess	10	
24-July	2	2	14	
17-August	2	5	15	
14-September	2	9	15	
8-October	2	13	27	After Mid-semester recess
2-November	2	16	27	

The data in Table 16 describes the variability of the response rate for the different applications of the SES throughout the first year. Initially 30 students provided responses in Week 1 of Semester 1 but this decreased as the semester progressed till it reached 10 student responses during the Semester 1 Examination Block. The results for 18 June and 3 July are the lowest scores and align for times when the students may have finished their Semester 1 studies and thus were not be checking their student email accounts.

At the commencement of Semester 2 (24 July) the response rate is down to half of that of the start of the academic year, and this level is maintained till late in Semester 2. The response rate then returned to a comparatively high level in the final month of Semester 2. The researcher was able to question 6 students during the semi-structured interviews conducted in September and October as to the reasons for gaps in their SES data. The reasons cited included being too busy due to assessments and work (three students), had seen the SES but had forgotten to reply (two students), or hadn't seen the email (one student).

I always fill them in if I see them. I am really slack at reading my emails so that is probably why I haven't filled them in. Student 7 (F, 17 notFinF)

I had a lot of things happening it got sort of put to the back burner. Student 22 (F, 40, FinF)

6.6.1 An interpretation of the Student Response Rate results and their associated implications

On first inspection the response rates associated with the Experience Sampling Method used in this study would appear to be less than optimal. The ability of the methodology to maintain the commitment of the students to be involved over the whole academic year is supported by the data. It would appear, based on the number of student completions of the SES instrument, that the methodology was less effective in Semester 2 than in Semester 1. The efficiency of the SES during Semester 1 is of great importance as “the start of the year is a particularly anxious time for personal as well as academic reasons” (Gibney et al., 2011, p. 354). The decrease in the student SES response during Semester 2 may warrant a ‘reconnection’ with the students and a refocusing of their attention on the goals of the study at the start of Semester 2. The difficulty students’ face in getting back into a study routine after a break (discussed in Chapter 4) could also be a reason for the drop off in SES responses in Semester 2 and justify this reconnection. To ensure the availability of the greatest number of students this reconnection would be best placed within a core subject and not as an add-on activity due to the limited time students may be spending on campus due to other commitments (work and family). It may also be prudent, as discussed earlier, to provide interim results of the research project at this point to remind students of the value it holds for themselves and future students.

The most appropriate times in the semester to send the SES emails to students also deserves further consideration. The student comments and the response rates identify that emailing the SES during recess times may not be appropriate, neither are times coinciding with the Examination Blocks. The students may see the Recess times as times to distance themselves from their studies and to recharge, or times where the lecturers are unavailable and thus will not be sending emails that warrant attention. The drop off in response rates as Semester 1 drew to a close may also be accounted for by the increase in assessment requirements, academic stress, and fatigue, coming to a head at the end of semester. Interestingly this pattern did not repeat itself at the end of Semester 2. This could possibly have been associated with the increased frequency of semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher during this period.

6.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has reported and discussed the results associated with Research Question #3:

“How efficient is the Experience Sampling Methodology in the collection of data associated with the student first year experience?”*

Key aspects of the Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM) employed in this study were investigated through the analysis of student comments provided during the semi-structured interviews. The SES instrument, its delivery, and the manner in which the students responded to its use were discussed and compared to findings identified in contemporary ESM literature. The effect of the insider-researcher relationship with the participants was also investigated in an effort to identify if this approach (ESM) was efficient in harvesting accurate data from and supporting the needs of, first year university students. Finally the SES response rates were interrogated to identify any patterns of involvement or areas of improvement that could be used to improve student involvement in future ESM studies.

In Chapter 7 the results and discussion from Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will be drawn together to develop a relational understanding of the student first year experience on a small campus of a regional university (Biggs, 1989). Following this, the limitations of the study will be identified and discussed. Finally aspects of the first year student experience and the ESM process that warrant further investigation will be highlighted, with the concluding researcher’s remarks identifying their personal growth through the planning, implementation and synthesis of learning arising from their involvement in the research process.

Chapter 7. Synthesis of results and concluding comments

The study set out to explore the first year experience of a group of pre-service teacher education students who chose to study at a small regional university campus, and simultaneously to investigate the efficiency of an Experience Sampling Method building an understanding of the factors that impact on students across the whole first year of their studies. This final chapter in the dissertation will bring together all of the results and findings that emerged while answering the study's three main research questions:

1. (RQ#1): *How do pre-service education students perceive their first year experience on a small regional university campus?*
2. (RQ#2): *How does the student experience vary over time throughout the first year of study?*
3. (RQ#3): *How efficient is the Experience Sampling Methodology* in the collection of data associated with the student first year experience?*

The main goal of this chapter is to create this researcher's relational understanding (Biggs, 1979) of the first year experience of students on a small regional university campus and provide recommendations for how their experience can be monitored and measured to more accurately reflect their lived experience across the year as opposed to a single point in time. It also includes discussion highlighting the researcher's original contribution to knowledge related to the study and enhancement of the students' first year experience in higher education. While the researcher believes the study has been very successful, there is also an acknowledgement that, in hindsight, the structure and application of the study, as well as the analysis and interpretation of results may have contained some inherent flaws. These limitations will be identified and briefly discussed in relation to the experiences of other researchers who have implemented similar strategies. The Chapter will conclude with the researcher's reflection on the possible limitations of this study, opportunities for extending this study to uncover further knowledge, and a personal reflection on the researcher's journey whilst conducting this study.

7.1 Relational Understanding of results described in Chapters 4, 5 and 6

As discussed previously (see page 151), a central tenant of this study is the researcher's agreement with Chickering and Gamson's (1987, p. 3) view that "an undergraduate degree should prepare students to understand and deal intelligently with modern life". Clearly for university staff to be able to facilitate this development they must hold an accurate picture of what this 'modern life' might entail. While the time that higher education authorities have to prepare students for 'modern life' is usually limited to the 3 or 4 years that the student is working towards completing their undergraduate degree (initially at least), the first year of study is broadly understood as the most critical period, and was the focus of this study.

7.1.1 Interplay of factors affecting the student's first year experience

During the collection and analysis of the data, it became clear to the researcher that the key factors that emerged were not mutually exclusive. There was a clear interplay of factors which formed the foundation of the students' first year experience. To adequately represent this interplay the researcher decided to construct a visual representation (a model) that could convey this understanding to the reader. What follows is a description of the thought process used by the researcher in the construction of the visual representation of the life of a first year university student studying on a regional campus.

Life experiences while a first year university student

Support provided to optimise student's first year life experiences

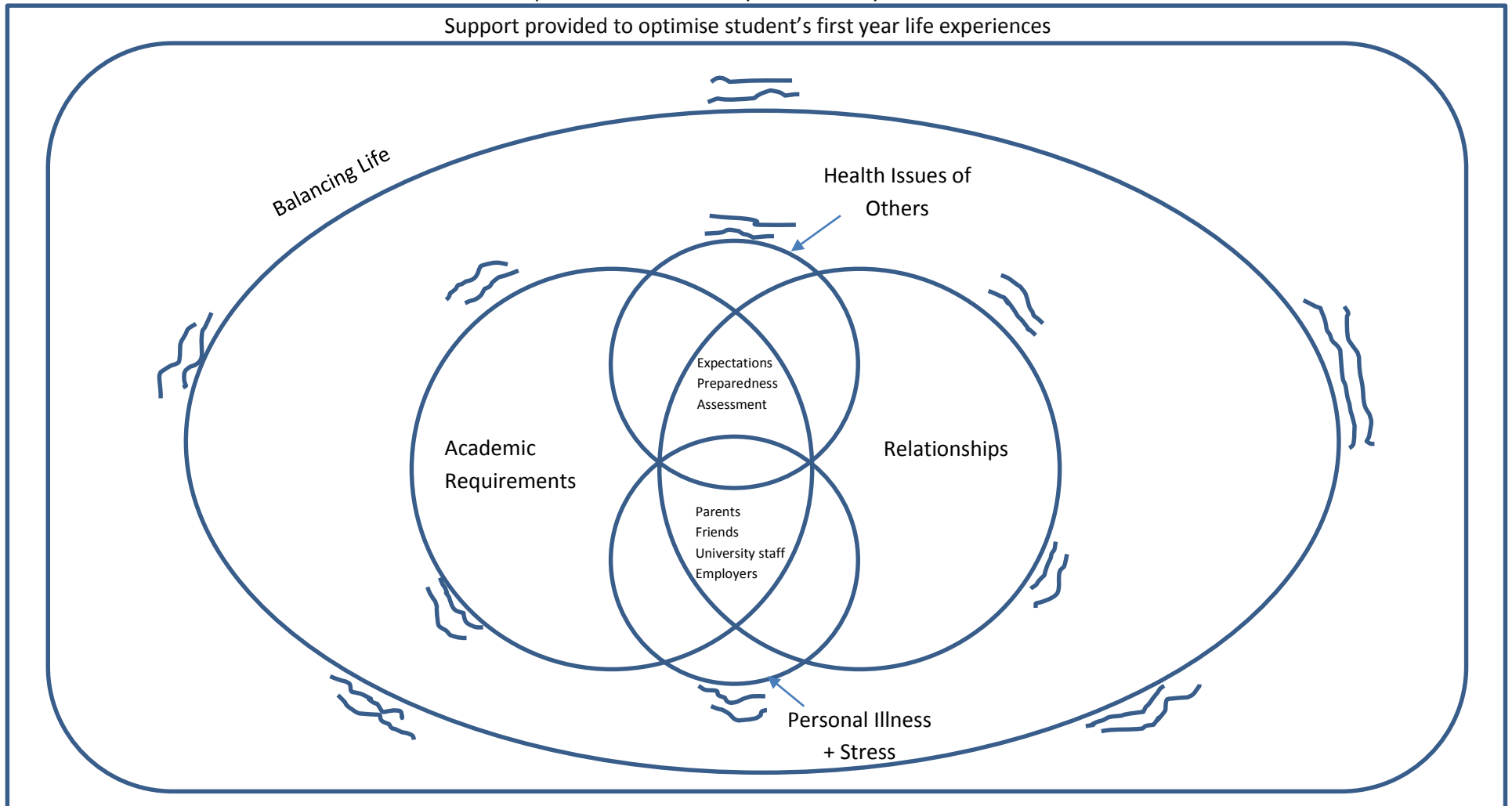


Figure 29. Visual presentation of the first year experience on a small campus of a regional university. The 'squiggly lines' represent the inference that the magnitudes of the factors, and their relative effect on the student's experience are student specific.

As 28 out of the 38 students in this study who completed SES surveys were classified as having experienced at least one major disturbance to their first year experience, the issue of support for these students when they face difficulties is of great importance. To optimise the academic and social outcomes for these students, optimising the effectiveness of the support that the students have available to them is called for. The results of this study clearly identify that students harness support from a wide range of sources including parents, friends, university staff and employers. Thus, if higher educational authorities wish to enhance student outcomes, taking on a role of coordinating and empowering these support agents may be highly beneficial. For support to be targeted and meaningful an in depth knowledge of what the first year students are experiencing is required.

The data provided by the students in the semi-structured interviews identified three key issues they faced that caused them difficulty:

1. Meeting the academic requirements of their studies,
2. Maintaining and developing new and existing relationships, and
3. Balancing all the competing elements of their lives.

While all three 'issues' have aspects that are specific to them individually, the data reflected that they interact (or interfere) with each other at various times throughout the year. Thus, focusing on one issue and not the interaction of multiple issues may be problematic. Further, focusing on these issues at the start of the academic year and not revisiting them throughout the year could mean that any initial support become less useful over time.

A key aspect of the data was the students' belief that interested parties (family, friends, university staff, and employers) did not truly or fully understand the issues they were facing. Two issues came to the fore, the recognition that (1) there are multiple interested parties, and (2) there is a need for information to be disseminated to these parties that would help them support the student. As Universities promote themselves as places of learning, the Universities role in identifying issues that confront the students and impede their growth, sharing this information with interested/support parties, and researching strategies that do this in the most effective and efficient manner, is highlighted by this study.

The lack of understanding held by the interested parties, while causing the students issues at times throughout their first year of study, made the start of the academic year more problematic for some, as these students held unrealistic expectations of what was to come. The students noted family (especially parents), school teachers, friends and employers as providing information that did not match their own experiences at the start of their first year at university. The data from this cohort of students supports the need for information sharing before the students start their studies, to ease the transition as much as possible. While this has been a focus of Universities previously, and has been noted by the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) and First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) as improving over time, for this cohort of students the evidence provided by this study implies there is a lot more work required in this area. The data was unclear on whether this is symptomatic of students specifically from first in family or low SES backgrounds (similar to this cohort), or students studying on small regional campuses generally.

While 'Health Issues' were initially classified by the researcher as falling within the 'Balancing Life' Theme, it was included separately in the Visual Representation to highlight its prominence in the first year experience of a substantial number of students in this study. As the majority of students were living at home with their parents, or living in the same town as their parents, their responsibilities for the care of family members when they were unwell was an ongoing expectation, and featured strongly in the semi-structured interview data. While this was a major issue for these first year students, the frequency of students facing their own personal health issues was a surprise result. For the students in this study there would seem to have been a need to provide an avenue for obtaining health related information, one that was unavailable on the small regional campus. Associated with these health issues were student concerns with balancing the other aspects of their lives: maintaining their studies, their relationships, and their jobs. Once again the need for greater awareness by all parties associated with the students' first year experience, of the issues they are facing, and affordances that may be required, was highlighted.

Within the personal health dimension of the Visual Representation, 'stress' was specifically highlighted due to its prevalence in the student semi-structured interview data. As stated in Chapter 4, there is no clear evidence whether the stress led to the

onset of health concerns or resulted from these health concerns, but this cohort appeared to be very susceptible to its effects. The student data provides some support for the notion that the multiple priorities of the students, lack of understanding of what university study realistically required, and conflict within their relationships may have made this issue very problematic for the students in this study. Again, the data does not provide evidence whether this was due to the backgrounds of the students (first in family, low SES etc.), or due to their attendance at a small regional campus.

7.1.2 The student's experience across their first year of study

While the students' perceptions of their first year of university study on a small regional campus have been summarised by the Visual Representation described previously, one feature of this diagram is yet to be explained. The 'squiggly lines' that have been included in the Visual Representation, have been included to infer that the magnitudes of the factors, and their relative effect on the student's experience are student specific. The data in this study very clearly supports the position that each student had a unique experience and that no 2 student perceptions of their experiences were the same. This was especially evident when the Tables in Chapter 5 are studied. The pattern of SES scores, although similar in some cases, showed different peaks and troughs, with issues occurring at different times of the year. Generalising a common student first year experience from the data would seem ill-founded and open to flawed interpretations. As well as reflecting differences between students, the 'squiggly lines' also reflect the changes that a student might experience across their first year of study, and how at any point in time, one of these factors may take up a less or more prominent position, and have a greater or lesser impact on the student's experience.

The results from this study provide evidence that the difficulties students face (represented by SES scores of 5 or less in one or more dimensions) were prominent at the commencement of the academic year but were also prominent at the end of the first year. The lower SES response rates at the conclusion of Semester 1 and start of Semester 2 did not allow the researcher to make judgements about whether the frequency of difficulties was consistent across the whole first year. At this same time there is not sufficient evidence to support the position that the students' learn about the requirements of being a first year student at the start of the year, get into a satisfactory study routine, and are in less need of support as the year progresses. Once

again it is not clear whether this can be attributed to the backgrounds of the students, the nature of the campus at which they are studying, or is symptomatic of all higher education settings.

However, when the reasons cited by the participants for causing major disturbances to their first year experience were interrogated (see Page 171), some broad patterns emerged. Firstly, in the first 8 weeks of the academic year the number of disturbances associated with being overloaded with study activities was at its highest, but was much less a concern as the year progressed. Secondly, the student's personal illness concerns were more frequently aligned with a major disturbance in the latter part of their first year of study (August to October). On an individual student basis though, the reasons for the disturbances were specific to their unique situation. While this gives some indication of the support that should be available at these times, the variability of each individual student's experience means that for some students this need does not diminish significantly over time, or occur during a specific timeframe within the year.

Another pattern that emerged from the disturbances data was the omission of issues associated with the students feeling the study materials and activities were too difficult and beyond their ability. Whether this is a true reflection of the student experience or whether it reflects a reluctance by students to verbalise this perception during the semi-structured interviews is unclear.

7.1.3 The Experience Sampling Method (ESM) employed in this study

The data provided by students during the semi-structured interviews indicate that the ESM, while efficient in collecting data across the student's first year of university study, also provided benefits for those students who participated in the study. Most importantly the ESM served as a bridge between the participants and a support provider, the First Year Coordinator (FYC). In fact, over time a range of participants associated the completion of the SES scores as just part of being monitored by the university to check on their progress. Thus the ESM assisted in the development of a relationship between the participants and the researcher/FYC. The coupling of the ESM with the semi-structured interview data collection process would appear to have been critical in this relationship building as it normalised the one on one discussion of

how the student was progressing and allowed the student to get to know and trust the researcher/FYC. This may have been especially effective as students from similar backgrounds have been found to be reticent to make contact with university staff and rely more on the staff being proactive (Rendon et al., 2000). Interestingly, the ESM process used in this study provided benefits for both participants and the researcher. The students had ready access to a support structure and due to this situation became more committed to the research process with an added commitment to providing accurate data to aid the researcher.

Another aspect of the ESM (and semi-structured interviews) were the benefits that accrued for the FYC. The ESM provided an avenue for the role of the FYC to be continually reinforced and promoted through the regular 2 – 4 weekly emails and interview process used across the whole first year of study. As a substantive number (56%) of students in the first year cohort chose to participate in the study, they developed a firsthand understanding of the researcher's role, and by extension, an understanding of the support role of the FYC. These students interacted with non-participating students in class and on campus, opening the opportunity for sharing of this knowledge and increasing the understanding of the whole student population. For the FYC too, the ESM scores provided a window into the lives of individual students. With this information, and that provided by the interviews, the FYC was able to develop a much deeper knowledge of the students' background, issues they confronted, and their goals, thus, when conversing socially, could convey to the student that someone (a university staff member) really did know and care about them.

7.1.4 The role of a first year academic

While collecting data to answer the three research questions the student comments provided clear guidance as to the support they as individuals found to be effective, or would have like access to so their needs could be met. Based on the students' perceptions of their experience (RQ#1), the variety of issues they confronted throughout the year (RQ#2), and their ongoing communication with the researcher associated with the ESM methodology (RQ#3), a clear picture of the knowledge, attitudes, and dispositions, of key support staff emerged. The key messages from the students in this study describing these attributes are synthesised and summarised below in a hypothetical 'First Year University Academic Job Description'. Following this

‘Job Description’, the researcher provides a brief substantiation of why these attributes have been highlighted.

Academic Staff Teaching into First Year University Subjects - Job Description

This position is available at a small campus of a regional Australian university. The first year student cohort is predominantly made up of students with first in family and/or low SES backgrounds, with most participating in part time work while studying.

The staff member will have a highly developed understanding of:

- 1. the content of the subjects of which they will provide instruction, and effective pedagogical practices that will support the academic and social development of first year university students, and*
- 2. the pastoral-care support role required to support the transition and ongoing support of first year university students.*

This highly developed understanding will be reflected by the following:

Knowledge

A demonstrated awareness of:

- the key characteristics of the first year students, their diverse needs, and how these may impact on the student’s ability to effectively transition to being a university student.
- the roles and responsibilities of support staff that are available to first year students.
- pedagogic strategies that can be used in classrooms to enhance student self-efficacy (e.g. Bandura’s (1994b, p. 72) Sources of Self-Efficacy).
- student-centred teaching strategies that develop, trust and belonging.
- the need to provide support throughout the first year of study.

Skills

A demonstrated ability to:

- clearly articulate academic expectations, monitor student progress and provide targeted support.
- communicate effectively with members of the student’s learning community (students, families, friends, school staff, and other university staff) using language they understand and in a manner that fosters respect for the role they play supporting the student’s belonging and development.

- accurately quantify the time and effort required to complete academic activities and manage these activities to mediate student's workload perceptions.
- work collaboratively with other staff teaching first year subjects to ensure students experience a cohesive program suited to their specific needs.
- effectively plan and implement engaging lessons that use student-centred pedagogies.

Attitudes

A demonstrated ability to

- portray a positive and friendly approach.
- acknowledge students as individuals both inside and outside the classroom.
- proactively check on the support needs of the students (both academic and social).
- understand that the students entering your classroom may not have the skills to be an Independent Learner but are able to develop these skills with time and support.
- work collaboratively with other members of staff to develop a cohesive first year curriculum that meets the needs of the students in the present cohort.

Academic staff wishing to teach into first year university subjects must also be aware that they will be expected to actively contribute to the *ongoing, collaborative research of the students' first year experience in this setting*.

A core principle reflected in the hypothetical 'Job Description' above is an acknowledgement that first year students may have special needs due to their (or their families) inexperience in the higher education setting. With this acknowledgement comes the requirement for a specific set of skills to meet these needs. This study has identified that, although there may be some general commonalities, individual student journeys are unique and as such assessment of student needs is critical at the commencement and throughout their first year of study. With the assessment of needs comes the responsibility to enact processes which can enhance the student's experience. The role of the academic is seen as being pivotal due to the power they have to plan classroom activities that develop the student's skills, confidence and belonging. A reliance on tutors who do not have these responsibilities or abilities could limit the possibilities and effectiveness of strategies employed to enhance the student's first year experience. In this study the backgrounds of students (first in family, low

SES, working etc.) would appear to make this even more important given the limited time students spend on campus beyond their timetabled classes.

Another principle incorporated into the Job Description is a key focus on relationships and an acknowledgement of the roles of all members of the students' learning community, such as families, friends, employers, school staff, and other university staff. While issues of privacy of information are paramount in maintaining the academic-student relationship, an awareness of the important role of other interested parties and an openness to acknowledge and empower these people could increase the effectiveness of any support mechanism employed by university authorities.

The role of the academic as a facilitator of support services also pervades the Job Description. The results of this study, and that of many other researchers justify the inclusion of this requirement (Benson et al., 2009; Crisp et al., 2009; Devlin & O'Shea, 2012). For students from first in family or low SES backgrounds similar to those in this study this is once again seen as critical with Tinto (2007) stating "access without support is not opportunity" and Devlin (2010) noting that opening access to students from previously under-represented groups and not providing the specialised support they require would be a tragedy. As the academic staff member has most access to the students, an awareness of what is available, the vision to identify students who could be in need of support, and the relationship to be able to discuss these needs with the student is suggested (Drew, 2001; Kantanis, 2000).

Finally another key aspect of the hypothetical 'Job Description' is the focus on the pedagogy employed within the classroom. The use of student-centred strategies to get students to interact with each other, build trust and belonging, enhance self-efficacy and support the students' needs has been highlighted. Only having knowledge of the generic needs of the students or the ability to research and identify these needs, without the ability to embed appropriate classroom activities to address these needs is seen as being insufficient. The 'hidden curriculum' of the social development of the students, connecting students to their peers and the university, enhancement of learning skills, development of time management skills, means that the academics who teach into first year subjects cannot solely be an expert in subject content but also an expert in people and learning.

7.2 Original contribution to knowledge related to the first year experience in higher education

The results and findings of this study enhance the previously existing knowledge base related to the students' first year experience in higher education in a number of significant ways. Each of these will be identified and discussed separately, with implications for higher education authorities and the broader community also addressed.

7.2.1 First year experience of under-represented groups

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the student Australian higher education population not only continues to increase in number but also in the diversity of the students (James et al., 2010). With this increased diversity the structures and processes employed by higher education authorities that have existed in the past may not be sufficient to meet the needs of these new students. The results of this study provide a new perspective on the needs of first year university students, especially those from first in family and low SES backgrounds, students who have been traditionally under-represented in higher education populations. While in previous studies, some key factors that may have affected the student experience have been identified, this study has been able to identify how these factors interact, compound, and shape the students' perceptions of their first year of university study (see Chapter 5). As students from these backgrounds have been found to be at higher risk of withdrawal or attaining lower educational outcomes, the deeper understanding resulting from this study provides a base for more targeted and appropriate support for students from first in family, low SES backgrounds, and students residing in regional contexts.

7.2.2 First year experience on small campus of regional university

As Kift *et al.* (2010, p. 3) state “context is important”, and has a profound effect on the student experience. With the number of smaller regional university campuses increasing the need to identify how these contexts may affect the student experience has increased. As this study was set on a smaller campus of a regional university, the results and findings contribute to a broader understanding of the student experience in Australian contexts including small regional campuses. Trowler and Trowler (2010) and Kuh *et al.* (2006) provide support for valuing research into single contexts as the

assumption that what works for students in one setting may not be effective in a different setting even if the students come from similar backgrounds.

7.2.3 Student perceptions of their first year experience.

As Bowles *et al.* (2013) note, studies of student perceptions of their first year experience have been very limited in number. In this study the data that was collected was all ‘perception’ based. The SES was structured so that any student experiences, whether they be within the confines of the university or beyond, were included in the decision making process. The semi-structured interviews asked the students to explain from their perspective the issues they faced and why these were affecting their first year experience. The researcher did not seek to focus students’ attention on those elements that he felt were important but was guided by the student. Thus, the results and findings enhance what has been found in the limited number of student perception studies and either confirms or disputes their findings. Therefore the original contribution to knowledge of this study will assist policy makers and those staff supporting first year students to better understand the students’ perspective.

7.2.4 Engagement as a narrow construct when studying the first year student experience

The Student Engagement construct as a means of measuring the effectiveness of higher education authorities has been questioned due to its focus on the activities directly under their control (Kantanis, 2000; Krause & Coates, 2008a). The factors that underpin this construct have formed the basis for much of the recent research into the first year experience. With this in mind, and the fact that student attrition is still substantial in the first year, the call for investigation of the broader student experience is becoming more pronounced (Baird & Gordon, 2009; Hagel *et al.*, 2011; Nevill & Rhodes, 2006; Vinson *et al.*, 2010). The results of this study have successfully drawn from the students’ data that relates directly with on campus activities as well as activities and experiences which come from all aspects of their lives. The students’ perceptions of their interactions and relationships with friends, family, employers, and university staff, as well as how these impact upon each other adds to what is already known about the complex lives of students in their first year of university study. The results of this study also provide guidance as to the power of influences that reside

outside the auspices of the university campus and specifically what issues could and probably should be targeted for support interventions.

7.2.5 Efficient methodology for research of the student's first year experience.

A key original contribution to knowledge resulting from this study relates directly to the process of data collection. The ESM for collection of data has been used in numerous studies but has had limited application within studies of the first year experience. As a result of this study future researchers will have an awareness of the possible strengths and weaknesses of employing ESM. Of special significance is the effectiveness of identifying students who could be viewed as 'at risk'. The SES scores provided by the students in the study were able to tap into any aspects of the lives of the students that could be causing distress and could possibly lead to lower academic performance or even withdrawal. As the ESM allowed the application of the SES on 13 occasions across the first year of study without apparent negative attitudes being exhibited by the students, it provides guidance for future researchers and support staff with respect to a means of monitoring student progress, one which is not viewed by students as obtrusive or onerous.

Beyond monitoring the student experience across the year, the ESM resulted in a means of comparing and contrasting differing student experiences. The SES scores provided the stimulus for the semi-structured interviews and prompted students' recollection of events. The integration of the SES and semi-structured interview data to construct a representation of the students' holistic experience of their first year of study (see Chapter 5) is unique to this study and as such represents an original contribution to knowledge. It provides a means of succinctly representing the ebbs and flows as described previously.

The results of this study have also raised questions over the ability of students to provide accurate global scores for elements of their student journey across their first year of study. The comparison of interim states to the global scores of the SES provides another voice to those who question the effectiveness of one off cross sectional global surveys and forms the basis for further studies in this area. Thus, this study provides valuable information that can be used to design research methods that will more accurately capture the 'real' and on-going student first year experience. The question

as to whether lack of accuracy is symptomatic of students from specific backgrounds (first in family, low SES, and regional university) or not, also requires further investigation.

7.2.6 Support of first year students

A key impetus for research into the students' first year experience is the goal of providing the most effective support for these students so they experience the greatest positive outcomes possible from their involvement with a higher education institution. This study has provided insights into not only the issues the students studying in a specific context (small campus of regional university) and with specific background characteristics (first in family, low SES) face, but also a support strategy that was found to be effective in meeting their needs. The ESM process combined with the semi-structured interviews monitored the students' progress across their first year and at the same time provided a means for the students to access a member of the university staff who could offer guidance and support (the First Year Coordinator). While this was not originally a goal of the study, the effectiveness of the ESM to identify the FYC as a support mechanism and to keep reminding the students of this fact became very apparent as the study progressed. The results and findings of this study provide an original contribution to knowledge of effective support processes for students in similar contexts and beyond.

7.2.7 The attributes of academic staff valued by first year university students

Finally, the results and findings from this study provide a comprehensive picture of the academic staff attributes that are valued by first year students, as well as the knowledge and skills these staff need if they are to cater for their specific needs. The breadth of specialised knowledge, skills and attitudes required by these staff, as represented in the hypothetical 'Job Description', is an original contribution to knowledge and the ongoing debate concerning effective teaching and learning in higher education contexts.

7.3 Limitations of the study

As with any research method, there is the possibility that its implementation may result in the collection of data that are not fully representative of the population from which the sample is drawn. This lack of representation may increase the

possibility of inferences with lower levels of accuracy or credibility. In this section the researcher will identify possible limitation of this study that need to be considered by the reader when interpreting the results and findings in this study.

7.3.1 Limitations of this study associated with the sample

For this study the researcher decided to use a convenience sample (described fully in Chapter 3) from the population of first year university students studying on a small regional campus. The sample was drawn from the group of students who the researcher had ready access to due to holding the position of First Year Coordinator for the first year students enrolled in the Faculty of Education. All first year students were invited to participate in the yearlong study when they attended Orientation Week activities with a follow up invitation being provided for those students who were unable to attend Orientation Week. With the ‘convenience’ that this sample provided also came some limitations. Firstly, the sample does not include students across the range of faculties that offer first year subjects on the small regional campus. Thus the experiences that the sample described are limited to interactions with staff associated with the Faculty of Education, and the workload associated with studying subjects within the Faculty of Education. Secondly, the sample includes only those students who study on one specific small regional campus meaning the experiences described by the students may be geographically biased. The cohort of students in this study identified as predominantly coming from first in family, low SES, or working part time backgrounds may not be characteristics demonstrated across all small regional campuses.

With the choice of ‘convenience sampling’ also came the limitation on the number of students who could possibly participate in the study. Of the 68 students who commenced their first year studies with the Faculty of Education, 48 initially completed the required Participant Consent Form, with 38 of those students going on to provide SES data. Thus 55.9% of the potential population actively participated in the study. As such there is a possibility that the sample was biased with “underlying, and unmeasured, attributes associated with membership of the convenient population” (Hedt & Pagano, 2011, p. 560). Statistically this would be a major concern due to the possibility of outliers, cases that were more or less pronounced than in the wider population, due to this sampling method. As this study was predominantly qualitative

in nature this issue is believed to not have posed a great challenge, as investigating disparate student experiences was a key aspect investigated in answering the three research questions (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012).

Finally the sample size could also have imposed some limitations on this study. The number of students supplying SES scores (38) also limited the number of students who could be approached to participate in the semi-structured interviews so they could describe their experiences and give meaning to their scores.

7.3.2 Limitations associated with the Experience Sampling Method employed to collect SES data

Similar to a range of other studies using an Experience Sampling Method of data collection, this study included a small number of participants (38 students) (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Scollon et al., 2003). Whilst the data provided by each participant was extensive, the small number of participants may have limited the breadth of experiences that were described by the students involved, or the strength of student issues may be overstated due to the relative proportion of the students providing the same response (Ilies & Judge, 2002).

Although the 38 students who participated in this study form a large proportion of the overall cohort (68%), another issue that arises is self-selection bias (Alliger & Williams, 1993; Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008). The nature of the ESM method requiring students to provide data on multiple occasions (13), over an extended period of time (first year of study), may mean that participants who were comfortable in making long term commitments would be over represented, with other students who felt they might not have the time, being underrepresented.

Another issue faced by similar ESM studies is one of the accuracy of the data provided by participants. Hormuth (1986) noted that if participants found participation in the ESM study to be too demanding they may resort to supplying poor quality data. Scollon *et al.* (2003) described this as an issue especially for studies that were over an extended period of time. Given the results described in Chapter 4, that the students felt overloaded with their workloads, this may have been an issue, although the results in Chapter 6 describe that these same students did not find their participation in the study to be intrusive or burdensome.

The quality of the data can also be related to the instrument the participants were required to complete and return. In an effort to limit the burden on participants in ESM studies, the questions they were required to answer were limited and thus offered very limited coverage of the construct under investigation (Miner, Glomb, & Hulin, 2005). This diminishes the reliability checks that are regularly used in other forms of research. This limitation is also true for this study as the students were only asked to answer seven short questions, with each answer being only a single numerical score between 1 and 10. At this same time though, the researcher did not use this data alone as the basis for making judgements. The scores were used as a trigger to invite students to participate in semi-structured interviews where they provided detailed descriptions of what they were experiencing /had experienced in their lives.

Another aspect related to the accuracy of the data provided by participants is that of reactance, defined by Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli (2003, p. 592) as “a change in participant’s experience or behaviour as a result of participation in the study”. In this study the students were asked to reflect on their recent experiences and to provide scores on their feelings. The very act of reflecting may have changed what the students would do in the future and thus shape their future experience. Whilst this may be viewed as tainting the data, reflection, reassessment of priorities, problem solving, and planning, could all be viewed as ‘intelligently dealing with modern life’ and thus be viewed as a normal part of a student’s first year university experience (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 3). Whilst highlighted by Bolger *et al.* (2003) as a possible limitation, they also found this to be a very small threat to the validity of ESM data.

The instrument used by participants to record their data can be a limitation of any ESM study (Scollon et al., 2003). In this study students were asked to reply to an email to return their SES scores. The use of emails was noted by some students as causing concern and the reason for non-submission of SES scores. The inability of students to filter emails, sort emails, and generally effectively use emails, on various devices (computers, smart phones) limited the number of responses supplied by the participants.

Finally one of the most significant possible limitations of this study, common to most ESM studies, is that they require self-reporting of data (Miner et al., 2005). Given the nature of the data being requested from the participants, feelings and

personal perceptions, the researcher believed that there was no other efficient means to harvest this information other than through self-reports. Also, as the SES data was corroborated with the semi-structured interview data, and the students commented that they were confident in divulging their personal circumstances to the trusted researcher/FYC, the researcher believes this issue had minimal impact in this study.

While studies using an ESM approach have common issues and limitations, there are also issues and limitations that are unique to this study. The first issue that may limit the generalisability of the results is the style of ESM employed in this study. As opposed to most signal contingent ESM studies that required all participants to instantly (or very quickly) record personal data following a synchronised prompt (i.e., electronic pager signal), this study asked students to respond to an email at their earliest convenience. This process was used in order to not add to their workload or to make them feel pressured to respond. As the participants were all first year students, a group identified as being 'at risk', this decision seemed justified. As a result students may have provided retrospective ratings for the SES as opposed to instantaneous ratings. Cutler, Larsen and Bunce (1996) found that participants recollections (memories) of events and feelings may not be accurate and thus lead to memory bias in the data they provide. While this inaccuracy is something that needs to be considered when evaluating the results of this study, the corroboration of the SES scores with the semi-structured interview data was thought to minimise this concern.

What may be viewed as a more substantive limitation of this study with regard to the SES data, is the varying response rate of the participants across the year. As the students provided different numbers of responses at different times of the year, this could lead to the potential of bias in the SES data (Shiffman et al., 2008). Firstly the students who submitted SES scores more frequently may be over represented when the data is aggregated across the year possibly leading to interpretations with lesser accuracy. Secondly the association of scores with specific periods within the year becomes problematic. Time series analysis would not be possible due to the gaps in student data. As described previously the corroboration of the SES data with the semi-structured interviews was thought to minimise these issues. Whilst the researcher provided reminders to the participants if they did not return their SES scores, there was a conscious effort made not to pressure the students to comply. This was especially the

case as the initial results from the semi-structured interviews identified that issues related to overwhelming workload and personal stress were common amongst the participants (see Chapter 4).

The yearlong sampling period used in this study also differs from the usual short-term collection periods associated with ESM studies. One issue that arises here is the attrition of participants (Scollon et al., 2003). Of the 38 students who provided SES scores, nine students withdrew from their studies in Semester 2. While their SES data is critical to this study, any inclusion of it in statistical analysis could lead to inaccurate findings. The choice of the researcher to use qualitative forms of analysis where the SES data and semi-structured interview data were used simultaneously is thought to have addressed this concern.

A notable limitation of this study could be the dual, and sometimes competing roles, held by the researcher. As the researcher also fulfilled the role of First Year Coordinator (FYC), the relationship with the participants was complex in nature. The FYC role was explained at the start of the students' first year as entailing personal support and advocacy. The students were also told that as participants in the research project if their SES scores were seen to decrease they would be invited to attend an interview to discuss this change. It is reasonable to assume that the expectation of the students was that they would receive support and guidance from the FYC when they attended the interview. On numerous occasions the students attended the research interview but it was either delayed or deferred due to the distress the student was exhibiting. At this time the support of the student was deemed by the researcher to be the priority. This situation led to the collection of less data than may have been possible if the researcher did not hold dual roles. While this may have decreased the volume of data, the students were invited to attend subsequent interviews, with the majority of students satisfying this request. Also, the strength of the relationship between the students and the researcher because of the FYC role was recognised by the students who described opening up more to the researcher than they might otherwise have done to an unknown researcher.

Similar to the limitations associated with the ESM strategy employed in this study, the issues of self-selection bias may also have limited the generalisability of the findings resulting from the semi-structured interviews. Students who did not feel

comfortable being approached by the researcher to discuss their SES ratings or their difficulties would have eliminated themselves from the study, thus increasing the chance the participants are not truly representative of the population of first year students. As students were approached by the researcher to participate in the study at the start of the academic year and had limited knowledge of what participating in a research project entailed, or the role and character of the researcher leading the project, only students with sufficiently high levels of social competence may have chosen to be involved. The researcher, in the guise of the FYC, tried to overcome this issue by conducting Orientation Week activities and ‘connecting’ with the students but the level of success of this strategy is unknown.

7.4 Strengths of the research design

Along with the range of possible limitations there was a range of strengths associated with the research design. Firstly the ESM used in this study, was not only efficient in collecting regular data from the students about their first year experience, but it was also deemed valuable by the students who participated as well. The promotion of personal reflection, clarity of who to contact when facing difficulties, and development of a sense of belonging were identified by the participants as by-products of their involvement. The support of the students for the continuation of the ESM process in the following years provided strong support for this finding.

Secondly, the strategy of inviting students to attend semi-structured interviews when their SES scores dropped was very effective in breaking the ice with participants. As the researcher (and thus the FYC as well) instigated the contact this took the burden from them of deciding whether their concern was significant enough to seek support and then identifying who could help them with their concerns. Also for this cohort of students, as all participants were contacted to participate in the semi-structured interviews, the process was seen as ‘normal’ and thus the student was not left feeling like they were the only one being contacted. Trotter and Roberts (2006, p. 374) support this style of approach as “helping students deal with personal problems or crises, and supporting them through this period of personal and intellectual growth, should be an integral rather than ancillary feature of higher education”.

7.5 Possibilities for further research

Given the nature of this study as a single site and, faculty investigation of students' first year experience in higher education, the possibilities of further research are extensive. Firstly, a multi-site investigation involving other small campuses of regional universities would be highly appropriate to identify if the size of the campus itself was a key influencing factor and not the student backgrounds that were predominant within this present study. With the push by successive Federal Governments to increase the participation of under-represented populations such as students from low SES or geographically isolated backgrounds, a clearer picture of the life of a student on a small regional campus would be highly beneficial. Secondly, as this study focussed on only those student enrolled in the Faculty of Education, a broadening of the sample to include students from other faculties would be valuable to distinguish possible differences in student experience related to career choice and program of study.

The success of the Experience Sampling Method in not only monitoring the student experience across their first year of study but also being perceived by the students as a support mechanism warrants further investigation. The efficiency of this method across faculties on the one campus, across campuses, and even across different universities would be a fruitful endeavour. At this same time a parallel investigation of the experience of the researchers, if they have a dual role as a support mechanism, would be very informative.

While the ESM used in this study relied on the use of student emails, this too requires further investigation given the SES response rates and the comments of students reflecting a lack of skill in using this medium. The prevalence of mobile phones may provide an avenue for investigation in this regard, with the use of a phone App for the collection of SES data being a possibility. A comparative study involving email and App means of delivering the SES may unearth which is the most efficient means of 'connecting' with the students to harvest progress data from first year students.

Also, given the apparent success in this study of the ESM, and the dual roles of the researcher, further research into the efficiency of this strategy with the growing number of students studying online may be fruitful. Whether the relationship building

with students, monitoring of student progress, and facilitation of student reflection could be successfully transferred from an on campus setting to an online setting would seem a relevant and rich area of future research.

7.6 Concluding reflexive comments

While the focus of a PhD dissertation is an original contribution to knowledge in a certain field of study, the researchers themselves benefit from the original and authentic experience of formulation, implementation, analysis, and synthesis, which form key stages in the research process. Before the commencement of this study the researcher had extensive experience with the planning and provision of pastoral care in both secondary school and university contexts. While the topic of this study may then have been viewed as a 'safe' choice, the lack of in-depth experience with the research process and the extended writing required to complete a dissertation placed the researcher in a position which had many commonalities with the difficulties confronting the first year students in this study. Issues such as unclear expectations, feelings of being under-prepared, lacking confidence, difficulty prioritising time, and making a commitment to completing the chosen study path were evident at various points in both the researcher's and students' journeys.

Looking back, the researcher learnt a lot of lessons as a result of this study that will guide his future actions. In the early stages of this study the researcher was required to reflect on his philosophical position (Ontology and Epistemology). This process highlighted the diversity of world views held by not only researchers but people in the wider community, and enhanced the researcher's ability to 'see' aspects of the world through different eyes. As the study progressed, issues of self-efficacy and lack of commitment confronted the researcher, much like that described by the first year students in the semi-structured interviews. This period persisted for much of the duration of the study causing various levels of concern. The support of the researcher's PhD supervisors was critical at these times and without their intervention (mastery experience and social persuasion) completion of the study would not have been possible (Bandura, 1994a). The importance of strong support from knowledgeable experienced mentors was essential. While holding what was thought to be a strong understanding of the student first year experience, the researcher also had to face the realisation that this understanding was limited or flawed. The value of research to

unearth new knowledge, to confront assumed knowledge, as well as illuminate biases held by the researcher was a key learning during this study.

Finally the central and controlling position of *trust* within the research design, implementation and reporting phases, has had a substantial impact on the researcher. The trust the participants have that the researcher will treat them and their information in a respectful manner, the trust that the researcher has in the participants to be truthful, the trust from students, peers and the wider community that the results and findings are accurately reported must all align if the research process and its results are to be respected and valued.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet



University of Southern Queensland

The University of Southern Queensland

Participant Information Sheet

HREC Approval Number: H11REA020

Full Project Title: Education students' first year experience on a regional university campus.

Principal Researcher: Trevor Black

I would like to invite you to take part in this research project.

1. Procedures

Participation in this project will involve:

- *Completion of a simple demographic survey to identify details of your background including age, gender and so forth (Approximately 5 minutes required)*
- *Completion of reflection activities distributed by email (Approximately 5 minutes per fortnight)*
- *Interviews to discuss your progress as a University student (Approximately 10 minutes per interview)*

The research process will be overseen by Associate Professor Romina Jamieson-Proctor to ensure your interests are protected. Through your involvement in this research you will develop reflective thinking skills and your progress will be closely monitored so that you are aware of and have access to support services.

2. Voluntary Participation

Participation is entirely voluntary. **If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to.** If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. Any information already obtained from you will be destroyed.

Your decision whether to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will not affect your relationship with the University of Southern Queensland. **Please notify the researcher if you decide to withdraw from this project.**

Should you have any queries regarding the progress or conduct of this research, you can contact the principal researcher:

Trevor Black Faculty of Education (Fraser Coast campus) Work: 07 41 943 184 **Mobile: 0423 389 779**

If you have any ethical concerns with how the research is being conducted or any queries about your rights as a participant please feel free to contact the University of Southern Queensland Ethics Officer on the following details.

Ethics and Research Integrity Officer (Office of Research and Higher Degrees)
University of Southern Queensland
West Street, Toowoomba 4350
Ph: +61 7 4631 2690 Email: ethics@usq.edu.au

Appendix B – Participant Consent Form



University of Southern Queensland
The University of Southern Queensland

Consent Form

HREC Approval Number: [H11REA020]

TO: Participants

Full Project Title: Education students' first year experience on a regional university campus.

Principal Researcher: Trevor Black

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I confirm that I am under 18 years of age.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that the recording of any interviews will be stored on a password protected computer only accessible by the researcher. Any transcripts made of the audio recording will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office.
- I understand that I could be audio taped during the study.

Participants under the age of 18 require parental or guardian consent to be involved in research. Consent for the involvement of a participant under the age of 18 requires the caregiver to countersign this consent form in the space provided.

Name of participant.....

Signed.....Date.....

Name of Parent / Guardian

Signed.....Date.....

If you have any ethical concerns with how the research is being conducted or any queries about your rights as a participant please feel free to contact the University of Southern Queensland Ethics Officer on the following details.

Ethics and Research Integrity Officer (Office of Research and Higher Degrees)
University of Southern Queensland
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Email: ethics@usq.edu.au

Appendix C – Demographic Survey

Education students' first year experience on a regional university campus.

Participant Survey

Your Name:

1. Are you a full-time or a part-time student? Full-time Part-time

2. How many of your first year courses are you studying On Campus?

3. Your Gender Female Male

4. Do you identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander decent? Yes No

5. What is your age?

16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-50	51-60
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Are you responsible for the care of any other members of your family? Yes No

7. If you are responsible for the care of family members, how many are you responsible for?

8. What is your highest educational qualification before entering the Bachelor of Education?

Year 10 Certificate	Completed Tertiary Preparation Program	Year 12	Diploma/Advanced Diploma	Bachelors Degree	Apprenticeship / Trade Qualification	Masters Degree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. How long has it been since you finished your last studies?

Less than 6 months	6 – 24 months	2 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	11 to 20 years	21 to 30 years	More than 30 years
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. Before commencing your studies, in which town or city did you live?

11. Are you the first person in your immediate family (including parents and siblings) to attend university?

Yes No

12. Are you in paid employment whilst studying? Yes No

13. If you are employed, how many hours per week do you work?

14. What is your expected annual income for this year? (Including work, scholarships, government support etc)

Less than \$5 000	Between \$5 000 and \$10 000	Between \$10 000 and \$15 000	Between \$15 000 and \$20 000	Between \$20 000 and \$25 000	Between \$25 000 and \$30 000	More than \$30 000

Thank you for your assistance in completing this survey.

Please be assured the information you have provided will be stored securely to ensure your confidentiality.

Trevor Black

Appendix D – Example of SES Email

Hi Everyone

Well we are now in week 5 – how time flies. It is time for me to check up on you again. Can I ask that you complete the survey below and send it back to me.

Now here is what you need to do:

1. Reply to this email
2. Type a score between 0 and 10 (inclusive) beside each of the seven statements below. '0' is very bad and '10' is excellent.

How do you feel about:

1. Being a university student
2. Your academic progress (chances of passing or getting the grades you want)
3. Your relationship with others associated with the university (students, lecturers, administration staff – only people that are somehow involved with the university)
4. The resources and facilities provided to you as a university student (lecture theatres, computers, library, café, sitting areas ...)
5. Your ability to balance study, work, family and friends
6. Your relationship with people outside of the university
7. The support you are receiving from others in relation to being a university student (support from family, friends university staff etc)

Thanks for doing this – If you have any questions / worries remember to email me, call me or make an appointment to see me.

Regards

Trevor

Trevor Black
School of Teacher Education and Early Childhood
Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts
Fraser Coast Campus
University of Southern Queensland
Ph: 41 943184
Email: trevor.black@usq.edu.au

Appendix E – SES Instrument

1. Overall, how do you feel about being a university student?
2. How do you feel about your chances of successfully completing the courses you are studying?
3. How do you feel about your relationship with the lecturers, admin staff and other students?
4. How do you feel about the resources (such as computers, library, cafe) provided by the university?
5. How do you feel about your ability to balance study, work, family and friends now you are a university student?
6. How are your relationships with people NOT associated with the university (family, friends, work mates, employers etc)?
7. How do you feel about the support you are getting in relation to being a university student?

Appendix F – Semi-structured Interview Guide

Stage #1

- Thank the student for making themselves available for the interview.
- Remind the student of the goals of the research project.
- Ask permission to record the interview and explain the process to maintain their anonymity.
- Remind the student that they can withdraw at any time without redress.
- Check the recording device is working properly.

Stage #2

- Hand the student their personal SES scores submitted up to this time. Explain that they will be asked to explain in their own words why they allocated these scores and also to explain why they think the scores may have changed at certain times.
- Start by getting the student to explain their scoring for Q1 and then move sequentially through the other questions.
- Remember not to finish the students' sentences and aim to get full responses – “in your words for the record”

Stage #3 (questions added after first 20 interviews in response to a student comment)

- Were the SES questions easy to answer?
- Did the questions take long to complete?
- Did you think deeply about the questions?

- Do you approach the questions differently because they are part of a research project?
- If the SES scores changed markedly would you feel comfortable for me to make contact and ask you in for a chat?
- Do you think the 7 questions gave you the chance to share all your important experiences?
- Do you think you would have provided the same SES scores if you didn't know me?
- Were you happy with having the SES sent to you using your student email account?
- If you got tired of completing the SES would you feel comfortable in telling me you would like to stop?
- Can you remember why you might not have filled in these SES scores?
- Should I continue with the SES and interviews next year with the new first year students?
- Do you think you have received any benefits for yourself due to participating in this research project? (added after student comment)

Appendix G – Schedule of Semi-structured Interviews

Date of Interview		Students interviewed on this day
March	14	Student 5
	15	Student 28
	21	Student 29, Student 2
	27	Student 30
	30	Student 13
April	19	Student 4, Student 26
	20	Student 18
May	1	Student 21
	21	Student 23
	23	Student 27, Student 22, Student 3
	30	Student 25
June	5	Student 15
August	13	Student 7
	14	Student 8
	15	Student 11, Student 24
	16	Student 12
	21	Student 17
	23	Student 6
	24	Student 1
	29	Student 16
30	Student 19	
September	20	Student 27, Student 28
October	16	Student 29, Student 21
	17	Student 3
	18	Student 30, Student 22
	19	Student 26, Student 13
	22	Student 12
	23	Student 23
	24	Student 5
29	Student 9	
November	2	Student 1, Student 10
	7	Student 20

Appendix H – Demographics of Participants

Student No.	Gender	Identifying as ATSI	Commencing Age	Carer	Highest Qualification	Time since last studied	Residence before		Studying in home town	Lived within 50 km	First in Family	Working	Hours Worked	Identifying as Special Needs
1	F	No	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9	No
2	M	No	44	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	20	No
3	F	No	19	No	Tertiary Preparation Program	6 to 24 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	12	No
4	M	No	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	16	No
5	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	16	No
6	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8	Yes
7	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	No	Yes	18	No
8	M	No	20	Yes	Year 12 Certificate	6 to 24 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	No	Yes	10	No
9	F	No	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	6 to 24 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	0	No
10	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	20	No
11	M	No	21	No	Tertiary Preparation Program	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	12	No
12	M	No	20	No	Year 12 Certificate	2 to 5 years	Toogoolawah	10	No	No	Yes	No	0	No
13	F	Yes	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	6	Yes
14	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Aldershot	11	No	Yes	Yes	No	0	No
15	M	No	17	No	Year 10 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	10	No
16	F	No	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	12	No
17	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8	No
18	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	12	No
19	M	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	8	No
20	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	6	No
21	F	No	30	No	Diploma	2 to 5 years	Brisbane	91	No	No	No	Yes	16	Yes
22	F	Yes	40	Yes	Tertiary Preparation Program	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	0	Yes
23	M	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10	No
24	F	No	25	Yes	Year 12 Certificate	6 to 10 years	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	0	Yes
25	F	No	21	No	Diploma	Less than 6 months	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	15	No
26	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	6 to 24 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	No	No	0	Yes
27	M	No	37	Yes	Diploma	6 to 10 years	Sydney	71	No	No	No	No	0	No
28	F	No	18	Yes	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	Yes	No	0	No
29	F	No	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Gayndah	17	No	No	Yes	Yes	8	No
30	F	No	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	6 to 24 months	Gayndah	17	No	No	Yes	No	0	No
32	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	No	No	0	No
33	F	No	21	No	Bachelors Degree	6 to 24 months	Moree	19	No	No	Yes	No	0	No
36	F	No	18	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	16	No
38	F	No	28	No	Diploma	2 to 5 years	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	12	No
39	F	No	19	Yes	Year 12 Certificate	6 to 24 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	No	Yes	13	No
40	F	No	31	Yes	Tertiary Preparation Program	Less than 6 months	Toogoom	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	0	No
41	F	No	23	No	Trade Certificate (Apprenticeship)	6 to 24 months	Ipswich	45	No	No	No	Yes	12	No
43	F	No	19	No	Year 12 Certificate	Less than 6 months	Maryborough	11	No	Yes	No	No	0	No
44	F	No	37	Yes	Diploma	11 to 20 years	Hervey Bay	17	Yes	Yes	No	No	0	No