



# **STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY: AN AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY**

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## Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the University Ethics Committee.

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Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 25th February, 2020 \_\_\_\_\_

# Statement of Appreciation

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## **Keywords**

engagement, first-year experience, higher education, identity, sense of belonging, transition, spectrum of engagement

## List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACDE	Australian Council of Deans of Education
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACU	Australian Catholic University
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
AUSSE	Australasian Survey of Student Engagement
DET	Department of Education and Training
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
FYE	First-year experience
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
ITE	Initial teacher education
LANTITE	Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students
LEO	Learning environment online
McASA	McAuley Student Association
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OP	Overall Position
OSS	Office of Student Success
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QTAC	Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre
SES	Socioeconomic status
SPQ	Study Process Questionnaire
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SOEF	Spectrum of Engagement Framework
SOESAT	Spectrum of Engagement Self-Assessment Tool
TEMAG	Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group
VET	Vocational education and training

# Abstract

The impetus for this study was a concern for first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students, and whether students experienced or engaged with the university support services offered by the university. My interest also grew from my experiences of teaching first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. Within this context there developed a passion to understand and optimise learning experiences for all students, particularly those who had gained entry to the degree with low scores or through alternative pathway entry.

Entry for students with low entry scores can be traced to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) goals of increasing the percentage of each member country's population with a university degree. Australia, like all OECD countries, has implemented plans to increase university student numbers, and this can be seen in the large increase in the student population at Australian Catholic University. Even though universities offer many and varied support services, this study seeks to establish if the services provided are used by students and supportive of student needs, in accord with better understanding and enhancing student engagement. With this context in mind, the research question for this study was: *How do first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) on the Brisbane campus engage with supports and experience university life, and can a tool be developed to assess engagement that will benefit the wider higher education community?*

The research explored this question by drawing on the perspectives of 93 first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students and three non-academic staff at Australian Catholic University on the Brisbane campus, Banyo. This was achieved by adopting an interpretivist study that used symbolic interactionism with two phases of data collection and analysis: Exploration and Inspection. The Exploration Phase was quantitative using the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ; Biggs, 1987), while the Inspection Phase used a qualitative approach with

semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. Quantitative analysis confirmed Biggs's (1987) earlier work that there were three main factors influencing student approaches to learning: *Surface approaches*, *Deep approaches*, and *Achieving approaches*. The qualitative analysis indicated that there were three main factors influencing student engagement: *Personal transition to university*, *Social experiences at university*, and *Academic experiences at university*. These findings led to the advancement of three theoretical propositions and the development of the *Spectrum of Engagement Framework (SOEF)* and the *Spectrum of Engagement Self-Assessment Tool (SOESAT)*, with both representing new contributions to the field and with both having important implications for first-year student engagement.



# Chapter 1: Overview of Study

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

My professional training included completion of a Diploma of Education (Early Childhood) in 1990 and a Bachelor of Educational Studies in 1992. My subsequent career in early childhood and primary settings was in Brisbane and entailed engagements with private educational providers, Education Queensland and Brisbane Catholic Education. I completed a Master of Education (Early Childhood) in 1999 and not long after began working in the higher education sector for various organisations, such as Queensland University of Technology and Shafston Institute, where my roles included teaching, research, and supervising practicum students.

Early career appointments led to my employment at Australian Catholic University (ACU) in 2008, on the Banyo campus in Brisbane. Since that time, I have continued to work in the School of Education within the Faculty of Education and Arts, teaching undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) and Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) degrees. I lecture predominantly in Education Psychology, which is a compulsory first-year unit for pre-service teachers, and I also lecture in various other units across both degrees. I am the Lecturer in Charge and Tutor for each of the units I teach.

Since joining ACU I have become very interested in first-year student experiences as I believe that early positive experiences at university can enhance student success. My interest has developed such that I have been the Faculty's unofficial First-Year Experience Coordinator as well as the Mentoring Program Coordinator. In addition to these roles, I have served on the Orientation and Open Day Committees for over 10 years. These roles focus on providing a positive entry and transition into university for first-year students.

It was due to my interest in the ongoing success of my first-year students that I decided to explore ACU first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students' experiences on the Banyo

campus, Brisbane. Due to my piqued interest, I began to notice many students were struggling with general literacy skills, such as reflective writing and interpretation of readings. It also became evident to me that some of my students were entering university with very low entry scores as revealed in their Overall Position (OP)<sup>1</sup> or Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR<sup>2</sup>; this is discussed further in Section 2.3.2). In addition, anecdotal evidence from students and staff, including Academic Skills services, indicated that few students sought extra assistance as they did not know how to obtain the help they needed. In light of this, I began to investigate support services provided by the university in an effort to direct students to seek out the support they needed to improve and succeed.

My interest in this field of study has continued with this thesis and the results of my doctoral studies. The research question that has guided my study is:

*How do first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) on the Brisbane campus engage with supports and experience university life, and can a tool be developed to assess engagement that will benefit the wider higher education community?*

## **1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

Australian universities have seen an increase in student enrolments in recent years, where students with low university entry scores in the form of OPs and ATARs (Baik, Naylor, Arkoudis, & Dabrowski, 2019), students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and Indigenous students make up the majority of this increase. Notwithstanding, Australian

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<sup>1</sup> An OP is a student's position in a Queensland statewide rank order based on their overall achievement in their subjects. OP1 is the highest score and OP25 the lowest score (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> An ATAR is a rank that provides a measure of student overall academic achievement in the Certificate of Education. An ATAR is ranked between 0.00 and 99.95 with increments of 0.05 (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2020).

universities provide support programs for all students but in particular those students who have not met the usual entry requirements.

In an effort to understand this change in policy for university entry by Australian universities, I undertook a review of Australian Government documents such as the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Within these documents are constant references to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) goals for all OECD member countries to increase the percentage of their populations of 24- to 34-year-olds with a degree. Consistent with this OECD goal, the Bradley Review (2008) recommended an increase in Australian student enrolments such that by 2025 Australia would have 40% of the population of 24- to 35-year-olds with a degree. To achieve this, entry of students from a diverse range of backgrounds across the Australian landscape has been recommended and is now being advanced.

It seems that many OECD countries are indeed in a similar position to Australia, with each trying to reach their allocated goal. With the changes in government policies and many students given the opportunity to enter universities come important consequences that cannot be minimised or overlooked. First, students who are ill prepared for university life can be expected to face difficulties without considerable support being provided. Second, Australian students pay for their higher education and, for those who are unsuccessful, will leave university without a qualification and with a large education debt that will need to be repaid to the Australian Government by being automatically taken from their salary until the debt has been repaid (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2015). This debt is known as Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). Third, the goal to increase the level of education and participation of the populations within the OECD member countries will have similar impact in Australia and overseas, whereby students who fail to meet the entry requirements will need considerable support. Understanding the level and type of support necessary for success is currently not well known, or at best, undeveloped.

Research on student engagement within first-year university is linked directly to OECD goals and is relevant to all member nations. The relevance and influence of the services provided by universities to support the new and increased intakes of students warrants inquiry. This research will provide a contribution towards guiding both academic staff and universities, within Australia and around the world, to understand the needs of students as they enter their first year of university. While the research will have specific relevance to the university campus at which I work, it will also influence other campus locations and provide insights for a wider university audience, nationally and internationally. While many students who are entering university are ill prepared for success, they are coming in with their own goals, and it is imperative that they are supported so they can succeed and realise their personal goals.

### **1.3 THESIS STRUCTURE**

This chapter has outlined my professional journey and how my interest in this topic of first-year experience (FYE) has developed over time. Changes in the Australian higher education sector has meant that students pay substantial fees, and when coupled with reduced entry requirements, many students are ill prepared to gain entry, are subsequently challenged by university expectations, and potentially leave university with a higher education tuition debt. This is a significant problem in terms of retention of students, the personal impact that accrues, and the wider social and economic outcomes that emerge. A deeper appreciation of the experience of first-year students is important to offset the unintended consequences of this phenomenon. The remainder of this chapter outlines the structure of the thesis indicating the content of each chapter.

#### **1.3.1 Chapter 2: Identifying the research problem**

To locate the thread of influence that has led to the research problem, a review of international grey literature was needed. This review provides an understanding of the importance of the international context, with particular consideration of the influence of the

OECD education goals on Australian higher education. As a member nation of OECD, the Australian Government has agreed to work toward reaching the aspirational goals of the OECD. With this in mind, the discussion in Chapter 2 commences with a review of the OECD educational goals, followed by the Australian Government's response. This response can be seen in the form of the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) that recommended increasing student bachelor's degree enrolments to allow for Australia to reach its goal of 40% of Australians aged 24–35 with a bachelor's degree by 2025. Measures taken by Australia and other OECD countries to prepare for this are also identified. This discussion is followed by the ACU response and then in particular how this has impacted initial teacher education on the Banyo campus in Brisbane. The chapter concludes by identifying the research problem and purpose, which guided the review of the literature.

### **1.3.2 Chapter 3: Literature review**

Extending the grey literature presented in Chapter 2, a review and synthesis of the research literature relating to influences on FYE is presented in Chapter 3. In this chapter, three main themes have been generated from the research literature review, namely, *FYE transition*, *What students bring to university*, and *University provisions for FYE students*. An outcome of this literature review is that gaps in the research became evident that led to the generation of the research question. This question was used to guide the selection of methodology for this study. The research question is as follows:

*How do first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) on the Brisbane campus engage with supports and experience university life, and can a tool be developed to assess engagement that will benefit the wider higher education community?*

### **1.3.3 Chapter 4: Methodology**

This study is situated within a constructionist epistemological stance and uses a symbolic interactionist theoretical lens to guide the case study that investigated a cohort of Bachelor of Education (Primary) students entering university. The investigation invited participation from 150 first-year students and three non-academic staff members. Data collection methods included questionnaire and interviews during two phases of data collection across the year. Quantitative data analysis used the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 25<sup>®</sup> (SPSS), a sophisticated statistical package supporting the display of descriptive statistics and calculation of inferential statistics. Qualitative data collected through interviews used constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2008) as the analysis strategy.

### **1.3.4 Chapter 5: Findings**

Chapter 5 commences with a discussion of the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ; Biggs, 1987) completed by 93 of the 150 students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course. The findings from the SPQ informed the development of the interview protocol used for semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews and the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. The semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews were conducted with five groups of six students, and the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews were conducted with nine students and three non-academic staff. In response to the data provided during these interviews, three students were reinterviewed to gain further in-depth understanding of their FYEs; therefore, the total number of individual interviews was 15. Results for each of these phases of data collection and analysis are displayed in this chapter, which concludes with a summary of the findings.

### **1.3.5 Chapter 6: Discussion of findings and conclusion**

The primary research question developed in Chapter 3 is discussed in Chapter 6 using the findings generated in Chapter 5. These findings are also discussed in relation to the research

literature. Specifically, the discussion focuses on the main factors that influence first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. Use of symbolic interactionism guides the advancement of theoretical propositions, and a theoretical framework of factors that influence first-year student experiences is advanced. This chapter also presents the conclusions and recommendations of the research, summarises the limitations of the study, and provides a concluding comment and a clear overview of the study.





## Chapter 2: Identifying the Research Problem

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to extend the discussion in Chapter 1 by examining the grey literature to explore the context for this study further. This review culminates in the justification of the research problem and research purpose. To this end, this chapter is structured in five sections. Section 2.2 addresses the international context that draws on the OECD and its influence on member countries to improve enrolments in higher education. Section 2.3 focuses on the Australian higher education context and specifically identifies the premise behind the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) in response to the OECD goals for its member nations and what Australia has done to increase its enrolments into higher education by 2025. This section also examines the importance of initial teacher education programs and the acceptance of students with low admission scores into universities. Section 2.4 explores the ACU responses, with a focus on the Faculty of Education and Arts responses, which then leads to a discussion on the School of Education. Section 2.5 provides the researcher's experience in brief, and Section 2.6 concludes Chapter 2 with the identification and justification of the research problem and the research purpose.

### 2.2 INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

When considering the influence that the international context has on higher education it is relevant for an Australian study to consider the influence of the OECD. The OECD is an international organisation that focuses on developing and promoting policies to effectively create better lives for the populations of member nations (OECD, 2019a). More precisely, its sole purpose is to “shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and well-being for all” (OECD, 2019a, para. 1). For this goal to be realised, the policies of the OECD need to be implemented by member countries as part of their national priorities.

There are 36 member countries in the OECD, with each country being represented by members of the council and advisors who engage in making programs to ensure better performances across the globe. Policies range from interests in economics to science and education. Of interest to this study is the focus on education and, more specifically, higher education. OECD documentation has expressed a level of concern about the performance of countries in meeting education, research, and engagement responsibilities and the impact this may have on the long-term economic advancement of its member countries (OECD, 2019b).

Entry into post-secondary education has been defined by the OECD as short-cycle tertiary programs, non-tertiary programs, and bachelor's or master's degree programs (OECD, 2019c). Further, "vocational education and training can also be a pathway to tertiary education" (OECD, 2019c, p. 32) and is generally considered for young people aged 15–24 years. In 2017, 18% of this age group across OECD member countries were enrolled in such programs, with young men enrolling at a higher rate than young women (OECD, 2019c). In Australia, 23% of males and 17% of females aged 15–24 years were recorded as being enrolled in vocational education and training (VET) programs in this report (OECD, 2019c).

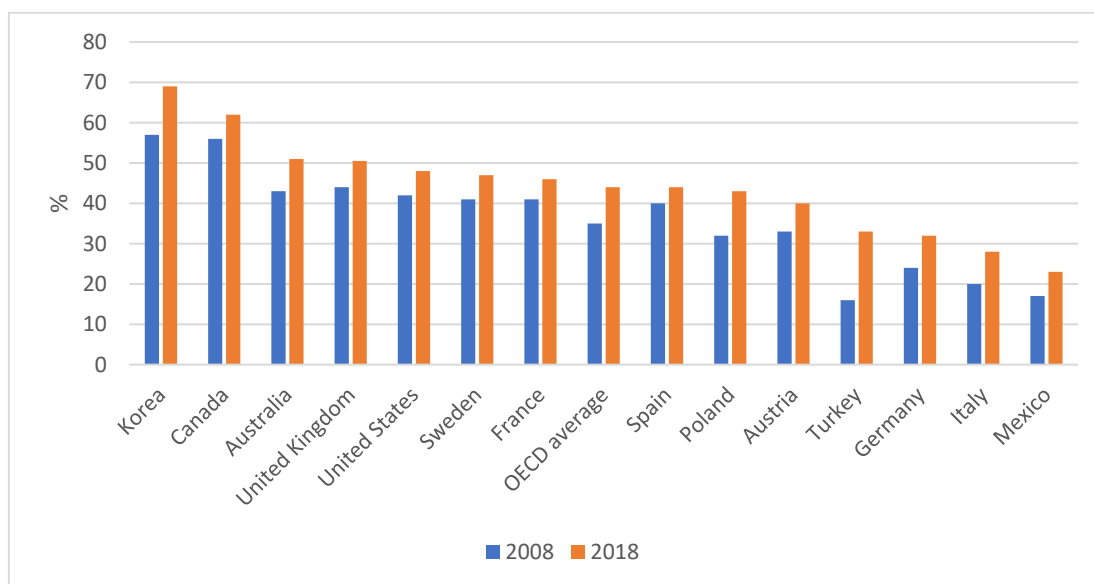
### **2.2.1 An increase in tertiary education enrolments across OECD countries**

Current research within the OECD indicates that the demand for all forms of tertiary education, that is, post-secondary school, is increasing (OECD, 2019c). The OECD identifies that, averaged across all OECD countries, 44% of 25- to 34-year-olds have obtained some form<sup>3</sup> of tertiary qualification in 2018, in comparison to 35% in 2008 (OECD, 2019c). This demand could include the fact that countries are experiencing an increase in demand for a skilled labour force, leading to heightened demand for post-secondary education that will ultimately lead to increasing wealth and growth. This in turn leads to policies of support to promote the post-secondary education sector and its accessibility to all (OECD, 2018a). Moreover, adults with a

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<sup>3</sup> For example; this could include short-cycle programs that are designed to provide students with knowledge, skills, and competencies prior to entering the workforce or moving to a bachelor's program (OECD, 2019c).

bachelor's degree make up most of this growth as each member country strives to increase the percentage of their population with university qualifications. Figure 2.1 identifies the growth in percentages of reported post-secondary education in a small selection of OECD countries between 2008 and 2018.

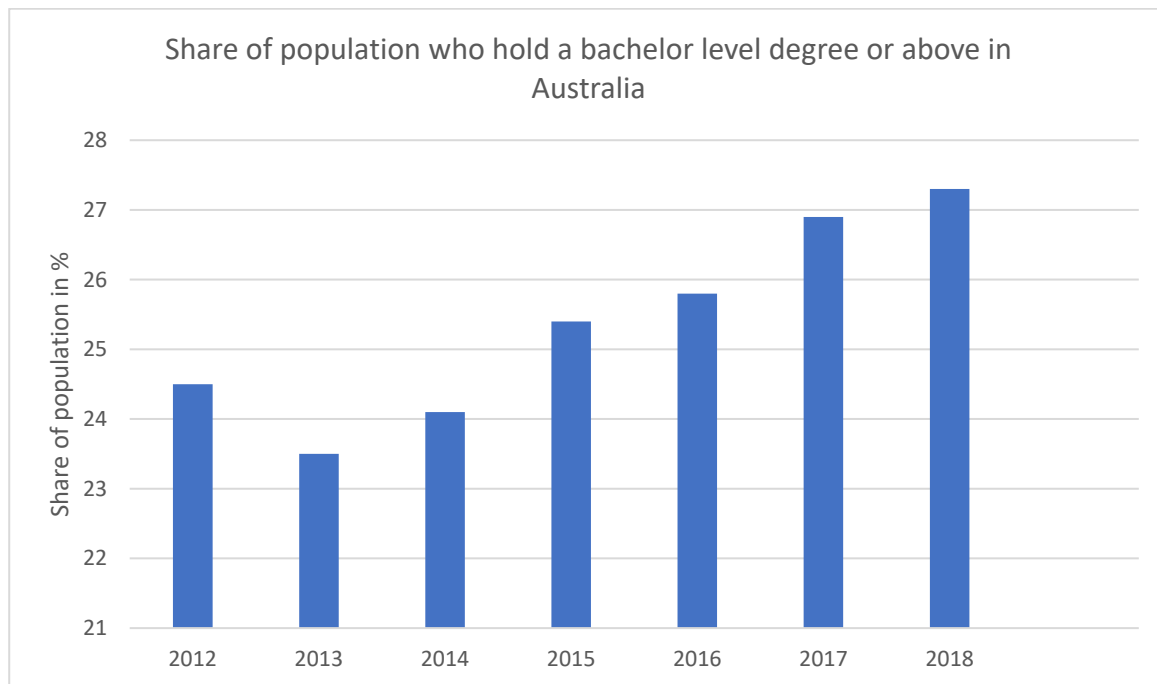


*Figure 2.1.* Percentage of tertiary-educated 25- to 34-year-olds, selected countries, 2008–2018. Adapted from Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators, by OECD, 2019 (<https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>). Copyright 2019 by the OECD.

Notably, Korea has moved from 58% to 68% of its population with some form of tertiary qualification, and Canada identifies as having improved from 55% to 62% of 25- to 34-year-old members of the population with a tertiary qualification of some form. Further, OECD research reports that the number of adults graduating with a tertiary qualification is set to increase by approximately 30% across OECD countries and G20 countries by 2030 (OECD, 2018b). For example, China aims to increase its tertiary graduates from 17% to 27% and India from 14% to 23% (OECD, 2018b). In comparison, OECD research has other advanced economies such as the United Kingdom and Australia attaining rates of 50% (OECD, 2019c) of the 25- to 34-year-old population with some form of tertiary qualification.

The data reported by the OECD differ from those reported within Australia. Australian sources report the percentage of the population with a bachelor level qualification, which is a very different metric from that of any post-secondary or tertiary qualification reported by the

OECD. Interestingly, Figure 2.2 shows that Australia has 27.3% (Granwal, 2019) of the overall population with a bachelor's degree or above. Noting these differences in definition between tertiary qualification and a bachelor's degree is important. Nonetheless, OECD countries are also trying to increase their percentage of the populations with a bachelor level qualification.



*Figure 2.2.* Share of population who hold a bachelor level degree or above in Australia from 2012 to 2018. Adapted from Share of population who hold a bachelor level degree or above in Australia from 1989 to 2018, by L. Granwal, 2019 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/612854/australia-population-with-university-degree/>). Copyright 2019 by Statista.

Providing additional support to students with a view to assisting a wider demographic to attend university has assisted many countries to increase their student enrolment and graduation rates. For example, in Norway and the Netherlands, students with young children are offered financial support to assist them, while students with special needs could be offered ways in which they can study at their own pace (OECD, 2019b). Further, OECD member countries promote application numbers through financial support that is specifically directed at people with low incomes as it is argued that financial assistance makes tertiary education more accessible for these students. Of the countries that have the highest university fees, more than 70% of students benefit from financial support by means of loans or grants (OECD, 2019c). “More than 40% of 19-20-year-olds in nearly half of OECD countries are enrolled in tertiary

programmes and the average age at entry into a bachelor's programme ranges from 18 in Japan to 25 in Switzerland" (OECD, 2019c, p. 23).

The quality of tertiary students entering university is a critical factor for higher education to consider alongside the goal of increasing participation, as all students need a skill set to lay the "foundation to succeed in higher education and acquire advanced skills and knowledge" (OECD, 2019b, p. 234). This foundational knowledge and skill set is assessed by the OECD during the final years of formal schooling through the establishment and implementation of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; OECD, 2019d) and has been described as a quality educational resource (Auld, Rappleye, & Morris, 2019). PISA's purpose is to evaluate "the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems" (OECD, 2018d, p. 2). It provides data that showcase what students in the highest performing and fast-improving countries can do as well as permits direct comparisons of results across the member countries (OECD, 2018d). The results of the test also assist governments to then consider how they can improve their education provisions to align more closely with OECD policies on education (OECD, 2018d), which aim to promote increasing quality of lifestyle for member nations.

PISA has completed seven data collection cycles, with each cycle occurring every three years. The PISA test assesses 15-year-old students' application of key concepts in subjects that assist in preparing them for life after school. The last period of assessment was undertaken in 2018, where students were assessed in the areas of literacy (the main focus), mathematics and science. In addition, the students' world views and perspective of others were also assessed and evaluated. Proficiency is allocated across six levels with six being the top level. Across the OECD countries, PISA assessment indicates that 80% of 15-year-olds reached proficiency level 2 or higher in reading in 2015 (OECD, 2016). In the 2015 report, it is noted that if a student reaches level 2, they are then considered as being able to fully participate in life following school, but this does not necessarily extend to attending university. Further, if they reach level 6, then they are capable of critical evaluation in problem solving and are well prepared for university life.

Across the member countries, there is a discrepancy between the education systems in terms of their students' proficiency in reading and financial literacy, based on PISA results (OECD, 2019b). In countries such as Canada, Ireland, and Finland, 90% of students reach a minimum of level 2 proficiency in reading and financial literacy and in Norway and Estonia 80% and 85% respectively (OECD, 2019b). In contrast, in Turkey and Mexico less than 60% are reaching this basic level of reading and financial literacy. Countries such as the USA, Poland, Italy, and Australia are all well above the OECD average in financial literacy with a proficiency level 5, as opposed to Brazil, Peru, and Chile with a proficiency level 1 (OECD, 2016). Some of the countries performing at lower levels are well below the OECD average and do not meet proficiency level 2, such as Algeria, Lebanon, and Indonesia (OECD, 2016). It can therefore be argued that the overarching goal of the OECD to improve the knowledge and skills of students in these countries has considerable distance to go before it is met.

The OECD does argue that it is the responsibility of these countries to supervise movements in their students' achievement of knowledge and their skills, suggesting that extra provisions need to be made while also arguing that every country has room for improvement (OECD, 2016). Nonetheless, it is reported that 44% of 15-year-olds across OECD countries are reaching the proficiency level needed to gain entry into post-secondary courses (OECD, 2016). Also worthy of note is that the PISA competencies that are measured at 15 years of age are now "better viewed as a starting point" to assess whether further formal education will occur after school as students are potentially more willing to devote extra time and effort into furthering their education (Borgonovi, Pokropek, Keslair, Gauly, & Paccagnella, 2017, p. 11). It is not surprising then that for countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore (OECD, 2016), where students attain strong results from the PISA test, they are more likely to attend university or post-secondary educational facilities (Borgonovi et al., 2017). In contrast, in countries where students perform poorly there is a higher risk of them not participating in post-secondary education at all.

Even though PISA is considered a reputable resource (Auld et al., 2019), this was not always the case. The OECD test has also been criticised for highlighting cognitive abilities and the knowledge of the student themselves (Auld et al., 2019) and that a focus on the levels of happiness of the student has been neglected (Schleicher, 2015). In response, the OECD has now included discussions around student well-being and happiness with the development of the OECD Learning Framework, 2030 (OECD, 2018b). With these amendments to their testing regime, a focus on the well-being and happiness of students will be included in future testing cycles (Auld et al., 2019).

It is the responsibility of the OECD to assess how well each member country's education system is performing against their goals and then to compare these results against the other member countries. Each member country also assesses their responsibilities to further enhance their expectations of reaching the goals to improve education standards and provide more students with access and ultimate success in higher education. Higher education systems operate differently in each OECD member country with each trying to improve; however, they all still face similar problems in terms of university enrolments, funding, and acceptable standards for entry.

### **2.2.2 Comparisons of some OECD countries**

In view of the push to increase participation in university across OECD countries, it is important to compare some of the OECD countries in terms of tuition fees, entry requirements, alternative pathways, supports, and provisions made for students entering university. However, as the OECD documents are diverse, it is difficult to precisely identify each country and compare all of them.

Although university entry requirements in OECD member countries vary according to their matriculation standard (OECD, 2018c), it is estimated that approximately 60% of young adults across OECD countries will attend some form of higher education institution (OECD,

2019b). For example, in countries such as Turkey, where literacy levels are recorded as low on PISA, almost all adults are expected to enter a tertiary program of some form; and in Lithuania, approximately three quarters of young adults are expected to enter post-secondary school education (OECD, 2019b).

Across OECD countries, universities and higher education institutions differ in terms of the fields of study, ranges of courses provided, levels of study, and supports they provide (OECD, 2019b). Countries such as Finland, Norway, Estonia, and the Netherlands offer supports for pre-service teacher programs in the form of funding. For example, in Finland, these programs are fully funded by the government, are very popular and entry is through a competitive process, with only one in four accepted to complete their pre-service teacher studies (Darling-Hammond, 2017). In contrast, Norway has announced that as of 2025, if a graduate has been teaching for at least three of the first six years upon graduating, then part of their student loan will be converted into a grant.

At the other end of student entry to pre-service teacher education programs is Estonia, where the number of students enrolled in teacher education programs is below the OECD average, and as a result the government has begun to offer funded scholarships to increase enrolments. These scholarships are based on students' grades, the progress of their study, and where they plan to teach after graduation. Another incentive for teacher education students in Estonia is that they are exempt from tuition fees (OECD, 2019b) so long as students are studying full-time. Like that of Estonia, the Norwegian government has developed incentives to attract young people into teacher education programs whereby they "pay lower tuition fees and no fees in public institutions regardless of whether they have already gained a qualification in a different field of study" (OECD, 2019b, p. 234).

Entry requirements differ for some countries as well; for example, in the Flemish community, students are required to complete a 2- to 3-year master's degree before entering the teaching profession, and in the USA, the universities are very selective when choosing their



students and maintain that all students wishing to enter must complete a comprehensive preparation program (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In many OECD member countries, such as the Netherlands and Norway, there are a number of entry pathways to university. In Norway, for example, there are several pathways into higher education, and it is standard practice that all students must demonstrate competence in secondary education or vocational subjects whereby students are expected to have passed academic subjects such as Norwegian, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Studies, English, and History (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2015; OECD, 2018c). Students over 23 years of age may also enter university if they have 5 years of work experience. Students who do not have sufficient credentials to satisfy entry requirements may be required to sit an entrance exam before being offered a position at their chosen university. Half of the places on offer are held for students under 21 years of age and the other half for older students. In contrast, universities in Estonia and China do not offer alternative pathways into university (OECD, 2019b); however, Australian higher education has introduced programs to increase the number of students entering university.

## **2.3 AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **2.3.1 Overview of Australian higher education**

Australian higher education has undergone major changes over the past 30 years (Bradley et al., 2008; Connell, 2008; Foster, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008). In 1987 John Dawkins, the Federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training under the Hawke Government, released his review of the higher education sector (Dawkins, 1987). He proposed a rise in graduates as well as the amalgamation of smaller higher education providers such as Colleges of Advanced Education, with a view to creating a system of fewer, larger universities “to enhance the system’s adaptability, effectiveness and capacity to deliver increased numbers of graduates” (DET, 2015, p. 11) in conjunction with OECD goals for member countries. The

subsequent white paper (Dawkins, 1988), seen as a statement of government policy, ushered in the beginning of the reorganisation of the current higher education system (DET, 2015). The overarching idea driving the white paper was to establish “capacity and effectiveness of the higher education sector” (DET, 2015, p. 11). This reorganisation of the higher education system saw the abolition of the “binary system” (DET, 2015, p. 12) where the number of institutions that provided higher education dropped from 73 to 38 fully accredited universities (DET, 2015).

Another change in the higher education system in Australia was the introduction of fees in 1989 under the title of HECS. The scheme is still an integral part of the Australian higher education system, whereby it has moved a large proportion of the cost of higher education from the government to students. Each year fees are estimated by the Consumer Price Index and this has allowed for the expansion of higher education in Australia (Jackson, 2003). Students have a choice to either pay upfront and receive a 25% discount or defer their payment and pay once their degree is completed, based on the compulsory repayment threshold. This is ultimately dependent on the income of the student (Jackson, 2003) and this continues today.

A series of other major reviews followed over subsequent years. For example, the West review in 1998 (West, 1998) investigated options for the funding of higher education covering both research and teaching. This was followed by the Nelson review (B. Nelson, 2002), which considered a balance between public and private funding of higher education and whether a return to no fees would benefit the students and/or the government.

In 2008, the Bradley Review was “established to address the question of whether education is structured, organised and financed to position Australia to compete effectively in the new globalised economy” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. xi) and remain competitive with other OECD countries. Moreover, it was argued in the Bradley Review that Australia may be excluded from the premier group of OECD countries aligned with performance and participation if the government failed to initiate appropriate reforms and increase student

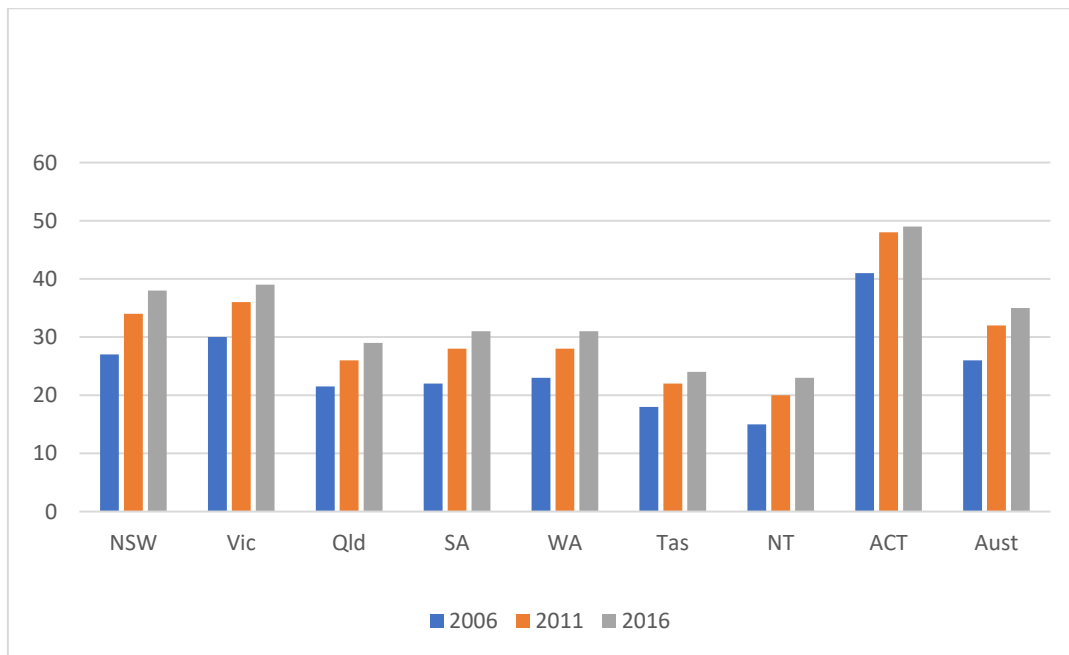
numbers (Bradley et al., 2008) and that major reforms needed to be implemented in Australia to ensure quality comparability with OECD performance in higher education.

While Bradley concluded that the Australian higher education system had many strengths, she identified multiple challenges that, if not addressed, might influence Australian universities becoming uncompetitive in performance and investment when compared to universities in other developed countries (Bradley et al., 2008). Bradley's review resulted in 46 recommendations. The aim at the time was to achieve a target of 40% of the population of 25- to 34-year-olds as holders of at least a bachelor's degree by 2020, later negotiated to 2025 (Bradley et al., 2008, p. xiv); at the time of the report, attainment was at 29.2% (Birrell, Rapson, & Smith, 2010). In order to meet this goal, Bradley recommended that student enrolments be increased in undergraduate courses. To achieve this, the government introduced the uncapping of entry places, thereby allowing more students to enter university. In an effort to support this recommendation, universities have considered widening student participation to those with lower entry scores. To further support the overall goal of an increase by 40%, Bradley also recommended that by 2020, the Australian Government have increased by 20% the enrolments of low SES students (Dow & Kempner, 2010); however, this has also been subsequently renegotiated to 2025. To support this recommendation, students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students were invited to enrol in courses through alternative pathways if they did not meet the entry requirements for a traditional entry.

To achieve this increase in student enrolments, all universities receiving Commonwealth funds needed to establish programs that supported the success of newly enrolled students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are typically not well prepared for university (Bradley et al., 2008). At the time, it was expected that universities would provide academic mentoring and ongoing support (Bradley et al., 2008). Another target outlined by Bradley et al. (2008, p. xiii) was to "enable national benchmarking against other OECD countries to track system quality and performance". This has been achieved through the benchmarking report comparing higher

education in some OECD countries (OECD, 2019b). Further to this, the OECD have also prepared reports (past and present) on OECD indicators and provide relevant data on the performance of education systems and their structures (OECD, 2019a).

Worthy of note is that the OECD in 2005 placed Australia ninth of the 30 member countries at that time when considering the percentage of the population aged 25–34 with degree-level qualifications (Bradley et al., 2008). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2018) reported that in 2016 the proportion of adults in this age group across Australia who have a bachelor's degree or higher was 35%, up from the figure of 26% reported in 2006 (see Figure 2.3). This overall figure does not accurately represent the proportion of the age group with a bachelor's degree within each state of Australia, however. In South Australia and Western Australia, for instance, the proportion is just over 30%, and in Queensland under 30%, which is well below the espoused goal of 40% recorded in the Bradley Review (2008). Worthy of note in Figure 2.3 are Tasmania and the Northern Territory, both of which lag behind. In contrast, in the Australian Capital Territory the proportion is above the Bradley Review target, while Victoria and New South Wales are very close to it (ABS, 2018; Bolton, 2019). It is clear, however, that the lower populated states require assistance to improve university enrolments as their growth in student graduations has slowed down (Bolton, 2019). It was recommended (Bradley et al., 2008) that assistance be offered to prospective students from low SES areas and that operational costs of running a university should also be subsidised in the lower populated states, along with the target of increasing enrolments of school leavers, first in family and Indigenous students. These calls for support continue (Bolton, 2019).



*Figure 2.3.* Percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds who have a bachelor's degree or higher in Australia up to and including 2016. Adapted from Education and Work, Australia, May 2018, by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6227.0>). Copyright 2018 by the Commonwealth of Australia.

The Bradley Review (2008) identified the major target group from which to increase student numbers as the low SES category. Since her review, the focus has been on further widening participation with the inclusion of Indigenous people from remote and regional areas. Widening participation is recognised as increasing admission to learning as well as optimising opportunities for success for the wider population (Rissman, Carrington, & Bland, 2013). This includes three main components: increasing the awareness of higher education, increasing the aspirations for higher education, and developing processes and strategies that assist these students to gain entry to university. Once students begin university, it is imperative to offer strategies that support them. Further, access without support is not recommended and the higher education sector have a responsibility to offer accessible processes to all students through practical policies and responses (Devlin, 2010).

The need for the higher education sector to take responsibility can be seen in part from studies where some students from low SES backgrounds have been identified as “problem students” (McKay & Devlin, 2016, p. 347), but they can also “demonstrate high levels of

determination and academic skills and actively seek high standards in their studies” (McKay & Devlin, 2016, p. 347). Many are the first in their family to attend university (Carpenter, Dearlove, & Marland, 2014; Devlin & O’Shea, 2011) and as a result potentially have limited knowledge of the university context. Consequently, they are unable to rely on parental advice to understand the expectations of the university (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Caution with this type of discussion has been called for as it is considered inappropriate to stereotype low SES students, and current research challenges this conception of such students (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Further, this research reports that these students have experienced multiple and varied challenges and being first in family may not be the major challenge. Rather, it may contribute to building their resilience (McKay & Devlin, 2016). The conclusion offered is that these students “need to be valued for their unique experiences and challenges” as this may well make them more determined to achieve success (McKay & Devlin, 2016, p. 347). Such challenges include full-time employment needed to meet financial pressures, and personal responsibilities. Moreover, balancing work, life, and study responsibilities has proven difficult (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Notwithstanding, since 2012, student enrolments from low SES backgrounds in Australian higher education have increased from 15% to 20%, with the target set by the government following the Bradley Review likely to be met if most students graduate (Chapman, Mangion, & Buchanan, 2015; McKay & Devlin, 2016). While this growth has been positive, Kift (2019) suggests that it will be a challenge to continue to increase education participation and attainment by students from such backgrounds, as well as students in rural and remote locations. She does, however, acknowledge that the government is committed to establishing a new funding model to support rural and regional higher education, which may change the outlook into the future with a new priority group being targeted.

A myriad of government support schemes and agencies already exist, with one particular scheme important for this discussion. This scheme supports regional, rural, and remote places and was established in 2018 in response to the Halsey Review (2017), which announced that

students in these places will be given access to higher education with the “commitment to improve the education of country students so they can reach their full potential and participate in Australia’s economy” (Department of Education, Skills and Employment [DESE], 2018, para. 1). The move towards university access for regional, rural, and remote students has received an added bonus recently, with the government announcing that the number of regional places has been increased to 25,000, up from the previous allocation of 23,000 (Mulder, 2019).

Australian Indigenous people and students from remote and regional areas are also encouraged to access university education, be it in either mainstream programs or specifically designed programs. If students do not move away from home to attend university, then they are more likely to study Indigenous-specific programs, which usually run as an intensive mode, also often termed block mode (Asmar, Page, & Radloff, 2011). The intensive mode of study usually includes short visits to campus over the semester with in-depth periods of study off campus. This mode of study allows students to attend to family and community responsibilities and to maintain employment (Asmar et al., 2011). This form of study differs from mainstream courses delivered on campus where Indigenous students participate alongside non-Indigenous peers. Moreover, teacher education candidates who are Indigenous or demonstrate connections with their communities and knowledge of Aboriginal issues are prioritised for acceptance into teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

It is evident from the commitment of the Australian Government to the recommendations of various reviews that they are focused on enhancing the quality of tertiary education and also opening it up to a wider cohort of students (OECD, 2018a). This is evident in several programs but more so in the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). The main aim of this program is to assist Australian students from low SES backgrounds to study at university and offer them opportunities to do so (DESE, 2020; OECD, 2018a). Depending on the number of enrolled students, funding is provided to assist universities and stakeholders to “undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses

... as well as improving the retention and completion rates of those students” (OECD, 2018a, p. 181).

While it is clear that the intention is to open universities up to students from all demographics, recent reforms have been implemented within the higher education sector that are designed “to improve transparency, accountability, affordability and responsiveness to the aspirations of students and future workforce needs” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 143). The reforms include a freeze on Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding from 2018, especially for bachelor’s degree courses available in 2018 and 2019, which is now deemed as capping of funds and brings about financial disadvantages for students from all demographics. Further, universities are expected to provide performance targets to regulate the growth in their Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for bachelor’s degrees from 2020. This means that funding would be capped at the growth rate in the age bracket of 18- to 64-year-olds and is now locked at the 2017/2018 levels irrespective of the increases in enrolments in higher education. Other reforms include “a combined limit for all tuition fee assistance under all HELP [Higher Education Loans Program] and VET Student Loans” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 9). HELP is a loans program that assists tertiary education students with the fees and costs incurred. The repayment of these loans depends on the students’ circumstances, how much was borrowed and how much they will earn once graduated. From July 2018, a new minimum payment threshold of “\$45,000 with a 1 per cent repayment rate and a maximum threshold of \$131,989 with a 10 per cent repayment rate” was put into place (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 143). Included in these reforms are the repayments for VET student loans and a variety of other loans for students entering university.

### **2.3.2 Initial Teacher Education**

While the discussion to this point has been about higher education in general, pre-service teacher education is the focus of this study. A review carried out by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG, 2014) recommended ways for initial teacher education



(ITE) to be improved and how institutions may better prepare new teachers. Their findings related to the following areas:

- raising the quality of initial teacher education;
- preparing effective teachers—integration of theory and practice;
- assuring classroom readiness;
- supporting beginning teachers through induction;
- strengthening national capability; and
- workforce planning and challenges (TEMAG, 2014, pp. xvii–xix).

The review focused on an authentic desire to understand and change the overarching ideas about learning to teach (Ingvarson, 2016; Tatto, Richmond, & Carter Andrews, 2016). More specifically, the aim was to understand teacher education in its entirety and the preparation of teachers entering the field in Australia (Rowan, Mayer, Kline, Kostogriz, & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). Consequently, all ITE providers are required to have existing teacher education programs accredited with their state’s teacher registration authority and for new programs to comply with the expectations of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). AITSL recommends that all providers are capable of demonstrating evidence against the nationally agreed Accreditation Standards and Procedures (AITSL, 2019b). These standards are incorporated in processes of registration for entering the teaching profession on the completion of a student’s teaching degree to enhance the quality of early career teachers (AITSL, 2019b).

The TEMAG Report (2014) emphasised a need for graduating teachers to have proficiency in discipline knowledge, such as literacy and numeracy. These requirements set the standard as the graduates prepared themselves for entering the profession (Tatto et al., 2016). High-quality practice that required proficiency in discipline knowledge was identified as an important indicator of a competent teacher. The conclusion of the report was that students must demonstrate the required teaching standards across all ITE programs before graduating

(TEMAG, 2014). As a result, applicants for the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree and all ITE programs must meet academic and non-academic entry requirements. Academic entry requirements include subject prerequisites in Mathematics, English, and Science, specified as part of the OP score or the ATAR (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre [QTAC], 2020a). To meet the academic requirements for a course offer, applicants' results and additional qualifications are considered, including the following:

- senior secondary (Year 12) results;
- successful prior study at university or VET level;
- successful completion of relevant professional qualifications; and
- approved admissions tests (QTAC, 2020a).

The non-academic entry requirement is met by applicants through an online questionnaire and personal statement that demonstrates the AITSL competencies (QTAC, 2019). In the personal statement two categories that highlight the applicant's understanding and motivations for becoming a teacher must be addressed. Category 1 focuses on the applicant's interest, motivations and suitability in teaching children and Category 2 focuses on the applicant's involvement in personal learning and leadership activities (QTAC, 2019).

Beyond these pathways, there are some minor variations, especially when associated with "special entry" (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2010). Specific criterion, such as entry scores, test scores or grade point averages are the most important and are used for the selection process for alternative pathways. While alternative pathways exist, it is also important to keep in mind that demand for teacher education places is strong and because of this demand some university places must be restricted (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). At the time of this study, no additional data were available for those students entering university through alternative pathways or retention of students. Considering this, students are not only entering university with an ATAR or OP but are also expected to meet other requirements such

as the non-academic and academic requirements through QTAC, specifically for students entering a university in Queensland.

Further, there have been concerns around the clarity of admissions processes, as ITE providers and the government have sought to balance the need for demand, while also providing equity of access and participation (AITSL, 2019b). Moreover, efforts to professionalise teaching have also grown. In the past there has been an undersupply of qualified teachers in some remote areas and therefore governments have developed schemes that offer incentives, such as guaranteed work and accommodation to pre-service teachers and those who wish to teach in these hard-to-staff areas (Queensland Government, 1995–2020).

Providing greater access to all has meant that teaching degrees have been popular among first-generation university students (Southgate & Bennett, 2014), with a larger proportion of Indigenous students and students from low SES backgrounds and regional areas enrolled in ITE over other areas of study (AITSL, 2019b). It has been argued that a culturally diverse teaching workforce positively reflects a broader proportion of the population; therefore, it has been claimed that it is Australia’s intention to attract individuals from marginalised racial and cultural groups (Bireda & Chait, 2011; More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative, 2017; Poloma, 2014).

Louden (2008) drew attention to the quality of ITE as the changes were being introduced. In order to respond to this and similar concerns, the Federal Government initiated a review of ITE by tightening national guidelines for the accreditation of programs and the selection of teacher candidates (AITSL, 2015a; AITSL, 2015b). These guidelines offered indicators that were used for “students from equity groups whose academic capability cannot accurately be determined from common or conventional measures of prior academic achievement” (AITSL, 2015b, p. 4). Moreover, they also indicated that incoming pre-service teachers should have the necessary academic requirements, such as the correct levels of numeracy and literacy (AITSL, 2015b). In each state, requirements vary, and they have included specifics that increase the

difficulty of ITE admissions processes (DET, Victoria, 2016). Recent research by Gore, Barron, Holmes, and Smith (2016) again highlights the concern with policy for admission practices into ITE programs, and these claims were echoed by AITSL where it was argued that admission requirements mainly target recent school leavers, comprising approximately 58% of applicants, leaving just under half of applicants gaining entry to ITE programs that was not on the basis of an ATAR (AITSL, 2019b).

### **2.3.3 Students with low admission scores**

Students with low admission scores are being accepted into Australian universities and the number is increasing (Baik et al., 2019; Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018). In Australia, most students entering university are offered enrolment in response to their OP or ATAR. The ATAR, however, is set to replace the Queensland equivalent, which is the OP, as of 2020 (QTAC, 2020b). The OP ranges from 1 to 25, with 25 being the lowest (QTAC, 2020b, “OP to ATAR conversion table” factsheet). The ATAR is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that “is a percentile rank, not a mark ... [and] indicates a student’s position relative to other students in their age group in any given year” (QTAC, 2020b, “ATAR: An overview” factsheet); for example, an ATAR of 80.00 means that a student is in the top 20% per cent of their age group (QTAC, 2020b, “ATAR: An Overview” factsheet).

Institutions vary in terms of their admission requirements. For example, the general score accepted to enter a Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree at ACU is an OP of 17 or an ATAR of 65 (ACU, 2019d), compared to that of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) where the OP is 13 and the ATAR is 72 (QUT, 2019). This is also comparative to Griffith University where they accept applications with an OP of 13 and an ATAR of 71 (Griffith University, 2019). These targets are set by each university independently of other universities and in response to the availability of positions at universities; however, as discussed above, the government has lifted the quota on students entering university, which is termed “uncapping” entry places (Sadowski, Stewart, & Padiaditis, 2018). This uncapping of entry places was in response to the

recommendations of the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008). This decision means that some universities have accepted as many students as they can, and a direct outcome of this decision has been that they filled their programs with students who have low entry scores. Further, the uncapping of undergraduate places means that many teacher preparation programs are allowing students to enter university with an ATAR below 50 and an OP as low as 25 (Baik et al., 2019; McGraw & Fish, 2018).

As the requirements for entry to many ITE programs in Australian universities are now low, students who gain entry may struggle with the requirements of their studies and the level of engagement needed within their program. These changes stand in stark contrast to what has previously been expected of students entering university. It was considered important that teacher education programs attract “people of the highest calibre who value learning, understand children and young people and have the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes needed to enable them to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003, p. 65). Addressing this concern, there is evidence that the universities of Australia are considering raising the status of teaching by mandating a minimum standard of an ATAR of 80 (Aspland, 2019). This is to attract higher academic achievers while at the same time preventing a shortage of teachers (Aspland, 2019).

Counterbalancing the issue of low standards on entry is the argument that it is the quality of the graduate by the time they have completed their degree that is important, not their entry score. While this position has been argued by the Australian universities, it is now being addressed through the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students (LANTITE; ACER, 2020):

(the test) is designed to assess initial teacher education students’ personal literacy and numeracy skills to ensure teachers are well equipped to meet the demands of teaching and assist higher education providers, teacher employers and the general

public to have increased confidence in the skills of graduating teachers. (ACER, 2020, para. 1)

The LANTITE is expected to be undertaken and passed before graduation (ACER, 2020). In most cases, if students do not pass the LANTITE before the expected graduation, then students do not receive course completion, and therefore will not graduate, nor receive teacher registration (ACER, 2020). The national results in 2018 indicated 90% of students met the numeracy standards and 90.4% met the literacy standards prior to graduating (DESE, 2019). Summarising these directions, Professor Tania Aspland, Dean of the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE), stated: “There is no way that teacher education providers will let teaching students loose in classrooms unless they have passed ... [the LANTITE] and rigorous means of demonstrating that teaching students meet robust national teacher professional standards” (Aspland, 2019, paras. 2–3). Nonetheless, there are still approximately 10% of teacher education students across Australia who complete the degree but do not meet the requirements for teacher registration.

## **2.4 ACU CONTEXT**

ACU is a public, not-for-profit university open to staff and students from all denominations. The university comprises seven campuses across Australia. Six of the seven campuses offer pre-service teacher education degrees. These are in Brisbane, Ballarat, North Sydney, Strathfield, Canberra, and Melbourne. ACU’s National School of Education is the second largest pre-service teacher education provider in Australia (ACU, 2019h). Consistent with the uncapping of student places, student enrolments have exceeded expectations and the student body has grown rapidly in the last few years. Currently ACU has approximately 32,000 students enrolled across all degrees and, 6,824 across all ITE degrees (ACU, 2019h).

The mission of the university states that “within the Catholic intellectual tradition and acting in Truth and Love, Australian Catholic University is committed to the pursuit of

knowledge, the dignity of the human person and the common good” (ACU, 2019g, “Our mission statement” section, para. 1). ACU policy documents also state the importance of providing quality in teaching, research and service, along with providing outcomes that aspire to engaging in free inquiry and academic integrity (ACU, 2019g). Further, university documents, specifically the University Strategic Plan, also indicate that it is concerned with the “dignity of human person” (ACU, 2019j, para. 3) and focus explicitly on the spiritual, social and ethical dimensions of each person, along with “justice and equity” for all (ACU, 2019e, “Highlighting the values” section, para. 2). Further noted in the Strategic Plan are the core values of truth, service and academic excellence.

Another intention of the university is to prepare and produce graduates who have skills and knowledge and who also demonstrate ethical behaviour (ACU, 2019e). This is done through embedding the university’s graduate attributes in all ACU courses. These attributes contribute to and are aligned with the university’s mission statement and are designed to support student development in areas of ethics, knowledge and skills such that students are:

“Ethically informed and able to

1. demonstrate respect for the dignity of each individual and for human diversity
2. recognise their responsibility to the common good, the environment and society
3. apply ethical perspectives in informed decision making

Knowledgeable and able to

4. think critically and reflectively
5. demonstrate values, knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the discipline and/or profession
6. solve problems in a variety of settings taking local and international perspectives into account

Skilful and able to

7. work both autonomously and collaboratively

8. locate, organise, analyse, synthesise and evaluate information
9. demonstrate effective communication in oral and written English language and visual media
10. utilise information and communication and other relevant technologies effectively”  
(ACU, 2019e, paras. 1–3).

The ACU mission statement, graduate attributes and catholic social teaching are embedded in all units across the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree within the Faculty of Education and Arts (TEMAG, 2014).

#### **2.4.1 Faculty of Education and Arts**

The Faculty of Education and Arts indicates in its documentation that it is committed to all students’ learning as the faculty has a “diverse community of learners” (Labone, 2019, para. 1). To this end, Professor Labone, the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education and Arts, states that it is the intention of the faculty to ensure that students are taught by experienced educators and the programs offered designed to deepen students’ professional and practical knowledge (Labone, 2019). The faculty also aligns its belief with the university’s mission and values and continues to implement ACU’s Strategic Plan across the School of Education. All ACU’s pre-service teacher education programs across campuses are student oriented and entail a variety of learning options, such as on campus, online, or blended learning (ACU, 2019h). These are designed to meet the professional standards for teachers (AITSL, 2019a) in Australia and overseas (ACU, 2019h).

Entrance into the Brisbane-based Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree in 2019 required a minimum OP of 17 or ATAR of 65 (ACU, 2019d) or was through a range of non-academic and other academic requirements set by QTAC (2019b). There are also further options to enter ACU for students who do not receive the qualifying OP or ATAR. These were called “bonus points” (ACDE, 2017) now referred to as “adjustment factors” (ACU, 2019b).



Adjustment factors are used to increase Year 12 OP or ATAR original scores. This is common across all universities and underpinned by demographics such as personal background, the final grade a student received in subjects when attending school, or whether the student attended a regional school (ACU, 2019b). Of particular interest to the Brisbane campus is that students who are eligible to enrol into a bachelor program will receive up to five OP points or six selection ranks using the ATAR system if they meet the necessary criteria. In this context, it can be argued that students entering the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree with an OP 20 on completion of school who have been given the benefit of the adjustment factors are being admitted with entry standards that are comparatively low (ACDE, 2017).

Further, there are a number of alternative pathways for students who either do not receive the appropriate score or have not met the prerequisites for entry into the Bachelor of Education (Primary) ITE degree at ACU, and this cohort of students varies from state to state (ACU, 2019i). In Queensland, students can apply directly to ACU for the Diploma in Educational Studies, which is a tertiary preparation course. Students are required to successfully complete this course and pass at least 40 credit points to meet the necessary entry prerequisites to the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree. Students can begin their teaching journey through enrolling in the non-ITE Bachelor of Educational Studies program (ACU, 2019i). This is a second pathway option and students are required to complete one year of full-time study to meet the academic requirements. Students then transfer through QTAC to complete the additional non-academic requirements to be then be offered a position into the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree (ACU, 2019i).

#### **2.4.2 School of Education**

This doctoral research is focused on first-year students in the School of Education on the Brisbane campus. This discussion now turns to this context. Education students across all year levels in the School of Education, Brisbane, exceeded 700 students in 2019 (ACU, 2019h). In particular, the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree, Brisbane campus, had 123 enrolments

for 2019 in first year. The degree is four years full-time and includes academic education and professional education, the latter of which includes professional experience placements in educational contexts throughout the degree (ACU, 2019h).

Support for new students entering the Banyo campus of ACU is offered through a range of student support services, such as access to and training in the associated library skills using helpful online toolkits where everything a student needs is provided to make sure they use the library successfully and efficiently (ACU, 2019f). Further, students are encouraged to “set yourself up for success by developing your learning skills in a supportive, encouraging environment with our Academic Skills Unit” (ACU, 2019a, para 1). Other options of relevance are the sporting clubs (ACU, 2018), social activities and the local McAuley Student Association (McASA; ACU, 2019c), all of which add to student awareness, engagement within community, and the development of personal and professional networks. Students are invited to join clubs, meet new friends, and engage in activities that are designed to build confidence and develop leadership skills by becoming involved in a range of on-campus activities and campus life more generally. Further, McASA is run by local students from across all faculties and there are a variety of opportunities allowing students to interact with students from other degrees (ACU, 2019c), for example, by becoming a member of the executive committee for McASA.

Another option open to students on the Brisbane campus is to become part of the Mentoring Program, run by the School of Education. This was developed in 2009 by an academic staff member (Coordinator of the Mentoring Program) of the Faculty of Education and Arts. This program is introduced to the students during Orientation Day and those students who enrol are known as “mentees”. The mentees are assigned a mentor (second-, third- or fourth-year education student), who assists with their transition into university.

This program was developed to assist incoming first-year students with their transition into university, particularly during the first six weeks. The main objective of the program is to offer new education students the chance to liaise with an experienced student. A mentor may offer

advice to new students about adapting to university and the rigours of academic study. Further, mentors involved in the program are available to assist the mentee to adapt to a new academic environment and also offer a sense of being connected to the larger community of ACU.

The number of mentees has increased over the years due to a growing interest from students who wish to participate as mentors and those new students who are encouraged to enrol. In 2019, the program consisted of 150 mentees and 80 mentors, with only a minority of first-year students not participating in the six-week program.

## **2.5 RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE**

My teaching experience at ACU over the past 12 years has permitted considerable engagement with thousands of first-year students. These students come from a range of backgrounds: non-recent school leavers, recent school leavers, low SES backgrounds, Indigenous and international students, with each bringing different experiences. I would argue that, from my experience, many students who enter the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree are passionate about teaching and wish to successfully complete their four years at university and join the teaching profession. With these students I have witnessed success both within the university environment and in the teaching profession, while on practicum. These students tend to immerse themselves in the offerings of the university: they attend all classes; access library skills, academic skills, and sporting clubs; and often engage in professional practices with the lecturers, such as conversations about assessment and university culture.

Notwithstanding the positive experiences of many, there are also some students who accept admission into the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree with low OPs or ATARs and are not confident or prepared for the academic rigour that the university requires of them. Consequently, I am concerned for these students who are not prepared academically to succeed at university and all the consequences that are associated with it. One major drawback for unsuccessful students is the HECS debt they will incur if they do not complete the degree. In

this case, they will have nothing to fall back on, due to them not receiving the marks necessary to pass their course. In advancing this position, I am seeking knowledge in regard to what is available to support these students and how the university acquires and applies strategies that will support achievement, limit failure, and offset the negative and financial consequences associated with early departure.

## **2.6 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM, PURPOSE AND QUESTION FOR THE STUDY**

### **2.6.1 The research problem**

The discussion in this chapter has highlighted that the OECD has a range of goals that all member nations aspire to achieve. One of these is to create opportunities to increase the proportion of each member nation's population that is more highly educated so they can live better and achieve more economically sophisticated lives. As a direct result of this goal, each member nation is trying to advance the educational opportunities in their country by offering a range of incentives to induce participation from the proportion of their population that has never attended university or who are experiencing difficulties that limit attendance. Australia, as a member of the OECD, is no different from other member nations as it works to meet the challenges of increasing the percentage of Australians with a university degree. The initiatives that the Australian Government has put in place to achieve the desired increase in participation are the uncapping of university places and the provision of a number of forms of support, which effectively allows all Australians to enter university if they desire. Of particular interest to this study is the way that ACU has responded to the government's call to increase university places. This has been achieved through the creation of a number of pathways that give those who do not meet the traditional requirements for entry an opportunity to enter a bachelor's degree program.

Six of the seven campuses of ACU offer the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree, a program to prepare pre-service teachers for a career in teaching. The Brisbane campus of ACU has many students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) across each of the four years

of the program. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that as students' progress they become enculturated into university life and this leads to them being more inclined to be successful. The first year of study is an important year, but the university has not conducted any research of how first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students on the Brisbane campus are experiencing university. Given that many students have come from circumstances that would not previously have given them entry to university study, such as low SES, mature-age and Indigenous students, the research problem to be addressed by this study is that while the university provides a range of services to support first-year students, there is limited research data on how students experience their first year enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree at the Brisbane campus, Banyo. Without such research, it is not known if and to what extent the services provided by the university for first-year students are adequate in their breadth, are able to be accessed appropriately, and are supportive of the FYE.

### **2.6.2 The research purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand the way first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at ACU on the Brisbane campus experience and engage with supports offered by the university and university life.

The clarity of this research purpose and problem provides the direction to the next stage of this research, the review of the literature.



## Chapter 3: Literature Review

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand the way first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at ACU on the Brisbane campus experience and engage with supports offered by the university and university life. The purpose of Chapter 3 is to extend the discussion of the grey literature presented in Chapter 2 to the research literature by providing a review that will inform the generation of the research question. This literature review will draw on the knowledge of peer-reviewed research in order to generate an appreciation of related research so as to create new pathways and ideas in respect to the research question (Neuman, 2006).

The literature for this chapter was selected from searches of various databases. These searches were initially performed using the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database, which provides 1.6 million bibliographic references for journal articles, books, conference and policy papers, reports, and other education-related materials (Institute of Education Sciences, 2019). The search terms used included but were not limited to the following: first\* year\* (e.g., first-year students, first-year experience); engag\* (e.g., engagement, engaging); student engagement; teacher education; teacher development; higher education; college; tertiary education; teach\* (e.g., teachers, teaching, teacher); learn\* (e.g., learn, learnt, learning); deep\* (e.g., deep learners); reflect\* (e.g., reflective); mentor\* (e.g., mentor program, mentoring). After conducting these searches, further searches were undertaken using specialised databases, focused on FYE and research into higher education in Australia, for example, Web of Science ([www.webofscience](http://www.webofscience)) and Scopus ([www.elsevier.com/en-au/solutions/scopus](http://www.elsevier.com/en-au/solutions/scopus)).

The searches conducted were restricted to peer-reviewed research outputs produced in the last 30 years and included the earliest Australian research to capture highly referenced authors

and seminal works. The literature reviewed led to the generation of three main themes: *FYE transition*, *What students bring to university*, and *University provisions for FYE students*. These themes are discussed in Sections 3.2 to 3.4 respectively, while in Section 3.5 the research question is advanced as a result of considering what is known about FYE and the gaps in this literature. The research question has been taken into the next chapter, Chapter 4, Design of the Research, as this guides the design of the study.

## 3.2 FYE TRANSITION

During their first year of university life, students go through a process of transition, understood as a “change navigated by students in their movement within and through their formal [higher] education” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 735). Tinto (2020) provides an explanation of transition as including social and academic experiences and the acculturation of students into their new university space. Transition has also been described as a process of complexity and challenge; one that invites responsibilities by universities through providing a range of support strategies (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010; Gast, 2013).

Multiple strategies are claimed to address the specific phases of transition (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2009; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; K. Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014). However, while there are multiple approaches available to assist student transition, universities adopt those which appropriately respond to the “strategic priorities of the university” (M. Christie, Penn-Edwards, Donnison, & Greenaway, 2018, p. 128). These typically originate from institutional values (Donnison, Penn-Edwards, Greenaway, & Horn, 2017) and aim to address the needs of the students they specifically enrol. The discussion of these supports has evolved with experience and the supports have subsequently been categorised as first, second, third, and fourth generation responses for FYE students (M. Christie et al., 2018, p. 129). Table 3.1 provides a description of these four



responses, each of which offers its own uniqueness and provides an evolving connection to subsequent university-originated supports.

Table 3.1

*Four Generations of FYE Support*

Generation	Focus of support
First generation	Institutionally supported preparatory pathways or courses, the provision of student services and co-curriculum activities.
Second generation	University wide, cross-curriculum support including administrative and academic resources and support.
Third generation	Transition pedagogy which combines first and second-generation approaches in an intentionally designed, pedagogically tested curriculum with academic and professional support.
Fourth generation	Communities of supportive practice in and outside the university that includes but also builds on first, second and third generation approaches.

*Note.* FYE = first-year experience. Reprinted from “Selective Planning of the First Year Experience in Higher Education: A Sweden-Australia Comparative Study of Support,” by M. Christie, S. Penn-Edwards, S. Donnison, and R. Greenaway, 2018, *International Journal of Higher Education*, 7(2), p. 129 (<https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v7n2p128>). Copyright 2018 by Sciedu Press.

Each generation of support offers strategic responses to transition and adapts with the university appreciation of FYE. Alongside these four generational approaches is literature that identifies three foundational approaches of the transition that occurs: transition as induction, transition as becoming, and transition as development (Gale & Parker, 2014). These transition phases when combined with notions of inter-generational responses provide a broad consensus in the literature on FYE transition.

The first-generational approach promotes specifically related preparatory courses and student services to assist first-year students, while the second generation focuses on the use of “university wide, cross-curriculum support including administrative and academic resources” (M. Christie et al., 2018, p. 129). The descriptions of these two generations align nicely with “Transition as Induction” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 741). Indeed, the induction phase needs

extensive planning by the university (Hultberg, Plos, Hendry, & Kjellgren, 2009) and this phase also invites students to adjust to the unique culture of the university. For many, their actual experience of university life is very different from which they anticipate. Consequently, for transition to be successful, students are required to direct themselves through existing programs or systems, with support provided to assist such experiences (K. Nelson, 2014). These programs introduce students to campus surrounds, to academic staff and support systems as well as to their peers. These induction experiences also assist students to critically reconsider the appropriateness of initial career decisions. Worthy of note is that induction experiences have traditionally sought to provide information on the expectations the university has of students, an introduction to academic teaching staff and where they are located (Hultberg et al., 2009). Further, the overarching concept of integrating induction programs into the FYE is to provide new students with a sense of stability in their new environment (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Given that there is pressure to increase student graduations by 2025 (Bradley et al., 2008) and that students are entering university with lower admission scores (Baik et al., 2019), some first-year students experience difficulties with bridging the gap from school or work to university. These students may experience concern with academic responsibilities very early in first semester (James et al., 2009; Kift, 2015). These challenges influence successful university transition in the acquisition of skills necessary to succeed in study (McMillan, 2014). Put differently, despite engaging with preparatory initiatives offered at university, students are not adequately prepared for academic study (Ford et al., 2015). Moreover, some students are challenged with balancing life, study, and work responsibilities and lack motivation at times (Bovill, Bulley & Morss, 2011; McKay & Devlin, 2016). If these challenges are not addressed, some students withdraw from university in the first year (Ford et al., 2015). More recent reports indicate that in an effort to support students, programs should not be restricted to the initial days at university; rather, they should be offered on an ongoing basis that involves commitment from staff and students for the whole of first year (Douglas, Rogers, & Ahuja, 2018).

The third-generation approach undertaken by universities favours university-wide initiatives that include administrative, faculty and academic services (M. Christie et al., 2018). Similarly, this phase of transition was identified by Gale and Parker as “Transition as Becoming” (2014, p. 746). This also incorporates student success through the faculties and academic support structures. It invites a transformation of teaching practices, curriculum and values. Further, universities seek to celebrate and affirm students’ cultural capital (Gale & Parker, 2014; Zepke & Leach, 2005). This approach is referred to as “transition pedagogy” (Kift, 2015, p. 51), an effective student support strategy (M. Christie et al., 2018) that is designed to focus on higher education as “being coherent, integrated, coordinated, intentional, cumulative, interconnected and explicit” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 743). According to Gale and Parker (2014), transition pedagogies emphasise the following:

- creating collaborative and inclusive spaces, in which students are encouraged to share their beliefs, knowledge and experiences;
- developing student-centred strategies, which entail flexible and tailored activities that enable students to ground their learning in something relevant to them as individuals;
- connecting with students’ lives, through subject matter that is relevant to students’ immediate lives and/or their imagined roles and identities as professionals;
- being culturally aware, which includes using culturally relevant examples, anecdotes and stories to aid learning, as well as a non-academic frame of reference for teaching (i.e. teaching beyond the academic culture). (p. 748)

While the university implements transition phases, students are also expected to be responsible for their attendance, engagement, motivation and participation once university commences (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Tinto, 2015).

The fourth-generational approach stands in clear contrast to the other three as it has its genesis within the wider community and consequently is characterised by the honouring of cultural and social capital (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014). Cultural capital respects diverse knowledge and different understandings of phenomena and corresponding behaviours (Donnison et al., 2017), whereas social capital refers to the connections students make, both individually and socially in networks they establish on campus. Consequently, the fourth-generation approach celebrates the “role that the FY student’s *social capital* plays in their successful transition into higher education” (Donnison et al., 2017, p. 64). Noticeably, with the fourth-generational approach there is an awareness of outside influences that assist with transition, which can be directly linked to what has been termed “Transition as Development” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 746). They include family, peers, children and partners, context, time and place (M. Christie et al., 2018; K. Nelson et al., 2012) and contribute to the development of a “community of practice” or learning communities that specifically support student engagement and transition based on student needs (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014, p. 32; Reaburn & McDonald, 2016).

This fourth-generational phase provides a focus on “students’ transformation or development from one life stage to another” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 741). In comparison to transition as induction, it is aligned to the first-generational approach where transition occurs along pathways designed by the university that necessitate substantial time to negotiate. During this time, students learn how to study, how to become independent learners and how to navigate their individual disciplines. It has been claimed that universities support students to transit through this phase by providing supportive curricula, assessment and pedagogical approaches (Kift et al., 2010).

A means for conceptualising student knowledge and difference is to appreciate who students are at university and how they “identify themselves” (Gale, 2012, p. 251) and come to understand their “funds of knowledge” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 31). Funds of

knowledge refer to what students know and what they bring to their university experience. Not only is this aspect important for students, so is understanding their own learning styles and preferences in order to support their learning. This is for both university teachers and students alike. There is a myriad of learning styles, all of which are influential in learning and academic achievement which play a part in how students learn (Yazici, 2006). One such example of learning styles is Kolb's Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) which provides a guide to producing valuable, deeper and meaningful ideas in pre-service teachers. Kolb's theory has been identified as offering an alternative to traditional classroom approaches, as it provides for personal change and development in terms of a learning cycle (Bergsteiner, Avery & Neumann, 2010). It has also been documented to assist learning in critical reflection and emphasizes a four-stage cycle and a four-type definition of learning styles each representing a combination of two preferred styles for a combination of the cycle and the styles. These are referred to as:

- Concrete experiences (CE)-a level of personal involvement;
- Reflective observation (RO)-reviewing what has been experienced;
- Abstract conceptualization (AC)-students relate knowledge gained from outside experiences;
- Active experimentation (AE)-students test out learned information and the cycle begins again (Groves, Bowd & Smith, 2010, p.12-13).

Kolb's learning cycle provides one of the most useful descriptive models of adult learning processes. Kolb's theory posits that learning is a cognitive process involving constant adaptation to, and engagement with one's environment. Here it is argued that individuals create knowledge from experience rather than just from received instruction. Conflicts, disagreements and differences drive the learning process as learners move between modes of action, reflection, feeling and thinking. Different learning styles reflect learning preferences that can change with the situation. Learning is therefore a holistic process and results from synergetic interactions with the environment, with people making choices about which parts of the environment to engage with (Bergsteiner, Avery & Neumann, 2010).

Further to this, individuals create themselves through the choices they make, and these choices have a direct influence on future actions. Experiential learning tasks can also be used to facilitate the development of study skills, as they have been viewed as “aiding student learning and the acquisition of skills” (Groves, Bowd & Smith, 2010, p.11).

The reflective learner describes a factor that acknowledges the influence of previous academic experience and an assessment of academic readiness on an adult’s decision to enrol in higher education (Stein & Wanstreet, 2006). It is evident that individuals learn better when they are actively engaged with class activities and the information being presented (Krause, 2005; Coates, 2010; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006). Students must engage in deep learning if they are to develop and become critical thinkers in their own learning. To facilitate deep learning and student engagement, it is proposed that at the beginning of the lecture and the activities employed are crucial for such learning. If there is limited engagement with practical details at this time, then retention of lecture material is also limited (Krause, 2005).

Through the promotion and development of engaging teaching practices we can create learning environments in which deep learning can occur, high quality student learning is promoted, and superficial approaches to learning are discouraged.

Even though there are many and varied initiatives in support of transition, it is the responsibility of the higher education system to include knowledge systems and practices that are more flexible and open to meeting students’ needs throughout their first year of university (M. Christie et al., 2018; Gale & Parker, 2014). In light of this the discussion continues with a focus on what students bring to university, followed by specific approaches used by universities to support students through these phases.

### **3.3 WHAT STUDENTS BRING TO UNIVERSITY**

Historically, students entering university were young, full-time and from an Anglo-Saxon heritage (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); however, this profile of first-year students has changed

to now encompass a “mix of distinct generations of learners with different histories, preferences, and values” (Holyoke & Larson, 2009, p. 12). In addition, each student brings unique past learnings and academic experiences to their first year at university (Gibney, Moore, Murphy, & O’Sullivan, 2011; Kasworm, 2018). Further, they bring with them a student identity that is “multi-layered, multi-sourced and evolving” (Kasworm, 2010, p. 143) and that over time will transform them into the student they will become (Wilson, Devereux, & Tranter, 2015). Nevertheless, while students overall are now more diverse and each possesses particular attributes, they all share common challenges: to successfully engage with university life and studies (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2009) and adjusting to their surroundings and forming new friendships (Buote, et al., 2007). It is the importance of these new friendships that often assist with the adjustment of their new social university environment.

### **3.3.1 First-year student characteristics**

Students enter university with various characteristics (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Kasworm, 2018) such as gender, race, academic ability, family background, educational levels of parents, plus different levels of commitment to the university they attend (Tinto, 1988). Research on the characteristics of first-year students advances that there are two specific cohorts of students who choose teacher education as a career. These are recent school leavers (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015) and non-recent school leavers (Heagney & Benson, 2017) or career switchers<sup>4</sup> (Richardson & Watt, 2016). Therefore, these terms have been used interchangeably by researchers depending on their context. Recent school leavers are those who access university immediately upon completion of secondary school (Baik et al., 2015), while career switchers encompass all those students who are not graduating directly from school (Richardson & Watt, 2016). The terms recent and non-recent school leavers will however be used within the Presentation of Findings chapter, Chapter 5.

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<sup>4</sup> This group of students has also been termed “mature age” (Heagney & Benson, 2017, p. 226) and “career changer” (Bauer, Thomas, & Sim, 2017, p. 185).

The career switcher has been characterised as professional and mature; committed to their studies and a teaching career; understanding themselves, particularly in their previous career; and having interpersonal and intrapersonal skills relevant for a career in teaching (Richardson & Watt, 2016). These career switchers traditionally identify with one of six profiles: “the parent; the successful careerist; the freelancer; the late starter; the serial careerist; and the young career changer” (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003, p. 98). Career switchers are generally aged between 21 and 35 years (Harvey et al., 2016) and make up approximately 40% of the Australian student cohort. Further, there has been an ongoing increase in the number of career switchers beyond 35 years of age (Harvey et al., 2016; O’Shea, Stone, & May, 2014). Past research has reported that there is an increasing trend for career switchers to enter teaching, with many of these students having been dissatisfied with their previous occupation and believing that teaching offers a rewarding future with meaningful work (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Wilson & Deaney, 2010).

While there are clear profile differences between recent school leavers and career switchers, there are common factors that influence each group to become teachers. These include the desire to work with young children; personal satisfaction; the desire to improve the quality of future education; and parental and teacher influences, along with vocational interests (Hench Roloff, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Trautwein, 2015; Mukminin, Kamil, Muazza, & Haryanto, 2017; Richardson & Watt, 2016). These findings are not new and are well established in the research literature (Anthony & Ord, 2008).

Drawing on more general research of first-year students at university, it has been documented in past research that “the characteristics, motivations and outcomes of mature-age students differ from those of younger students” (Chesters & Watson, 2014, p. 1638). The differences have been identified as students who were less likely to have graduated from high school, may not have a university-educated parent and have their own children. These differences require mature-age students to change their lives in order to fit university studies



into their already existing commitments (Heagney & Benson, 2017). However, balancing a variety of commitments for all students is real (Tetteh & Attiogbe, 2019). Research by Tetteh and Attiogbe (2019) explored how university students who worked were able to combine this with their study and whether working affected their academic performance. A survey was distributed to 360 students who worked while studying. They were randomly selected from four universities across Ghana. The study employed the “Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient ( $r^2$ ) to establish the relationship between the variables considered in the hypotheses” (Tetteh & Attiogbe, 2019, p. 531). The results confirmed that combining university study with work does negatively affect academic performance. It was identified that students found it difficult to allocate sufficient time for study due to the requirements of their work.

Even though it is known that working affects study outcomes, research confirms that there is an increase in students who work part-time and many who work full-time (Hall, 2010; Holmes, 2008; Salamonson, Everett, Koch, Andrew, & Davidson., 2012). Holmes (2008) researched why students worked during their degree, the influences of their choice of work, and students’ perception of how to balance work and study. Holmes distributed a survey to 42 first- and second-year students at the end of the second semester. It was reported that 83% of students worked at some point while they were studying. The research identified that the majority of students who worked needed to pay for the basic costs of living. Further, while 53% of students believed they could balance work and study, 30% who responded to the survey felt that they experienced a negative impact on their degree while they worked (Holmes, 2008). While these studies discussed the negative effects working has on students’ commitments and the balance of work and study, Hall’s (2010) research also found that students believed universities should cater more for “the needs of working students by providing more online facilities for assignment submission and communication and more flexible timetables and submission requirements” (p. 439). Worthy of note is that it is well established that balancing work and study does not

always result in an equal balance; it can vary over time depending on the individual and there is no one-size-fits-all for different cohorts (Bird, 2006).

Regardless of what cohort first-year students identify with, the commonality of their motivations, or whether they work part-time or full-time, first-year students are often underprepared to succeed at university (Dunbar & O'Connor, 2016). It is well established that some students often experience a “serious lack of institutional fit ... are disengaged, unmotivated and expect instant gratification” (Barefoot, 2000, p. 13). This situation has not changed, with a more recent study by Baik et al. (2015) reporting that current first-year students “were less socially engaged in the university community, spent less time on campus, and more students tended to keep to themselves” (p. 1). For approximately 30% of the students in the study, “getting motivated and coping with university study remains challenging” (Baik et al., 2015, p. 1). As well, 30% are at risk of not completing their first year (Mason & Matas, 2015); therefore, it is important to encourage persistence (Ross-Gordan, Rose, & Kasworm, 2016). The phenomenon of first-year lack of engagement and early termination is argued to be exacerbated by the impact of increasing class size on learning; decreasing student engagement, with students having other priorities (Baik et al., 2019); establishing a study–life balance (Coates, 2014; Habermas, 1984); reduced university community connections (Baik et al., 2019); forming and developing new friendships (Buote et al., 2007) and widening diversity in student demographics (Kasworm, 2018).

Within the Australian context, Richardson and Watt (2006) explored student choice in teaching and established a “Factors Influencing Teaching Choice” (FIT-Choice) framework (p. 31) to elucidate the complexity underlying student engagement. The framework focused on altruistic-type motivations as well as personal and intrinsic motivations. It enunciated “‘socialization influences’, followed by more proximal influences of ‘task perceptions’, ‘self perceptions’, ‘values’, and ‘fallback career’” (Richardson & Watt, 2006, p. 32).

The framework was further developed into a quantitative survey scale and applied in the wider contexts of the USA, Germany and Norway (Watt et al., 2012). Results proved to be similar in these countries and reinforced its application, potential and suitability within Australia (Watt et al., 2012). International contrasts revealed that motivations for teaching were similar; however, a concern was identified that “perceptions about the teaching profession reflected country differences”, for example, the differences in salary rewards (Watt et al., 2012, p. 791). Despite acknowledging that teaching is a demanding career, teaching offers minimal rewards in terms of social status and income, yet Australians were found to be passionate about continuing their study at university (Richardson & Watt, 2016), and positive links existed between status and the attractiveness of entering teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### **3.3.2 Student engagement in higher education**

Student engagement in higher education has been well researched (Krause, 2017; Xerri, Radford & Shacklock, 2018; Zepke, 2018), with participation at university and engagement in learning being pivotal to academic success (Masters & Donnison, 2010; Ramsden & Callender, 2014). However, because “engagement is influenced by a wide range of factors it is therefore experienced differently by different cohorts and in different contexts” (Kahu & Lodge, 2018, p. i).

In the past, student engagement has been identified as a myriad of differing ideologies relating to policy, learning, teaching, enhancement and improvement (Kuh, 2009; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Trowler, 2010); however, engagement is complex and not easy to define (Ramsden & Callender, 2014). For instance, while there are differences in the research literature regarding the meaning of student engagement and retention (Tight, 2019), some of these definitions obscure the full understanding of engagement (Pittaway & Moss, 2019). One simple and practical definition refers to engagement as constituted by “how engrossed or attentive students seem to be in their learning or how integrated they are with their classes, colleagues and colleges” (Caruth, 2018, p. 17). Further, past research confirms that the more students are

engaged in their learning environments, the more likely they are to become successful students at university (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

The link between effective engagement and student learning is clear. The ACER (2010) confirms that involving students with activities is likely to generate high-quality learning. Moreover, if learning and engagement are to be activated successfully, then thoughtful, engaging high-quality strategies and activities in the higher education classroom must be instigated by the teacher, and students are encouraged to be enthusiastic and demonstrate the required "effort necessary to develop their skills and knowledge" (Axelson & Flick, 2011, p. 7). Alternatively, if high-quality activities do not occur then students might fluctuate between being engaged and disengaged in their learning (Bryson & Hand, 2007).

Similar to the ACER's (2010) findings, student engagement is a shared responsibility between students and teachers (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Teachers are called to design and implement engaging activities and arrange the university classroom environment, and students are called to participate meaningfully (ACER, 2010). In addition, and in view of wider organisational implications, Tight (2019) advanced that student engagement has moved from being the responsibility of the student to that of the higher education institution.

Different understandings of student engagement exist within the USA, Europe, the United Kingdom (Solomonides, Reid, & Petocz, 2012) and Australia (Xerri et al., 2018). In the USA, one of the most widely used and validated frameworks is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2005; Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010). This survey was designed to measure the extent to which university students are engaged in good practices in undergraduate education (Pascarella et al., 2010). It was redeveloped in 2016 (Zhoc, Webster, King, Li, & Chung, 2018). Further, several key iterations of the NSSE have been used to understand student academic challenges, student learning, peer relationships, experiences with faculty, and the campus environment. The overarching concept is that the more time students spend participating in good practices, the more a student's cognitive and social development will be influenced by

their education (Pascarella et al., 2010). The NSSE to date is now widely integrated into higher education practices and policies (Gonyea & Shoup, 2018), similar to the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE; Brown, 2018; Coates, 2010).

The AUSSE parallel of the NSSE (Zhoc et al., 2018) aims to offer a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, constraints and opportunities facing higher education institutions, along with “encouraging the expansion of evidence-based quality management in higher education” (Coates, 2010, p. 1).

This AUSSE has become the preferred instrument for surveying student needs and is administered across many universities in Australasia (Coates, 2010). In the past, findings from survey data on student participation and success reported on the quality of the education offered, gave ideas on how to enhance activities, and identified good practices within universities (Coates, 2010). A recent study using the NSSE and AUSSE made comparisons between disciplines and institutions with the outcome being improvements in both areas (Leach, 2016). The research pointed to the value of survey instruments in providing relevant data in terms of positive higher education performance.

Research has capitalised on engagement surveys and developed theoretical frameworks to conceptualise the dimensions and complexity of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Kuh, 2007; Pittaway, 2012). An original theoretical “framework of student engagement” by Kahu (2013, p. 766) acknowledges the student is at the centre of university engagement with the variables of affect, cognition, and behaviour being important (Kahu, 2013). As such, student engagement incorporates four perspectives: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic (Kahu, 2013), with these perspectives focusing on how students’ (and teacher) behaviours and success link together. Affect focuses on enthusiasm and interest in the topic and a sense of belonging to the university. Cognition identifies whether students formulate deep learning and are self-regulated within their learning. Behaviour constitutes the time and effort students put into their study, the interaction they have with peers and staff, along with participation within the

university structure. Sociocultural influences are identified as characteristics of the student and the institution. Further, an appropriate way to envisage engagement is the way that it “acknowledges the lived reality of the individual” (Kahu, 2013, p. 766).

The framework includes engagement with the structural and administrative influences of the university and the student. These influences include culture, policies, curriculum, assessment, and discipline. Student influences reflect background, support, family, and life load. The psychosocial influences of the framework depict the relationships between the university and students and record the position that we cannot do it alone (Kahu, 2013). The proximal consequences of student engagement are separated into “academic, learning and achievement, and social, satisfaction and well-being” (Kahu, 2013, p. 767).

The distal consequences include academic, retention, work success and life-long learning but also the social impacts that could lead to the future of students’ decision-making. Importantly, the framework identifies that it is necessary to understand that engagement is not driven by just one influence but is more of a constant connection between them all (Kahu, 2013).

Critique of the Kahu (2013) framework identifies that it does not highlight the factors that impact and interact with “psychosocial mechanisms” (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, p. 59) that influence the success of a university student. It lacks the provision that focuses on how to “design and implement curricula and co-curricular initiatives that can enhance student success and retention” (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, p. 59). Kahu and Nelson (2017) make significant contributions to research on engagement and ascertain that students’ engagement is influenced through the interactions and partnerships they have with peers and the institution itself. This aligns with Matthews (2019), whose research underpins the concept of engaging students as partners in order to shape their higher education experience.

Extending these findings, a recent Australian research study identified student engagement as a “critical factor contributing to the overall success of students studying in higher education institutions” (Xerri et al., 2018, p. 589). This research surveyed 209 first-year

undergraduate students to address the gap in research into what influences student connectedness. Invitations were electronically sent to an original cohort of 712 students, with 29.5% responding. The results propose that “student-student (peer) relationships, teacher-student relationships, and students’ sense of purpose for studying a higher education degree, were central to student engagement in academic activities” (Xerri et al., 2018, p. 589). Previous research identified similar findings and summarises the ongoing phenomenon:

Traditionally, high quality implies recognizing that students must be engaged with the content of learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach understanding. ... Sharp engagement, imaginative inquiry and the finding of a suitable level and style are all more likely to occur if teaching methods that necessitate student energy, problem solving, and cooperative learning are employed. (Ramsden, 2003, p. 97)

A second theoretical framework that informs our understanding of first-year engagement and process of support is offered by Pittaway (2012). This theoretical framework consists of five elements: personal, social, academic, professional, and intellectual. Her theoretical framework can be applied to any university year level, discipline or course, and it was initially developed to enhance “support for students across all courses, year groups and modes of delivery” (Pittaway, 2012, p. 40). All the elements can be used by academics who are writing and developing their units and considering their teaching practices. The elements can also be used by students who decide on what, when and how they will engage in their university work. Professional staff can use the theoretical framework in designing materials to support “marketing, recruitment, orientation, induction, transition and student support initiatives” (Pittaway, 2012, p. 40). Research reviewed by Kahu and Lodge (2018) also reports on the significance of involving professional staff to assist in supporting students through the process of university enrolment.

While recognising the breadth of application of Pittaway's initial theoretical framework, it gives limited importance to the construct of social engagement and the phenomenon of interaction in the first year. This is because at the time of the 2012 research, the social engagement construct was not fully developed; however, further research by Pittaway and Moss (2019) progressed the original theoretical framework and included the significance of social development, specifically in the online teaching space. Even though all of the original elements of the theoretical framework are important, recent research highlights that social engagement aligns best with participation at university (Pittaway & Moss, 2019). Moreover, social engagement highlights "students' interactions with their peers and university staff in both formal and informal contexts and is often suggested to be central to students' success" (Pittaway & Moss, 2019, p. 7). Within the context of their study, Pittaway and Moss (2019) adopted a case study approach and identified one first-year student who was enrolled online. The study focused on the underlying ideals and the need for social interaction for student success and engagement. This is confirmed by Redmond, Abawi, Brown, Henderson, and Heffernan (2018). Previous research also confirmed that if social interaction and contact is lacking, then students may feel a sense of alienation with their lecturers (Mann, 2005).

In traditional face-to-face higher education classrooms one factor that may contribute to feeling alienated is the "assumption that participants make about what is or is not appropriate or significant in the different learning environments. For example, the assumption about being a good student or not understanding the experiences of each other" (Mann, 2005, p. 44). These can lead to restraints for both teachers and students and to lack of engagement in the academic learning process. Alleviation of these outcomes can be offset by staff in and out of class through experiences of hospitality, safety, sharing power, and encouraging criticality (Mann, 2005).

The importance of profiling student engagement constitutes a starting point to support students in their first year at university. However, awareness of difference and connection alone is insufficient to overall student retention and success. Also critical to these goals are the



strategies universities offer to address difference and to build connections within the wider university community.

### **3.4 UNIVERSITY PROVISIONS FOR FYE STUDENTS**

Within the review of university support strategies, the value of orientation programs is highlighted, specifically as to how they can be implemented for first-year students (McPhail, French, & Wilson, 2015). Further, the literature identifies ongoing supports such as mentoring programs, academic support services (Larkin, Rowan, Garrick, & Beavis, 2016), and assessment feedback. Moreover, how initial teacher education (ITE) exists within the context of the broader university, including the culture of the university; blended and online learning; and Surface, Deep, and Achieving approaches to learning are included in this review of university provisions for first-year students.

#### **3.4.1 Orientation programs**

Orientation programs continue to be an important part of the FYE at university and have been recognised by past research (Braxton & McClendon, 2001). Prior to classes commencing, students are encouraged to attend orientation activities. The aim is to develop a sense of “affiliation with their institution and their course and staff” (Baik et al., 2015, p. 30). It is at this point that students are preparing to engage with their university surroundings. Further, orientation aims to raise students’ awareness about the expectations and standards set by the university and the kind of academic skills students need to perform well at university. Notwithstanding, orientation activities remain as an under-researched aspect of engagement and retention (McPhail et al., 2015).

Most Australian universities have some form of orientation programs that are designed to assist students’ transition to the university environment and culture (McPhail et al., 2015). The overarching concept behind orientation is to welcome new students and to provide them with the opportunity to view university as their new learning environment. Orientation is planned

for the students by the university staff to introduce them to their degree and to showcase support that is offered on an ongoing basis. This support requires a commitment from both staff and students with the intention being to create an atmosphere of open communication and to guide students in making an easy transition into university life (Kift, 2015).

When examining orientation programs, McPhail et al. (2015) went beyond listing supports typically associated with university strategies to outlining specific improvements of the orientation program for first-year students to assist them in preparing for the reality of academic study. To move beyond this usual approach, the study developed and implemented the “Commencing Student-Needs-Centred Orientation Framework” (McPhail et al., 2015, p. 109). In this instance the orientation program comprised a one-day program that developed the insights of Lizzio (2006). The goal was to identify the “big picture” (McPhail et al., 2015, p. 109) for students and “systematically work through the five senses of student success” believed to provide very specific information needed for the early weeks of first semester (McPhail et al., 2015, p. 117). The five senses of success provided a platform for designing effective and efficient orientation strategies that may assist students in first year (Lizzio, 2006). These are described as sense of connectedness; sense of capacity; sense of purpose; sense of resourcefulness; and sense of academic culture (McPhail et al., 2015). Further, they link back to earlier research (Lizzio, 2006) by providing a description of the academic, personal and social transition processes, which are all connected as they inform practice in understanding how the student and university staff operate (McPhail et al., 2015). The one-day program was built on the five senses, whereby students were invited to five sessions that related specifically to their experiences. These sessions were developed after the original orientation program was implemented. Feedback informed program improvement, which was implemented in semesters A, B and C. According to McPhail et al. (2015), the aims of the program were as follows:

- collect and analyse baseline data from students on their current experience of their orientation day programme, including suggestions for improvement;

- use both the student data and the Five Senses Model of Student Transition to re-design a transition-sensitive orientation day programme;
- trial and evaluate the revised programme; and
- implement and evaluate the revised programme with a second independent commencing student cohort in a subsequent semester. (p. 114)

The research of McPhail et al. (2015) entailed survey and focus group interviews with 385 commencing students over a period of three semesters. The breakdown of enrolled students was as follows: 164 commencing students in the original orientation program in Semester A; 44 new cohort of students participating in the revised orientation program trial in Semester B; and a final new cohort of 177 students participating in the full implementation of the revised orientation program in Semester C (McPhail et al., 2015). The participants were mainly recent school leavers studying full-time and were first in their family to attend university (McPhail et al., 2015).

The first part of the study undertaken in Semester A required the participants to complete a short survey on the same day as the program. Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with the orientation day program relating to the five sessions and the extent to which the sessions prepared them for university life and becoming a student. The results indicated that 81.4% of the participants believed that the orientation day was effective in preparing them for university (McPhail et al., 2015). Further, in Semester B, a survey was offered to all commencing students with the expectation being that they complete it between weeks 4 and 7 of their semester of study. These participants were asked to evaluate their experience of orientation, combined with the learning environment in which they were immersed and whether orientation prepared them for their academic study (McPhail et al., 2015). Students reported that they had the “right amount of information” but during the weeks identified, they knew that they needed more academic assistance (McPhail et al., 2015, p. 116). In contrast to the first set of survey results in Semester A, the results were far less favourable in terms of the program assisting them with the realities of

academic life and study. Only 32% (164 participants) responded to the survey, with only 37.8% of these agreeing that they were prepared (McPhail et al., 2015).

Following the collection of survey data, the researchers then focused on reflection and action in order to improve the orientation day program. A working party was established to investigate the reasons between the differences identified and how revising and redesigning may improve the program (McPhail et al., 2015). Enrolled students in Semester C were then invited to undertake the second iteration of the revised orientation program. The results from this cohort identified that the revised program offered substantial improvements in the students' perceptions of orientation day and how it assisted them both socially and academically (McPhail et al., 2015). Not all strategies were reported to be equally effective, but the overall findings drawn from the three semesters showed strong improvements in student perceptions of the student-centred aspects of the program and their influence on preparation for university study (McPhail et al., 2015).

The findings of McPhail et al. (2015) on building student awareness of their self and purpose contrast with the approach of Douglas, Rogers, and Ahuja (2018), which focused on a transition initiative that was embedded into the first year of study for cohorts of students between 2009 and 2012. This research identified that one-day orientation programs are unsatisfactory and should extend across the course of the first year after induction. The program they developed in conjunction with this idea was called "The Student Challenge" (Douglas et al., 2018, p. 70), a strategy that included ongoing support on campus through a series of fun and educational activities conducted throughout the year. These entailed opportunities to share meals, participate in social functions, socialise with students from other year levels, participate in sports competitions, and access online resources to assist with the yearlong challenge (Douglas et al., 2018). These strategies were identified as assisting the students in developing a "sense of belonging" (Douglas et al., 2018, p. 79) and providing regular information about support, culture and peer networks. Of the 445 students who were invited to participate in the

research, there was a mix of age, gender, domestic and international backgrounds. Data were collected from a voluntary paper-based survey with a response rate of 50% (Douglas et al., 2018). This aligns with the fourth generation (M. Christie et al., 2018) and sense of belonging research (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014; Tinto, 2017). Results of the Douglas et al. (2018) study extended McPhail et al. (2015) by recommending that orientation should entail a continuous process throughout the whole year as it offers the skills and knowledge required to transition into second year. Further, the socially oriented experiences engaged peer support and security through the implementation of social, fun and educational activities all year long (Douglas et al., 2018).

The findings of these two comprehensive approaches to orientation, Mc Phail et al. (2015) and Douglas et al. (2018), reveal the success of different strategies to support first-year students and are similar in that they highlight the importance of orientation as a continuing process which engages personal and social dimensions, as opposed to programs that are on offer for one day only. However, such programs are indirect in their relationship with overall learning support and are often applied alongside support strategies of a more direct nature, such as mentoring, academic support services, and assessment and feedback, which have been presented in the recent research literature and have been argued to support students across their first year of university study. These will be discussed in the following section.

### **3.4.2 Ongoing supports the university provides throughout a student's first year**

Australian universities are investing time and money to improve the quality of the FYE by offering academic support sessions throughout the year (Larkin et al., 2016) that are not specifically linked to orientation itself. These support sessions extend the existing university programs that are offered within regular, timetabled classes (Larkin et al., 2016). Universities have accepted responsibility for understanding the student and their individual needs by addressing challenges before they arise through providing learning opportunities during their FYE. Consequently, programs are deliberately planned to enhance skills and knowledge and to

develop a culture of learning that supports students to successfully complete their degree (Baik et al., 2015; Kift, 2008). As a result, university experience is complex and broad, with students having individualised experiences (Blair, 2017; Larkin et al., 2016). These experiences are viewed in the literature as “communities of practice”. Discussed in this section are the support programs that have been identified in the literature.

### *Mentoring programs*

Mentoring programs involve mentors who are experienced peers, and first-year students who are mentees or the protégé (younger peer) who is being mentored (H. Christie, 2014; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss, 2008). A relationship normally develops between mentors and mentees and offers those students involved an opportunity to reflect on how they learn in higher education and how they may apply this to their interactions with their peers. This relationship is particularly beneficial in pre-service teacher education programs where students are working towards a career in education (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). Mentoring has become well known in higher education “as a way of enhancing the personal and professional development of the student”, as well as supporting a smooth transition into university” (H. Christie, 2014, p. 955).

Although there is no clearly accepted definition of peer mentoring, it has previously been defined as “hierarchical relationships positioning the participants differently” (Le Cornu, 2005, p. 358). More recently, it has been defined as a “dyadic, hierarchical relationship between a more experienced person and an inexperienced person in a specific field” (Lim, MacLeod, Tkacik, & Dika, 2017, p. 396). However, when mentors engage in processes of co-learning this notion is challenged. The idea of co-mentors or co-learners redirects the hierarchy of relationships. Students are working together as co-constructors of knowledge (Le Cornu, 2005). As a result, mentoring is generally seen as an incentive program that supports students to be successful learners by integrating them into the learning community and offering support where necessary (H. Christie, 2014; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Lim et al., 2017). More recently,

mentoring has been identified as a way to mitigate against the attrition rate of first-year students and to strengthen student engagement (Cooper, 2018). In addition, the provision of student mentors assists first-year students to become more independent managers of themselves (Cooper, 2018; Haber-Curran, Everman, & Martinez, 2017). To reach this end goal, the Trident peer mentor program was developed by Cooper (2018) and included three parts. These integrated a “Study Space”, which is a voluntary, standalone space for students to attend outside of classes; “Peer Assisted Tutorial” sessions (PATs) to assist first-year students; and an “Online Study Space” (p. 90). Student and volunteer mentors reported that by including multiple options in the Trident program catered for different preferences for learning and offered multiple pathways for such learning (Cooper, 2018).

Supporting a holistic approach to mentoring, the “undergraduate peer mentor (UPM) program” (Douglass, Smith, & Smith, 2013, p. 223) was designed to determine the traits of a good mentor from the perspective of both mentors and mentees who were enrolled in intensive writing courses and to ascertain how mentoring activities assisted them through the duration of the writing course. Thirteen mentors, mostly female, were selected for the program after having been recommended by their teachers as suitable mentors. The high rate of female participation is not surprising given that H. Christie’s (2014) research also confirmed that females predominantly volunteered across many mentoring programs. Further, the undergraduate peer mentor program also included a prerequisite for participation where mentors had to demonstrate a proficiency in academic writing (Douglass et al., 2013). Similarly, in research by Cooper (2018), the Trident peer mentor program required mentors to be selected through a thorough recruitment and training program and be high-achieving students who exhibit very strong interpersonal skills. This element of these programs also aligns with H. Christie’s (2014) research whereby they too were also trained to participate in the program. Further, to ensure mentors were adequately prepared, they were required to undertake paid training, attend

monthly meetings, assist in class, attend office hours and assist students with writing assessment pieces (Douglass et al., 2013).

In the study by Douglass et al. (2013), the participating students completed three surveys. Survey results suggested that the mentors were well trained and that many students preferred to discuss issues with their mentors rather than their teachers (Douglass et al., 2013). These results support previous findings by Heirdsfield et al. (2008) whereby first-year students may be “reluctant to approach or question academic staff and have difficulty in relating to them” (p. 112). Douglass et al. (2013) also reported that mentor and mentee relationships might be improved if they are matched with a peer who has similar personal interests. Beyond the benefit of similar interests, several of the mentors admitted to thinking and behaving like a teacher, which also required them to offer feedback to their mentees.

There were differences and similarities in what mentors and mentees considered to be relevant and important abilities of a peer mentor (Douglass et al., 2013). Mentees indicated that knowledge in the field of writing was an important characteristic of the mentor, along with the mentor’s having previously undertaken the writing course in which they were assisting. The credibility of the mentor, as judged on knowledge mentors shared with their mentees, was deemed valuable. A difference between some participants’ responses was their preference regarding the level of prior mentoring experience. In some instances, experience was not considered a necessary means for being a successful mentor. This may link to prior research where it was reported that support, trustworthiness and good communication skills were important factors (H. Christie, 2014). The provision of time was also seen as important with mentor availability considered crucial to the mentees (Douglass et al., 2013). Mentees wished there was more time to meet their mentors and suggested improvements in the program, perhaps in the way of more office hours, as many were unable to attend meetings during office hours due to timetable clashes and their own work commitments (Douglass et al., 2013). Nonetheless, research has confirmed that peer mentoring programs assist with forming relationships and



invite socialisation between mentors and mentees, which assists first-year students to develop their own identities as university students and adapt to university life (H. Christie, 2014).

Notwithstanding the advantages of mentoring in enhancing positive outcomes for students, risks are also present; in particular, there are “dangers in constructing mentors as being in a formal position of expertise” (H. Christie, 2014, p. 962) and potentially engaging in exchanges reflective of power and control. Moreover, in some instances, mentees expect assistance with their academic work, and when this does not occur it can cause stress and a feeling of mistrust by the mentee towards the mentor (H. Christie, 2014). These findings illuminate the context of mentor provisions as a strategy for first-year support and value mentoring researched by Douglass et al. (2013) and Heirdsfield et al. (2008). What is implied in these outcomes is that mentoring along with continuing orientation programs are linked to a variety of supports including more formal academic assistance, particularly from the mentors themselves.

### *Academic support services*

All universities offer students at the beginning and throughout the duration of their degree academic support services. These services are planned and implemented to assist with the smooth transition into university life (Hossain, Gorman, Lawrence, & Burton, 2012). Academic support services may include a weekly one-hour support session outside normal class time. These sessions focus on specific skills such as referencing and writing workshops, with the inclusion of understanding assessment criteria. It has been reported that students’ value specific guidelines in the writing of assignments (Bovill et al., 2011). Moreover, they particularly appreciate academic support personnel with whom they can discuss the writing of their assignments. While these strategies have been reported as desirable, for the most part they are less satisfied with the “support provided in terms of contact time with tutors and feedback on performance (Blair, 2017, p. 215). Further, students were generally happy with supports from academics, but often struggled with what is expected in assignments, despite knowing where

they can go for such support. Associated with such processes are the practices of assessment and feedback that are embedded in learning units and experiences.

### *Assessment and feedback*

Assessment and feedback have been identified as “key professional activities” in higher education (Barnard, de Luca, & Li, 2014, p. 933); however, some researchers would argue that there has been minimal focus on the importance of feedback in first year (e.g., Blair, 2017). It is well established in the research literature that assessment and feedback are most valuable when undertaken early in the first semester of first year to encourage a sense of engagement, to evaluate and support student learning and achievement, and to give feedback on assessment pieces (Larkin et al., 2016; Lynam & Cachia, 2018; Thomas, Martin, & Pleasants 2011). This is supported by research showing that students may be at risk of leaving university due to difficulties they have with assessment early in their degree (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Although established as important for students, it has also been reported that once students “submit their work, they typically become disengaged with the assessment process ... because they become passive recipients of assessment outcomes” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 1). Rather than developing a passive manner towards feedback and assessment, what students prefer is verbal feedback to assist with their understanding (Blair, 2017). This has been suggested to alleviate the disengagement. Further, Thomas et al. (2011) identified that peer and self-assessment might add to a fuller understanding by students if it is used as well as feedback from teachers and should be applied on a larger scale in the first year of university. This approach was also supported by Nulty (2010) in earlier research.

As a complement to lecturer feedback, peer and self-assessment practices allow students to become “realistic judges of their own performance” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 2). Further, Barnard et al. (2014) examined peer feedback, which demonstrated that students were initially apprehensive about receiving and giving feedback; however, their attitudes and skills changed during the course of the process as it became evident that their learning was being understood and

scaffolded by their peers. This, in turn, allowed students to practise peer feedback as that served to build confidence and understanding about the learning process (Blair, 2017). Extending the proposition of self and peer assessment, Cramp (2011) addresses the importance of feedback in first year with the inclusion of allocated times set aside for personal tutoring sessions with allocated tutors. These sessions would offer the student the overarching ideas of university-related academic skills required by academic teaching staff and how these could assist with a variety of assessment types. Initially, they would assist with an awareness of academic demands, endeavour to make assessment clearer, and offer an interpretation of feedback. This research was undertaken by a cohort of 200 students, and staff were allocated 25 hours into their workload to assist students with feedback. Students and staff would attend meetings to discuss content and feedback on their assignments (Cramp, 2011). The study concluded that the sessions benefitted students in regard to understanding the feedback they received from lecturers as well as assisting in developing learning relationships with their personal tutors.

Another aspect of assessment prevalent in the literature is the concept of group work. Group work is considered an assessment strategy and a common pedagogical practice within first year. The argument presented is that being involved in group work supports students to participate in collaborative learning (Robertson, Naylor, & Sleeman, 2019); however, not all students agree that they even like group work, “because they don’t want their grade held hostage by someone else’s effort (or lack thereof), or they have had experience of having to do other people’s work for them” (Murray, 2017, p. 1). In addition, their hectic schedules may not allow them the time to complete designated work on time because each group member’s commitments do not allow collaborative time together.

The actual composition of each group is also an important aspect for students, and it has previously been argued in the literature whether students should organise their own groups or whether the lecturer should take charge (Watson, 1996). Further to this notion is that all groups should be heterogeneous as this ensures that groups are diverse with a greater range of opinions,

and this will assist students to work with others, which can be more effective in the long run (Hernandez, 2002). Not only are these factors important when forming groups, but research by Mahoney (2010) suggests the size of the group is important as well. Four to six students in a group is a manageable size as it ensures that students interact with one another (Mahoney, 2010).

Beyond arguments about group composition, Murray's (2017) work focused on his decision to continually try to improve the group assessment presented in the courses he taught. His main outcome was to make sure that the group presentation had a balance between individual assessment and group assessment and that each student was accountable for their specific duties allocated to them. To achieve this, he assigned half of each student's grade as individual (usually a draft) and the other half as a group final product. Murray (2017) argued that the latter had been more challenging at times. To ascertain this challenge, he devised the terms "Captainships" and "Non-Compliance Policy" in the major group assignments (p. 2). To this end, "Captainships" refers to assigning each group member a specific role and responsibility, for example, a Team manager. His approach is not isolated. For example, Mayne (2012) concurred that ensuring at least one group member has leadership skills is paramount for the success of the group, while Shoemaker (2011) related his group work research through the concepts of "responsibility", "attributability", "answerability" and "accountability" (p. 602). The most distinct concept within his research is "responsibility". In essence, this focuses on students being responsible for their actions and draws on work by Scanlon (2008) and Smith (2007) to assist in seeking answers concerning what it means for a student to be attributable, accountable, and answerable for an action when undertaking group work. It highlights the importance of students understanding what their moral obligations to peers are and that each student needs to accept ownership for the work they engage in regardless of failure or fulfilment of such obligations (Shoemaker, 2015).

Taking the issues of roles for group members and issues of accountability one step further, Murray's (2017) "Non-Compliance Policy" provides a "protocol by which a group can essentially fire a member of the group from any aspect of the project if they are not doing their

work, thereby protecting their own grades” (Murray, 2017, p. 3). The outcomes of Murray’s work are reported as both positive and productive, with the students in his classes reporting that they “actually enjoyed the group work and it was a favourite part of the course” (p. 2). His research concluded that the two strategies have assisted to make the students “more cognizant of their responsibilities to other group members by explicitly assigning and defining those responsibilities and ensure that any group dysfunction is discussed, so students can reflect on their own complicity” (Murray, 2017, p. 3). Earlier research in the field of student collaboration and group work was established by Johnson and Johnson (2004) and drawn upon by Murray (2017). Their research consisted of “the power of cooperative groups” (Johnson & Johnson, 2004, p. 6); however, it lacked the capacity to focus on the individual in the group, and rather, it sought to provide a thorough account of how the group functions as a whole. This being said, they do engage with the fact that “everyone has to do his or her fair share of the work” and that all members are accountable (Johnson & Johnson, 2004, p. 29). This research aligns with Murray’s pedagogical practices of the same ilk.

### **3.4.3 ITE exists within the context of the broader university**

ITE exists within the context of the broader university. It responds to this context through awareness and intervention in culture; blended and online learning methods; Surface, Deep, and Achieving approaches and learning experiences, all of which are discussed in the research literature and are included in this section.

#### ***Culture of university***

University culture is the integrated patterns of behaviour or products that we can learn through an enculturation process, making it possible to pass that cultural makeup on to others as they join the environment (Byrne, 2016). These behaviours or products may involve cultural values and norms to which new students and staff must adjust as both come to the university with their own individual cultural values and these are moulded to fit those of the established culture of the university (McPhail et al., 2015). Further, Byrne (2016) confirmed that

engagement with the cultural environment may be hindered when students and staff do not share similar social and cultural backgrounds. Past research confirms that associated with these backgrounds are the additional challenges of managing student identity, understanding academic writing and knowing what the university culture entails (Mak & Barker, 2000). Students must also develop communication, interpersonal, presentation and self-management skills, which are integral to university success and integration into the university culture (Mak & Barker, 2000). Addressing this problem becomes an immediate priority as “students must adjust simultaneously to the environment, teaching and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and disciplines of the university” (Lawrence, 2002, p. 4). Further, if students fail to engage with the cultural challenges, their learning may be impeded. In this instance, the experiences resonated with other research as some “students’ engagement with the university cultural experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are the students for whom the culture of the university is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting” (Krause, 2005, p.9).

Further, Byrne’s (2016) research revealed that there are many aspects of cultures or subcultures at university and confirmed that these consist of the following:

The composition (including ethnicity and age) and relationship of faculty, students, and staff; disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving and knowledge creation; balance of teaching, scholarship, and service; relationship of academic, athletic, and cultural pursuits; focus on individual and/or team excellence; and many others. (p. 56)

These subcultures can be determined by the university, its standards and values, along with personal expectations, which are influenced by both internal and external bodies. These include added pressure from students and professional affiliations, university mission and priorities, expectations of consumers (including parents and students), resource availability, and the leadership of the institution. Worthy of note is that cultural dimensions of universities are many, varied and complex (Byrne, 2016).

These findings have been confirmed by current research and further suggest that with the economic context and rapidly evolving university cultures, universities are required to improve their decision-making processes regularly (Romero-Pérez, Mateos-Blanco, & de las Heras-Monastero, 2017). This then strengthens the university competitiveness and assists to find the best way to satisfy university users with a more efficient use of resources, productivity and services.

### ***Blended and online learning***

As discussed earlier, universities are recognising the ever-changing nature of students' lives in terms of the necessity for them to juggle employment, family, community and recreational pursuits along with meeting university learning expectations. Consequently, blended and online learning technologies are an integral part of the university learning provisions (Ellis & Bliuc, 2019). In addition, online and face-to-face learning are generally integrated, using a combination of internet-based technologies and online activities that in essence extend in-class learning. An increasing online presence and the provision of a diverse range of opportunities for blended and online studies is widely employed by universities (Boelens, Voet, & De Wever, 2018; Redmond et al., 2018). This prevalence means that blended and online teaching and learning is now considered the "new normal" in universities (Havemann, Charles, Sherman, Rodgers, & Barros, 2019, p. 1).

In addition to ease of accessibility for students, other positive outcomes from blended and online learning include a flexible response to the mix of learning preferences and the application of multiple pedagogical options (Keengwe & Kang, 2013). López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza (2011) reported that blended learning also has a positive effect on attrition rates and improving final grades as it allows students the opportunity to connect with other forms of learning, generally termed e-learning, other than face-to-face lecture style teaching. These e-learning activities were aimed at students' ability to understand concepts being taught. Activities such as crosswords, matching, multi-choice tests, and wikis were designed to support

the students (López-Pérez et al., 2011). It is through these blended learning approaches and e-learning activities that many of the students in this study experienced support in areas of utility, motivation and satisfaction. This large study received 985 completed questionnaires that targeted these three concepts. Reported Cronbach's alpha results of comprehensive survey questions were "0.7 for utility, 0.76 for motivation and 0.73 for satisfaction" (López-Pérez et al., 2011, p. 820), which indicate internal consistency reliability for each of the three scales. The results highlight the significance of utility, motivation and satisfaction and encourage positive attitudes towards student learning. In addition, the online activities incorporated into the units were useful and enhanced and supported their learning process. Further, these activities would influence how they study independently (López-Pérez et al., 2011).

The findings of Guzer and Caner (2014), while identifying the options associated with online learning, questioned whether the characteristics of online learning were enough to create a supportive and positive online learning environment. The research concluded that "teachers using blended learning environments should encourage student participation in the environment and should find ways of creating social interaction through more collaboration" (p. 4602). They reported from the literature they reviewed from previous studies that students would benefit more from this approach if these environments were planned with more engagement intent (Guzer & Caner, 2014). Ellis and Bliuc (2019) have confirmed more recently that online and blended learning can offer positive outcomes for students in the form of deep learning. They used three questionnaires in their study that were administered in two parts at the end of the year. Part A included 93 participants in their first year and the Part B population included 145 a year later. The questionnaires were a combination of the "Student Approaches to Inquiry (SAI) questionnaire; the Student Approaches to Online Learning Technologies (SAOLT) questionnaire and the Student Perceptions of the Learning Environment (SPLE) questionnaire" (Ellis & Bliuc, 2019, p. 14). Each questionnaire has two subsets: Surface and Deep approaches. Accordingly, the "Cronbach's alphas of the subscales were calculated to assess the internal



consistency of the subscales” (Ellis & Bliuc, 2019, p. 15). The Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .061 to .084 for the subscales in the three questionnaires and were considered as reliable. The results of the study are quite broad and detailed, but the overarching findings indicate that there are “distinct patterns of associations between students’ approaches to inquiry and online learning technologies, and their perceptions of the online learning context” (Ellis & Bliuc, 2019, p. 18). Further, the scales in the study reviewed Deep and Surface approaches to inquiry and learning within the online context and are consistent with scales applied in an Australian context (Biggs, 1987).

### ***Surface, Deep, and Achieving approaches to learning***

Learning approaches have been discussed in the literature as Surface, Deep, and Achieving. Biggs (1987) developed and validated the SPQ with a cohort of over 800 students to identify learning styles. The SPQ has subsequently been used in research (see, for example, Ellis & Bliuc, 2019; Lake & Boyd, 2015; Regan, 1996; Zeegers, 2001) and is acknowledged as a valuable tool that supports understanding of student learning approaches (see Section 5.2). The tool is used to assist in identifying the level of Surface, Deep, or Achieving approaches used by students throughout their time at university (Lake & Boyd, 2015). The inclusion of these three approaches to student learning was based on the initial work by Biggs (1987) which was supported subsequently by the development of a survey instrumentation that assessed these approaches. Surface learning highlights a teacher-focused approach, where the teacher imparts knowledge and information to students and students are then required to reproduce that information (Lake & Boyd, 2015). In response to this surface learning approach, the learner is typically unmotivated and works to meet minimal course requirements set by the teacher. Further, they can achieve their goals by rote strategies. Over 30 years ago, it was claimed that surface learners are unlikely to be competent meta-learners. This means that surface learners will not strive to search and understand all they can about the content of their subjects, do not want to achieve high marks, and will be disorganised and unmotivated (Biggs, 1987).

In contrast, deep learners are intrinsically motivated, seek to personalise their learning, and undertake meaningful learning activities. These learners are motivated to achieve high grades, be competitive, and be self-organised in their learning practices (Biggs, 1987; Lake & Boyd, 2015). All students are capable of developing surface learning approaches; however, learning at a deeper level requires very different approaches and strategies that have been identified as more difficult to achieve (Ramsden, 2003). In addition, students focus on the main ideas of the topic and at the same time draw on their prior knowledge, assisting them to understand and create the overall picture of that being studied (Lake & Boyd, 2015). Their attitude towards the task is almost always positive and they show an interest, along with expecting a challenge and working towards completing that challenge. Students who engage in Deep approaches have been identified as those who “set about the task with the intention of understanding it for themselves, which, of course, makes it more likely they grasp the meaning” (Entwistle, 2009, p. 33).

Students who undertake an Achieving approach to learning do so by adopting strategies and motives that allow them to set themselves targets. These targets are generally associated with particular grades they wish to work towards in conjunction with the effort they need to establish in order to achieve that result (Lake & Boyd, 2015). In earlier research, Biggs, Kember, and Leung (2001) confirmed that the Achieving approach to learning was also based on how students organise how they will engage with the task they set out to undertake. This includes how, what and where they choose to engage.

A recent Australian study by Lake and Boyd (2015) involved a self-selecting group of students across all faculties. The survey included 20 questions from the original Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Biggs, 1987; Biggs et al., 2001), now called the revised two-factor SPQ (R-SPQ-2F) with questions that related to gender, age and grade point average. This study focused on two main scales, which were Deep and Surface approaches, as opposed to the original study that assessed Surface, Deep, and Achieving approaches. Five hundred and sixty

students returned the survey, which represented approximately 5% of the student cohort. This figure is considerably less than Biggs's 1987 study, where approximately 850 students (representing 24%) returned the original survey. Age was used as a grouping variable: 25 years and under and the over 25-year-old group. The study indicated changes in learning approaches, with the Surface approaches declining over time and the Deep approaches increasing over time (Lake & Boyd, 2015). "While the overall patterns are similar for the 25 and under and over 25-year-old cohorts, the older groups appear to start with a greater propensity towards surface learning and less propensity towards deep learning than the younger group" (Lake & Boyd, 2015, p. 58).

Associated with Deep and Surface approaches are processes of self-reflection. Reflection is another essential skill to develop while studying at university (Pretorius & Ford, 2016). Students who develop reflection skills are considered to be deep learners (Entwistle, 2009; Lake & Boyd, 2015). The processes involved in reflective practice have been discussed in terms of the application of four lenses within the teaching and learning process. These include the lens of appreciation of one's autobiography as a learner; the lens of operating in the eyes of other students; the lens of perception by colleagues; and the lens of compliance with educational literature (Brookfield, 2002). Moreover, the essence of reflective practice demands that contextual appreciation be developed so that cognitive skills are increased and that students are given the opportunity to participate in genuine learning experiences (Brookfield, 2002). This process of reflection engages the learner to identify personal learning goals and develop intellectual independence (Hickson, 2011).

Engaging the learner is important as teachers and students both use the skill of reflection to understand, question and investigate their own learning and practice (Boud, 2001). In addition, even though reflection is integral to quality teaching, students are expected to "develop reflection skills through their assignments" (Pretorius & Ford, 2016, p. 241), but in Pretorius and Ford's (2016) study it was identified that students are expected to achieve this

with only “minimal instruction, practice or guidance on how to reflect” (p. 241). The students in this study were required to attempt reflections before they were taught reflective practice theory. One hundred and seventeen students participated in the program called “Transition 2 University (T2U)”, with 58% being mature-aged (Pretorius & Ford, 2016, p. 242). The original premise of the program established in 2015 was to assist students with their academic achievement and do so by integrating both content knowledge and real experiences so students could transfer these skills to their learning (Ford et al., 2015; Pretorius & Ford, 2016). The 2016 study extended this idea and worked on transferable skills and reflective practice using journals and daily reflection prompt questions. The students were also provided with a questionnaire where three questions focused on reflective practice. The study concluded that those students who attended the T2U program appeared to have an understanding of reflective practice and continued to use the strategy to assist their study (Pretorius & Ford, 2016). The authors also went on to argue that when reflective practices are demonstrated in transition programs for first-year students, the students are more likely to appreciate reflection as a tool for learning and use it more effectively and consistently throughout their student life (Pretorius & Ford, 2016).

Reflective practice is also reported as enabling students to evaluate their performance and better align their capacity to self-assess through judgements of their performance and learning. Importantly, it assists both teachers and students to make informed decisions as to their learning and teaching engagements (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Entwistle, 2009).

### **3.5 SUMMARY**

Chapter 3 has reviewed individual and institutional factors influencing student transition into the first year of university. Literature examined first-year student characteristics and student engagement in higher education. In addition, the literature review covered university provisions for FYE students, including (a) orientation programs; (b) ongoing supports the university provides throughout a student’s first year, such as mentoring programs, academic support

services, and assessment and feedback; and (c) ITE exists within the context of the broader university; including culture, blended and online learning. The review concluded with a discussion of a third aspect of the broader context of the university to pre-service teacher education: Surface, Deep, and Achieving approaches to learning as integral to academic success.

This review of the research literature has highlighted a range of tools developed by researchers that assist researchers who follow in their footsteps. The review has also provided insights that contribute to or alleviate the research problem that is the impetus for this study. It demonstrated that some data were dated, some were gathered in one context and in a variety of ways, and some were collected in real time to investigate the causes of the problem. A significant milestone for this study has been reached with the generation of the research question:

*How do first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) on the Brisbane campus engage with supports and experience university life, and can a tool be developed to assess engagement that will benefit the wider higher education community?*

This research question directs the selection of research design for the study, which is discussed in the following chapter.



# Chapter 4: Design of the Research

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand the way first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at ACU on the Brisbane campus experience and engage with supports offered by the university and university life.

In Chapter 2: Identifying the Research Problem, the discussion concluded with the articulation of this research purpose. In Chapter 3: Literature Review, the synthesis of the research literature resulted in three themes: *FYE transition*, *What students bring to university*, and *University provisions for FYE students*. This discussion concluded with the generation of the research question:

*How do first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) on the Brisbane campus engage with supports and experience university life, and can a tool be developed to assess engagement that will benefit the wider higher education community?*

The purpose of this chapter, Chapter 4: Design of the Research, is to respond to this research question by presenting the research design for this study. The discussion that follows includes seven sections. In Section 4.2 the theoretical framework is discussed, followed by the research methodology in Section 4.3. In Section 4.4 data analysis and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data are discussed. Section 4.5 addresses verification of the research. Section 4.6 addresses ethical issues and then in Section 4.7 the limitations and delimitations of the study are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary in Section 4.8.

## **4.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A theoretical framework for research offers a philosophical foundation that gives direction and structure to the research design and determines the data collection strategies and analysis for the research (Creswell, 2008). The areas within the framework are the epistemology, research paradigm, and theoretical perspective. Each of these areas is aligned to the research purpose and question and the framework ensures that the assumptions embedded in the epistemological stance inform each element (Crotty, 1998).

Epistemology is a theory of knowledge that is embedded in the theoretical perspective on the nature of knowledge and learning (Crotty, 1998). This study employs the epistemological theory of constructionism to guide the exploration of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) students and their experiences in their first year at ACU. This is discussed in Section 4.2.1.

From within the constructionist epistemological stance, the research paradigm of interpretivism is adopted, and nested within this paradigm, the lens of symbolic interactionism is used to draw meaning from the data (Creswell, 2008). This identifies a basis for the study to draw a deep understanding of the social lifeworld (Charon, 2010; Neuman, 2006) of Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. Interpretivism is discussed in Section 4.2.2 followed by a discussion of symbolic interactionism in Section 4.2.3. The methodological approach of case study has also been adopted for this study and this approach is discussed in Section 4.2.4.

### **4.2.1 Epistemology: Constructionism**

Epistemological theories draw on the different kinds of knowledge that can be known (Crotty, 1998). In this way, epistemological theory reflects the researcher's perspective on the knowledge that can be known and therefore underpins and guides the selection of research decisions. For each research study it demonstrates the researcher's perspective and how knowledge is studied and generated; it also determines whether it is valid (O'Donoghue, 2018). It sets the boundaries, indicates how knowledge is seen as true, and develops parameters as to



how knowledge is created. The epistemology adopted for this study is constructionism, as it is believed that by focusing on the individuals enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree, with a view to understanding and knowing how they socialise with their peers in first year and how they share their realities and, in the process, construct meaning about their FYEs, (Crotty, 1998).

The epistemological framework of constructionism claims that “designing in itself is not research unless it is also accompanied by reflection upon the process making” (Feast & Melles, 2010, p. 1). It also includes the paradigm that humans construct their understanding of reality and scaffold their learning (O’Toole & Beckett, 2010) and that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6).

Constructionism provides a definite view of the world and applies culture to aid in shaping how individuals interpret their world (Crotty, 1998). It also provides the perspective that “what is real is a construction of the minds of individuals” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 83). Further, individuals develop subjective meanings of their experience by seeking understanding of how they interact in their world and the world in which they interact (Creswell, 2008), and for this study it is the world of first-year university life.

Constructionism deals also with the meaning of truth and rejects the ideas of objective and subjective “truth” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43), as this notion of scientific objectivity has no place in constructionism. This position is consistent with my perceptions, as I perceive that the realities of one student attending university are not the same as those of another student; therefore, each student’s truth can be entirely different.

Constructionists acknowledge that objects in the world should not be separated from the world. According to Sarantakos (2013), constructionism incorporates the following assumptions:

- There is no objective reality; the physical world exists but is not accessible to human endeavour.
- There are no absolute truths.

- Knowledge does not come through the senses alone.
- Research focuses on the construction of meanings.
- Meanings are not fixed but emerge out of people's interaction with the world.
- Meanings do not exist before a mind engages them.
- The world is constructed by the people who live in it. (p. 38)

Constructionism provides the overarching theoretical perspective for this study, which endeavours to illuminate the first-year students' realities of attending university. Students bring to university prior knowledge and experiences. These are extended through the learning and teaching environment provided at university and lead to these students' ongoing construction of meaning within their worlds. Therefore, the use of the constructionist epistemology is relevant for this study as student perceptions of their experience inform and shape their behaviour and ultimately the findings that will result from this study.

#### **4.2.2 Research paradigm: Interpretivism**

A research paradigm is an approach to represent and explain human society (Crotty, 1998). It is based on a way of viewing and constructing an understanding of the world (Blumer, 1998; Crotty, 1998). The research paradigm adopted for this research is interpretivism and this sits within the epistemological theory of constructionism (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 1998).

Interpretivism proposes that there are numerous realities that define individual experience and these realities can change according to time and place. It highlights social interaction as the foundation for knowledge (O'Donoghue, 2018), and in this instance, it is the knowledge construction of first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. Further, interpretivism provides a lens for social interaction within the world the students are interpreting. In attending university, they may make sense of that world based on their past and social perspective (Charon, 2010). They seek to understand the context and then interpret what they find, which

is shaped by their own experiences and backgrounds as well as the experiences and backgrounds of other first-year students with whom they interact (Charon, 2010).

In the case of this research, the purpose of this study is to understand the way first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at ACU on the Brisbane campus experience and engage with supports offered by the university and university life.

Knowledge is constructed by mutual negotiation and is specific to the learning experiences of the first-year students in this study. Interpretivism focuses on analysing symbols, such as signals, behaviours or language as a means of understanding the students' world. Within this research, interpretivism provides the research direction and highlights individual influences on students' learning experiences in their first year of university (Crotty, 1998). There are three forms of interpretivism, being symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology:

- “Symbolic interactionism is where the investigator is directed to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those being studied” (Denzin, 1978, p. 99).
- “Hermeneutics is an attempt to *read* human practices, human events, and human situations in ways that bring understanding” (Crotty, 1998, p. 87).
- “Phenomenology is in the search of objects of experience rather than being content with a description of the experiencing subject” (Crotty, 1998, p. 83).

Symbolic interactionism has been adopted for this study.

#### **4.2.3 Theoretical perspective: Symbolic interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism is the theoretical lens used for this research as it aims to construct meaning through the use of social interactions from the perspective of the first-year students under study. It focuses on the study of these students and their social worlds. The symbolic interactionist viewpoint believes “that the very essence of being human depends upon four interdependent socially-created characteristics: use of symbol; possession of self; engaging in ongoing mind action; and taking the role of the other” (Sly, 2008, p. 1).

These four characteristics of symbolic interactionism are important for first-year Bachelor Education (Primary) students and how they experience learning. Students socially construct their world through the use of symbols, such as gestures and words, in communication amongst themselves and with their lecturers in order to understand the university world in which they are immersed (Charon, 2010). In this instance, “complex human society relies on symbolic communication” (Sly, 2008, p. 2). Symbols are argued to include classes of social objects and are comprised of language and other gestures; however, words are the most important symbols, making human thinking possible (Charon, 2010). They are social, meaningful, and important for communication. Symbolic communication is made up of two parts: (a) the actor uses symbols to enable self-talk, and (b) the actor uses symbols to communicate with others (Charon, 2010).

Symbolic interactionists acknowledge the importance of the “self”. Humans have many “selves” and these reflect the differing groups with whom they engage (Sly, 2008, p. 2). Each student comes with differing backgrounds, circumstances, and real-life journeys. They are balancing work, life, study, and family. These “groups” are influential for first-year students and each student brings with them experiences from their world. The “real self” for first-year students is dependent on which group they “fit” into. “The central principle to symbolic interactionism is that we only understand what is going on if we understand what actors themselves believe about their world” (Charon, 2010, p. 206). Further to this notion, the researcher interacts with the actors through observation and interviews to “reconstruct their reality” (Charon, 2010, p. 206). It is with this lens that the researcher may begin to understand the actor’s perspective and how and what has influenced their actions. According to Charon (2010), the following five broad premises pertain to symbolic interactionism:

1. Social interaction is almost always central to what we do.
2. Thinking is almost always central to what we do.
3. Definition is everything; what we do does not result simply from reality as it is but from how we define what it is.

4. The present, not the past, must be understood in order to understand cause; what is going on right now in our present situation makes the real difference in how we act.
5. We are here conceptualised as active participants in what we do.

The overarching perspective of symbolic interactionism is that humans act the way they do because of how they define situations. In this way, it is the experiences of first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students that will generate meaning, particularly through being socially interactive with each other. The students are identifying and making meaning from these experiences within the university context.

Three tenets are central to the concept of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). The first tenet views how individuals attribute their own meaning making to a given phenomenon and act according to their constructed meaning. Tenet one also views communication as a symbolic process that takes place through language and symbols. In making these choices, individuals exhibit a sense of personal decision-making that influences their actions (O'Donoghue, 2018).

The second tenet is that meaning making is derived from social interaction with others. This statement suggests that “the meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other people act towards the person with regard to the thing” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). What is derived here is that understanding or meaning ascertained by a person can be regularly changing due to interactions with others. This means that the view of the world or perspective of the person is not fixed or constant as there is a level of acceptance that views alternative to one's own views are possible.

The third tenet is that meaning making is “handled and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Within this tenet people identify that things have different meanings, and people check, review, and transform meaning depending on the situation and the interaction with others (O'Donoghue, 2018) that results in a common meaning. This process is true for the students in

this study as well as for me as the researcher. Trying to understand and interpret the students' differing meanings is the role of the researcher. In this case, the researcher is interacting with the participants and therefore becomes symbolic only because of the significant symbols, that is, the language, gestures, and non-verbal communication that we share and through which we communicate. It is only through this dialogue the researcher becomes aware of the perceptions, feelings, beliefs and attitudes of others and is able to interpret their meaning making and intent (Crotty, 1998).

Symbolic interactionism employs two distinct phases during data collection, the Exploration Phase and the Inspection Phase (Charon, 2007). The Exploration Phase is where the researcher gains an early understanding of “what is going on around here?” (Charon, 2007, p. 147). The second phase is the Inspection Phase where issues identified in the Exploration Phase can be investigated further.

The adopted theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism has informed the selection of case study as the research methodology (Crotty, 1998).

#### **4.2.4 Research methodology: Case study**

Research methodology is the “strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of the methods to the desired outcome” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). The methodology selection is also directly linked to the epistemology and research paradigm and justifies the choice of data collection strategies and how these are implemented (Sarantakos, 2013).

This research adopts case study as the methodology, which incorporates the views of the actors in the case under study (Hughes & Hitchcock, 1995). The case under study in this research is the experience of Bachelor of Education (Primary) students in their first year of university.

A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (Creswell, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is a procedure of enquiry that investigates a phenomenon within a context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not obvious (Merriam, 1998). This methodology allows the researcher to gather data about the learning experiences of the first-year “actors” involved. Case study recognises that the context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). “The purpose of case study is not to represent the world, but to represent the case” (Neuman, 2006, p.158) as it is “case[s] and not variables” which are of interest in the interpretivist approach (Stake, 1995, p. 245). In this study the case was the way in which first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at ACU on the Brisbane campus experience and engage with supports offered by the university. This case study, as with all case studies, requires the researcher to provide rich descriptions and analysis of their deeper understanding of how the participants construct meaning during the learning process (Bryman, 2008) so that the reader can generalise to their own context as case study research is not generalisable. It is intended that the findings from this research will benefit other higher education institutions. Case study assists with feeling like an inconspicuous observer in the life of the participants, while still being in close proximity, permitting the researcher to understand the students’ real-life situations (Merriam, 1998). The context in which the participants are involved is unique and dynamic as they are a part of a social group all striving for the same outcome—to become teachers—which permits close observations of the unfolding interactions of events and human relationships in this social context that will be observed.

Notwithstanding the support for case study methodology, there has been criticism of this methodology and, more specifically, the influence of subjectivity (Punch, 2013). That is, the researcher may interpret results selectively without wider verification. The researcher is the main person collecting and analysing data and generating findings. This may lead the researcher to influence the findings and conclusions reached (Punch, 2013). Several strategies, such as

constant engagement with the participants at the site of the research along with the use of multiple data collection strategies, have been identified as ways to alleviate this problem (Neuman, 2006). By sourcing rich data and information from the participants using differing techniques, case study evidence may be stronger. However, in response, critics of case study methodology argue that the quantity of the data gathered may overwhelm the researcher and be too long to hold the reader's attention. With the consideration of these criticisms in mind, case study has been selected for this study.

This section of Chapter 4 has discussed the theoretical framework adopted for this study. Table 4.1 draws this discussion together by listing the decisions made.

Table 4.1

*Theoretical Framework Used in This Study*

Element of theoretical framework	Theoretical framework used
Epistemology	Constructionism
Research paradigm	Interpretivism
Theoretical perspective	Symbolic interactionism
Research methodology	Case study

### 4.3 METHOD

In this section of Chapter 4 the method of the study is discussed. The research participants are identified in Section 4.3.1, followed by the data collection strategies of the SPQ, semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with students and staff in Section 4.3.2.

#### 4.3.1 Research participants

Participants are the informants for the study and assist with illuminating the ideas of the case (Patton, 2002). The participants in this study were a cohort of first-year Bachelor of



Education (Primary) students (N = 150). The sample in this study was purposive as they were the students available to the researcher on the Brisbane campus of ACU. They were also easily accessible by the researcher as she is a Lecturer in Education at ACU and had access to these students. This first-year cohort of 150 students was invited to voluntarily participate in this study. An invitation to complete the questionnaire was sent to the cohort of students. Of the 150 students, 30 agreed to participate in the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews and 12 of these students participated further by being individually interviewed using a semi-structured in-depth interview approach. This represents a small proportion of students engaging in interview, which is typical of qualitative research of this type. Overall, 35% of the student population participated in this study which is reflective of an acceptable level for interpretive studies.

In addition to student participation, three non-academic staff members were invited to participate in semi-structured in-depth individual interviews (see Appendix A). The contributions of these staff are considered important as the staff provide many of the support services offered by the university through their work in the Office of Student Success (OSS), inclusive of the Academic Skills Unit and Orientation Day Committee.

A summary of participant groups and interview strategies is provided in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

*Participant Groups and Interview Strategies*

Participant group	SPQ	Focus group participants	Individual interviews <sup>a</sup>	Number of participants
Students	SPQ1 = 150 SPQ2 = 150	30	12	150
Non-academic staff			3	3

<sup>a</sup> Individual interviews include in-depth case studies.

### 4.3.2 Data collection strategies

This study used three data collection strategies: the SPQ (Biggs, 1987); semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with students and non-academic staff.

#### *SPQ*

The SPQ (Biggs, 1987) is a “self-report” (p. 8) questionnaire used to identify the learning approaches of higher education students (see Appendix B). The SPQ is a 42-item questionnaire that identifies approaches learners adopt when engaging with university study. The SPQ was administered first within the data gathering strategies in order to ascertain the students' approaches to learning. Statistical analysis (descriptive and inferential) were then used as a guide to develop the interview protocol for the semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interviews. Biggs (1987) has identified three possible approaches to learning—*Surface approaches*, *Deep approaches*, and *Achieving approaches*—which are further refined by *Motives* and *Strategies* adopted. *Surface Motives* are extrinsic, such as fear of failing, while *Surface Strategies* include reproductive or rote learning and minimalistic learning such as learning that is just enough to meet the course demands (Biggs, 1987). Identification of these approaches is important as such approaches may lead to inadequate academic performance (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In contrast, students who engage in Deep approaches undertake the tasks with the intention to understand. Students employing Deep approaches work towards generating personal and academic meaning. These strategies are intrinsic, aiming to achieve maximum academic performance (Entwistle, 2009). Achieving approaches also concern maximising performance. Students engaging in Achieving approaches use either Surface or Deep strategies to help them achieve passing grades (ACER, 2010; Biggs & Tang, 2007).

In this research, the SPQ was used to gather data that assist in understanding students' approaches, motives, and strategies for learning. As students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) enter with a range of experiences and levels of academic expertise, understanding

these factors was deemed necessary in order to consider the supports that could enhance their FYE. The SPQ was used in the Exploration Phase as a tool to understand “what’s going on around here” (Charon, 2007, p. 194). To facilitate the administration of the SPQ, the survey instrument Qualtrics XM<sup>5</sup> was used. The 42 items on the SPQ (Biggs, 1987) were uploaded to Qualtrics for the participants to access. An initial invitation was sent via student email (see Appendix A) prior to the commencement of the semester and again following the completion of the semester. Students were also informed how to access the questionnaire through the Bachelor of Education (Primary) learning environment online (LEO) site whereby they chose to participate by clicking the link within the letter to participants and completing the questionnaire (see Appendix C).

The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert-style scale, which is popular in educational research (Likert, 1932). The following descriptors were included in the questionnaire: (5) *Always or almost always true of me*, (4) *Frequently true of me*, (3) *True of me about half the time*, (2) *Sometimes true of me*, and (1) *Never or only rarely true of me*. The benefits of closed questions are that they are quick and easy to answer and provide consistent responses that can be numerically quantified and analysed using a variety of statistical techniques (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2008). The purpose for administering the SPQ twice in the semester was to analyse the possible differences in learning approaches before and after completion of the participants’ first semester at university. Participants were also invited to include their mother’s maiden name and their house number in order to match their pre- and post-semester SPQ responses while at the same time maintaining their anonymity. This assisted with knowing who completed SPQ1 and SPQ2 and allowed for differentiation of participants. Other demographic questions that assisted with data collection included a question regarding gender and whether they were of recent school leaver or non-recent school leaver status. Further, it was deemed inappropriate to ask students directly about their OP, ATAR or entry pathway. On completion

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<sup>5</sup> Qualtrics XM<sup>®</sup> is an online survey tool.

of the SPQ, it was evident that doing so would have added clarity to the data. As a result, this study was focusing on all first-year students, not just those who entered under special consideration. At the time of this research, however, data of those students who entered through an alternative pathway were not provided to Faculty academic staff.

### *Semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews*

Semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews are an “organised discussion” where the researcher aims to promote ideas through discussion with the participants (Basit, 2010, p. 104). The intention is to gather data that seek to clarify participants’ opinions and differing views on the same topic from within a similar context and to make these available to the researcher. It is important, therefore, that the semi-structured in-depth focus group interview questions are relevant and easily understood by participants. It is also important that the focus group interviews do not engage the participants in a question-and-answer response session; rather, the researcher explains the purpose of the research and acts as a facilitator of a discussion between the participants, occasionally asking questions or commenting, clarifying, or summing up (Basit, 2010). This approach is designed to prevent a rigid debate approach (Basit, 2010; Patton, 2002).

There are many advantages to using semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews. While labour intensive, this type of focus group interview is still considered a cost-effective way of collecting rich data from several people with experience in the topic under discussion. This is the case of collecting data from first-year students. The open-ended questions designed for this interview style assist with the flow of the organised discussion and avoid extended periods of silence, as students consider what their response might be. Further, they assist with flexibility, rich information, guidance, and an exploration of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002), along with questions being designed to enable the researcher to record, in real time, written comments that capture the attitudes or experiences of respondents (Cohen et al., 2011). Also, open-ended questions enable sensitive issues to be addressed explicitly (Cohen et al., 2011).

Being a part of a semi-structured in-depth focus group interview engages the participants in a social and relaxed atmosphere (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

While these advantages are widely accepted by those who use semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews as a data collection tool, disadvantages have been highlighted in the literature. Patton (2002) lists the following:

- a reduced number of questions can be covered;
- response time for individuals is restricted;
- the facilitator needs to have skills in managing the session;
- minority perspectives can be silenced;
- when focus group participants are known to each other they might feel constrained;
- confidentiality cannot be guaranteed;
- it doesn't assist in micro-analysis; and
- it usually takes place out of the participants' normal social context.

(p. 386)

As the participants in this study are first year education students, due consideration of each of these disadvantages will be given. For example; where minority perspectives could be silenced, the researcher will make sure that all participants had equal opportunity to speak and contribute to the discussion.

The purpose of the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews in this research was to explore understandings and learning approaches that first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students engage in while they are studying. The focus group interviews took place following the completion of first semester. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, analysis of the SPQ data collected at the completion of the first semester was undertaken. Conclusions drawn from this analysis were then used to write the interview protocol for the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews (see Appendix D). Thirty students volunteered to take part in five semi-

structured in-depth focus group interviews, with six participants in each group. Each of the five focus group interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours; they were recorded and notes were taken during the conversation, with consent from the participating students (see Appendix E). The recordings were subsequently transcribed by the researcher to provide a rich database for analysis (Merriam, 1998).

### *Semi-structured in-depth individual interviews*

Using semi-structured in-depth individual interviews means that some questions and probes can be arranged and developed in advance, particularly as a result of analysis of previously collected and analysed data. The emerging themes from this analysis assist the researcher to structure the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. As the researcher is not able to anticipate the student responses prior to or at the time of the interview, an informed probing technique is used to assist with responses (Patton, 2002). These interview probes are incorporated and arranged from the analysis of data collected earlier in the study. Using these probes assists with the interviews to keep the volunteers and researcher on track and to gather important insights into the phenomenon (O'Donoghue, 2018). Throughout this phase, cross-checking of the data must occur, as it strengthens the trustworthiness of the findings (Patton, 2002). Once the SPQ and semi-structured in-depth focus group interview data had been collected and analysed, the semi-structured in-depth individual interview protocol was developed from the emerging themes (see Appendix F). With the protocol developed, all students were invited to participate in the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. Initially, nine students volunteered and participated in the individual interviews. Three of the nine were reinterviewed to go deeper to clarify data collected previously, and subsequently, further interview protocols were developed (see Appendix G). These then formed three additional semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, called case studies, which made up Phase 2 Step 4 of the data collection and are presented in Chapter 5. These case studies were included as participants agreed to be re-interviewed and the researcher believed that their stories

would make a valuable contribution to study. The 12 semi-structured in-depth individual student interviews were held over a three-month period. All individual interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher soon after they were conducted.

Following the analysis of student semi-structured in-depth individual interview data, three non-academic staff members from the OSS were interviewed (see Appendices H and I) once during Semester 2 to establish the appropriateness of the supports offered to students on campus and whether or not these services were provided regularly and used accordingly by the students. The semi-structured in-depth individual interviews were approximately half an hour in length and made up Phase 2 Step 5 of data collection. These interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher soon after the interviews were conducted. Once this process was complete, participants had the opportunity to read and make changes if they believed the intention of their comments was not accurately captured by their conversation at the time of the interviews (O'Donoghue, 2018).

The discussion in this section of Chapter 4 has focused on the data collection strategies and the timing of the collection of these data. This information is summarised in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

*Overview of Data Collection Process*

Data collection phases	Steps of data collection and analysis	Data collection strategies, timing and participant numbers
Phase 1: Exploration Phase	Step 1	SPQ1 Prior to commencement of Semester 1 150 students
	Step 2	SPQ2 Following completion of Semester 1 150 students
Phase 2: Inspection Phase	Step 3	Student semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews Following analysis of SPQ data 5 groups x 6 students (30 students)
	Step 4	Student semi-structured in-depth individual interviews Following analysis of semi-structured in-depth focus group interview data 6 students x 1 interview plus 3 students x 2 interviews (9 students, 12 interviews)
	Step 5	Staff semi-structured in-depth individual interviews During Semester 2 following analysis of student interview data 3 non-academic staff members

**4.4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

Data analysis entails the researcher first considering the types of data collected and then the most appropriate methods to be employed to analyse those data. The overarching purpose of data analysis is that it includes what has been heard, seen, and read, so you can make sense of what you have learned (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This thesis employs a range of statistical analyses for the quantitative data and constant comparative analysis for the qualitative data collected.



#### 4.4.1 Quantitative data analysis and interpretation

In this section data entry procedures and specific techniques that were used to analyse and interpret the data generated by the SPQ respondents are outlined. It is recommended that a series of steps be undertaken in the preparation and testing of quantitative data (Creswell, 2008). The first step is to “prepare and organize the data ... by assembling all data, transforming it into numeric scores, creating a data-base for computer or hand tabulation, and selecting a computer program to use in performing statistical tests on the data” (Creswell, 2008, p. 183). The computer program chosen for this study was SPSS<sup>®6</sup>. It was chosen as it provided the best analysis tools for all data. The next step involves “exploring and descriptively analysing the data” using a process that “consists of two general steps (1) exploring and describing the data, and (2) conducting statistical tests on the data” (Creswell, 2008, p. 191). Creswell (2008) also recommends “analysing the data to test hypotheses (research questions)” (p. 195) as the third step, however, as this study was interpretative in nature, it was not appropriate to test hypotheses. Here it is important to select the most appropriate statistical tests. The next step is the interpretation or “represent[ing] and summarizing the data in tables, figures and a detailed discussion of the results” (p. 190). Creswell (2008) recommends concluding the research “by summarizing the major results ... explaining the results, noting limitations, and advancing suggestions for future investigations” (p. 207). This study follows some of Creswell’s recommendations.

To support the SPQ data collection, Qualtrics<sup>®</sup> was used. Students were invited to participate through the Bachelor of Education (Primary) LEO site whereby they chose to participate by clicking a link and completing the questionnaire and submitting it. These actions indicated their consent to participate in the study. By providing all students with the same link, anonymity was maintained. Completed surveys were downloaded in an Excel file and transferred to SPSS<sup>®</sup> where the file was prepared for analyses. It is worth noting at this point

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<sup>6</sup> SPSS Version 25<sup>®</sup> was used for the analysis of the SPQ in this study.

that an assumption for inferential testing is that the sample is drawn from the population randomly. The first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students do not represent a random sample of the population. This immediately places any inferential statistical analysis conducted in doubt. However, these analyses were not intended to be an end in themselves; rather, they were used to guide the development of the semi-structured in-depth focus group interview protocol and the subsequent collection of qualitative interview data from the Bachelor of Education (Primary) students as a way to explore more deeply their experiences of the supports provided by the university in their first year.

Normality of data distribution is also an assumption of inferential statistical analyses and hence must be tested. This testing is achieved through the calculation of the skewness and kurtosis statistics. The skewness statistic is an indicator as to the symmetry of the data distribution, while kurtosis is an indicator as to whether data were peaked or flat relative to the normal distribution. Skewness and kurtosis statistics between  $-2.0$  and  $2.0$  are considered acceptable indicators of normal distribution (Field, 2013; George & Mallery, 2013). In this study, all 42 individual items presented as normally distributed, as did the scales embedded within the questionnaire. Table 4.4 summarises the statistical properties of the SPQ.

Table 4.4

*Statistical Properties of the SPQ (n = 93)*

Scale name	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Scale mean	Standard deviation	Min. statistic	Max. statistic	Mean correlation	Skewness statistic	Kurtosis statistic
Surface	.69	2.51	0.48	1.5	3.79	.32	0.25	-.45
Deep	.83	2.62	0.57	1.5	4.07	.47	0.48	-.09
Achieving	.74	2.63	0.50	1.57	4.29	.49	0.57	0.49

Important to note in Table 4.4 is that there are three scales: *Surface*, *Deep*, and *Achieving*. After carefully following the instructions regarding the implementation of the SPQ, I thought

it necessary to confirm with Professor Biggs that the content of the SPQ was represented accurately; therefore, I contacted him privately. As a result of personal communication with Professor Biggs (October 14, 2019) his advice was to focus on these three scales by including 14 items per scale that combined items related to Motives and Strategies for each scale. Using this recommended approach, items that relate to Motives and Strategies are nested within each of the three scales. Upon further personal communication (December 3, 2019), Professor Biggs informed me that none of the items had been previously reverse scored and that the percentage responses were conducive to the students' responses. This contact confirmed correct implementation of the SPQ. Further, to test internal consistency reliability for each of the scales, Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alphas ( $\alpha$ ) were calculated, with the lowest being .69 for the scale *Surface*. This was considered to reflect at least a sound internal consistency reliability as it was substantially above the researcher's decided minimum of .60. Item scale correlations were conducted confirming that all items had been correctly allocated to the appropriate scales and that all items contributed to each scale's internal consistency reliability.

To assess the mutually exclusive dimensions of the SPQ, discriminant validity was also identified. Table 4.4 reports the validity data for the three scales, *Surface*, *Deep*, and *Achieving* approaches, using the mean correlation of each scale against the remaining scales. Such validity confirms and provides the numbers and how they vary. The varying scales measure mutually exclusive dimensions of the SPQ. The mutual exclusivity reinforces that the three scales were distinct from one another. Worthy of note, in the case of this study, the closer the mean correlation is to zero, the more distinct the scales are. For internal consistency reliability, the desired outcome is to have items very closely related (Cohen et al., 2011) and therefore form a scale, hence the closer the Cronbach's alpha is to 1 the higher the reliability. To provide a distinct outcome with discriminant validity, it is best to have each scale very different from one another. It is evident that each scale overlaps, but this does not interfere with the structure of the SPQ. Furthermore, the results in Table 4.4 show that the mean correlation for each scale is

low, being *Surface* .32, *Deep* .47 and *Achieving* .49. These mean correlations are low enough to show independent distinct scales even though some overlap of the scales does exist. Furthermore, these scales are distinct, meaning that theoretically the scale *Surface* is different from the scales *Deep* and *Achieving*. This also supports the decision to maintain all three scales in the SPQ (Biggs, 1987).

This study was guided by symbolic interactionism, and consistent with this theoretical approach there are two phases in the study, Exploration and Inspection. The SPQ formed the Exploration Phase and the analysis of the SPQ data are discussed in Chapter 5. These data also informed the development of the semi-structured in-depth focus group interview protocol outlined in Appendix D. The qualitative data collection using semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interviews formed the Inspection Phase of the study. These qualitative data analysis and interpretation steps are now discussed.

#### **4.4.2 Qualitative data analysis and interpretation**

As with the analysis and interpretation of quantitative data, there are also several steps for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. The data were transcribed following the interviews and prepared for analyses. Part of this preparation was the coding of participant interview data that took the following form. The code FG represents semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews and included the student's pseudonym name, and the order of the focus group (Katie FG1). Similarly, Sue II denotes semi-structured in-depth individual interviews (II) and the student's pseudonym name. Following analysis of the first round of semi-structured in-depth individual interviews an additional three individual interviews were planned to capture more in-depth discussion of the themes identified in the first round of individual interviews. Those participants who were invited to return for the second individual interviews that formed the three in-depth case studies are represented by a coding such as Conor CC, which represents the case studies and the student's pseudonym name. Three non-academic staff members were also interviewed and are represented by the staff member's pseudonym name and using the

letter S for “staff”, followed by II denoting individual interview, therefore, Eddie SII represents one non-academic staff member.

Constant comparative analysis was used once the transcripts were prepared. This qualitative data analysis technique has a clearly defined process of coding that researchers using the technique must follow. Coding highlights the process that allows data to be examined and grouped into conceptual themes (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The collection of one item of data informs the other and alerts the researcher to specific details (Merriam, 1998). Coding is required throughout the analysis of all qualitative data and there are three major types of coding: open, axial, and selective coding (O’Donoghue, 2018), all of which are applied in this research, however, no coding program was used as it was determined by the researcher that it was appropriate to manually handle all data as this format allowed the researcher to work closely and personally with all data. Three steps were taken to verify the final themes that were generated from the qualitative data analysis.

First, open coding is used whereby codes are identified and data are broken down to identify categories and details with meaning. This process opened up the participants’ transcripts to find meaning in what they are reflecting on and identifying these to the researcher. Open coding aids in the discovery of the unexpected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In both the focus group interviews and the individual interviews, open coding is used so that a variety of concepts and categories can be identified from the data. In the process, all data are first transcribed and coded. Data are repeatedly read using an iterative set of procedures resulting in additional questions or concepts for further clarification (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Second, axial coding allows for initial categories involving tentative relationships with open coded categories (O’Donoghue, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the Inspection Phase, axial coding reduces the number of the original codes and in doing so, groups them together so that they assist with identifying their connectedness (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Third, selective coding is a more focused level of coding as it highlights links and integration between categories generated in the open and axial coding process. This results in building a theory (O'Donoghue, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It views relationships within these categories, looks for validation, and further explores other categories to decide on further progression and development. It is at this time that the focus on the analysis is highlighted (Patton, 2002).

Table 4.5 provides a snapshot of the transcripts and the process used to generate codes that were then collapsed to generate major themes from the data. Theory was developed following this process.

Table 4.5

*Examples of Transcripts, Codes and Themes*

Transcript	Code	Theme
<p>“There is no doubt a great deal of content (O Day) is provided and <b>I learnt a lot on the day</b> and it assisted me to know what was on campus and who could help me when I needed help.” (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)</p> <p>“Trying to remember everything is difficult for students as they are just <b>bombarded with information</b>. There is only so much a student can take <b>in on the day</b>.” (Eddie SII, Phase 2, Step 5)</p> <p>“There was <b>way too much information</b>, an overload and at times it was <b>overwhelming</b>. It certainly scared me thinking about what was ahead.” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4)</p>	Orientation Day	Transition to university
<p>“The <b>Mentor Program</b> is a great concept and similar to Big Sister I had at school when beginning high school.” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4)</p> <p>“<b>I met my mentor</b> many times during the early stages of uni. She was able to show me where to go for help and made the first few weeks a little easier. I’m glad we were encouraged to sign up during O Day.” (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)</p> <p>“After participating in the program <b>as a mentee</b>, I now would like to <b>join up to be a mentor</b> ... It’s a great concept, and despite not every mentee needing it in the end, I can certainly see the benefits and would like to give back to the program.” (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4)</p>	Mentoring Program	
<p>“It’s <b>very independent</b> and you don’t really have someone telling you the whole time when things are due, what’s due and you have to be very independent about going about doing assignments and you don’t have a lot of time.” (Eddie FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)</p> <p>“... aren’t as <b>many contact hours</b> and you can fall into the trap of thinking that there’s less work to do.” (Will FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)</p>	Freedom while studying	Student learning experiences

*Note.* O Day = Orientation Day; II = individual interview; SII = staff individual interview; FG = focus group interview.

## **4.5 VERIFICATION**

The verification process highlights the strengths of the research by sharing details of the case to the reader so that all parties have access to the same material (Patton, 2002). This recommendation has been adopted for this study. Interpretivism illuminates the story of social interaction, and that there is value in the multiple perspectives of the “actors” in the study. The collection and quality of data is first evident in its trustworthiness, whereby trustworthiness in interpretive research ensures its authenticity. Case study methodology applies the concept of trustworthiness and demonstrates it in the way the data are collected, analysed, and presented on completion of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within this research, trustworthiness was achieved by paying attention to its elements, being credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **4.5.1 Credibility**

Credibility assists in the process of limiting any biases that may be portrayed by the researcher (Hughes & Hitchcock, 1995). Further, it ensures that the research is defensible of the researcher’s interpretations of the data collected. Credibility incorporates member checking of data collected during interviews and confirms the researcher’s interpretation of those data (Polit & Beck, 2004). It is also necessary to refer the themes and details back to the participants for these to be validated by them. High levels of trust are necessary for the process to work effectively. By following this process, the values and beliefs of the researcher are identified, further aiding the trustworthiness of the research undertaken through participant contribution.

### **4.5.2 Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to data interpretation and whether it can be confirmed by others. Allowing for participant reviews of the findings establishes the trustworthiness of data interpretation. This also allows the researcher to confirm the interpretations and explanations generated from data analysis.



All participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts and the 15 participants in semi-structured in-depth individual interviews were provided the opportunity to read and respond to the interviewer's notes and interpretation of the meaning of their comments. It is noted that 5 participants reviewed the transcripts. The process enabled the participants to appreciate how their perspectives were interpreted and understood by the researcher. To this end, it allowed them to offer suggestions on the researcher's interpretations.

#### **4.5.3 Dependability**

Dependability is how the researcher ensures the inclusion of an audit trail and identifies trustworthiness and dependability of the research. An audit trail involves a trail of all data, how they were collected, coded, and analysed, and where they were stored for review. External review was undertaken throughout the research process. The reviewers consisted of two research supervisors who read all the necessary content, supervised the collection, coding and analysis of data through regular meetings throughout the process of compiling the thesis. This checking process provided a further element of trustworthiness to the research.

#### **4.5.4 Transferability**

Transferability refers to how the findings from the research may be transferred to another context (Polit & Beck, 2004) as generalisability of the findings from this research is not claimed. Transferability is enhanced through the accurate and definite representation of information from within the context. Using an interpretive research design also limits the findings of the context that aligns with the case study phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). Rather than claim generalisability, the reader is left to make decisions about the transferability of the findings to their own or other contexts on the basis of "fit" (Stake, 2000). This process is termed "reader-user generalisability" (Merriam, 1998, p. 211) through "case-to-case transfer" (Firestone, 1993, p. 16); therefore, this study does not seek to represent the wider population or claim generalisability of the conclusions (Basit, 2010).

## 4.6 ETHICAL ISSUES

In order to protect the identity of the respondents, anonymity for each participant engaged in the SPQ, semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews was ensured through the use of codes relating to the Exploration and Inspection Phases and steps within the process.

This research explores individuals' perceptions of themselves and how they experience learning within their first year at university. Ethical issues are considered based on the selection of participants and how data are collected, analysed, and reported. "Ethical issues are respect for democracy, respect for truth, and respect for persons" (Bassey, 1999, p. 73). These three components encompass the protection of the participants. This can be maintained by obtaining informed consent and outlining the role of the researcher, how data are stored, and the confidentiality provided for participants.

The researcher's attentiveness to democracy is evidenced in practices of participant engagement. In considering the respect for persons, the researcher outlines the research and seeks informed consent from the participants. Informed consent allows the participant to participate at their own choice. In this research, consent for the SPQ was sought through the written information letter via the LEO digital platform, whereby if the participants chose to click the link to complete the SPQ, completed it and submitted it, then this was considered as consent. As for the semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interviews, letters were signed and consent obtained at the beginning of each interview (Berg, 2004). Confidentiality of data and their appropriate storage, along with anonymity, was provided consistent with the university's requirements.

Other details of the selection process cover the length of the study, the process of confidentiality, the findings and how participants may view these findings. The appendices contain the ethics approval letter from the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee (Appendix

J) together with the letters of information to participants (Appendices B, K, and L) and participant consent forms (Appendices E and M).

Data collected were secured and protected in a locked filing cabinet and on the researcher's password-protected laptop and data USB stick, both in her home and in her office at ACU. Consent forms and transcripts are stored in the office of the researcher as these are hard copies and will be held for the mandated period of 5 years following the completion of the research study. A list of participant codes is also stored in the office of the researcher, but this is kept in a different digital folder from the raw data folder. Data collection strategies and ethical considerations are highlighted in Table 4.6.

The researcher was known to all the participants as at the time of the research she was the Lecturer in Charge of one of the units studied in first semester. When researchers undertake studies as "insider members" of the community that is the subject of the research, then uncertainties can occur (Hanson, 2013, p. 388). The role of the researcher may be seen as ambiguous and has potential to influence the whole research process (Hanson, 2013). Researchers in this position have reported that tension may arise between their role and the organisation (Brew, 2010); however, this did not occur with this research as the semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interviews were held at the conclusion of Semester 1, outside of the period the researcher had teaching responsibilities with the study participants. Important to note, that the researcher may teach the students again in another year level and in a variety of units.

Table 4.6

*Data Collection Strategies and Ethical Considerations*

Data collection strategy	Ethical considerations
SPQ	Participants were emailed a link to the SPQ on Qualtrics. Consent was included at the beginning of the SPQ (see Appendix B).
Semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews	<p>Participants were read instructions of confidentiality present at the top of the Interview Protocol (see Appendix D).</p> <p>Each participant was allocated a pseudonym name, for example; Conor with FG1 included. FG standing for focus group and the number representing the order of the focus group.</p> <p>Additional considerations included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information and Consent Forms were written clearly and concisely.</li> <li>• Expectations were clearly explained.</li> <li>• Students were not academically compromised by non-participation.</li> <li>• It was acceptable to withdraw at any stage without compromise to self or effect on academic grades.</li> </ul>
Semi-structured in-depth individual interviews and case studies	<p>Consent of the interviewee to proceed with the interview and clarify issues of confidentiality was sought. Participants were read instructions of confidentiality present at the top of the Interview Protocol (see Appendices F, G, and H).</p> <p>Each student participant was allocated with II, this meaning individual interview.</p> <p>Each non-academic staff participant was allocated a pseudonym name with SII, meaning staff individual interview. Opportunity was provided for all participants to review and modify transcripts as relevant post interview.</p>

*Note.* SPQ = Study Process Questionnaire.

#### 4.7 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

This study has three limitations:

- The design for the SPQ completion relied on students following a link and completing and submitting the questionnaire; in order to do pair samples *t* testing, sufficient numbers were needed for this to occur.

- This study focused on an unstated set of assumptions about the type and scope of supports provided by the university as reported by the participants.
- The study was undertaken by the lecturer who teaches the cohort of FY students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree and could pose as a conflict of interest even though data were collected before and after teaching had ceased.

There are three delimitations to the study:

- The participants in this study were limited to the first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students, and those who agreed to participate may not reflect the opinions of all first-year students at ACU.
- It was intentional that academic staff members were not interviewed as it was the views of the students about their experiences that were required to address the research question.
- Because all students had gained entry to the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree, it was deemed unnecessary to ask students their entry score (OP or ATAR) or their entry pathway.

## **4.8 SUMMARY**

In Chapter 4 the design of the research used for the study to explore the research question has been introduced and justified. Discussion of the theoretical framework identified that the epistemological stance is constructionism, and the research paradigm is interpretivism with symbolic interactionism nested within it. These decisions guided the selection of case study as the methodology. The methods were then discussed, including the research participants and data collection strategies. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses and interpretation were discussed for both types of data collected. This chapter has concluded with a discussion of verification, ethical issues, and limitations and delimitations.

## Chapter 5: Presentation of Findings

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand the way first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at ACU on the Brisbane campus experience and engage with supports offered by the university and university life.

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to present the findings. In Chapter 4 the intended design of the research for this study was introduced and discussed. Part of the discussion was the use of the SPQ (Biggs, 1987). Normality of the questionnaire was assessed and reported to demonstrate that the assumption of normality had been established. This discussion also reported the internal consistency reliability of the SPQ (Biggs, 1987). Data collected during the Exploration Phase of the study via the use of the SPQ are reported in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 of this chapter and changes to the intended design are discussed at that point. The purpose of this discussion is to allow readers of this research an insider's view of the response to difficulties that presented during this study. The subsequent Inspection Phase of the study, which included the interviewing of participants through semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews followed by semi-structured in-depth individual interviews that explored students' experiences of the supports offered by the university in their first year at ACU, is discussed in Sections 5.4 to 5.9. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings in Section 5.10.

Worthy of note at this point is that given this research is interpretive, the research product is not found but rather it is generated from the researcher's engagement with the participants and their perspectives. This chapter includes the researcher's understanding of others' understandings of the research question.

## 5.2 EXPLORATION PHASE: SPQ

In this section descriptives for each item in the SPQ as well as the statistical analyses of the three main scales are displayed. The planned use of the SPQ as outlined in Chapter 4 was for the first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students to complete the SPQ prior to the commencement of the semester and again following completion of the semester. This would have allowed paired samples *t* tests to be conducted on the individual items and scales. Only 34 students completed the SPQ prior to the commencement of their first semester. When all first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students were invited to complete the SPQ following the completion of the semester, none of the original 34 students completed the SPQ. Consequently, a deviation from the planned use of the SPQ (Biggs, 1987) had to be accommodated. While none of the original students completed the questionnaire at the end of the semester, a further 59 of the 150 students in the cohort did complete it, giving 93 respondents in total. It was then decided to complete independent samples *t* tests on the items and scales. As a result, descriptives as well as independent samples *t* tests were used to assess differences between the perceptions of the students who completed the SPQ at the beginning of the semester (SPQ1) compared to the perceptions of the students who completed the questionnaire at the end of the semester (SPQ2). The two groups that participated in the SPQ1 and SPQ2 were representative of the overall ITE student cohort and similar in their demographic profile. As the SPQ was used in the Exploration Phase and was not intended to be an end in itself, it was deemed satisfactory to use independent samples *t* testing to explore students' perceptions as a way to inform the development of the semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interview protocols for the Inspection Phase of the study. Cohen's *d* was also used to measure effect size for the items that demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the SPQ1 responses and the SPQ2 responses. A value of 0.20 is considered to be a small effect size, 0.50 a medium effect size, and 0.80 a large effect size (Pallant, 2016). Upon analysis of data and conclusions drawn from it, the researcher intends to investigate certain themes, concepts and patterns of interest

further. This will occur throughout the focus groups and interviews. Prompts will be used to extend on these (See Appendices D, F, G, H and I). Worthy of note, is that the findings for each section will be provided in dot points to summarise the findings so that they can be taken to the next step of analysis.

### 5.2.1 Analysis of individual items on the SPQ: Surface approaches

Table 5.1 lists the 14 *Surface approaches* items with their response proportions. This scale is made up of seven items that focus on *Motive* and seven items that focus on *Strategy*. There were no statistically significant differences when independent samples *t* tests for the items in the *Surface approaches* scale were calculated. When considering the descriptive statistic of percentage difference, of the seven *Motive* items, two items, 7 and 19, had a higher percentage of students selecting response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) prior to commencing their first semester of study than those students who completed the SPQ2 at the closure of their semester of study, indicated a lower level of student perception than those students who completed the SPQ1 at the commencement of the semester. For item 7, in SPQ1, 38.2% selected response category 5 indicating that *I am discouraged by a poor mark on a test and worry about how I will do on the test*. This percentage was lower for the group who completed SPQ2 to 25.5%. The initial response rate could be attributable to student stress about prior experiences of receiving a poor mark adding extra pressure on their overall performance; however, during the semester, this perception regarding test results changed, and this may have been due to the feedback students were given that assisted them for future tests. However, when SPQ1 and SPQ2 response category 4 and 5 were added together, a response rate of 82.3% is evident. In item 13, a higher response rate of 85.3% in response categories 4 and 5 can be calculated to identify that students perceive that *whether I like it or not, I can see that further education is for me a good way to get a well-paid and secure job*.

For item 19, in SPQ1, 44.1% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) indicating that *even when I have studied hard for a test, I worry that I may not be able to*



*do well in it*. This percentage was lower in SPQ2 to 37.3%. This could be attributable to students beginning the year with prior experiences on tests influencing their perspective; however, after one semester, the percentage was lower again, indicating that students felt more confident that the test preparation they do will help them with their tests. Although when response category 4 and 5 are calculated for SPQ1 had a high percentage and is identified at 79.4%, indicating that students do worry about the quality of their study.

In contrast to items where the response value for category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) dropped between SPQ1 and SPQ2, some items identified a higher level in student perceptions for those students who completed SPQ2. These were items 25, *Lecturers should not expect students to spend time studying material which everyone knows will not be examined*, and 37, *I am at university mainly because I feel that I will be able to obtain a better job if I have these qualifications*. With item 25, in SPQ1, 32.4% selected response category 2 (*Sometimes true of me*). Prior to commencing the semester, students perceived that it is important to study more than is on the test. In contrast, students who completed SPQ2 at the end of semester became more test focused and perceived that it was not necessary to study more material to gain a better understanding, as the proportion of responses in this category lowered to 13.6%. Cohen's  $d = .035$ , indicating a small effect size between those who completed SPQ1 and those who completed SPQ2.

Table 5.1

*Surface Approaches Response Percentages*

No.	Item		Response %				
			Motive	Time	5	4	3
1	I choose my present courses largely because of the better professional opportunities when I graduate rather than out of their own interest to me.	SPQ1	23.5	23.5	26.5	5.9	20.6
		SPQ2	16.9	35.6	11.9	15.3	20.3
7	I am discouraged by a poor mark on a test and worry about how I will do on the test.	SPQ1	38.2	44.1	5.9	11.8	0
		SPQ2	25.4	44.1	13.6	11.9	5.1
13	Whether I like it or not, I can see that further education is for me a good way to get a well-paid and secure job.	SPQ1	52.9	32.4	11.8	2.9	0
		SPQ2	42.4	39.0	16.9	0	1.7
19	Even when I have studied hard for a test, I worry that I may not be able to do well in it.	SPQ1	44.1	35.3	8.8	11.8	0
		SPQ2	37.3	35.6	15.3	8.5	3.4
25	Lecturers should not expect students to spend time studying material which everyone knows will not be examined.	SPQ1	5.9	29.4	20.6	32.4	11.8
		SPQ2	15.3	25.4	37.3	13.6	8.5
31	I do not really like having to spend years studying after leaving school but feel that the end results will make it all worthwhile.	SPQ1	17.6	20.6	23.5	14.7	23.5
		SPQ2	22.0	37.3	22.0	5.1	13.6
37	I am at university mainly because I feel that I will be able to obtain a better job if I have these qualifications.	SPQ1	29.4	35.3	11.8	5.9	17.6
		SPQ2	39.0	32.2	20.3	5.1	3.4
<b>Strategy</b>							
4	I think browsing around is a waste of time, so I only study seriously what's handed out in class or in the course outlines.	SPQ1	11.8	11.8	23.5	41.2	11.8
		SPQ2	5.1	27.1	28.8	32.2	6.8
10	I learn some things by rote, going over and over them until I know them by heart.	SPQ1	17.6	41.2	32.4	8.8	0
		SPQ2	20.3	42.4	25.4	10.2	1.7
16	I tend to choose subjects with a lot of factual content rather than theoretical kinds of subjects.	SPQ1	8.8	14.7	55.9	5.9	14.7
		SPQ2	5.1	23.7	40.7	22.0	8.5
22	In studying I generally do what the lecturer says to do; it is unnecessary to do anything extra.	SPQ1	8.8	17.6	29.4	17.6	26.5
		SPQ2	1.7	27.1	44.1	18.6	8.5
28	I learn best from lecturers who work from carefully prepared notes and outline major points neatly on the board or use multimedia to express an idea.	SPQ1	14.7	55.9	17.6	11.8	0
		SPQ2	27.1	37.3	20.3	13.6	1.7
34	I find it best to accept the statements and ideas of my lecturers and question them only under special circumstances.	SPQ1	8.8	29.4	38.2	23.5	0
		SPQ2	3.4	33.9	45.8	16.9	0
40	I am very aware that lecturers know a lot more than I do and so I concentrate on what they say is important, rather than rely on my own judgements and opinions.	SPQ1	35.3	52.9	11.8	0	0
		SPQ2	27.1	42.4	25.4	5.1	0

*Note.* SPQ = Study Process Questionnaire.

For item 37, in SPQ1, 29.4% of students agreed that *I am at university mainly because I feel that I will be able to obtain a better job if I have these qualifications* by selecting response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*), and in SPQ2 this increased to 39.0%. When the results for item 37 are compared, it is probable that students' opinions changed over time between SPQ1 and SPQ2 as the Cohen's  $d = 0.35$ , indicating a small effect size. These results indicate that students feel as though gaining a qualification and working hard will assist them in securing a good job. Further to this, response categories 4 and 5, when combined in the SPQ1 were indicated at 64.7% and then was higher in SPQ2 with 71.2%.

Within the *Strategy* items (see Table 5.1), item 10, *I learn some things by rote, going over and over them until I know them by heart*, and item 28, *I learn best from lecturers who work from carefully prepared notes and outline major points neatly on the board or use multimedia to express an idea*, are represented with lower percentages for response category 5 in SPQ1 than in SPQ2. For item 10 in SPQ1, 17.6% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) indicating that the students learned some things by rote. This percentage was slightly higher at 20.3% for those students who completed the SPQ2. This may be attributable to them falling back on old study strategies that they have relied on in the past. When response categories 4 and 5 are combined for item 10, there is an increase from SPQ1, being 58.2% and SPQ2 62.7%.

For item 28, in SPQ1, 14.7% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*); the percentage reached a higher level of 27.1% for those students who completed SPQ2. This may be attributable to the fact that students appreciated that lecturers outlined the main points for them to learn by rote but also used different modes of presentation that may assist their learning. Although, when response category 4 and 5 are combined for SPQ, a high figure of 70.6% is calculated as opposed to those students who completed the SPQ2 where a response rate was lower at 64.4%.

For item 40 *I am very aware that lecturers know a lot more than I do so I concentrate on what they say is important, rather than rely on my own judgements and opinions* in when response rates are combine in category 4 and 5, there is the largest percentage calculated at 88.02% for SPQ1 and this then lowers for those students who completed SPQ2 and is 69.5%.

### **5.2.2 Analysis of individual items on the SPQ: Deep approaches**

No statistically significant differences between SPQ1 and SPQ2 were recorded when independent samples *t* tests were calculated for the items in the *Deep approaches* scale displayed in Table 5.2. This scale is made up of seven items under *Motive* and seven items under *Strategy*. Two of the seven *Motive* items, item 8, *While I realise that truth is forever changing as knowledge is increasing, I feel driven to discover what appears to me to be the truth at this time*, and item 26, *I usually become increasingly interested in my work the more I do it*, showed a higher level in percentage of students selecting response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) from SPQ1 to SPQ2. For item 8, in SPQ1 a total of 70.6% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) or category 4 (*Frequently true of me*). The combined percentages for response categories 4 and 5 declined in SPQ2 to 45.8%. This change could be attributable to students' failing to attain *Deep approaches, Motives* as the semester progressed.

For item 26, in SPQ1 the total percentage across response categories 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) and 4 (*Frequently true of me*) was 73.5%. The percentage was lowered at 55.9% for those who completed SPQ2. This could be attributable to SPQ1 capturing students' positive intention at the beginning of Semester 1 of showing increasing interest in their work throughout the semester. After Semester 1, students were still showing interest in their work, but not at the same level.

While there is a higher level of perception in relation to the *Deep approaches* scale items within *Motive*, two items stand out where students' perceptions have decreased: item 2, *I find*

*that at times studying gives me a feeling of deep personal satisfaction*, and item 14, *I feel that any topic can be very interesting once I put effort into it*. For item 2, in SPQ1, 61.8% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) or category 4 (*Frequently true of me*). This percentage was lower at 39% for those who completed SPQ2. When the difference between the item 2 responses in SPQ1 and SPQ2 was compared using Cohen's *d*, a small effect size of 0.37 was recorded.

Table 5.2

*Deep Approaches Response Percentages*

No.	Item	Time	Response %				
			Motive	5	4	3	2
2	I find that at times studying gives me a feeling of deep personal satisfaction.	SPQ1	11.8	50.0	14.7	20.6	2.9
		SPQ2	8.5	30.5	27.1	27.1	6.8
8	While I realise that truth is forever changing as knowledge is increasing, I feel driven to discover what appears to me to be the truth at this time.	SPQ1	11.8	58.8	20.6	8.8	0
		SPQ2	13.6	32.2	45.8	6.8	1.7
14	I feel that any topic can be very interesting once I put effort into it.	SPQ1	23.5	38.2	23.5	14.7	0
		SPQ2	16.9	28.8	32.2	20.3	1.7
20	I find that writing an assignment can at times grab my interest, so that I will continue with it and not get distracted.	SPQ1	14.7	26.5	38.2	11.8	8.8
		SPQ2	8.5	20.3	30.5	25.4	15.3
26	I usually become increasingly interested in my work the more I do it.	SPQ1	8.8	64.7	14.7	8.8	2.9
		SPQ2	16.9	39.0	28.8	11.9	3.4
32	I believe strongly that my main aim in life is to discover what I believe are the best rules to live by and to act strictly in accordance with them.	SPQ1	23.5	35.3	11.8	17.6	11.8
		SPQ2	16.9	30.5	42.4	8.5	1.7
38	My studies have changed my views about such things as politics, my religion, and my philosophy of life.	SPQ1	2.9	41.2	29.4	17.6	8.8
		SPQ2	15.3	32.2	27.1	11.9	13.6
Strategy							
5	While I am studying, I often think of real-life situations to which the material that I am learning would be useful.	SPQ1	35.3	35.3	14.7	11.8	2.9
		SPQ2	25.4	33.9	27.1	8.5	5.1
11	In reading new material I often find that I am continually reminded of material I already know and see that old material in a new way now.	SPQ1	8.8	41.2	35.3	14.7	0
		SPQ2	11.9	32.2	47.5	8.5	0
17	I find that I have to do enough work on a topic so that I can form my own point of view before I am satisfied.	SPQ1	11.8	47.1	32.4	5.9	2.9
		SPQ2	16.9	33.9	32.2	16.9	0
23	I try to relate what I have learned in one subject to that in another.	SPQ1	17.6	47.1	20.6	14.7	0
		SPQ2	16.9	35.6	30.5	13.6	3.4
29	I find most new topics interesting and often spend extra time trying to obtain more information about them.	SPQ1	2.9	35.3	47.1	14.7	0
		SPQ2	6.8	27.1	39.0	25.4	1.7
35	I spend my free time finding out more about interesting topics which I have discussed in different classes.	SPQ1	5.9	11.8	26.5	38.2	17.6
		SPQ2	5.1	20.3	30.5	28.8	15.3
41	I try to relate new material, as I am reading it, to what I already know on that topic.	SPQ1	23.5	47.1	26.5	2.9	0
		SPQ2	11.9	45.8	32.2	10.2	0

*Note.* SPQ = Study Process Questionnaire.

For item 14, students were quite positive in SPQ1 where 61.7% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) or category 4 (*Frequently true of me*) indicating that they felt that any topic could be very interesting once they put effort into it; however, after one semester this was lower at 45.7% for those who completed SPQ2. When the effect size for this change for item 14 from SPQ1 to SPQ2 was calculated using Cohen's *d* a small effect size of 0.31 was recorded.

When looking at the items in *Strategy* of the *Deep approaches* scale, one item is notable for the change in response proportions for the total of response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) and 4 (*Frequently true of me*) from SPQ1 to SPQ2. This is item 35, *I spend my free time finding out more about interesting topics which I have discussed in different classes*. For item 35, students were quite low in SPQ1, with a combined response proportion for categories 5 and 4 of 17.7%. However, for the students who completed SPQ2, this proportion had a higher level at 25.4%. It could be argued that students are using strategic approaches to support their study as they engage with other students.

### **5.2.3 Analysis of individual items on the SPQ: Achieving approaches**

Independent samples *t* tests were conducted on all items in the *Achieving approaches* scale displayed in Table 5.3 to compare the perceptions of students commencing university (SPQ1) with those of students after completion of the first semester (SPQ2). This scale is made up of seven items under *Motive* and seven items under *Strategy*. Table 5.3 shows that items 3, 9, and 39 within the *Motive* items, and items 12 and 18 within the *Strategy* items, were statistically significantly different between SPQ1 and SPQ2.

Table 5.3

*Achieving Approaches Response Percentages*

No.	Item		Response %				
			Motive	Time	5	4	3
3	**I want top grades in most or all of my courses so that I will be able to select from among the best positions when I graduate.	SPQ1	58.8	32.4	8.8	0	0
		SPQ2	44.1	25.4	18.6	10.2	1.7
9	**I have a strong desire to do my best in all my studies.	SPQ1	67.6	29.4	2.9	0	0
		SPQ2	39.0	33.9	27.1	0	0
15	I would see myself as an ambitious person; I want to get to the top in whatever I do.	SPQ1	26.5	38.2	23.5	8.8	2.9
		SPQ2	28.8	30.5	28.8	10.2	1.7
21	If it came to the point, I would be prepared to sacrifice my immediate popularity with my fellow students for success in my studies and subsequent career.	SPQ1	26.5	35.3	26.5	8.8	2.9
		SPQ2	16.9	39.0	23.7	15.3	5.1
27	One of the most important considerations in choosing a course is whether or not I will be able to get top marks in it.	SPQ1	5.9	14.7	26.5	20.6	32.4
		SPQ2	5.1	22.0	27.1	25.4	20.3
33	I see getting high grades as a kind of game, and I want to be one of the winners; I like to be better than most others.	SPQ1	5.9	23.5	32.4	17.6	20.6
		SPQ2	6.8	30.5	32.2	11.9	18.6
39	**I believe that society is based on competition and schools, colleges and universities should reflect this.	SPQ1	2.9	14.7	23.5	23.6	35.3
		SPQ2	8.5	20.3	45.8	10.2	15.3
Strategy							
6	I summarize suggested readings and include these as part of my notes on a topic.	SPQ1	14.7	29.4	41.2	14.7	0
		SPQ2	8.5	27.1	40.7	13.6	10.2
12	**I try to work consistently throughout the term and review regularly when the exams are close.	SPQ1	29.4	58.8	11.8	0	0
		SPQ2	18.6	42.4	30.5	8.5	0
18	**I try to do all of my assignments as soon as possible after they are given out.	SPQ1	5.9	44.1	26.5	17.6	5.9
		SPQ2	5.1	18.6	32.2	32.2	11.9
24	After a lecture I reread my notes to make sure they are readable and that I understand them.	SPQ1	8.8	29.4	17.6	41.2	2.9
		SPQ2	10.2	18.6	28.8	30.5	11.9
30	I test myself on important topics until I understand them completely.	SPQ1	2.9	55.9	20.6	17.6	2.9
		SPQ2	5.1	30.5	33.9	23.7	6.8
36	I make a point of looking at some of the suggested readings that go with the lectures.	SPQ1	8.8	47.1	29.4	11.8	2.9
		SPQ2	10.2	25.4	42.4	22.0	0
42	I keep well organised notes for most subjects.	SPQ1	14.7	58.8	14.7	11.8	0
		SPQ2	25.4	32.2	25.4	16.9	0

Note. SPQ = Study Process Questionnaire.

\*\*  $p < .02$ .



For item 3, *I want top grades in most or all of my courses so that I will be able to select from among the best positions when I graduate*, there was a statistically significant difference in scores for SPQ1 ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = .66$ ) and SPQ2 ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = .43$ );  $t(90.76) = -2.74$ ,  $p = .007$  (two tailed). Cohen's  $d = .55$ , representing a medium effect size. Analysing the response percentages for item 3, in SPQ1, 58.8% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*); however, for those who completed SPQ2 only 44.1% believed they wanted top grades. Worthy of note is the change in percentage in response category 3 (*True of me about half the time*), which was a higher level from 8.8% in SPQ1 to 18.6% in SPQ2.

For item 9, *I have a strong desire to do my best in all my studies*, there was a statistically significant difference in scores for SPQ1 ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = .54$ ) and SPQ2 ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = .81$ );  $t(88.8) = -3.75$ ,  $p = .000$  (two tailed). Cohen's  $d = .76$ , representing a medium effect size. Analysing the response percentages for item 9, in SPQ1, 67.6% selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*); however, this percentage lowered dramatically to 39.9% for those students who completed SPQ2. Students expressed a keenness to do well early in their degree, and then perhaps realised after one semester of study that doing their best was not a reality.

For item 39, *I believe that society is based on competition and schools, colleges and universities should reflect this*, there was a statistically significant difference in scores for SPQ1 ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) and SPQ2 ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ );  $t(91) = 2.83$ ,  $p = .006$  (two tailed). Cohen's  $d = .60$ , representing a medium effect size. Interestingly, the percentage of students who agreed with this statement by selecting response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) for item 39 was low, with only 2.9% selecting this option in SPQ1 and 8.5% in SPQ2. This result could have been influenced by students potentially feeling that university should not be competitive to enter, as reflected in the relatively high percentage who disagreed with the statement by selecting response category 1 (*Never or only rarely true of me*), with 35.3% in SPQ1 and 15.3% in SPQ2.

For item 12, *I try to work consistently throughout the term and review regularly when the exams are close*, there was a statistically significant difference in scores for SPQ1 ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) and SPQ2 ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = .87$ );  $t(86.5) = -2.9$ ,  $p = .004$  (two tailed). Cohen's  $d = .53$ , representing a medium effect size. Analysing the response percentages for item 12, in SPQ1 88.2% selected category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*) or 4 (*Frequently true of me*); however, this combined percentage was lower at to 61% for those who completed SPQ2. Students began the semester intending to work consistently, but by the end of the semester they reported they had not been as consistent.

For item 18, *I try to do all of my assignments as soon as possible after they are given out*, there was a statistically significant difference in scores for SPQ1 ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) and SPQ2 ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ );  $t(91) = -.23$ ,  $p = .02$  (two tailed). Cohen's  $d = .60$ , representing a medium effect size. Analysing the percentage responses for item 18 in SPQ1, only 5.9% of students selected response category 5 (*Always or almost always true of me*). Even after Semester 1 was complete, the percentage remained similar at 5.1% in SPQ2, which indicates that students from both groups did not feel they needed to work on their assignments immediately. Less than 50% were interested in working on their assignments immediately and this lowered over the semester.

### **5.3 COMPARISONS OF SPQ SCORES ACCORDING TO STUDENT**

#### **CHARACTERISTICS**

In this section, the comparisons of the SPQ scores are reported according to three different grouping variables: (a) time the questionnaire was completed (i.e., SPQ1 or SPQ2); (b) gender; and (c) recent school leaver or non-recent school leaver status. It was understood that these three characteristics may influence first-year students' perceptions of their learning, their use of strategies, and their motives at university. As standard parametric tests assume that the sample was drawn from a random population, and the sample in this study was purposive because they

were the students available to the researcher on the Brisbane campus of ACU, statistical analysis for significance was used as a guide to develop the interview protocol for the semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interviews. Cohen's  $d$  (1988), which is the difference in group means per pooled group standard deviation, was used to measure effect size. It is proposed that a value of 0.20 is a small effect size, 0.50 medium, and 0.80 large (Pallant, 2016). Graphs are provided to illustrate mean scale scores for each comparison as these graphs offer a visual representation of the different response perceptions depending on respondent characteristics.

### 5.3.1 SPQ scores according to the time the SPQ was administered

Figure 5.1 shows the mean scale scores for SPQ results according to the grouping variable of time. A noteworthy feature of this figure is that there is almost no difference between SPQ1 and SPQ2 mean scale scores. When Cohen's  $d$  was calculated to measure effect size it was less than small for *Surface approaches*, being .12, but classified as small for *Deep approaches*, being .26, and for *Achieving approaches*, being .32. There was no statistically significant difference between SPQ1 and SPQ2 for each of the three scales according to the time of administration.

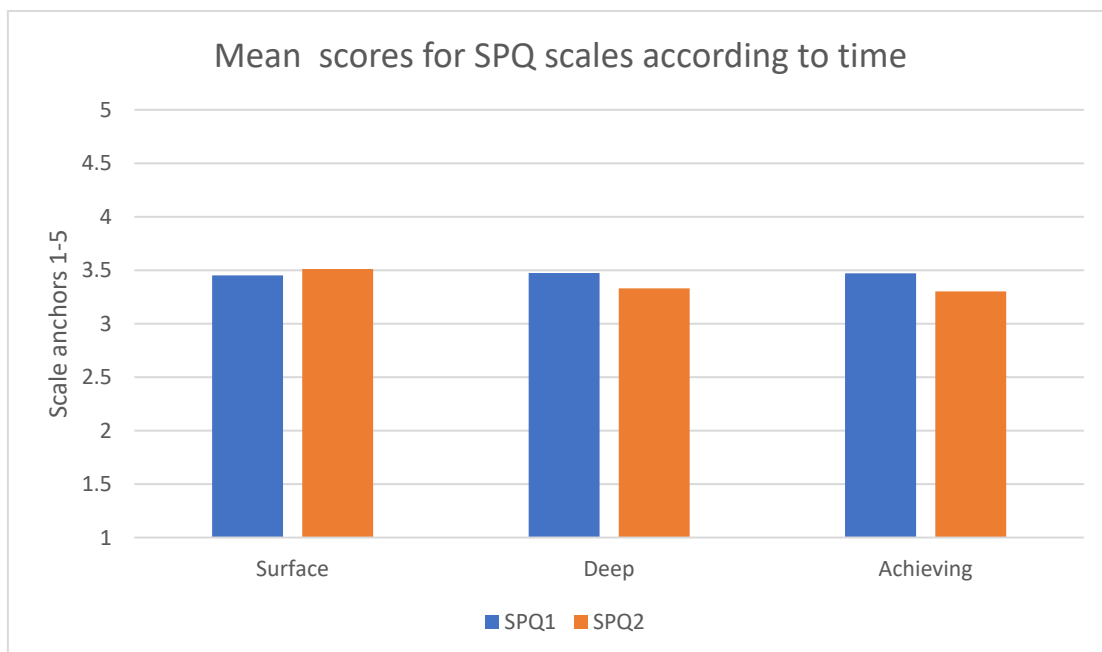


Figure 5.1. Mean scores for SPQ scales according to time ( $n = 93$ ).

### 5.3.2 SPQ scores according to gender

Figure 5.2 shows the mean scale scores according to gender. Important to note is that seven students did not identify their gender when completing the SPQ and as a result this figure reflects the responses from 26 males and 60 females. A noteworthy feature of Figure 5.2 is the gap between male and female responses for the *Achieving approaches* scale. Also, male mean scale scores were higher than female mean scale scores for the *Surface approaches* scale and lower for the *Deep* and *Achieving approaches* scales. Cohen's *d* was calculated to measure effect size, with the *Surface approaches* scale being .24 indicating a small effect size and the *Deep approaches* scale being .46 also indicating a small effect size. No statistically significant differences were recorded for the *Deep approaches* and *Surface approaches* scales. Cohen's *d* was also calculated to measure the effect size for the *Achieving approaches* scale with a result of .46 indicating a small effect size. Despite the small effect size, there was a statistically significant difference in scores for the *Achieving* scale between males ( $M = 3.17, SD = .58$ ) and females ( $M = 3.41, SD = .45$ );  $t(84) = 2.057, p = .043$  (two tailed).

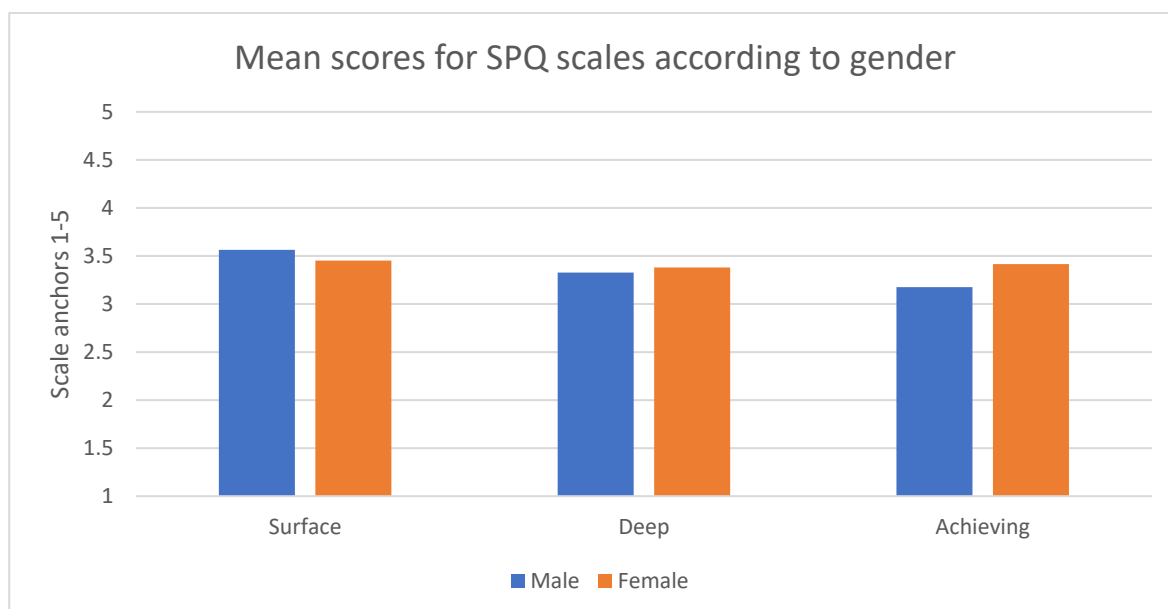


Figure 5.2. Mean scores for SPQ scales according to gender (females  $n = 60$ ; males  $n = 26$ ).

### 5.3.3 SPQ scores according to recent school leavers and non-recent school leavers

Figure 5.3 shows the mean scale scores according to respondent characteristics of recent school leaver and non-recent school leaver. Recent school leavers are those who access university immediately upon completion of secondary school (Baik et al., 2015), while non-recent school leavers are those who are not graduating directly from school (Richardson & Watt, 2016). Important to note is that seven students did not identify if they were a recent school leaver or a non-recent school leaver when completing the SPQ and as a result this figure reflects the responses from 50 recent school leavers and 36 non-recent school leavers. A noteworthy feature of Figure 5.3 is the gap between school leavers and non-recent school leavers for both the *Deep approaches* and the *Achieving approaches* scales. When Cohen's  $d$  was calculated to measure effect size for the *Surface approaches* scale it was .24, which is a small effect size; for the *Deep approaches* scale it was .56, which indicates a medium effect size; and for the *Achieving approaches* scale it was .27, which indicates a small effect size.

Independent samples  $t$  tests were conducted to compare the mean scale scores for recent school leavers and non-recent school leavers for each of the three scales. There was a statistically significant difference in scores for the *Deep approaches* scale between recent school leavers ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) and non-recent school leavers ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = .55$ );  $t(84) = 2.56$ ,  $p = .012$  (two tailed).

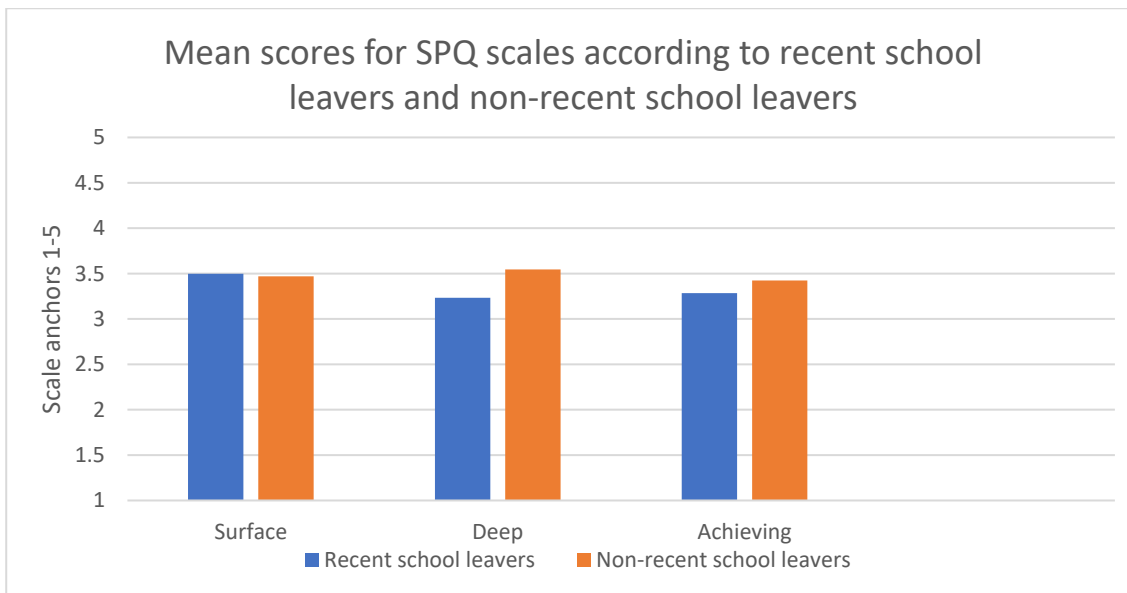


Figure 5.3. Mean scores for SPQ scales according to recent school leavers ( $n = 50$ ) and non-recent school leavers ( $n = 36$ ).

#### 5.3.4 Findings following SPQ analyses

The findings from the analysis of the SPQ include Surface, Deep and Achieving approaches and are outlined below.

##### *Surface approaches*

- Some students agreed that it was not necessary to spend extra time studying material which everyone knew would not be examined. In contrast, students who completed the SPQ2 at the end of semester thought that it was necessary to study more material to gain a better understanding of the content of the unit.
- There was an increase after one semester in student perceptions that obtaining a degree would assist them to get a job.

##### *Deep approaches*

- Some students were less satisfied by their study after one semester.
- Some students were less interested in putting in effort to enjoy a topic if it did not immediately grab their attention.

- A statistically significant independent samples *t* test for recent and non-recent school leavers showed the non-recent school leavers' mean scale score was higher than that of the recent school leavers for the *Deep approaches* scale.

#### ***Achieving approaches***

- Interest in achieving top grades declined over the semester.
- Desire to do well in studies declined from the beginning to the end of the semester.
- Perception that university should be competitive declined from the beginning of the semester to the end.
- There was a decline in student intentions to work consistently over the semester.
- There was a decline over the semester in student propensity to commence assignment work immediately.
- A statistically significant independent samples *t* test showed male students had a higher mean scale score than that of females for the *Surface approaches* scale.

These findings informed the Inspection Phase of the study.

#### **5.4 INSPECTION PHASE: SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS AND SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

The SPQ data informed the development of the interview protocols for the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews. These protocols can be seen in Appendix D. The focus group interviews were analysed and themes generated. These themes then informed the generation of the semi-structured in-depth individual interview protocols (see Appendices F to H). In some cases, the individual interviews added more depth to the theme under discussion, and in other cases, new themes were generated from the analysis of the individual interview data. Four overarching themes were generated through the analysis across all interview data: *Transition supports on campus*, *Student learning experiences*, *Student identity*, and

*Engagement factors at university*. These are discussed in Sections 5.5 to 5.8 respectively, with each theme forming a section in the chapter. In Section 5.9, the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews that formed the participant case studies are discussed, followed by Section 5.10, findings generated across all phases.

## **5.5 TRANSITION SUPPORTS ON CAMPUS**

In order to appreciate the themes generated from data analysis, it is appropriate to explain ACU initiatives provided for students in their first year at university, as they were the focus of discussion during the interviews. Three non-academic staff reported that student experience begins with support during their transition to university. This is planned for the students through three strategies: Orientation Day, Mentoring Program, and the OSS (including the Academic Skills Unit), all of which are designed to assist in building successful university experiences. Each of these strategies is discussed in the following subsections.

### **5.5.1 Orientation Day as a support**

The first aspect that was a focus of the theme *Transition supports on campus* was Orientation Day as a support. This discussion considers how students perceive Orientation Day and how it endeavours to encourage participation into university life. On this day, students are encouraged to engage in the university social and educational activities provided. It also offers opportunities for students to meet the university personnel who are responsible for enhancing their university journey. The chair of the Brisbane Orientation Day Committee and coordinator of Orientation Day expressed this opinion:

The aim of Orientation is specifically to orientate the students to allow them the opportunity to gain the core information they need to begin university. Students will meet staff members who will be teaching them and they are informed about the services the university offers. (Eddie SI, Phase 2, Step 5)



Students are also introduced to the wider community of the university during Orientation Day. They meet representatives from the Student Centre, sporting clubs and societies. With the inclusion of these groups, Orientation Day provides a window for students to connect with other students who outline how important Orientation is for the new students. One of the OSS staff members stated:

Orientation Day provides opportunities to harness their energy and get them involved in university life outside of classes. If there was no Orientation Day to do this, you would spend the rest of the year chasing them to join the clubs. You can actually see the disconnect as the weeks go by and the realities of uni takes over. (Maxine SI, Phase 2, Step 5)

Students in the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews also reported Orientation Day was important:

I learnt things during Orientation Day, like there are Academic Skills, and I used these in first semester to get my skills squared away ... to make sure I was on the right track with assessments. (Andy FG5, Phase 2, Step 3)

I remember everything from Orientation Day. I was like a sponge because I was scared I would miss something ... I wrote down notes about Academic Skills and where to find them. I got a lot of information from the day, but also from the website. I went to every session I could on Orientation Day. (Sally FG5, Phase 2, Step 3)

When further prompted during the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, students also indicated that it was also stressful, as there is excessive information offered on one day. Students expressed their opinions with comments such as: "I was a little overwhelmed with all the stuff I had to remember" (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4). There was consensus on this perspective, with another student agreeing that at times: "There was way too much information, an overload and at times it was overwhelming. It certainly scared me thinking about what was ahead" (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4). Students further supported this opinion, with the following comment typical of comments made by students during their interviews:

There is no doubt a great deal of content is provided and I learnt a lot on the day and it assisted me to know what was on campus and who could help me when I needed help. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

When these perspectives were presented to the staff, they argued that all students are encouraged to access the ACU Orientation website to clarify and validate information that they may have missed while attending Orientation Day. In comments such as the following, it was argued that students who did not attend Orientation Day were encouraged to visit the ACU Orientation Day website before commencing university. This is highlighted by comments from two staff members. One staff member from Academic Skills stated:

There's the online aspect of Orientation and preparation for students and the post Orientation provides avenues for students who have missed Orientation, and they can access information as quickly as possible ... it's really about the transition and students aren't going to finish Orientation, and that's it, they're orientated. There's further support for at least six weeks. It's really just the beginning. (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 5)

The Chair of the Orientation Day Committee confirmed this perspective:

Trying to remember everything is difficult for students as they are just bombarded with information. There is only so much a student can take in on the day, so that's why there is the online option as well. (Eddie SI, Phase 2, Step 5)

Staff members presented the perspective that students' feedback is listened to and that as feedback comes directly from the students on Orientation Day it is taken into consideration for future planning; however, the Orientation Day Chair stated that: "There is no formal feedback at this time and it is something to consider for the coming years" (Eddie SI, Phase 2, Step 5). He stated that the feedback from the students comes via the staff members on the committee, who all report back to the committee once Orientation Day is over.

### 5.5.2 Mentoring Program as a support

The second aspect that was a focus of the theme *Transition supports on campus* was the Mentoring Program as a support. During the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, mentoring was not a prominent issue in discussion; however, when mentoring was introduced as a discussion point during the individual interviews, students communicated that the “Mentor Program is a great concept and similar to the Big Sister I had at school when beginning high school” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4). Another student who was interviewed confirmed this: “Being a part of the program helped me feel included and assisted with the transition from school to university” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Students in the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews discussed the Mentoring Program largely in positive terms. They outlined that the program and mentors are advised by the Faculty Coordinator to offer simple, yet effective advice to the mentees. In discussing the types of services a mentor could provide, their examples included how to put money on the student card, where the library and education faculty are located, where the student centre is located, and where to buy a coffee. Typical of the comments were two students’ comments made during their individual interviews:

I met my mentor many times during the early stages of uni. She was able to show me where to go for help and made the first few weeks a little easier. I’m glad we were encouraged to sign up during O day. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

After participating in the program as a mentee and learning where things were early, I now would like to join up to be a mentor ... It’s a great concept and I can certainly see the benefits and would like to give back to the program. (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4)

The students also pointed out that it is not the mentors’ job to assist with academic writing or assessment but to guide the mentee where to seek assistance. Typical of these comments was the following:

I enjoyed meeting my mentor and developing a friendship with them. I understood that they were not to assist me with my assignments and if I needed help, they showed me where to go. (Mary II, Phases 2, Step 4)

It was evident from student comments that the relationship did not work all the time, with a few students not meeting their mentors: “My mentor contacted me and I told her that I was fine and I was settling into the routine quite well and didn’t need the support offered” (Anna II, Phase 2, Step 4). Another student confirmed this: “I signed up for the program, but didn’t end up needing anyone, as I met people who helped me. I think it’s a good program though” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4).

### **5.5.3 OSS and Academic Skills Unit as supports**

The third aspect that was a focus of the theme *Transition supports on campus* was the work of the OSS and Academic Skills Unit as supports. The Academic Skills staff member interviewed outlined that the initial introduction to Academic Skills occurs during Orientation Day, when students are introduced to the Academic Skills staff members and advised of classes that are held in support of first-year students. The purpose of this is to advise students that these services exist. The Academic Skills staff member outlined that Academic Skills staff also attend some first-year classes during the initial weeks of university to remind students again of the services they provide and to invite them to attend workshops programmed during the semester.

During the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, several students agreed on the value of such visits to classes and how the support from Academic Skills staff attending early in the semester is useful. One such student commented: “Even though I am still learning stuff, I really liked that the Academic Skills people bothered to come to class after Orientation Day. It refreshed my memory that they existed” (Sally FG5, Phase 2, Step 3).

The topic of Academic Skills was also relevant during the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. Another student added: “This assists to break down the barriers early in

first year” (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4). One student confirmed this further and, in particular, commented on the workshops they attended to improve academic writing:

Even though I was informed about Academic Skill[s] during Orientation Day and attended some workshops, it was great that they came to classes, as this assisted me as a reminder to use them and what’s on offer and they can help with your work ... I thought, “Well if this is being offered, why not take advantage of it?” ... I’ve used them a lot and it’s definitely helped. The workshops are really useful as well. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

One comment from the Academic Skills staff member confirmed these visits: “The staff are invited to attend tutorials in week three in an Education class to offer guidance on writing assignments, particularly for that unit” (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 5).

In contrast, some students identified that they did not use the service of Academic Skills personnel. They argued that because Academic Skills officers were constantly busy and students’ timetables clashed with workshops or drop-in sessions that were being offered, students did not know where to seek assistance. Students recounted during the interviews the problems they experienced; for example, one student stated that on numerous occasions “I tried to make an appointment to go and see them, but it just never worked for me. Perhaps they could have weekend sessions as well” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4).

First-year students also identified that they were reluctant to attend Academic Skills workshops because they thought they would be perceived as struggling, stating that “I don’t attend as I don’t want to be perceived as dumb and that I needed help because I entered uni off a different pathway” (Rob II, Phase 2, Step 4). This perception plagued many students as they discussed the “stigma” attached to attending these sessions. However, student perceptions changed once they realised the service was for everyone:

I now realise that attending Academic Skills is for everyone. Those who want to receive a HD [High Distinction] and for those who wish to simply receive help. It’s a great service and I will use it in the future. (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4)

The Academic Skills staff member was able to add to these points by contributing:

When students attend, especially first years who have recently left school, they quickly realise that it's different to school, where their day is planned for them and managed for them ... they come in looking for tips and certainly to start off to how they can manage their semester. Students who come to Academic Skills do so for various reasons. To begin with, they might come for technical administrative aspects, things like LEO [online learning environment system] and email. They also come with high stress levels in the first weeks, as they've received all their unit outlines, it's all in front of them and they are completely overwhelmed. We advise them to just focus on one week at a time. (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 5)

This Academic Skills staff member believed that it is important for first-year students to focus "on one week at a time because they are inundated with the rigour of university study and assessment items" (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 5). The staff member stated during the interview that in the first few weeks of university, students are challenged to submit some of their assessment items for grading. These assessment items vary from a group presentation, whereby they are grouped with people they have only just met, to a short reflection based on a reading from their unit. While support occurs in class, students are also encouraged to attend workshops that focus on assistance with these assessment items, time management, and study strategies.

The Academic Skills staff member confirmed that additional workshops are offered throughout the semester and involve time management and reading strategies. The staff member interviewed identified that these workshops are lodged on the ACU website, along with individual and group consultation opportunities. These are offered in week one and then again in week four. Workshops are provided for essay and academic writing. "These workshops are very busy. We have at least 30 students in each workshop and they are all repeated again in week four, five, and six, several times during the day" (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 5). After approximately week six of the semester, the number of workshops decrease and students are encouraged to book one-on-one appointments or to use the drop-in service provided. These can

be used to gain further guidance with writing, such as APA formatting and assignment design. Academics often write feedback on assignments and make a recommendation for students to seek Academic Skills support if they believe their writing could improve or if they wish to seek an improved grade. This is evident from the interview with the Academic Skills staff member:

Students come to us and say, “my lecturer recommended that I come to see you for guidance”. They do expect us to look at the content, but we say, “No, we can’t. But I can help with your structure, referencing or your language choice.” It could even be exam preparation, because students get overwhelmed by the amount of reading ... we give them ideas about how to be strategic in their approach to reading. When their grades improve, they come back and show us. (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 5)

Orientation Day, Mentoring Program, and the OSS (including the Academic Skills Unit), have been discussed all of which are designed to assist in building successful university experiences. The findings from these sub themes will now be identified.

#### **5.5.4 Findings from the theme *Transition supports on campus***

The following findings about transition supports on campus emerged from the interview data:

- Orientation Day assists students during the transition phase of their university life and for students it is just the beginning of a learning journey. Students understand that the people with whom they engage are willing to assist them. This is the beginning of students committing themselves to study and university discipline.
- For those students involved in the Mentoring Program, the assistance offered to them during Orientation Day is very beneficial and for some mentees they wish to continue as a mentor.
- The OSS offers workshops and drop-in sessions for all students with the expectation that they will attend. OSS staff believe that assistance with assessment and academic writing is essential for students to succeed; however, some students feel that there is a stigma attached to attending for support.

- Some students find it difficult to get an appointment with OSS and have suggested that they offer weekend Academic Skills sessions as well.

## **5.6 STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

The theme of *Student learning experiences* was generated as a theme initially from the SPQ data as students referred to their learning experiences throughout the questionnaire. Some of the items in the SPQ were also identified as important, which also assisted in the structure of the interview protocols. The theme was then investigated further in the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews and later confirmed or extended by the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. There are four aspects to this theme: freedom while studying, peer networking and diverse social groups, student study habits and strategies, and online learning.

### **5.6.1 Freedom while studying**

The first aspect that was the focus of the theme *Student learning experiences* was freedom while studying. This aspect was important for the students during their interviews as they associated university life with increased freedom. At the same time, they also recognised that they are expected to take personal responsibility for their study. Students were surprised at the flexibility university offers and that they are in control of their own study patterns, their attendance and progress. They saw that their success was dependent on their motivation to learn and the effort they put into their studies. A comment typical of this perspective is the following during the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews:

It's very independent and you don't really have someone telling you the whole time when things are due, what's due, and you have to be very independent about going about doing assignments and you don't have a lot of time. (Eddie FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)

During the focus group interviews, this was a topic of conversation, and students were surprised that they have freedom to choose their own classes and whether they attend these



classes throughout the semester. This new responsibility contrasts with their more structured high school experience, as one interviewee stated:

I really enjoyed uni first semester ... it was a big change from school. I'd get to school and everyone was on my back to do this, do that. Then at uni it's all about my own motivation and I found it much easier. (Ben FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)

This student saw being in control of their own learning as important. He was motivated to take charge of his study to succeed and realised he preferred to do this himself, as opposed to being “pushed” as was the case while he was at school. He argued that this freedom actually “assisted his learning” (Ben FG1, Phase 2, Step 3). The number of contact hours and the volume of expected work was also discussed. There “aren't as many contact hours as school and you can fall into the trap of thinking that there's less work to do, but I know there isn't” (Will FG3, Phase 2, Step 3).

During the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews students were prompted further, and they also commented about the specific contact hours per semester and that it is their responsibility to fully engage during those contact hours, which are set out in their unit outlines. One student was very accurate about the requirements, stating: “I know that I am expected to engage in at least 150 hours per unit. That includes attending tutorials, lectures and doing all the readings. That seems like a lot” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4).

In addition to the number of expected contact hours, another important idea was generated by students during the individual interviews, being the feeling that they could “get lost in the crowd” (June II, Phase 2, Step 4). Students tried to overcome this feeling by making friends as a way to alleviate their sense of being at a loss. They were able to do this in the small classes they attended, which encouraged meaningful communication. While still feeling the freedom, students felt part of the university community because they were known to staff and other students. This comment from a student explains this phenomenon:

I noticed the tutors know me because I have had a lot of contact with them because of assignments coming up ... at the start I felt like you know ... just another body

in the room, but towards the end of the semester I have felt that I have been noticed and also by my peers. I wasn't feeling lost anymore, which was a nice feeling.  
(Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Talking about this issue, a student confirmed that "it's important to be recognised by your peers and the staff who teach you because it assists in professional and peer friendship networking"  
(Conor II, Phase 2, Step 4).

### **5.6.2 Peer networking and diverse social groups**

The second aspect that was a focus of the theme *Student learning experiences* was peer networking and diverse social groups. Many of the students identified that these groups are made up of students from cohorts of non-recent school leavers, recent school leavers, and like-minded students who are at university to learn. During the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, peer networking and diverse social groups was not a prominent discussion point; however, the topic was introduced during the individual interviews where it was evident that the students were passionate about discussing these groups in a one-to-one situation.

Some students agreed that they form social groups to assist with their independent and collaborative learning. Students claimed that they access these groups to assist with assignments, discuss unit content and share ideas about what they are learning. One student interviewed identified that:

I try to schedule meetings with people when I'm on campus. Anyone can come along and anyone who hasn't done their homework can come and we just talk about how we are and what we did. We work on things together ... we book a room in the library. (Conor II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Other students confirmed the importance of forming these groups, with one indicating: "I've got so many different groups ... It's good because I hear different points of view; that's what I like about it. I have mature-aged people and school leavers all coming together to share their ideas" (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4). Further, these students believed that forming these social

groups benefits their study habits and understandings of the content of the units they are studying. Students frequently identified that the support they experienced from other students assisted in creating a sense of community for them. They confirmed that support is especially important in shared experiences outside of tutorials and lectures. They highlighted that learning not only takes place in the classroom, but also when they feel safe and comfortable in their surroundings and where students feel a sense of belonging: For example, one student said:

We've got quite a few people in our group. Some that I'll see every single time I'm here at uni and we've even met up outside of uni so they're more than just study buddies. You definitely need it because as well as coming here to study, it is also a social thing and feels like a real community of learners. Yeah, we've got quite a broad group of people. We're all different ages, all come from different backgrounds. It's good, like I really enjoy my group. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

The majority of students interviewed agreed that working with peers and having friends alleviated the stress and made university more manageable, particularly at busy times throughout the semester, with one student summing up this perspective: "By the time these busy times arrive in the semester, most of the friendship groups are forming or have formed, so it's good to get in early" (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4).

While most of the students wanted large friendship groups and saw the benefits of having lots of friends with which to collaborate, some students interviewed needed fewer friends and talked about making one or two friends at university in the first few weeks as being influential in assisting students' decisions to stay at university and continue their studies. These students suggested they faced added difficulties on top of not forming friendships, and this may have detrimental effects on their likelihood of engaging in class. Overall, students confirmed that friendships are formed through casual conversations in class and students end up working with these people and forming a bond. A student confirmed this through the following comment:

You quickly become friends with them because you find they are really interested in terms of the same beliefs, maybe opinions, and you can just approach someone

and just say “hi” and become fast friends. Because of this, it helped me to stay at uni and not to quit. (Rob II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Another student argued the point that to assist him with the whole idea of university and creating friendship groups to support him, he quickly established that he “could always rely on my peers for support” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4). In stark contrast, one participant commented how forming peer groups was “not a priority” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4) as they had friends outside of university and did not need extra friends on top of the commitment required for being successful at university. This student stated: “My lifestyle is very different to others, and it is easier for me to separate the two worlds.” In saying that, she confirmed that:

I am independent on that respect ... family and university are the priority for me. I don't need friends at uni, I come here to study, and I leave. I've got too much happening outside of uni to bother with that. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Moreover, some students found it difficult to “keep the peace” (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4) with their “outside friends” and stated that:

I am at a different stage in my life and now just focused on becoming a teacher. For 12 weeks, I study and work, then I can go out with my friends in between semesters ... it's taken a while for them to realise how serious I am. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Most students expressed the importance of forming peer networking groups as these assist them with their study. Students understood that if they had the support of their peers that university becomes a little easier to handle.

### **5.6.3 Student study habits and strategies**

The third aspect that was the focus of the theme *Student learning experiences* was student study habits and strategies. This was discussed by students as important for their success. Students understand that they all enter university with prior knowledge and study experience, be it through school or work environments. The OSS including the Academic Skills Unit (see Section 5.5.3) at ACU encourages new students to attend workshops to assist with developing

new and sophisticated study habits. Many students made comments during the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews regarding what works for them. Typical were the following:

So, I use a few different strategies. I always do pre-reading so I can more easily understand my lectures and then I only have to take extra things from the lecture instead of trying to understand the whole lecture. I do set myself somewhat of a timetable, but I am very flexible. That's kind of where I'm at. (Kate FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

I don't really have a study strategy as such ... Procrastination was my favourite thing but other than that it's probably the easiest way I've found to do it. (Conor FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

Some students revealed that they work better under pressure and leave things "until the last minute" (Eddie FG1, Phase 2, Step 3). This is confirmed through the following comment:

So, I work a lot, so I try and get other people to tell me when things are due. I rely on a lot of my friends at uni to keep me up to date, as these guys know. But I try my hardest of what I can do, even if I have to do it the night before, I always will stay up later and make sure it's to the best of my standards that I would like it to be. (Eddie FG1 Phase 2, Step 3)

Other students were a little more relaxed when trying to develop study habits. This comment is confirmed by the following student:

Oh yes. Sometimes I have a bit of a break and don't do anything but I'm enjoying the "no responsibility" time. (Aidan FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

The OSS staff member made several recommendations about what study habits tend to work for students:

Habits such as listening in class, going over notes after class, preparing a study timetable, looking at content on LEO prior to the lecture, pre-reading and highlighting notes. Any of these are useful strategies. (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 4)

A common view among the students during the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews was that being organised was an excellent study habit. Students tend to do this using a timetable that is designed to tell them when assessment is due and how much extra time they

should be spending on keeping up with their study outside of classes. One student confirmed this and stated that they “organise a personal timetable to help me study, and I don’t sway from the organised times and use spare time to study. I’m very organised” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Students also confirmed that they make the most of their time at university, and during breaks they tend to complete work and use the time they have to work on assignments; however, some students find that they can get distracted and, therefore, work is less productive than at home. They confirmed this through comments such as “I would like to establish some good study habits, but right now I don’t have any effective ones to use” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Regardless of which habit or strategy students used, they realised that it is important to keep motivated and self-reflect on what is working for them as individuals. A wide spectrum of perspectives was encountered during the interviews, with another student noting that when they are studying, “The more I put in, the more I get out of it. Just passing is not good enough” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). While some said they like “completing assignments bit by bit” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4) and in doing so, they complete the assignment thoughtfully and at a better pace, other students suggested that they “try not to over think and this helps break the assignment down and in no time I have finished the essay” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). It is clear that there are many different habits/strategies that students use to assist with their learning at university. One student concluded with the following comment:

I do a lot more highlighting ... so before I would actually sit with the book and I would write all my notes ... but it was just taking way too long ... so I write maybe headings or major points and then I will highlight other things that I think I might need to go back to ... so I still read the whole article, but more strategic about what I write down. (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Many students expressed their thoughts on the significance of developing effective study habits and strategies early in their degree as these can be taken into each semester to support their learning. Students also noted that Academic skills were a service offered by the university and the staff are available to support every student regardless of their academic achievement.

#### 5.6.4 Online learning

The fourth aspect that was the focus of the theme *Student learning experiences* was online learning. Access to online learning was important for students, but worthy of note is that the first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students have face-to-face learning and do not experience fully online learning. During the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews some students spoke with unease about potential study completed fully online. This is evident in the following comment from one student:

I didn't sign up for online. There is no rapport with the lecturer. I hope I don't have any as you don't get that face-to-face attention. I've been told that there is some online study. You don't get the instant return of email if staff are not on campus or they are interstate. If you have a problem, you don't hear back immediately. (Geoff FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)

This perspective was taken up with the students during the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. One student discussed the prospect of “fully online” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4) units; however, other students pointed out that they experience “online learning which in this instance is whether the lectures are recorded, and class content is available on LEO” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4). LEO is known as learning environment online which is the learning platform students engage with for their unit content. Many students identified that even though they attend their lectures, they can take advantage of the lecture recordings by listening to them online. “I can review the content and listen to it again. This, for me reinforces the material ... I can take notes, stop the lecture and can listen at my own leisure” (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Another positive outcome of the lectures being recorded for students is highlighted by a comment “that there is limited chatter when listening to the recording as this can be very distracting” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4). When discussing preference for online or attendance mode of lectures, some students identified that “not all lectures are recorded, which does not assist with balancing work, study, and life” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4). On the other hand, some

students argued that they want to get what their university fees are paying for: “I pay for attendance, so I want to go to listen” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Most students indicate that they prefer to attend on campus classes as opposed to online as that is what they intentionally enrolled in. Student experiences included the sub themes of freedom whilst studying, peer networking and diverse groups, student study habits and strategies and online learning. It is from these sub themes that the following findings are identified.

#### **5.6.5 Findings from the theme *Student learning experiences***

The following findings about student learning experiences emerged from the interview data:

- Most students enjoy the freedom that university life brings but identify that developing friendship groups early in the semester is important for them to fully engage with their study.
- Being a member of a diverse range of study and social groups invites alternative perspectives to be heard, promoting a deeper level of understanding and engagement with course material.
- Working to a timetable means that students are organised well in advance allowing their friendship groups to have focused discussion on their study.
- There are students within the cohort who take time off, rely on others to keep them informed, and then need to stay up late to get assignments finished.
- Students do not want to be taught via the fully online mode.

### **5.7 STUDENT IDENTITY**

The theme of *Student identity* was generated as a theme initially from the SPQ data as in responding to the questionnaire items, the students referred to some of their perceptions of



themselves. The theme was then also investigated further in the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews and later confirmed or extended by the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. Five aspects of the theme were generated: student expectations of first year, sense of belonging, university is a full-time job, voice of the non-recent school leaver, and time management.

### **5.7.1 Student expectations of first year**

The first aspect that was the focus of the theme *Student identity* was student expectations of first year. Many students interviewed in the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews believed that individual students had a range of expectations and many agreed that they had commenced an important journey in preparation for a teaching career. This is confirmed through these responses: “I’ve enjoyed uni so far. It is harder than what I [had] expected” (Rob FG1, Phase 2, Step 3); and “I don’t think I knew what to expect, but I want to be a teacher, so this is the right decision for me” (Anna FG5, Phase 2, Step 3). For many students, entrance into the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree as a first-year student is a “new and confronting experience” (Adam FG2, Phase 2, Step 3) and students frequently identified what they thought their expectations of attending university would be, even though they differed. A variety of perspectives were further expressed:

My expectations of uni were, it was going to be hard, but I’m sure I can do it, but I didn’t realise it would be so hectic and crazy. I definitely had high expectations and did not expect it to be a walk in the park. (Sue FG2, Phase 2, Step 3)

Another student reflected on her previous experiences:

I had done half a year [of] online tertiary education before I came to university, so I had an idea of how to structure my time and my days, but it was very different being on campus to the online style of learning, where everything was available at your fingertips basically. That has helped me ease into it and then the library, all the staff were fantastic there, so that kind of completed that transition for me. (Kate FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

In contrast, some students entered the university journey holding more casual expectations. This perception is appropriately illustrated through the following comment:

I'm not putting too much pressure on myself, I don't particularly have too many expectations. I'm a mature-aged student. I guess I didn't really know what to expect either, but most of it's been pretty easy I guess so far. (Adam FG2, Phase 2, Step 3)

Students discussed the quality of their university outcomes and their abilities, especially when their high schooling was not of a high standard:

Academically there's a lack of self-belief in myself from previous schooling and all of sudden I've come to university as an adult and I'm actually doing well ... at the beginning of the year, I had a panic attack about how I might not do so well this year, but everything is as I expected. (Anna FG5, Phase 2, Step 3)

This perception seems to have started in high school where many students were told how difficult university was going to be. One student stated that "teachers at school told me how hard it was going to be, so I sort of had expectations of what it was" (Liam FG2, Phase 2, Step 3). This student further elaborated on how she was concerned about whether attending university was the correct decision for her but once here, was pleasantly surprised:

My initial expectations have been exceeded, as I now know that this uni kind of supports you a little bit more. It's a bit more structured I think. And I wasn't sure whether or not I could fit uni into my life. But yeah I can. (Liam FG2, Phase 2, Step 3)

Not all students transitioned from school to university as easily, and in fact many reflected on their previous attempts at university and drew from past experiences, which in turn assisted them with their expectations of this new journey in their lives, as one student expressed:

I spent last year doing a bridging course at CQU [Central Queensland University], so I had a pretty good idea, it is almost identical to this except the workload is, well, I kind of did expect it, but you don't know until you get it, the workload is huge and it's manageable. So, I guess it's pretty much everything I expected and I'm enjoying it, although it has not been easy at all. (John FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

This theme of *Student expectations of first year* was taken to the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, where some students identified that they felt well prepared for university life: “I have tried university before, so I have a bit of an idea on what to expect” (Rob II, Phase 2, Step 4), while others suggested that “I don’t feel I am as prepared as I should be, but I’m prepared to give it a go nonetheless” (Anna II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Prior to commencing university, students reflected on whether or not they were capable of or prepared to undertake study and often elaborated on the fact that they were questioning their abilities and were not sure if they could actually go ahead and do it. Students confirmed that along with their expectations of university came trepidation and acknowledged the value of preparation:

I have actually done a fair bit of research before I came to uni, because it’s quite daunting ... because I knew I would not know how to do a lot of things. ... So I had looked at a few uni websites, about how to write essays, different information you can find through their websites to prepare myself, but I needed that for the confidence ... I didn’t think that I was going to be able to do it. (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4)

In their accounts of the events surrounding their self-doubt and questioning their self-efficacy, students considered that they would struggle with the expectations of university and concluded, “this does not help with the learning process” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). As highlighted by another student: “It makes it harder to take charge of your study and strive to do the best when self-doubt creeps in” (June II, Phase 2, Step 4). A student confirmed that they were continually questioning their own self-worth with the following comment:

One of the biggest things so far is I’m noticing it’s not my inability to do it that’s making it hard, it’s my own self-doubt and my own questioning about things. I’ll get an assignment done and then keep looking at it and go “oh this is wrong”. That’s the hardest part for me, just getting over my own insecurities I think. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

The majority of students expressed their satisfaction with what they expected university to be. Students understood that they were faced with new surroundings and new people and did so by being engaged with a positive attitude.

### **5.7.2 Sense of belonging**

The second aspect that was a focus of the theme *Student identity* was sense of belonging. This aspect of the students' responses was not generated during the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews but was prominent within the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. Students believed that in most cases, university is a big adjustment, not only adjusting personally: "I need to treat university like a job, so I attend 9 to 5, even if I don't have classes" (Conor II, Phase 2, Step 4); academically: "It's a big change from school, but I'm sure I will manage with the work" (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4); and socially: "I'm not just a number or face in the crowd. I want to be part of the bigger group and make friends" (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4), but also adjusting to the cultural aspect of university staff: "It's understanding the dynamics of how the lecturers teach, especially if they come from different cultures and I don't understand what they are saying" (Conor II, Phase 2, Step 4).

At times, students identified that they became overwhelmed with these adjustments by failing to establish positive relationships because they struggled to adapt to their new surroundings. Students established in the interviews that developing a sense of belonging becomes increasingly difficult as there is a diverse range of students who attend university and enter with differing family backgrounds, interests, work and social experiences that at times are not connected to their university experience:

I found that there are so many different personalities and I sometimes sit back and assess the situation to see who I can form friendships with. This is difficult at times. It can take me a while to feel as if I belong. (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Students did indicate that they felt welcomed by staff and other students were friendly towards them, which assisted with their sense of belonging and their learning. For many

students, initially, making friends was a struggle, but once barriers were removed, students realised all students experienced similar concerns; however, as the semester progressed, some students indicated in the interviews that they struggled to be heard and felt isolated at times. Students, particularly non-recent school leavers, found it difficult to be acknowledged in tutorial groups:

If I'm right up front about it, as a mature-aged student, I find that we are potentially dismissed a bit. ... I like to engage when I'm in tutorials so I'm probably one of the first to put my hand up. Even if I'm not chosen, I feel like it's "Yes, okay we know what you think but who else thinks something?" ... I did not feel valued and felt isolated ... my experience at that moment is feeling like my points aren't valid. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

This statement identifies a phenomenon experienced by at least one non-recent school leaver. This student believed that as a non-recent school leaver she had been neglected by university personnel, making her feel as if she was "not worthy" of the university place she was given. She indicated that, at first, she was reluctant to talk to lecturers, which had a negative influence on her enthusiasm and motivation. Moreover, the student perceived non-recent school leavers as a group were, at times, intentionally ignored. Consequently, she believed her opinions were undervalued and stated that "I am here to learn and my answers should be validated" (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). She further commented: "I chose ACU because of its mission and religious beliefs. The mission says that all students be treated with respect and experience equal validation and acceptance" (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). She noted that receiving validation assisted with learning, which meant she should be academically and personally motivated by staff, through her participation in class. This student argued that when derogatory comments are delivered publicly, students can experience humiliation and are likely to prematurely terminate studies. She supported her beliefs through this comment:

I've come back to uni at my age. So it's a combination of proving this to myself, I can do this and achieve this. It's those first steps of being accepted. It's your tutor telling you: "You're doing a good job." It's the validation that you are

capable and committed. I'm not here for a holiday. I'm here to work and to achieve high grades. ... I'm here to learn and my answers should be validated. I felt I wanted to quit, because I wasn't getting that. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Receiving validation early in the semester allowed the students to feel welcomed and secure in their decision about attending university and to move on from always seeking that clarity. It also offered the guidance and the acknowledgement of being able to take their study into their own hands and not requiring validation constantly from the lecturer. This, in fact, assisted students to be more in control of their learning responsibilities. Typical of this view is the following student comment: "The learning experiences in class were engaging and I felt as though I had a voice after a while" (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4).

A sense of belonging for many first-year students is imperative. The idea of knowing that they are individually supported and are assisted to engage in class is an essential aspect to university life.

### **5.7.3 University is a full-time job**

The third aspect that was a focus of the theme *Student identity* was that university is a full-time job. In the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews students reported that they perceived attending university as their job and treated it in that manner. Students felt they needed to put 100% effort into their studies if they were to succeed in their first year and their degree in the long term. In several cases students felt that they had given up a great deal, in terms of their previous full-time job, to follow their goal of becoming teachers. In order to take on full-time study, their goal was prioritised such that they were "treating university as a full-time job" (Will FG3, Phase 2, Step 3).

Students also reported that they were very serious about university and thought it best to attend university 40 hours per week, as they had done at their previous job. They expressed that the time spent at university and the effort they put in makes a difference to the outcomes in the long run:

I applied the same principles I've always adopted at university; I just treat it as a job, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day and if I need to do more time in the library, I stay until 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. (Aidan FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

The discussion was continued in the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, where one student reported that he was supported through sponsorship of his sporting career and was able to focus completely on his study and not work outside of university: "Yes, I am lucky as I don't need to work. I am supported by my sponsors, so basically, it's uni, training and competitions" (Conor II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Beyond the discussions of the highly motivated, the reality, however, is that many of the students expressed that they struggled to manage their study and work commitments. Students provided insights into the reality that they chose to work outside of university, and in many cases, this was an imperative that they work either part-time or full-time to support themselves. A comment from one student supports this perspective: "I couldn't survive if I didn't work. I need to pay the bills and eat. It's quite simple really" (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Treating university as a full-time job was highlighted by several participants. It was important for them to engage in their studies at a level that they felt that they were participating 100% of their time.

#### **5.7.4 Voice of the non-recent school leaver**

The fourth aspect that was a focus of the theme *Student identity* was the voice of the non-recent school leaver. The non-recent school leavers' voice was "loud" in the interviews as they represented approximately half of the proportion of students who volunteered for the semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interviews. Comments from these students during the focus group interviews exemplified that they had left a previous place of employment, many of which were stressful, to take on study, and that full-time study now provided them with "a peaceful lovely life, with limited responsibility compared to my previous life" (Ash FG5, Phase 2, Step 3).

Another student responded as follows:

I spent 12 years in business development and sales management. That was down in Sydney. I worked in the events and exhibition industry doing that. And I guess I just got sick of it and decided to go for a career change. I don't think it's unusual these days for people to go through a career change and I had the opportunity, so I thought "why not?" Teaching was also something that I [had] always contemplated. (Adam FG2, Phase 2, Step 3)

The discussion was important for many of the non-recent school leavers in the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews as they explained that they had already studied at another university, having not completed that degree, with one saying "I haven't studied for 12 years, I was in recruitment and felt I wanted to do teaching for a long time, so I took the plunge and enrolled" (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4).

The students interviewed noted that they believe they take ownership of their study as they had made a career change and made the decision to become teachers. These students made it clear in the interviews that they are now self-motivated because "attending university after school wasn't an option as my OP wasn't good enough, so I earned money and worked full-time" (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4), providing an alternative pathway to university. Other students commented that they came from stressful work environments with large corporations, were self-employed, or had worked overseas. A comment from one student in their interview confirmed this notion:

I lived and worked in Italy teaching English for several years. I fell into this job ... This helped my pathway, as it cemented that there was nothing else I wanted to do. I came back home and applied for uni and got in, first preference and first round offer. I was so excited. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Students further reported that making these large changes in their lives by returning to university was something that was important to them as this decision was usually for themselves, although one student identified that "I am doing this for my family, so when my children grow up I have a career that I will be proud of and I can show them that hard work



pays off” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). These students understand the commitment that is required of them, as some have left full-time employment to focus on full-time study. One student confirmed this: “This leaves us with only one income, so I need to treat this very seriously” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). For these students, juggling a career change and returning to full-time study invites considerable commitment and self-management.

Interestingly, the non-recent school leavers identified as approximately half of the cohort involved in this research. It is important to understand their perceptions of first year and how their student identity is formed throughout the initial stages of their university experience.

### **5.7.5 Time management**

The fifth aspect that was a focus of the theme *Student identity* was time management. Time management was important for all students interviewed as they had to balance work, life, and study to be successful at university. Most of the students identified that time management was something that they understood they must engage with if they were to succeed at university; however, some found it difficult. Typical of this response from the semi-structured in-depth focus group interview was the following: “University rules my life ... the balance of everything is the biggest negative ... it comes down to time management, but sometimes I do find it hard” (Bridget FG2, Phase 2, Step 3).

Other first-year students in the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews indicated that they struggled with time management as well; however, as they progressed in their degree, they became more accustomed to the length of time some assessment items took and tried to develop good time management skills to assist them. They were also getting better at factoring in all the on-campus activities, with one student indicating “I use a mobile app with my timetable on it, so I know when and where I need to be” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4). Other students talked of spreading their workload across the semester: “If I put all my assessments on a schedule, then I can see when I need to be working towards those deadlines” (Anna II, Phase

2, Step 4). Another student responded: “Time management equips and assists me to handle the stress of university, my job and life in general” (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4).

There were other students who acknowledged that they needed help and sought support:

I went and saw Academic Skills to help me with time management. They helped me to review how I was studying, how to improve my time management ... instead of spending 60 hours a week reading and wasting my time. (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4)

The Academic Skills staff also reiterated that they help students with time management:

[We] offer sessions for the students to assist with time management; these sessions could include setting long- and short-term plans and identifying and prioritising what needs to be completed in the semester and setting a time of events to assist with knowing when assessments are due. (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 4)

This staff member commented further:

It is important to keep a realistic pattern of study and to set a schedule ... and that using time constructively and efficiently is a skill all students should develop throughout their university degree. It will assist them for their future when they are teaching. (Martha SI, Phase 2, Step 4)

Student identity has been discussed with the inclusion of student expectations of first year, sense of belonging, university is a full-time job, voice of the non-recent school leaver, and time management. It is from these that findings below will be outlined.

### **5.7.6 Findings from the theme *Student identity***

The following findings about student identity emerged from the interview data:

- Many students have entered university with low entry scores or through alternative pathways. For these students, self-doubt is plaguing their progress as they perceive that university study is going to be hard, with many preparing for it by undertaking courses prior to starting or doing their own course of preparation.

- Feeling a sense of belonging early in first year is important for students because if this does not happen it can be detrimental to fitting in and the student can become “lost in the crowd”.
- Time management is important for all students, with non-recent school leavers treating their study like a full-time job allowing their time management skills from previous employment to assist with being prepared, while school leavers use time management apps to support them.

## **5.8 ENGAGEMENT FACTORS AT UNIVERSITY**

The theme of *Engagement factors at university* was generated as a theme initially from the SPQ data as students referred in the questionnaire to what engagement strategies they prefer. The theme was investigated further in the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews and later confirmed or extended by the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. Students reported during the interviews that at the beginning of their degree they were given access to the Course Map outlining what units were in their degree, specifically, those in Semester 1. Drawing on the Course Map, they identified that they must choose four compulsory units per semester if they are studying full-time. All the students interviewed were enrolled in full-time study; therefore, they confirmed that the units they undertook in Semester 1 were the following: Children’s Literature for Literacy, Indigenous Cultures and People, Science and Technology for Early Childhood and Primary Teachers 1, and Contexts for Learning and Development. Three aspects of the theme were generated: engagement in and outside of class; student perspectives of assessment in units, and lecturers’ feedback and support.

### **5.8.1 Engagement in and outside of class**

The first aspect that was a focus of the theme *Engagement factors at university* was engagement in and outside of class. During the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, students discussed the importance of being engaged at university and how the university expects

attendance in order to achieve such engagement. However, some students argued that they were too busy to attend, while others argued that

the university expects me to attend at least 80% of classes during the semester, but if I don't see anyone doing anything about it, it's my choice I guess. I do like it if the lectures and tutes [tutorials] are interesting. That gives me a reason to attend. (Rob FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)

Even though this student expressed that staff do not follow up with students when their attendance and engagement is poor, another confirmed that in one class in first semester, one teacher

made me do extra work if I missed three or more tutes. It was explained to me that it wasn't punishment as such, it was to make sure I am getting the most out of the content and to assist with reaching the learning outcomes of the unit. (Ben FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)

Some students expressed negative views on engagement in class, which surfaced during the focus group interviews. Students stated that "if I'm not engaged, then I believe attending is pointless" (Conor FG3, Phase 2, Step 3). This student confirmed that

the teacher made it very difficult; difficult to understand; conducted badly; when slides read and no elaboration, what's the point? You don't get the whole story. I enjoy participation and being productive. I want to be engaged with interesting content and activities. (Conor FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

Another student commented that

all lecturers are different. It's much better when they don't present verbatim [from their notes]. What's the point of attending if they are just reading off the slides? You don't have to be a doctor to do that. I can do that at home. I want engaging strategies, more visual than just slides, putting things into context that I can relate to, to get the bigger picture. (Cath FG2, Phase 2, Step 3)

One student throughout his focus group interview did show some signs of empathy for the lecturer:

I felt sorry for the lecturer as I just think that she came in a bit late and the whole subject seemed a bit unorganised. Maybe she didn't have a lot of time before the semester started. I found it hard to keep on top of figuring out where they are going with the subject. The teacher was a no show on occasions which seemed unprofessional to me and others. (Will FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

In contrast to these negative statements, students expressed many positive views on engagement. One student commented that “one major motivator in class is definitely interactive engagement” (Conor II, Phase 2, Step 4). Another student confirmed this engagement in class through the following statement:

Classes are hands on ... lectures are good, they pile information at you and you've to know all that. ... I don't like going to tutes where you sit around ... I like to role play, imagine you are the child, look at what you are doing physically, teach it like you are in a classroom. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Students also felt that engagement at the university level can occur outside of class, particularly when it is a smaller campus. This issue was taken to the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, where one student said: “Hopefully the staff get to know you ... Actually, one lecturer called me by my name in the second week and I was happily surprised. This made me feel welcomed and helped with developing a relationship with them” (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 3). Other students noted that engagement occurred outside of classes because lecturers offer “drop-in” (June II, Phase 2, Step 4) times and some have an “open-door policy where I can just go and chat” (Rob II, Phase, Step 4). Students also considered that attending classes assists with student engagement:

There are plenty of people that don't attend; how do they expect to be engaged when they are not present? I get more out of it when you're in class and all classes are important to attend. ... I find them more interactive than listening to the recording. (Conor II, Phase 2, Step 4)

However, another student made the following comment:

It seems non-attendance of lectures and tutorials is because how some classes are conducted and how busy students are and how they need to allocate their time to other things outside of university. (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 3)

Students acknowledged that all lecturers are different and have different teaching behaviours that they employ to engage students; however, one student reported that when “lecturers are disorganised and at times do not show up to classes, then this becomes very frustrating and proves to me that the lecturers are not interested in my learning, and therefore, there’s no way I will be engaged” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4). Because students felt that engagement was a major aspect of their classes, they also thought that lecturers should

practice what they preach, as we are in training to become teachers. They are the best role model we have at this time, so not showing up and not following the unit schedule is not a good thing. I show up and I want to be taught. (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Regardless of whether students are engaging with their peers or with their lecturers, students perceive that engaging in and outside of class is a major aspect of their university experience.

### **5.8.2 Student perspectives of assessment in units**

The second aspect that was a focus of the theme *Engagement factors at university* was student perspectives of assessment in units. Students reported in the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews that once they have access to the unit outline on LEO, the online learning environment used by ACU, they usually go directly to the assessment section to see what they need to do for the unit. During the discussions on assessment many aspects surfaced. The reflective writing piece in one unit was particularly important for the students as they were expected to commence it early in the semester. They identified that the Folio of Reflections was scheduled to be submitted during weeks five to nine in tutorials. The task involved a small written piece, based on readings from the unit, to demonstrate an understanding of contextual

relationships to explain influences on child and adolescent behaviour and development. The students elaborated on their thoughts on the assessment:

The idea of the Folio of Reflections presented to collaborative friendship groups is great! By seeing the improvement over time is vital to first-year students and it allows us to gain a wider range of knowledge on all topics rather than a report at the end of the semester [on one topic only]. (Rob FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)

Another student confirmed their liking for this particular piece of assessment:

I really liked the idea of having a reflection due each week rather than all at once, because then I got to focus on just the one theorist each week, what they were saying and how I would implement it [their ideas] in the classroom. It made me have to, and want to, come to the tutorials and I really enjoyed the task having it broken up each week. (Tim FG4, Phase 2, Step 3)

Another student commented on assessment being early in the semester: “Most of the first-year units have early assessment. ... I guess small assessment early is good, that way if you stumble, you can receive feedback and improve for the next piece of assessment” (Gary FG1, Phase 2, Step 3). Students deliberated that many of the assessments were due at similar times, which made it difficult to balance everything. A student confirmed this:

A lot of the assessments are due around the same time. It’s very stressful, but if staff put in place mechanisms to support student stress at assessment time, for example, allowing extensions and moving assessment due dates ... this would allow for submission of a high standard of work. (Sally FG5, Phase 2, Step 3)

Students also acknowledged that there were some positive and negative perspectives on group work. Students identified that in first-year units; they were grouped with others they did not know. Their comments support this as they contributed to the interview:

Group work is challenging; you can’t choose your own group members so you can get to know hard workers. If you’ve worked with them, then it’s easier, things can go smoother. Not everyone pulls their weight in the group, so I put myself in a leadership role to keep on focus, push others to work. (Kate FG3, Phase 2, Step 3)

Further comments by students supported the idea of the “confidential checklist” supplied by the lecturer in the unit outline. This is completed by students and identifies who has and has not participated fully in the preparation of the group assessment. “The checklist is a good way to inform the lecturer about who did what when working together in groups. We complete it based on participation and nobody knows what is said” (Adam FG2, Phase 2, Step 3). This was confirmed by another student: “The checklist is great as it keeps everyone accountable and even though the marks are distributed evenly, sometimes the lecturer can decide whether a student loses marks or not, based on the feedback from the students” (Gary FG1, Phase 2, Step 3). A student offered another positive message regarding group work:

My experience with group work was positive and everyone did what was expected of them and we all received the same grade. I’ve heard of others who receive individual marks if they don’t perform effectively though. I don’t want to be in that boat. (Mary FG1, Phase 2, Step 3)

The topic of group work was also prevalent in the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews as one student stated that “it is often the best way to manage the class early in the semester” (Katie II, Phase 2, Step 4). However, many students agreed with the following view:

I would prefer to be able to choose the students I wish to work with in order to achieve the highest grade as my standards are quite high, and it annoys me if I have to work with someone who’s not on the same wave length and I have to carry them to get a good mark. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

The Folio of Reflections assessment piece was again discussed in the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews, and in stark contrast to the opinions expressed in the focus group interviews, there were students who would have preferred a different personal reflection assessment piece. One comment was that “I struggled to articulate how I felt, and a critical essay is easier than a reflective piece for me” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). This student understood, however, that in becoming an effective teacher, she must learn how to be reflective in her teaching practice and be able to link theory with practice in a reflective way. The student continued: “I am fully aware that I need to learn how to be reflective as eventually I will take



that into the classroom, but I just struggled with that assessment, even though the lecturer unpacked it quite well” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Another student commented in relation to assessments being due close together that “it would be great if assessment was also staggered, as this would lighten the load and I could concentrate on all pieces and do a good job on each one” (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4). However, they seemed to understand that with four units in 12 weeks, this could be difficult.

Several students in the individual interviews agreed that the unpacking of assessment assisted with knowing what was required of them: “For me, it is important to know what I can do in preparation for assessment. It might just be simply reading the unit outline assessment section and wait to be told by the lecturer” (Aidan II, Phase 2, Step 4). Students confirmed that in the first tutorial, “lecturers unpack the assessment items, which gives you a better idea of what to expect” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4). This perception is confirmed with this comment: “In the first few weeks, I remember being given a quiz or reflective piece of writing. These exercises motivated me to participate in the content and assisted me with further preparation with assessment” (Anna II, Phase 2, Step 4).

As much as there are many pieces of assessment across the first semester in first year, students identified that there is good reason why some assessments are due in the early part of the semester. This is to allow the students a chance to identify where their strengths and weakness may lie and to seek support where necessary.

### **5.8.3 Lecturers’ feedback and support**

The third aspect that was a focus of the theme *Engagement factors at university* was the lecturers’ feedback and support. Students believe that both feedback and support from lecturers were foundational to success. During the semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews students acknowledged that they appreciate feedback that is “received before the next piece of assessment is due and invites time to reflect” (Wendy FG5, Phase 2, Step 3). Similarly, students

commented that it is difficult if feedback is not received: “You don’t always get feedback and that’s difficult. Not receiving feedback does not assist with personal growth or to understand knowledge gap” (Geoff FG1, Phase 2, Step 3).

During the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews comments on assessment feedback were also made: “Verbal feedback assists me with scaffolding my assignments and offers me guidance. I know how to improve, and I like that” (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4). Another important form of feedback and support students suggested was necessary for improvement was how to present the assignment. Several students commented on how “the lecturer actually took the time to scaffold the assignment and go through it step by step so I could set it out correctly. This is really something that is useful and what I needed” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4).

Students identified that if they feel the lecturer is interested in their success and wants to support them, then they are more likely to approach the lecturer in the future: “At first, I was a little tentative to approach my lecturer, but I realised they were there to help, and they were willing” (Anna II, Phase 2, Step 4). Further, written and verbal feedback and support were important for guiding them in their units of study. This is evident in the following comments:

Support from lecturers in units assisted in the enjoyment of the unit and when they have an open-door policy to visit and chat, then that certainly helps as well. This sure settles the nerves and allows me to get to know the staff in a more personal way. (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4)

In one particular unit, students are encouraged to visit the lecturer, make appointments, email or call the lecturer if questions need to be answered. Having this engagement available outside of the classroom offers us extra support. The support that students receive showcase that some lecturers in units show a relationship care factor. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Similar to in the focus group interviews, some students commented about not receiving feedback, agreeing with the view that this is not helpful: “Some of the quizzes have been online, so we don’t get any feedback for that, just a mark. It’s not very helpful” (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4).

The sub themes of engagement in and outside of class; student perspectives of assessment in units; and lecturers' feedback and support have been identified. These findings will now be discussed further.

#### **5.8.4 Findings from the theme *Engagement factors at university***

The following findings about engagement factors at university emerged from the interview data:

- Many students believe that it is imperative for their lecturers to be engaging and that some of the strategies they employ in classes could be detrimental to their learning.
- Assessment must be clearly set out and scaffolded for students to understand what is expected of them.
- Written and verbal feedback are essential to guide and assist students. This is useful both before assessment is due and after it has been marked for students to know how to improve for the next piece of assessment.
- Swift staff communication and support from lecturers, especially on assessment, is considered an important aspect of student learning.
- Lecturers can impede student engagement with their studies. Matters of language and pedagogy influence learning and need to be understood and negotiated as part of the learning process.

### **5.9 SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS:**

#### **PARTICIPANT CASE STUDIES**

The purpose of this section is to elaborate on key issues raised from the initial semi-structured in-depth individual interviews during Phase 2, Step 4. For this purpose, all students who participated earlier in the study were contacted again, and permission was obtained to pursue those issues that invited further amplification. Three non-recent school leavers each agreed to participate in a second semi-structured in-depth individual interview, which are

shared through the three participant case studies discussed in this section. The initial analysis of data generated three key issues: *Sense of belonging* (Section 5.7.2), *Peer networking and diverse social group* (Section 5.6.2), and *Engagement in and outside of class* (Section 5.8.1).

The first issue concerns *Sense of belonging* and is examined in case study 1. It focuses on a non-recent school leaver and her experiences with some academic staff and peers and the lack of validation she received while in class attendance.

The second issue concerns *Peer networking and diverse social groups* in case study 2 and how developing these networks assisted learning of first-year students. The participant is focused on assisting herself as well as her peers and they have developed a community of practice in the shape of study groups.

The third issue concerns *Engagement in and outside of class* where the lecturers' behaviour is the discussion point in case study 3. The participant identifies his disappointment in a unit he was studying and how this behaviour affected his decision to attend classes.

These case studies are now explored in depth in the following subsections.

### **5.9.1 Participant Bridget CC – Case Study 1: Sense of belonging**

Participant Bridget CC, previously Bridget II and FG2 entered university as a non-recent school leaver who had a previous career in recruitment. As her higher school certificate results did not provide her with access to university, she “just clocked out”. After leaving school she entered the workforce but as an 18th birthday gift, her family financed her travel to Britain, where she remained for three and a half years. There, she met her husband and they both returned to Australia. She gained a role in recruitment where she was successful in her role as a recruiter; as a result, she dismissed prior ideas concerning university study and becoming a teacher. She confirmed this through her comments: “I fell into recruitment; it was good for a while and it paid well. I decided to not bother with uni as my score wasn’t good enough. I just took leave when I started to have my children.”

The experience of motherhood influenced her changing priorities. The working hours in her previous career were not conducive to raising children. Even though it was a high-paying job and all her attention was focused on her position, she regularly worked from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. She believed that her recruitment career became incompatible with parental responsibilities. Consequently, she decided to pursue a previous interest in a teaching career. It was an easy decision, because many in her family were teachers. Further, she wanted to engage in education to support the growth of her young children. Even though the decision meant financial challenges, Bridget knew it was the right decision and believed that she could balance being a “mum” and studying because she was passionate about both. She stated:

When I was thinking about the change, I kept coming back to teaching. I had always thought about it. I think I would make a really good teacher and although it will be hard at times, I’m sure I have the support to balance it all.

Bridget’s application for entry into the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree at ACU was successful. This generated excitement and trepidation early in her degree. On entering university, she was so proud of herself. She commented: “Uni had felt elusive to me, even though I felt as though I can do it, but it never seemed close.”

As a Bachelor of Education (Primary) student and feeling very proud of the fact that she gained entry into university, she initially felt that she was not taken seriously by others and thought she was being dismissed in class. After coming from a successful career in the workforce and being “validated” by her boss and peers as an excellent employee, she these positive feelings of validation would be transferred, but initially this was not the case: “In my previous role as a recruiter, I was in a leadership role, I was a mentor within the workplace. I guess I was always listened to and my points were validated. Coming to uni, this changed.”

For Bridget feelings of isolation as a non-recent school leaver, and the dismissive behaviour from academic staff and peers, contributed to her perception of feeling undervalued and unworthy of her place at university. Consistently, she reported that she would raise her

hand to participate in class, and most times she was dismissed and not given the opportunity to engage in conversation. Bridget dwelled on this point by repeating, “Even though I know I mentioned this before, I still feel as a mature-aged student, I am dismissed. I come to uni to be engaged. I want to feel valued and validated.” As a result, she was reluctant to talk to lecturers and engage in conversation in classes. She reported that this initial perceived experience had a negative influence on her enthusiasm and motivation. She believed she was perhaps potentially ignored based on her status as a non-recent school leaver. Consequently, she believed her opinions were undervalued and this did not accord with how she had been positively treated in her previous place of employment, where her opinion mattered. She commented:

The feelings of being dismissed took me back to the whole sense of proving myself. I took any and every opportunity to get validation ... that pat on the back ... it actually drives me ... getting that validation from somebody else. If I’m not having that collaboration with someone, I find it hard for the content to stick and sink in.

Bridget believed that her voice should be heard at all times, that she had an opinion and deserved to be treated with respect and acceptance. In her view, to receive validation motivates learning. In addition, a respectful relationship with staff confirms and enhances a sense of self-worth and a belief that pursuing a university degree may be successful. In contrast, when Bridget felt she was dismissed, she felt publicly humiliated and considered terminating her studies.

Students who experience validation early in their semester feel welcomed and confirmed in their decision to attend university. This, in fact, appears to assist students to be more in control of their learning responsibilities. Even though she believed that she was capable of completing her studies successfully, lack of validation and negative feedback from staff hindered her progress in her first semester at university.

Despite the lack of validation, she became even more determined to prove to herself and to others that her decision to attend university and succeed with high results was the right one.

In order for her to be validated, she decided to focus more on her acceptance in class and worked harder to prove how her engagement in class made a significant contribution. She said:

At times ... I don't know what I'm learning, I'm learning like everybody else, I'm going to lectures, I'm going to tutorials and from the personal point of view, I learn through interaction, dialogue. ... I talk out my thoughts and my ideas and I need those justified and clarified, just like everybody else.

Bridget believed that attending classes was one of the main ways to retain the content and to become accepted by lecturers and peers. "It's getting accepted, that first paper submitted, that first distinction. It's the tutor telling you that you are ok and proving yourself." Moreover, she understood the importance of "the real world" and, because she had assisted people as a recruiter, knew what employers were looking for when employing staff. Her experiences from her previous role were transferred into her role as a pre-service teacher and she highlighted this in the following comment:

I have to treat this like a job because I have to know that there's a consequence for not performing, and so that is why, for myself, if I know this is a job, I commit to it ... this is why this degree is really important to me. I want to finish it. I really have to drive myself to complete things. In your real job you expect validation, if you are not performing, you get a warning, then you're gone. Well it's the same here at uni for me.

It is clear that validation and motivation for Bridget were a main priority. As the first few weeks of university passed, she perceived slight improvements with the validation and acceptance from lecturers. She could not provide any real indication why the lecturers' attitude towards her changed, although she confirmed that "as the learning experiences became more engaging, when I raised my hand to offer my opinion, I was chosen to participate a little more". Bridget felt that her answers were taken into consideration: "I felt as though I had a voice after a while." Clearly, although it took several weeks for her to experience the validation she needed, by the end of the semester she had developed a sense of belonging at university.

Having a sense of belonging at university is a clear indication of feeling connected to the community and university life. It is through these experiences that some students can engage appropriately to strive to reach their full potential as first-year students.

### **5.9.2 Participant Sue CC – Case Study 2: Peer networking and diverse social groups**

Participant Sue CC, previously Sue II and FG2 initially shared her experience of peer networking and diverse social groups in some depth during Phase 2, Step 4 of the research. As a result, Sue was further contacted, and permission obtained to pursue this issue in depth.

Sue left school and travelled overseas planning to undertake a short working holiday, but this extended to a period of five years. She was employed as a teacher's aide and teacher in Italy, teaching English. Her Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certificate qualifications assisted her both with employment in Italy and with entrance into university on her return.

During her time in Italy, she decided she wanted to earn a teaching qualification. She gained as much experience over her five-year stay with the hope that she could obtain her qualification and part-time teaching employment on her return to Australia. However, her search for part-time school teaching employment was unsuccessful as teachers need to be fully qualified in Australia, so she explored full-time university enrolment.

At first, Sue thought she could not afford to attend university full-time due to the cost but realised that with the HECS she could repay her university tuition debt to the Australian Government when she was employed. This information came from a friend who was already studying at university, who explained to her that she had not paid any fees because HECS offered tertiary fee loans for Australian citizens. Sue had believed she would be ineligible for HECS because of the quality of her matriculation grades as well as the substantial time lapse since leaving school. Happily, she was informed she was eligible to obtain a HECS grant.



Initially, Sue thought that she would complete a Diploma in Children's Services, while working in a childcare setting. Later, she chose to study teaching young children. This assisted in her decision to apply for university. Her application for entry to the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree at ACU was successful. Her previous experience, qualifications, and referral from her Italian employer all contributed to her successful entry in the first round of offers. Sue was "ecstatic" about entering the course and was looking forward to the work and challenges ahead of her.

Sue experienced content overload on Orientation Day. She also found navigating the campus problematic. These issues contributed to her having apprehensions concerning future university life:

I'm very structured and like to know everything that's happening, but that was not a reality at the start of university. ... I realised I needed to take things slow and understand that everything I needed would come eventually.

During Orientation, she met several peers who were also enrolled in the same degree. Consequently, knowing other enrolled students assisted in relieving her anxieties: "Somehow, I was just drawn to these people, and even as a non-recent school leaver, after 11 years of leaving school."

On entering university, the initial challenge of Orientation Day dissipated and one of the main aspects that assisted Sue in becoming a part of the Primary pre-service teacher cohort was that she quickly made friends and developed social and study groups. These friendships were formed coincidentally because she was timetabled in the same classes. She confirmed this by stating:

The lecturers encourage in class conversation to begin discussion with their peers. We are mostly in the same boat, and no one knows each other. We did some ice-breaker activities and learnt a little about people very quickly.

Sue realised that those with whom she bonded assisted her in her studies. "Often, we would bounce ideas off each other to understand interpretations of the content." The early

making of friends in the Primary cohort helped her to assimilate quickly into university life. Having “study buddies” and friends from social groups assisted her to engage intelligently with the units she was studying. She confirmed this through this comment: “It’s important to develop those friendships particularly at the start ... apart from the stress of uni, having friends and forming friendships makes it all more manageable. These study groups do all of that.” Sue knew the type of people to whom she was drawn and with whom she wished to engage. She elucidated this fact:

They are people who are real, aren’t afraid to question things and go out of their way to clarify it, read all the information and move forward. ... I’m drawn to the same people with the same needs and interests as me. It’s important to develop those friendships particularly at the start ... apart from the stress of uni, having friends and forming friendships makes it all more manageable.

Sue associated herself with peers who were motivated to strive towards receiving high marks. The peers in these diverse social groups were similar to Sue, demonstrating similar needs, interests, and thought processes while at university. Essentially, these students had established a community of practice, whereby they shared information and supported each other. Further, when they met as a group, they were sharing their passions for teacher education, especially insights from what they were learning. These regular meetings motivated them to do well in their studies. Moreover, Sue often socialised with these same friends outside of university times:

We’ve got quite a few people in our group. Some that I’ll see every single time I’m here at uni and we’ve even met up outside of uni, so they’re more than just study buddies. You definitely need it because as well as coming here to study, it is also a social thing and feels like a real community of learners. Yeah, we’ve got quite a broad group of people. We’re all different ages, all come from different backgrounds. It’s good, like I really enjoy my group.

Knowing and understanding the people in the peer networking and diverse social groups has assisted Sue to develop a close rapport with her peers. Such relationships have assisted her

both personally and academically. She described how, when on campus, she utilises the time between classes and makes suggestions to her study group peers regarding

booking a room in the library; hiring a textbook to go over notes ... getting together and dividing up the subjects and topics so that they can each study a part of and share that information ... this works really well, especially if there is an exam coming up.

This form of collaboration and bond that has developed between Sue and her peers contributes to the trusting relationships that each of the group members have established. As Sue suggested,

I think it's a good idea because you get other people's point of view and it can save on time. This collaboration continues while attending lectures and tutorials as students are offered opportunities to participate in the large lectures as well as in the smaller tutorials.

Developing such groups of support for students is a priority for some. It is evident that engagement within these groups offers an extension of university life in general, but also provides a time and place for students to connect to discuss important aspects of their study.

### **5.9.3 Participant Conor CC – Case Study 3: Engagement in and outside of class**

Participant Conor CC, previously Conor II and FG3, shared his experience in some depth during Phase 2, Step 4 of the study. As a result, he was contacted, and permission obtained to pursue his issue further. Conor entered university as a non-recent school leaver after successfully conducting a business in public services, which demanded he work 60 hours a week. Conor was recently divorced, which generated considerable personal and financial stress, and as a result, he disengaged from his friends and focused on his study and his hobby of body building.

During the initial semi-structured in-depth focus group interviews, Conor explained that he “did not need to work” and after his divorce he reflected on what “life was really about”. Previously, Conor had a “great deal of money and many cool toys”, but since his divorce he now has “very little money and no cool toys”. As a result, he believed that he was happy for the

first time in a long time. He realised that he had changed as a person and was much “nicer now even though I don’t really have much ... I’ve got a lot of time for everyone and I’m happy where I am”. This personal change in him became one of the catalysts for Conor to choose to undertake full-time university studies, while pursuing his interest in body building:

I’ve thought “I’ll treat university as a job. If I throw 40 hours at it, I should be fine.” Yeah and I’m really liking it. It’s a lot less stress than what I was used to, so it’s quite good. I can balance my body building with study, because if I do well in the competitions, I do receive supplements and some prize money.

Conor acknowledged that he was required to start afresh with friends as well as taking responsibility in making future choices, one of which was to become a teacher. He had a realistic appreciation of the time needed to succeed at studies. In addition, another catalyst to becoming a teacher was so he could be a more caring and supportive father to his two primary-school-aged daughters:

I want it so I can see my girls and spend quality time with them during the holidays. If I have to do some schoolwork, it’s okay, but I get to spend a lot of time with them. That is what drives me.

It’s taken me a while to get to uni, but becoming a teacher will allow me more opportunities, both with my own children and the children I will be teaching. I’m very excited for the future.

Conor appreciated that university was difficult but anticipated that his lecturers would help him to succeed:

I chose ACU as I’d always heard good reports about it and the fact that it’s a small campus with very approachable staff ... I came in with high expectations and plan to study hard and do well. I expect the staff to be engaging and professional as well, but it seems that some are just not.

Early in Semester 1, Conor’s perception was that he felt disengaged in a unit and found difficulties in communicating with the unit’s teaching staff. Even though he liked the unit and the content was interesting, the delivery and teaching strategies lacked engagement. He believed

the presentation lacked a logical sequence, while his understanding of content was impeded by the lecturer's heavy foreign accent:

It sounds really racist, but I couldn't understand her. I just couldn't understand her, and we'd go [to the lectures] and I was getting no benefit. It was just reading straight off the slides, where most other classes we go to the slides are up but you're talking and there's other stuff, other input, which is really good ... she gave no examples to support the content. There was a language barrier that was not conducive to satisfactory learning and this made integrating into that part of the university culture very difficult.

Further, Conor reported that there was a time where the lecturer failed not only to attend lectures, but also to inform students about this absence. It is the expectation of the university that lecturers attend all allocated lectures and tutorials, are prepared and organised, follow the weekly schedules, and do not change the content of the unit. Lecturers are to prepare a unit outline for the students, which is a bound contract between students and staff. In this first-year unit, many errors occurred that did not assist with Conor's journey. Because content was different from what was printed on the unit outline, Conor felt confused and stated: "I'm probably too lazy to make a complaint, but one of our subjects is an absolute joke. They change everything and do whatever they want and it's just confusing for everyone."

Conor believed the lecturer's behaviour in this case was not acceptable and did not meet his expectations. He expressed "bitter disappointment" with this lecturer's behaviour; however, he made the decision to engage in the content and do his best to pass the unit. The perceived lack of support, encouragement, motivation, and engagement by the lecturer of the unit affected his attendance pattern as he chose to stop attending lectures but continued with the tutorials: "I still attended the tutorials because it was a different tutor and he was approachable and committed to attending to my educational needs. He tried really hard to help me." Conor understood his own learning style and took advantage of the tutor's professionalism, because he wasn't being engaged

by the lecturer during lectures. In the end he stated that he needed to do everything to engage himself so that “I will be happy with just a pass”.

Conor anticipated that each lecturer who taught him would be a positive role model and model behaviour that is conducive to becoming a teacher. He believed that the teaching staff at university would engage in teaching strategies that would assist students in understanding the intricacies of becoming a teacher. He perceived that the lecturer’s behaviour and lack of engagement affected his experiences in his first year. Because of this, Conor took matters into his own hands and turned the negative experience into a positive one by engaging in the content through an external tutor who was also a teacher. Conor was able to share the knowledge that he was learning from the textbook and tutorials with his teacher friend who understood the content and provided guidance and assistance.

In contrast to this negative experience, Conor acknowledged the variety of lecturers’ teaching strategies that did engage him:

One unit the lecturer dances, and that is just great. It grabs my attention and the music played in class relates to the topic being presented. It still takes a bit to grasp the content, but I love that class ... It’s my favourite subject ... All lecturers are different. I want engaging strategies, more visual than just slides, putting things into context that I can relate to, to grasp the bigger picture.

It is evident that a variety of teaching strategies and approaches appeal to students at differing levels. Each student will decide which ones benefit them in order to gain the most out of their university learning experience and how they choose to engage with such experiences.

#### **5.9.4 Findings from the three case studies**

Findings from the three case studies are as follows:

- Being validated serves as an important aspect for student engagement. If this does not occur then there is potential for students to feel isolated and unable to form relationships with their peers and university staff.

- Forming study and friendship groups is reported as imperative for students to assist them with the academic rigour of university. Students who are like minded and work effectively are usually invited to join such groups.
- Student proactivity and responsibility can offset unmet expectations of lecturing staff.

## 5.10 FINDINGS FROM STUDY

The findings in this chapter indicate that most first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students engage in a variety of experiences that either assist or do not assist their learning. This study has created an awareness of the different experiences and supports at ACU and demonstrated contrasting beliefs concerning the influence of such engagement. Further analysis of the findings provided in this chapter has generated three overarching themes that provide insight into student experiences of first-year university.

### *Theme 1: Personal transition to university*

- Engaged students value Orientation Day, but many find it overwhelming.
- Engaged students value the Mentoring Program.
- Engaged students develop a sense of student identity and are motivated to succeed.
- Engaged students value validation from staff and peers.
- Engaged students take responsibility for their engagement.

### *Theme 2: Social experiences at university*

- Engaged students benefit from social interaction through study and friendship groups.

### *Theme 3: Academic experiences at university*

- Engaged students develop positive study habits and strategies to promote time management skills.
- Engaged students create partnerships with their teachers to improve their engagement in and outside of class.

These themes are now discussed further in Chapter 6, Discussion of Findings and Study Conclusions.



## Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings and Study Conclusions

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### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this study was a concern for first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students, and whether students experienced or engaged with the university support services offered by the university. My interest also grew from my experiences of teaching first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. Within this context there developed a passion to understand and optimise learning experiences for all students, particularly those who had gained entry to the degree with low scores or through alternative pathway entry. This concern stemmed from my role as the Lecturer in Charge and Tutor of first-year pre-service teachers, and the complementary roles of First-Year Experience Coordinator, Mentoring Program Coordinator, and member of the Orientation and Open Day Committees. In these roles, particularly as a lecturer of first-year students, I noticed that some students struggled with general literacy skills such as reflective writing and interpretation of readings, as well as demonstrating limited engagement within the overall life of the university. When reviewing the literature on the context in which my concerns rested (Chapter 2), I concluded that the policy to provide access to university for those who traditionally did not gain access can in part be attributed to goals set by international institutions such as the OECD, their adoption within national tertiary education frameworks, and in response to institutional mission and strategic intentions.

With this background, I identified the research purpose as one of understanding the way first-year students experience and engage with supports offered by the university and university life. ACU provides a range of services to support first-year students and with many of these students now entering the university with low scores, there is limited research data on their experience of first year, specifically for those enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree at the Brisbane campus, Banyo. Without such research, it is not known if and to what

extent the services provided by the university for first-year students are adequate in their breadth, are able to be accessed appropriately, and are supportive of the FYE.

The research question was generated following a review of the literature centred on student experiences and was articulated as follows:

*How do first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) on the Brisbane campus engage with supports and experience university life, and can a tool be developed to assess engagement that will benefit the wider higher education community?*

A constructionist epistemological position was taken that used an interpretivist research paradigm, along with case study as the methodology, which incorporated the view of the actors in the case under study (Hughes & Hitchcock, 1995). Data were viewed through a symbolic interactionist lens to identify the centrality of significant symbols as first-year students interpreted their reality during their first semester of study (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with symbolic interactionism, two distinct phases of data collection were used: Exploration and Inspection (Blumer, 1998). The Exploration Phase asks, “What’s going on around here?” (Charon, 2007, p. 194). In this study this perspective was achieved through the application of the SPQ (Biggs, 1987), which informed the development of the interview protocols. The Inspection Phase of the study drew from conclusions established within the SPQ and used a series of semi-structured in-depth focus group and individual interviews to explore the research question. Both stages of the study were supported by an iterative process of data analysis. The purpose of Chapter 5 was to display and discuss in detail these data and develop findings; this led to the generation of three themes based on the findings and summarised at the conclusion of the chapter. The three themes comprised *Personal transition to university*, *Social experiences at university*, and *Academic experiences at university*. Each theme encompassed a number of findings, reproduced here for the convenience of the reader:

*Theme 1: Personal transition to university*

- Engaged students value Orientation Day, but many find it overwhelming.
- Engaged students value the Mentoring Program.
- Engaged students develop a sense of student identity and are motivated to succeed.
- Engaged students value validation from staff and peers.
- Engaged students take responsibility for their engagement.

*Theme 2: Social experiences at university*

- Engaged students benefit from social interaction through study and friendship groups.

*Theme 3: Academic experiences at university*

- Engaged students develop positive study habits and strategies to promote time management skills.
- Engaged students create partnerships with their teachers to improve their engagement in and outside of class.

While there is a clear overlap between the three themes of findings, they will be separated artificially in Chapter 6 to permit the detailed analysis presented in Sections 6.2 to 6.4. The purpose through these sections is to discuss the findings by drawing on the research literature and the symbolic interactionist lens to provide greater insights with a view to addressing the research question underpinning the thesis. Considerable research draws on Pittaway's work (see for example; Redmond et al., 2018 & Mann, 2005) as this work has become an important framework for use in higher education. To achieve this, the discussion using symbolic interactionism draws on the three tenets of symbolic interactions (Blumer, 1969). The first tenet views how individuals attribute their own meaning making to a given phenomenon and act according to their constructed meaning making, and views communication as a symbolic process evidenced in language and symbols. The second tenet is the acceptance that others make meaning that can be different from their own meaning making. The third tenet is that meaning

making is “handled and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). That is, social interaction demonstrates that established meanings can be changed through a jointly agreed upon interpretive process (Blumer, 1969; Crotty, 1998). In this case, the researcher is interacting with the participants and therefore becomes symbolic only because of the significant symbols, that is, the language, gestures, and non-verbal communication that are shared and through which communication follows. It is only through this dialogue that the researcher becomes aware of the perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes of others and can interpret their meaning making and intent (Crotty, 1998). It is not the intention of the researcher to associate a value to each tenet provided, but rather to identify and interpret how each student’s experiences differ from one another according to their engagement levels and the tenets of symbolic interactionism, and how these can be linked to their experiences. It is not possible to assess each student’s level of engagement across a number of activities as these were not consistently discussed by students. Rather generalised discussion on levels of engagement are advanced.

Understanding the type of interaction that takes place through the individual internal discussion of talking to oneself occurs with symbols. This process is identified by symbolic interactionists (Charon, 2007) as thinking, and it is through this thinking—the process of carrying on a conversation and pointing things out to oneself internally—that analysis occurs based on reflection. Moreover, insight into changes in knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes can be apparent when this internal interaction is externalised—for example, during the completion of the SPQ or during the various forms of interviews conducted in this study. By mapping these interactions using symbolic interactionism and aligning the insights with the research literature, it is possible to amplify connections and explore the findings. In this light, Section 6.5 addresses the research question by advancing theoretical propositions. While the discussion to this point has artificially separated the three themes of the findings to provide clarity, the reality is that it is more complex and this simplicity is limited. Addressing this simplicity, the connections

between these three themes are drawn together in Sections 6.6 and 6.7 through my contribution to the field in the form of the application of the theory: *Spectrum of Engagement Framework*. Finally, in Sections 6.8 to 6.10 the recommendations, limitations and thesis conclusions are presented.

## **6.2 PERSONAL TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY**

Transition to university is supported through the provision of orientation experiences and peer mentoring. The intention of these supports is for students to ideally develop a university student identity, become motivated, feel validated by students and staff, and in turn take responsibility for their engagement at university in order to succeed.

### **6.2.1 Engaged students value Orientation Day, but many find it overwhelming**

Students in this study attended Orientation Day, which included a full day of activities where the experience enabled the communication of information on course expectations by course advisors and provided an opportunity for students to meet university personnel at a “meet and greet” session and participate in campus tours, essentially to acclimatise themselves to the campus. Some students were genuinely engaged at this early point of their student life, reinforcing the conclusions of Baik et al. (2015), who reported that students do interact initially and willingly with others. In this study, this was evident where students actively sought out friends and began to form networks of new friends. These students came to Orientation with a view to change, to be open to new ideas, to establish themselves as students, and to interact with others to make this happen. These interactions align with Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969) as students started to negotiate meeting arrangements and come to common understandings as to places, people, and expectations. Interestingly, because of their motivation and engagement, these students were open to new ideas and were changing and maturing their views and seeing themselves as professionals in the field early in their degree. This finding confirms the research by M. Christie et al. (2018) whereby orientation provides valuable information that also

includes the “strategic priorities of the university” (p. 128), along with research by Baik et al. (2015), who reported that the aim of orientation is to develop a sense of “affiliation with their institution and their course and staff” (p. 30). For these students, Orientation Day met their needs and they took advantage of the supports provided by the university.

While Orientation Day was considered valuable, many students interviewed indicated that it was also overwhelming and at times there was too much information provided and it was difficult to embrace it all. This finding supports previous research that orientation should be a transition initiative that is embedded across the first year of study (Douglas et al., 2018) and not be understood as a standalone experience. However, this finding contrasts with the views of McPhail et al. (2015), who argued that the objectives of one-day orientation programs can be met with a short program. The findings of this research confirm that while one-day orientation is worthwhile, and that most students in this study did actively engage with it, there would be advantages to having a protracted orientation across a longer time frame. In this way, the research by Douglas et al. (2018) is supported. Using the symbolic interactionist lens, it is easy to see that for most students, a one-day orientation limits interaction with the information provided and minimises the potential connections among participants. Most students come to this day understanding that Orientation will provide them with information that will push the boundaries of their thinking, and for many this is confronting. This short, sharp approach puts these students under pressure that has them seeking comfort by retracting to Tenet 1, relying on their own understandings (Blumer, 1969). Some of these students may see that other possibilities and different understandings exist, placing them at Tenet 2 of symbolic interactionism, but are too overwhelmed to interact in a way that will bring them to Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969). Without additional extended opportunities to interact with academic staff, professional staff, and other students, they are unable to interact sufficiently well to progress to Tenet 3 where they can co-create a common understanding of expectations and responsibilities evident in the highly engaged students.

### **6.2.2 Engaged students value the Mentoring Program**

This study confirms that a mentoring program offers a practical approach for students to be introduced to the life of the university, confirming the research by Lim et al. (2017), while serving as a positive influence on overall progress (Cooper, 2018). While differences exist with the implementation of mentoring programs, what is consistent is the emphasis on support in the first year (Douglass et al., 2013; Heirdsfield et al., 2008). However, highly engaged students in this study joined the program and it can be argued that their actions have them aligning with Tenet 3 as they demonstrate making choices to join the program, engage in social interactions, and communicate with one another. This resulted in developing socially constructed meaning about being a student in their first year of study. In contrast, those students who did not enrol in the program remained at Tenet 1, while those who did enrol but failed to engage had moved to Tenet 2 (Blumer, 1969) but could not socially interact with others, keeping them at this level.

### **6.2.3 Engaged students develop a sense of student identity and are motivated to succeed**

A finding of this study is that students do transition into their student identity through their engagement with Orientation Day and the Mentoring Program. However, it is also understood that, for the students in this study, there was an acknowledgement that their identity as university students began to develop prior to this point and was particularly supported at the point of receiving a university offer and at the time of enrolment. Motivation for attending university has been nominated as an influence on student identity that can promote student learning (Elkins et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 2015). In this context, there are varied reasons why students attend university and what motivates them to establish and maintain their engagement. What is clear, however, is that first-year students are transitioning from different experiences and generate their own personal strategies based on their backgrounds and priorities, which has also been reported by Gale and Parker (2014). These personal experiences and characteristics distinguish students from one another and explain differing motivations and attitudes towards engagement, confirming the conclusions of Heagney and Benson (2017). Students who quickly

adapt to their new surroundings and interact with others and thereby develop a student identity are seen to be operating at Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969).

While most students presented as interacting at Tenet 3, demonstrating motivation and developing their student identity, other students in this study narrated that in the beginning of their time at university they were unmotivated as they expected university life to be like school. These students initially failed to interact with university experiences and held strongly to their existing beliefs and understandings, which prevented them from moving beyond Tenet 1. Further, this restricted view about what university life should be like contributed to a lack of motivation and precipitated a loss of confidence and disappointing grades. Fortunately for most, these early experiences became the catalyst for a change in attitude as they began to realise they needed to interact and seek new practices to be successful. This reflective thinking can be aligned with Tenet 2, where students acknowledged that other students have different views and interacted in different ways and that it may be worth interacting with them to understand these. This reflective thinking of Tenet 2 allowed them to advance their thinking to adopt a more responsible approach towards their study and life at university, hence then operating at Tenet 3.

#### **6.2.4 Engaged students value validation from staff and peers**

Research literature concludes that when attending university, students are eager to be recognised, confirmed, and assisted in their learning by academic staff (e.g., Baik et al., 2019). This study can confirm this finding and extend it. The finding is that while non-academic staff endeavour to offer students a supportive and encouraging learning environment, this is not limited to academic staff. The students in this study reported that validation and friendship from their peers was also important (Buote et al., 2007). This was more evident from students who were highly engaged. They sought interactions with peers to negotiate understanding, espouse their views, and argue their point of view. This highly interactive process aligns with Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969) and indicates that these students are co-constructing new meaning and that opportunities



for this to occur are essential. It is here that the academic needs to provide a supportive space for this in all teaching forums.

### **6.2.5 Engaged students take responsibility for their engagement**

The conclusion can be drawn from the research literature that it is a shared responsibility of students and staff to take responsibility for student engagement at university (Axelson & Flick, 2011), although Tight (2019) recognised that there has been a shift in the responsibility resting with the student to that of the higher education institution. The finding is that while this is important for the university, it is more so important for the student to make decisions to engage and to take measures to do so, which will assist with university success. This was more evident from students who were highly engaged. Students participated in Orientation Day, social groups and clubs, the Mentoring Program, and other services provided by the university. This is relative to Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969) whereby students, in the process of meaning making, are co-constructing new meaning and engaging in as many opportunities as they can, which in turn, identifies these students as highly engaged.

## **6.3 SOCIAL EXPERIENCES AT UNIVERSITY**

### **6.3.1 Engaged students benefit from social interaction through study and friendship groups**

Social experiences through study and friendship groups are significant to first-year university experience. This influence can be understood through the phenomenon of communities of practice (Reaburn & McDonald, 2016). In this study, students reported that as a result of being involved in these groups, they were more inclined to experience first-year university in a positive way. This finding confirms earlier research that those involved within the community of practice can also entail “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing

basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). By engaging in such groups and sharing and developing common understandings, students are interacting in a way that is aligned with Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969). That is, they have socially constructed common understandings. Their participation continues in the group because they have constructed these commonly held understandings as they benefit all. This symbolic interactionist understanding sits well with earlier research that supports the notion that to enable learning and engagement in university life, this ideally occurs in an interactive environment with community dynamics offering a breadth of social and professional learning opportunities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002).

The students in this study outlined that their study groups were initially generated through class interactions, allowing friendships to be established, which, in turn, led to the establishment of small study and friendship groups (Buote et al., 2007). Students reported that when formed, their study groups enabled them to engage with one another outside of timetabled classes to share ideas and discuss content of lectures, as well as to generate strategies to complete assignments and to offer alternative perspectives on course material. Not only did students in this study support each other academically and socially in these groups, but they also supported each other emotionally, particularly when they experienced the stress of assessment. Notwithstanding the importance of the groups, students determined who belonged to the groups and were open to change as students continually entered and exited as common understandings did not always form. The interactions of the students in these groups are at Tenet 3.

In contrast to students who sought interaction through study and friendship groups, it was reported by some students that it was not necessary to join these groups and, therefore, their social interaction with other students was limited. Such students have been termed “legitimate peripheral participants” (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 315). For these students, the formation of these groups was not seen to be important to them, as they did not wish to, or did not know how to, associate themselves with fellow peers. It has been noted in the research literature that this could then lead to students not continuing with university studies as they fail to develop a

sense of belonging (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014). These students could be seen as operating at Tenet 1 (Blumer, 1969) as they are only making meaning of the experiences that are important to them, which often confirms their own thinking that is guided by their own reflective actions and self-talk. If this group of students are the students who gained entry with low entry scores or through an alternative pathway, then they are missing out on the richness of the student discussion that is part of constructing meaning about what they are learning and how they are to learn it.

In addition, for interaction to occur, it relies on friendships developing, and in this study, participants held contrasting opinions regarding the importance of friendship groups at university. Not all students made friends early in the first semester of their degree but went on to do so toward the end of Semester 1. It could be argued that these students have slowly moved through the tenets, moving from Tenet 1 to Tenet 2 and on to Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969). There were also many students who chose not to engage in a group, and these continued to operate at Tenet 1. An interesting aside is that non-recent school leavers reported that they tried to make friends with the recent school leavers but felt isolated from them at times. Indeed, recent school leavers were not particularly interested in forming friendships with the older students.

## **6.4 ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AT UNIVERSITY**

### **6.4.1 Engaged students develop positive study habits and strategies to promote time management skills**

Many highly engaged students in this study sought advice from the OSS to develop appropriate study habits and strategies such as time management skills. There were, however, other students, many of whom entered university with low entry scores, who did not seek this support. Discussions with these students suggested that their lack of engagement was due to the stigma they perceived was associated with accessing this form of support.

ACU provides workshops to support student study habits as university study requires a new level of expertise for almost all students (ACU 2019a; Larkin et al., 2016). The workshops that students discussed in this study introduced them to specific habits and strategies, one of which was time management. During the Orientation Day sessions, all students were encouraged to attend OSS. Research confirms this strategy and advances that the establishment of and access to effective study habits and strategies is the responsibility of both the student and the university (Van der Meer, Jansen, & Torenbeek, 2010; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

This study showed that it was predominantly the non-recent school leavers who used the workshops of the OSS. These students believed that academic skills were significant to their overall academic experience and as such were open to new ideas on how to achieve success at university. It is here that students move into Tenet 2 as they acknowledge that there are ways of strengthening their opportunities at university by engaging in social and academic interactions to support their learning. This further interaction and implementation then place them at Tenet 3 (Blumer, 1969). However, while it was established that non-recent school leavers used the service more often, there were instances where some recent school leavers did also attend. This was motivated by their university experience being different from school, particularly with processes of organisation and developing habits and strategies that were useful for academic success.

In the beginning, many students failed to interact with the provisions of OSS as they were not prepared to relinquish their pre-existing perspective that this type of university support is for those people who struggle with academic work, which prevented them from advancing beyond Tenet 1. When reflecting on this situation, some students who were reluctant initially did indicate that they eventually did attend some support services, but this delay had its consequences for these students. Unfortunately, others stayed at Tenet 1 as negative connotations presented barriers to participation. While it is well established that there are workshops and guidance from Academic Skills to assist with university transition and the academic rigour across all universities (Blair, 2017; Hossain et al., 2012), some students in this

study feared the stigma of support that was attached to any additional help, which was the case when they were at school, and they perceived this also existed at university. It could be argued that it was these very students who would have benefitted most by attending the support sessions, as some may have previously received learning support when at school. This claim is made as it is supported by recent research that confirms many teacher preparation programs are allowing students to enter university with an ATAR below 50 and an OP as low as 25 (Baik et al., 2019; McGraw & Fish, 2018). This fear of being identified as needing academic help restricts student engagement, keeping them at Tenet 2, where they know that opportunities exist but are not willing to interact. It presents as essential that university academic support services differentiate their service from school-based support so as both to assist the limited number of students with learning difficulties and to provide the more general academic-related services they offer to support all university students.

#### **6.4.2 Engaged students create partnerships with their teachers to improve their engagement in and outside of class**

Many engaged students in this study created partnerships with their teachers to improve their engagement in and outside of class. This was achieved through conversations about assessment, personal experiences, and teaching experiences and through choosing to take advantage of drop-in sessions to converse with their teachers, all of which assisted with developing these partnerships. Students confirmed that they were recognised outside of class and were impressed when teachers called them by their name. If students choose not to extend their engagement in this fashion, then they are operating in Tenet 1 (Blumer, 1969). However, for those engaging with their teachers, it is evident that they align with Tenet 2 where they are open to new meaning making and Tenet 3, co-constructed meaning, as they are making connections and co-constructing their relationships to inform and reinforce their engagement.

## 6.5 ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This study has generated considerable data across two stages of the study to understand the research question:

*How do first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) on the Brisbane campus engage with supports and experience university life, and can a tool be developed to assess engagement that will benefit the wider higher education community?*

As this research study is interpretive, it is not the intention to definitively answer the nominated research question. Rather, the intention is to write a descriptive account of the findings to enable the reader to make decisions about the transferability to their own context on the basis of “fit” (Stake, 2000). To support the reader in making these decisions, theoretical propositions are provided, and these are based on the three themes that were generated from the analysis of data that formed the basis of the display of data presented in Chapter 5. Consequently, following the interpretation of these data in this chapter by using the research literature and the symbolic interactionist lens, the advancement of the following theoretical propositions was undertaken.

*Personal transition to university proposition:* When students see themselves as members of the university life, where they engage with one another, allowing their strongly held views to change and grow through interaction, they become motivated students, and this ultimately leads to enhanced opportunities for success.

*Social experiences at university proposition:* Students who engage and connect socially through communities of practice advance their thinking and learning through an interpretive process supported by interaction with others that ultimately leads to co-constructed new meanings for them as university students.

*Academic experience at university proposition:* Academic success is founded on the engagement with knowledge and skills between the student and other students and the student and staff, and this is supported by appropriate behaviours that draw from the immediate and wider academic learning environment as well as personal preferences in terms of the habits and strategies that students employ to assist themselves.

These theoretical propositions advance our understanding of first-year student experience and permit the application of these theoretical propositions to a theoretical framework that can provide greater depth of understanding and potential application to the immediate and wider contexts in which first-year students are engaged.

## **6.6 APPLICATION OF THEORY: SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT**

### **FRAMEWORK**

The experience of first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at the Brisbane Campus of ACU is complex, multifaceted, and unique. The Spectrum of Engagement Framework (SOEF) to be outlined in this section is a theoretical framework created by the researcher as is for understanding and representing the dynamic nature of this engagement by first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students across the three dimensions of findings advanced by this thesis. The SOEF incorporates the findings nested within personal, social, and academic dimensions detailed above and advanced in the theoretical propositions. These have been generated from the literature that incorporates Deep, Surface and Achieving learning approaches and the work of Pittaway (2012). The SOEF further establishes that in the engagement of these dimensions there are fundamental engagement strategies that influence the quality of this engagement, and these are detailed in the criteria sheet shown in Figure 6.1. In addition, the interaction of the dimensions of engagement with the level of application results in the location of three levels (low, middle, or high) of this overall engagement experience. This

engagement framework therefore serves as a resource for understanding, interpreting, and supporting the experiences of first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students.

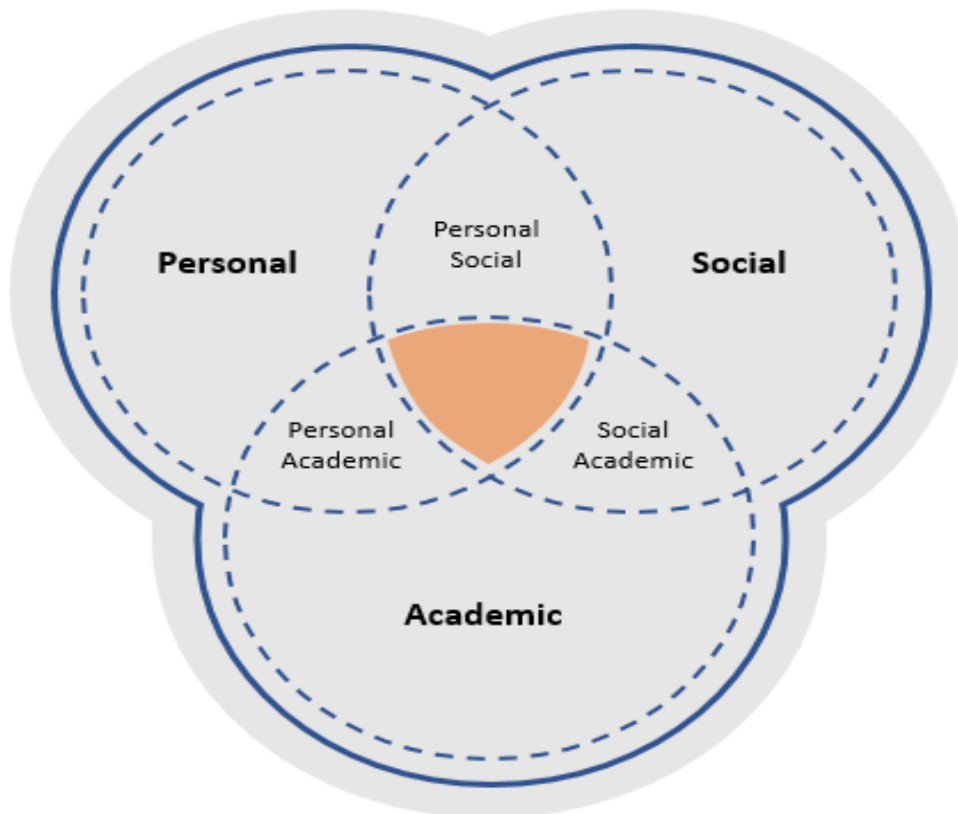


Engagement Dimensions	Engagement Strategies	Classification Levels and Engagement Indicators		
		Low	Middle	High
		<b>Personal Dimension</b>		
Developing a Student identity		Limited interest in developing a student identity	Partial emergence of a student identity	Development of a strong student identity
Developing motivation	Facilitating self-knowledge and a clear learning purpose	Limited motivation	Partial motivation emerging	Motivated and enthusiastic in class
Validation of self by staff		Limited validation from staff	Class attendance and some participation with staff	Active engagement with content and lecturer
Validation of self by students		Limited validation from students	Class attendance and some participation with students	Active participation with students
Orientation Day		No involvement in Orientation Day	Attended Orientation Day, but did not connect with peers	Attended Orientation Day and developed a network
Mentoring Program	Promoting relationships and support through individualised programs	No involvement with the Mentoring Program	Enrolled in program but limited contact with mentor	Program enrolment and constant connection with mentor and interest in becoming a mentee
		<b>Social Dimension</b>		
Study groups that support learning		Minimal contact inside and outside of class	Some peer connection in study groups with limited contact outside of class	Active engagement with peers in setting up study groups
Friendship groups that support learning	Enabling student autonomy in selection process	Minimal contact inside and outside of class	Some peer connection with friendship groups with limited contact outside of class	Active engagement with peers in setting up friendship groups
Involvement with social clubs		No interest in social clubs	Emerging interest but without participation	Active interest and participation in social clubs
Involvement with sport clubs	Communicating expectations and recognising financial capacity	No interest in sport clubs	Emerging interest but without participation	Active interest and participation in sport clubs
		<b>Academic Dimension</b>		
Establishing a study–life balance	Advocating an integrated approach to life and study	Non-class attendance with inadequate study–life balance	Class attendance with gradual balance in study–life commitments	Substantive university attendance with balance in study–life commitments
Seeking advice from OSS staff	Support for learning how to study at university	Struggling with time management and no participation in study skills programs	Learning to manage their time and can use appropriate study strategies with support	Becoming independent learners who are able to manage their time and use appropriate study strategies
Study habits and time management		Minimal interest in seeking assistance from Academic Skills staff	Some interest in seeking assistance from Academic Skills staff	Actively seeking assistance from Academic Skills staff
Engaging lectures with positive strategies		Limited engagement and strategies within lectures	Moderate engagement and strategies within lectures	Excellent engagement and strategies within lectures
Response level to written and verbal feedback	Engaging proactively to support own learning	Limited feedback from staff	Good feedback from staff	Constructive feedback from staff
Group work and active participation		Limited enjoyment of group work	Partial participation in group work	Engaged fully in group work

Figure 6.1. Spectrum of Engagement Framework (SOEF) criteria sheet.

Worthy of note is that Figure 6.1 outlines the three dimensions of the SOEF, engagement dimensions, engagement strategies, and the classification levels with the inclusion of engagement indicators descriptives. These have been generated from the interviews conducted in the Inspection Phase of the study and discussed in Chapter 5.

As this framework represents a spectrum of engagement, it is possible to see the differences in engagement level through a model that emphasises the personal, social, and academic dimensions of engagement. For example, in Figure 6.2, the point at which each of the dimensions overlap is seen as the central point shaded in orange and is large in size, representing the level of student engagement.



*Figure 6.2.* Model representing high level of engagement for personal, social, and academic dimensions.

Drawing on some data previously presented, it is possible to demonstrate the level of engagement to reflect the attitudes of students who were fully engaged with their university life, making comments such as the following for personal–social overlap:

People who are real, aren't afraid to question things and go out of their way to clarify it, read all the information and move forward ... I'm drawn to the same people with the same needs and interests as me. It's important to develop those friendships particularly at the start ... apart from the stress of uni, having friends and forming friendships makes it all more manageable. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

and this for personal–academic overlap:

Even though I was informed about Academic Skill[s] during Orientation Day and attended some workshops, it was great that they came to classes, as this assisted me as a reminder to use them and what's on offer and they can help with your work ... I thought, "Well if this is being offered, why not take advantage of it?" ... I've used them a lot and it's definitely helped. The workshops are really useful as well. (Sue II, Phase 2, Step 4)

and for social–academic overlap:

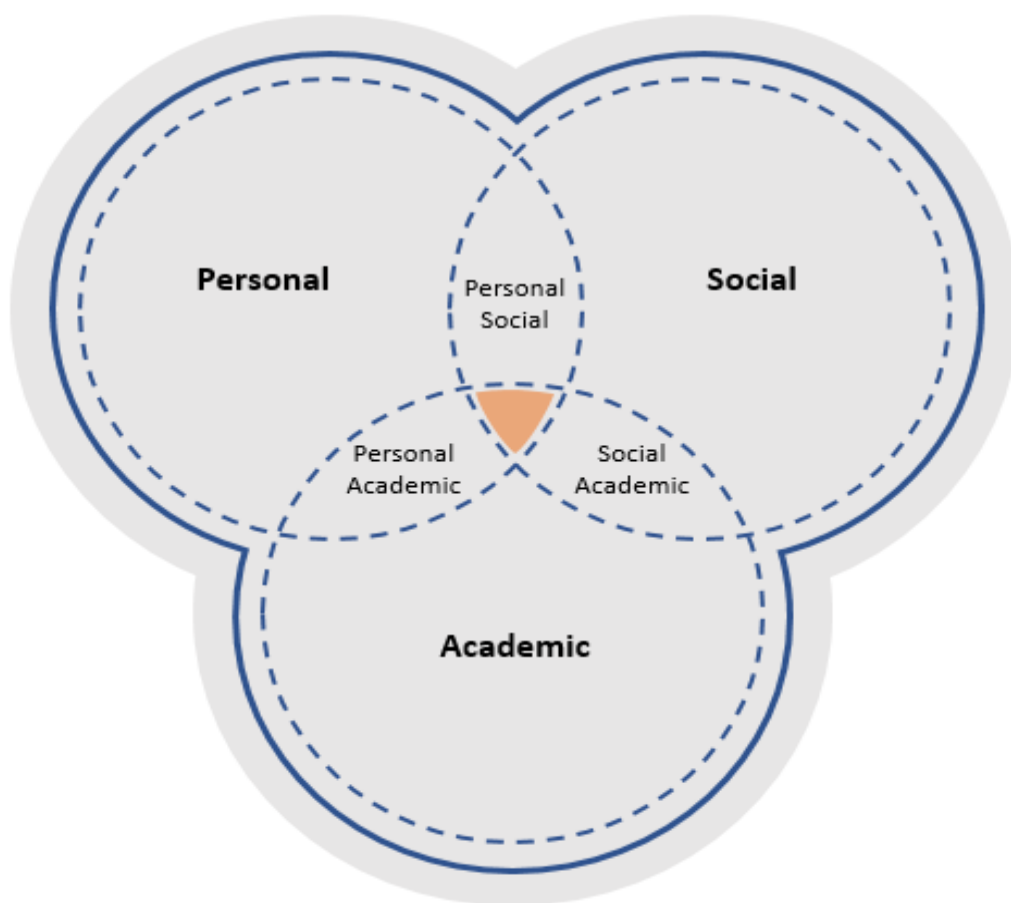
You quickly become friends with them because you find they are really interested in terms of the same beliefs, maybe opinions, and you can just approach someone and just say "hi" and become fast friends. Because of this, it helped me to stay at uni and not to quit. (Rob II, Phase 2, Step 4)

A comment typical of high engagement across all aspects is the following:

After participating in the program as a mentee and learning where things were early, I now would like to join up to be a mentor ... It's a great concept and I can certainly see the benefits and would like to give back to the program. (Mary II, Phase 2, Step 4)

Figure 6.2 is reflective of the high level of engagement and is characterised by the descriptors detailed in Table 6.1 for high level engagement.

In contrast to this figure, those students who actively restricted their interactions with others have a very different shape for engagement. This is evident in Figure 6.3 with a very small level of engagement represented by the orange section.



*Figure 6.3.* Model representing low level of engagement for personal, social and academic dimensions.

This figure represents those students who prefer limited interaction, and as a result, the overlap between their personal, social, and academic dimensions is small. The limited personal–social overlap is represented by typical comments such as the following:

I am independent on that respect ... family and university are the priority for me.  
 I don't need friends at uni, I come here to study, and I leave. I've got too much happening outside of uni to bother with that. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

They also do not allow their personal academic achievements to be supported by services such as Academic Skills workshops. As we now understand, students with low entry scores attached a negative stigma to attending Academic Skills workshops as evidenced by the following quote: “I don't attend as I don't want to be perceived as dumb and that I needed help because I entered uni off a different pathway” (Rob II, Phase 2, Step 4). This is represented by the minimal overlap we can see between their engagement with personal and academic dimensions. These

students also failed to join student and friendship groups. They kept to themselves and prioritised their contacts outside university. This is represented by the low level of overlap between the social and academic dimensions resulting in limited engagement, as represented by the following comment:

I've come back to uni at my age. So, it's a combination of proving this to myself, I can do this and achieve this. It's those first steps of being accepted. It's your tutor telling you: "You're doing a good job." It's the validation that you are capable and committed. I'm not here for a holiday. I'm here to work and to achieve high grades ... I'm here to learn and my answers should be validated. I felt I wanted to quit, because I wasn't getting that. (Bridget II, Phase 2, Step 4)

A comment typical of low engagement across all aspects is the following:

It seems non-attendance of lectures and tutorials is because how some classes are conducted and how busy students are and how they need to allocate their time to other things outside of university. (Aidan I1, Phase 2, Step 3)

These figures represent the spectrum of engagement from a very high level of engagement in Figure 6.2 to a low level of engagement in Figure 6.3. Figure 6.1 outlined the dimensions and the descriptors for each level of engagement, and the understandings of the overlapping of dimensions drew on quotes previously displayed in Chapter 5 as a way to support understanding of this model and the level of student engagement. Figure 6.1 also included an additional component of the SOEF, being engagement strategies. These strategies vary according to the types of connections students make with each dimension.

Representation of the components of the SOEF is a reflection of the participants' commentary and the researcher's interpretation of the experiences of first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. Moreover, the SOEF is broad and complex involving different qualities and classification levels. Further, once an appreciation of engagement classification has been achieved, the framework serves as a mechanism to review, prioritise, and renew engagement activities. Here the student can reflect on their level of engagement and make

changes to it. Moreover, university staff can review and support engagement, which in turn, generates a different classification of engagement and serves to reinforce engagement quality.

Figure 6.4 illustrates the dynamic application of the framework. The framework incorporates the three dimensions of engagement for first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students and identifies engagement strategies as mediating influences on students' engagement, which leads to a level of engagement classified as low, middle, and high. Learning styles are intentionally not included in this framework, but they are inherent within the personal, social and academic dimensions as the specific learning styles will depend on the outcomes of the SOESAT for each individual student.

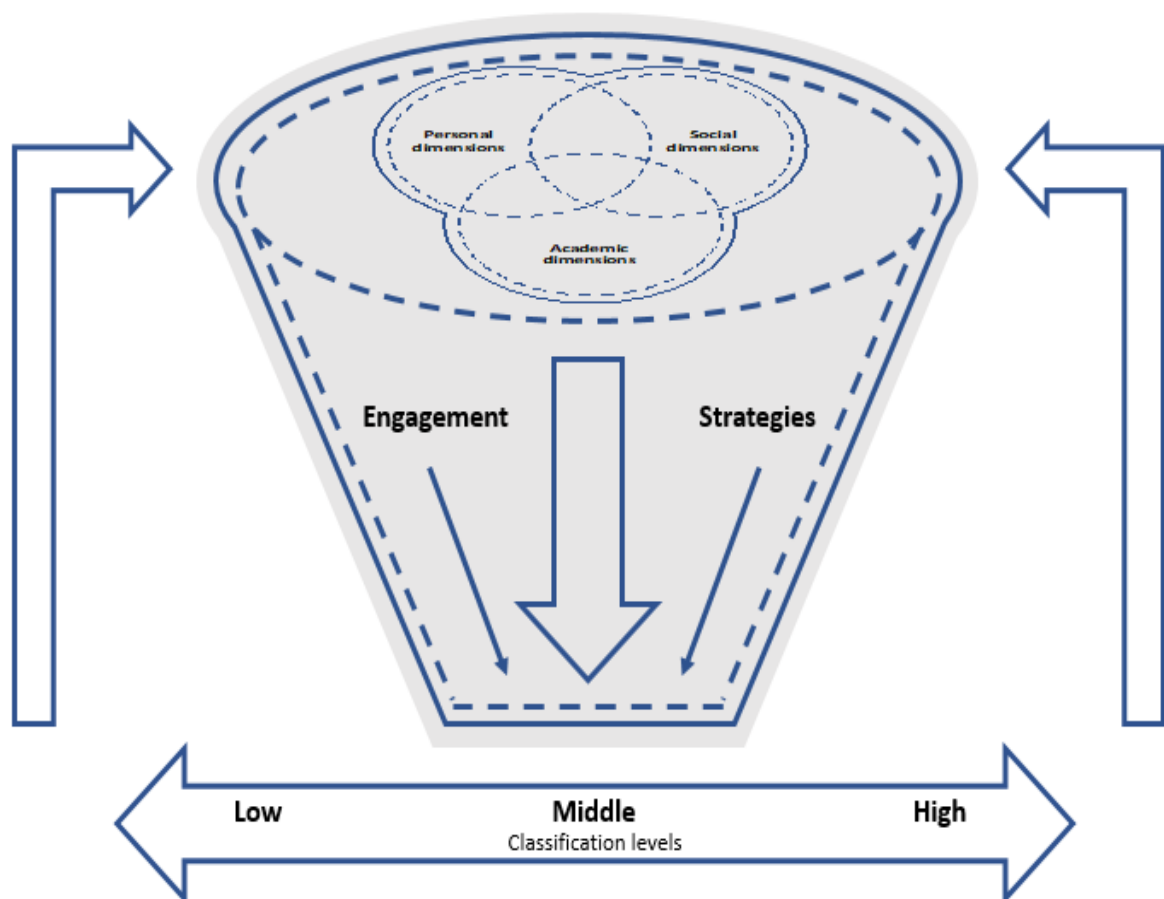


Figure 6.4. Spectrum of Engagement Framework (SOEF).

The vertical and return arrows within the extremity of the figure indicate the cyclical nature of the SOEF and reinforce engagement characteristics as comprehensive, flexible, and

responsive to individual students and their personal differences, their responses to interaction with others, and their own reflective meaning making process. The presentation of two of the aspects of the SOEF, dimensions and engagement strategies, are embedded in a “funnel”, while the classification levels are at the exit of the funnel. These indicate that engagement processes are initially very broad and are refined as students begin to engage with the supports the university provides. Further, it is when engagement is influenced by varying strategies that have different levels of quality (engagement strategies) that the outcomes are deduced and can be precisely classified and, where necessary, supported strategically. However, if this does not occur immediately or simultaneously, then the process repeats itself by way of the return arrows until students determine where their engagement strategies and levels fall.

The conceptualisation of first-year university engagement through the SOEF can be applied and extended through the development of the Spectrum of Engagement Self-Assessment Tool (SOESAT; see Appendix N) The application of this tool allows students to take some responsibility for their progress at university. This tool allows students to complete each section of the tool during Semester 1 so that they can self-monitor their level of engagement. Completion of the tool means that each dimension can be graded by the students to see where they may “fall” in each category, being low, middle, or high levels of engagement. Students can then make decisions to change their priorities in response to their own reflection or make firm decisions to continue to proceed with existing strategies. It is also possible for students to complete the self-assessment tool and then discuss the results with a staff member as a form of support. The personal dimension of SOESAT is included as Figure 6.5 to demonstrate that aspect of the self-assessment nature of the tool. Here the students will quantify their level of engagement and, as part of the summary, assess what they need to do to increase their level of engagement by answering the questions, *What engagement conclusions have I reached?* and *What engagement priorities need to be actioned?* These sections of the tool are displayed as Figure 6.6. It is important to note that the aggregate scores within this tool are

different for each dimension as the number of items in each dimension vary in number. The maximum of 5 points per item can be awarded for each item. Consequently, the possible score for each dimension is different. The possible total score for personal is 35, social is 25 and academic is 50.

Personal dimensions of engagement: Reflective of who you are as a student					
Please consider and respond to the following statements on your personal engagement at university.	Strongly				Strongly
	Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Disagree
	5	4	3	2	1
I attended Orientation Day					
I am involved with the peer mentor program and became a mentee					
I am motivated by my learning groups					
I am motivated to study with peers					
I have developed a student identity through interaction with others					
I feel validated by staff in class through my interactions					
I feel validated by students in class through my interactions with them					

Figure 6.5. Personal dimensions of engagement reflection.



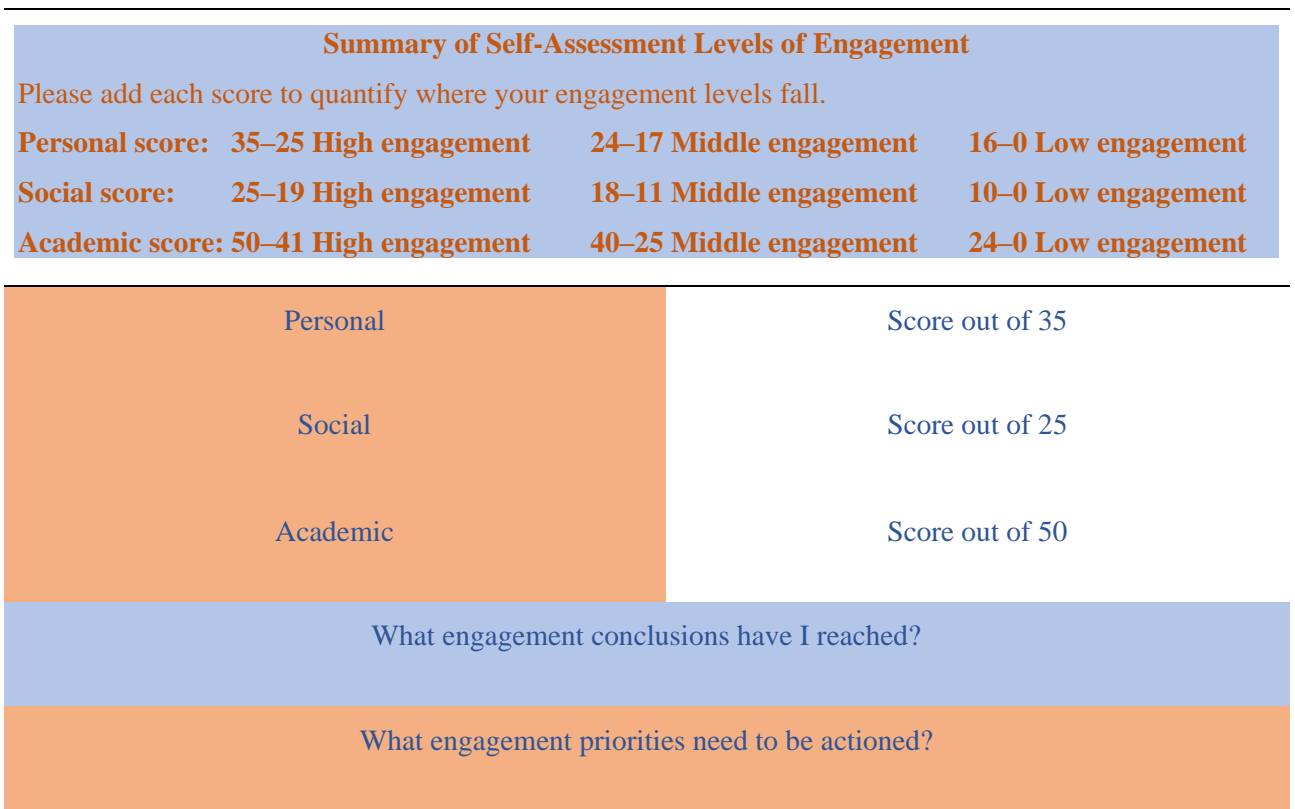


Figure 6.6. Summary of self-assessment levels of engagement.

## 6.7 CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD

### 6.7.1 Contribution to new knowledge

This study concludes that the location of personal, social, and academic dimensions of engagement, engagement strategies, and classification of levels of engagement can identify the level of overall engagement of a first-year university student. To represent these conclusions, the SOEF, a theoretical model of the relationship between the elements, has been developed. To bring the theoretical model back to a practical contribution to the field, the SOESAT has been developed.

The interaction of the dimensions of engagement classifies student engagement as low, middle, and high. This classification offers an understanding and general measure of student engagement and provides rationales for supportive student learning interventions. This study concludes that first-year university engagement is a complex process involving the interaction and nomination of aspects of experience that are influenced by quality practices and differing

levels of student interaction. The overall process of engagement is characterised and conceptualised as follows:

- multidimensional and inclusive of personal, social, and academic dimensions;
- dynamic and integrative;
- supported strategically by reflection on personal-, social-, and academic-sensitive experiences;
- a way to monitor and support student engagement through the SOESAT.

### **6.7.2 Contribution to practice**

To bring the theoretical model back to a practical contribution to the field, the SOESAT has been developed and is attached as Appendix N. In addition, this study has four conclusions that contribute to new practice.

#### ***Identification of engagement dimensions***

The research identifies three dimensions of engagement for first-year university students: personal, social, and academic dimensions that individually and jointly influence the quality of student engagement. These dimensions are lenses for university academic staff to understand the students' world. Involvement in supporting student engagement would therefore need to be mindful of each student's individual engagement dimensions and their relationships with students and staff.

#### ***Engagement strategies that maximise engagement***

Within the dimensions of engagement, the research establishes that there exist supportive practices (engagement strategies) that maximise the quality of student engagement. These strategies serve to build on the dimensions of engagement and add quality to student insights and interventions. These strategies are outlined in Figure 6.1 and reflect personal, social, and academic dimensions based on quality of engagement, being low, middle, and high within the SOEF. For the convenience of the reader the strategies are detailed below:

- facilitating self-knowledge and a clear learning purpose;
- promoting relationships and support through individualised programs;
- enabling student autonomy in selection process;
- advocating an integrated approach to life and study;
- support for learning how to study at university;
- removing stigma associated with participation in Academic Skills programs; and
- engaging proactively to support own learning.

### ***Classification of student engagement as a mechanism for monitoring and support***

The dimensions of engagement, together with the adoption of strategies that promote engagement, enable students to complete the SOESAT to classify their own engagement as low, middle, or high. The purpose of such classification is to allow for identification of student engagement opportunities and for the prioritisation of these opportunities to facilitate targeted engagement with a view to advancing learning outcomes.

### ***Monitoring student engagement***

Monitoring of student engagement may be supported by the application of the SOEF. For the student's lecturer, the importance of the SOEF is its capacity to monitor student progress and to provide specific information for staff to tactically respond with appropriate learning support. In this context, the SOEF provides the basis for a review of engagement quality for each student. It is also important for each student to monitor their own engagement levels through the SOESAT and engage in the supports offered by the university. Students and staff can work collaboratively and begin to develop partnerships through monitoring engagement on campus collectively.

## **6.8 RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study offers recommendations that emanate from the research conclusions. They represent suggestions by which all those involved in the education of pre-service Bachelor of

Education (Primary) students can move to enhance their practice for developing student engagement with a view to minimising the current “at risk of not completing first year” rate reported as being 30% (Baik et al., 2015, p. 1). These recommendations take two forms, further research and policy change.

### **6.8.1 Further research**

- The SOESAT to be piloted, trialled, and used to promote greater understanding of how students engage with experiences during their first year of university as a way to support all students who enter university.
- Invite researchers to use and modify the SOEF and SOESAT as appropriate to their context.

### **6.8.2 Policy change**

- Non-academic staff involved with first-year students to be proactive in understanding their students’ engagement. This may be achieved through effective means of monitoring first-year engagement such as the use of the SOEF and the associated SOESAT. The monitoring of student engagement invites all personnel into responsibilities in support of the efficacy of first-year engagement.
- As students with low entry scores are being enrolled, cross-campus sharing of university resources, such as the SOEF, and engaging personnel to enhance the learning of first-year students invites the review of policy, particularly concerning the allocation of finances and staff resources to assist in the management of first-year university engagement.
- Universities should appoint a first-year coordinator for each faculty to develop, implement, and support practices of student engagement across the university, particularly for those with low entry scores.

- Early intervention and continuing support in first year: The university seeks to support first-year students through a variety of programs offered prior to the commencement of scheduled classes. While these can't be comprehensively sustained on an individual basis, some of this support is offered on a continuing basis for first-year students, particularly as academic expectations increase across the year. It is during these "busy times" that students seek guidance and assistance not only from the academic staff, but also from professional staff and personal counsellors. Knowing that there is additional support from staff allows first-year students to take advantage of this support, allowing them to take responsibility for their own learning in ways that maximise their engagement and contribute to learning outcomes.

## 6.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Study limitations were discussed in Chapter 4. Beyond these limitations, a further three limitations presented during the course of the study.

First, it was expected that a large proportion of the 150 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) would complete the SPQ prior to the commencement of lectures, which would have allowed pre- and post-testing through using paired samples *t* testing. Thirty-four of the 150 students completed the SPQ at this time. At the conclusion of the semester, none of these students completed the SPQ again. Instead, 56 students who had not completed it at the commencement of the semester completed it at the conclusion of the semester. This return rate forced the decision to conduct independent samples *t* testing on the data retrieved. What can be learned from this limitation is that it would benefit the study if the same cohort of participants completed SPQ1 and SPQ2 and therefore, data can be compared across the semester.

Second, it was not the intention of the researcher to interview academic staff who taught first-year students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree as this study was focused on understanding how first-year students experienced supports provided by the university and

university life. However, upon further consideration, this would have been another opportunity to broaden and deepen the data to include an understanding of the perceptions of academic staff who provide many of the supports to these students.

Third, at the commencement of this study, it was considered inappropriate to ask participating students if they had gained entry through low entry scores or alternative pathways, and this caution is also recorded in the research literature (McKay & Devlin, 2016). I now realise that this would have allowed greater support to be provided for these particular students who had captured my attention in the beginning and to whom I want to provide every opportunity to enhance learning success.

## **6.10 CONCLUSION**

The impetus for this study was a concern for first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students, and whether students experienced or engaged with the university support services offered by the university. My interest also grew from my experiences of teaching first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. Within this context there developed a passion to understand and optimise learning experiences for all students, particularly those who had gained entry to the degree with low scores or through alternative pathway entry. The research explored how to understand the way first-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students at ACU on the Brisbane campus experience supports offered by the university and university life.

This study emphasised the nature and practices within first-year university engagement and offers perspectives for future research and policy change on this important and complex phenomenon. It also provides tools to assist academics to be proactive in the provision of engagement opportunities for the students themselves to understand their own engagement and prioritise that engagement.

As I feel I am now more informed on the topic of first-year student engagement, I will continue my journey to provide greater care and support for first-year students, across all universities, through my research community.





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# Appendices

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## Appendix A

### Email to Students and Staff

Invitation to students inviting them to volunteer to participate in the focus groups and individual interviews.

#### **Research Project – Student experiences in their first year at an Australian university: A case study**

**Conducted by: Katie O’Brien – Doctor of Education Student**

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in focus group interviews and individual interviews at the end of semester 1 and during the June/July break. The questions asked will relate to how you approach university study and your first-year university experiences.

If you wish to participate, please return this email to Carmel Turner at [Carmel.turner@acu.edu.au](mailto:Carmel.turner@acu.edu.au), Course Co-ordinator and further correspondence will be sent to you regarding a convenient time for you to participate.

Kind regards,

Katie O’Brien  
(via Carmel Turner)

Initial invitation to staff inviting them to volunteer to participate in the individual interviews.

#### **Research Project – Student experiences in their first year at an Australian university: A case study**

**Conducted by: Katie O’Brien – Doctor of Education Student**

Dear Staff,

You are invited to participate in individual interviews to share your experiences when teaching at an Australian university. These will take place between at the end of semester 2. If you wish to participate, please return this email to me and further correspondence will be sent to you regarding how to be involved.

Kind regards,

Katie O’Brien

## Appendix B

### Study Process Questionnaire, Consent Process and SPQ Qualtrics Consent

#### Study Process Questionnaire

Consent for the completion of the SPQ will be obtained via an online consent process via the Bachelor of Education (Primary) LEO site and the consent letter provided. If you agree to participate in this questionnaire, please click **yes** and you will be taken to the questionnaire. If you do not wish to participate, please click **no**.

#### Study Process Questionnaire

There are 45 items on this survey that collect data on your first-year experience. For each of the first 42 items there five options on a scale of 5–1. A response is shown by selecting one of the five options. Please choose the response that best suits you. The final three items on the questionnaire collect your demographic and confidential data.

1. I chose my present courses largely because of the better professional opportunities when I graduate rather than out of their own interest to me.
2. I find that at times studying gives me a feeling of deep personal satisfaction.
3. I want top grades in most or all of my courses so that I will be able to select from among the best positions when I graduate.
4. I think browsing around is a waste of time, so I only study seriously what's handed out in class or in the course outlines.
5. While I am studying, I often think of real-life situations to which the material that I am learning would be useful.
6. I summarize suggested readings and include these as part of my notes on a topic.
7. I am discouraged by a poor mark on a test and worry about how I will do on the next test.
8. While I realise that truth is forever changing as knowledge is increasing, I feel driven to discover what appears to me to be the truth at this time.
9. I have a strong desire to do my best in all my studies.
10. I learn some things by rote, going over and over them until I know them by heart.
11. In reading new material I often find that I am continually reminded of material I already know and see that old material in a new way now.



12. I try to work consistently throughout the term and review regularly when the exams are close.
13. Whether I like it or not, I can see that further education is for me a good way to get a well paid and secure job.
14. I feel that any topic can be very interesting once I put effort into it.
15. I would see myself as an ambitious person; I want to get to the top in whatever I do.
16. I tend to choose subjects with a lot of factual content rather than theoretical kinds of subjects.
17. I find that I have to do enough work on a topic so that I can form my own point of view before I am satisfied.
18. I try to do all of my assignments as soon as possible after they are given out.
19. Even when I have studied hard for a test, I worry that I may not be able to do well in it.
20. I find that writing an assignment can at times grab my interest, so that I will continue with it and not get distracted.
21. If it came to the point, I would be prepared to sacrifice my immediate popularity with my fellow students for success in my studies and subsequent career.
22. In studying I generally do what the lecturer says to do; it is unnecessary to do anything extra.
23. I try to relate what I have learned in one subject to that in another.
24. After a lecture I reread my notes to make sure they are readable and that I understand them.
25. Lecturers should not expect students to spend time studying material which everyone knows will not be examined.
26. I usually become increasingly interested in my work the more I do it.
27. One of the most important considerations in choosing a course is whether or not I will be able to get top marks in it.
28. I learn best from lecturers who work from carefully prepared notes and outline major points neatly on the board or use multimedia to express an idea.
29. I find most new topics interesting and often spend extra time trying to obtain more information about them.

30. I test myself on important topics until I understand them completely.
31. I do not really like having to spend years studying after leaving school but feel that the end results will make it all worthwhile.
32. I believe strongly that my main aim in life is to discover what I believe are the best rules to live by and to act strictly in accordance with them.
33. I see getting high grades as a kind of game, and I want to be one of the winners; I like to be better than most others.
34. I find it best to accept the statements and ideas of my lecturers and question them only under special circumstances.
35. I spend my free time finding out more about interesting topics which I have discussed in different classes.
36. I make a point of looking at some of the suggested readings that go with the lectures.
37. I am at university mainly because I feel that I will be able to obtain a better job if I have these qualifications.
38. My studies have changed my views about such things as politics, my religion, and my philosophy of life.
39. I believe that society is based on competition and schools, colleges and universities should reflect this.
40. I am very aware that lecturers know a lot more than I do and so I concentrate on what they say is important, rather than rely on my own judgements and opinions.
41. I try to relate new material, as I am reading it, to what I already know on that topic.
42. I keep well organised notes for most subjects.

Are you male or female?

Please choose the correct response.

Are you a school leaver?

Are you a non recent school leaver?

Please include your mother's maiden name and the number of your house.

This is used to identify your participation and is confidential.

End of questionnaire.

Thank you for participating.

## Appendix C

### Study Process Questionnaire Participant Information Letter

**PROJECT TITLE:** Student experiences in their first year at an Australian university: A case study.

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin

**STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Katie O'Brien

**STUDENT'S DEGREE:** Doctor of Education

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

#### ***What is the project about?***

The research offers you an opportunity to share your opinions about your first-year experience at university. The research is important as it may contribute to further research in this area and it may contribute to better understanding how students engage with their first year of university study.

#### ***Who is undertaking the project?***

This project is being conducted by Katie O'Brien and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Education at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin.

#### ***Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?***

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research. However, if you feel that you do not wish to participate, then there is no obligation and no consequences.

#### ***What will I be asked to do?***

You will be invited to volunteer to participate in this research. If you participate you will be required to:

- Complete two online questionnaires (Study Process Questionnaire) over the course of Semester One, 2014. Each will take approximately 20 minutes. Informed consent is obtained from the research participants and their rights outlined. Consent will be obtained via the online questionnaire.

The types of questions asked will relate to how you approach university study and your university experiences. You will be invited to volunteer to complete a questionnaire twice in 2014. These will occur at the beginning and end of Semester One. An initial invitation will be sent via student email in February 2014, then a second request will be sent via student email in May 2014.

#### ***What are the benefits of the research project?***

There are no immediate minimal benefits to the participants. Although, the intention is for them to share their university experiences with the researcher.

#### ***Can I withdraw from the study?***

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences. Although once the questionnaire is submitted, you cannot withdraw the survey, but can still withdraw from the research and future contacts. Non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your ongoing enrolment.

***Will anyone else know the results of the project?***

The study or parts thereof may be published in Australian or International Educational Journals and the final thesis. Participants will not be identified in any publications. Responses are reported in coded form and participants are non-identifiable for confidentiality.

***Will I be able to find out the results of the project?***

The final thesis will be made available for those students who participated. It will be the decision of the participants to follow up this process.

***Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?***

Questions regarding this research should be directed to me at [katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au](mailto:katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au); (0410109307) or my Principal Supervisor, Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin (07 3623 7154); [denis.mclaughlin@acu.edu.au](mailto:denis.mclaughlin@acu.edu.au); or:

Faculty of Education  
Australian Catholic University  
PO Box 456  
Banyo Queensland 4014

***What if I have a complaint or any concerns?***

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (approval number 2013 157Q). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

Chair, HREC  
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)  
Australian Catholic University  
Melbourne Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
FITZROY, VIC, 3065  
Ph: 03 9953 3150  
Fax: 03 9953 3315  
Email: [res.ethics@acu.edu.au](mailto:res.ethics@acu.edu.au)

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

***I want to participate! How do I sign up?***

If you consent to complete the questionnaire, please follow the link [www.qualtrics.com.au](http://www.qualtrics.com.au).

Your participation or non-participation in this research does not disadvantage you with your continued study. Your identity in all aspects of this research remain strictly anonymous and confidential.

Thank you for your participation. It would be appreciated if you wish to complete the Study Process Questionnaire to please do so by XXX via the available link above.

Yours sincerely,  
Katie O'Brien  
Denis McLaughlin

## Appendix D

### Semi-Structured In-Depth Focus Group Interview Protocol

#### Before turning the tape recorder on:

1. Explain the purpose of the interview.

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, I am interested in understanding how you experience your first year at university. I am going to be asking you questions about your personal experiences, your strategies for learning, the units you are enrolled in, assessment, and, about learning environments and lecturers.*

2. Consent Process: Ask each participant if s/he has not already completed consent forms. Participants sign a copy of the consent form for them to keep and for the Interviewer to keep (2 copies in total). In all cases, tell the participant:

*Before we begin the interview, I want to remind you that participating in this study is voluntary and your responses are completely confidential. At any point during the interview, if any of you would like me to turn off the recorder, just tell me to do so. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?*

#### Turn the recorder on

*It is XX date at XX time. This is Katie O'Brien and I am interviewing first-year students in a focus group.*

*I am going to ask a few introductory questions to begin the interview and then move to more targeted questions about your experience at university this year so far.*

#### PRIOR TO ATTENDING UNIVERSITY

*I'm now going to ask a question about your previous life experiences before university, whether it be school or work.*

1. *Prior to coming to university, you had other life experiences, work or school. What's the difference been like?*
2. *Have your previous life experiences assisted you to transition into university life?*

#### STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AFTER ONE SEMESTER OF STUDY

##### Experience

1. *You've experienced 12 weeks now, a full semester of university. So, tell me, what did you expect university life to be like in the beginning?*

### Prompt

- a. Has it been as you expected? Why or why not?
2. *Can you tell me about what you like about being a uni student?*

### Prompts

- a. Can you describe some positive experiences?
- b. Can you describe any disappointing experiences?
  - i. Are there any strategies that the lecturer might have implemented to assist you with these disappointments?
3. *Would anyone like to add anything else?*

## Learning

1. *What have you done to assist your own learning to get ready for your lectures?*

### Prompts

- a. Reading lecture notes
- b. Pre-readings of text books
- c. Have study groups to revise previous week's work
- d. Organise your timetable
- e. Rote learn
2. *What have you done to assist your own learning to get ready for your assignments?*

### Prompts

- a. Have you attended Academic Skills workshops?
- b. Are you a member of a study group?
  - i. Do you have a study group timetable?
  - ii. When do you begin to work on assignments?
- c. Have you completed a library search to seek references?
- d. Have you made an appointment with the librarian?
3. *Do you have any things that might assist you in your independent learning that you find are beneficial?*
4. *What sort of feelings can you describe when you think about your study and university?*

### Prompts

- a. Happy?
- b. Sad?
- c. Satisfied?

5. *Name some interesting things about the units you are studying.*
6. *Do you research different or new topics that might be of interest to you?*
7. *Do you just stick to the content of the unit?*
8. *What grades do you try to achieve?*
9. *Do you put your top effort into all your units?*
10. *Now I'm going to ask you questions about other strategies that assist or do not assist you.*

### **Engagement**

*I'm going to ask you a few questions relating to your engagement in your first year of study.*

1. *What subjects do you like the best? Why?*
2. *Why do you think it's the best?*
3. *What subjects do you like the least? Why?*

### **Assessment**

*I'm going to ask you some assessment related questions now.*

1. *In terms of the assessments that you've had for all your units, what have you enjoyed?*
2. *What sort of test preparation do you participate in?*
3. *Part of your assessment has been to reflect on your learning. Do you think you have developed the necessary skills to be more reflective? If so, explain why.*

#### **Prompts**

- a. *And as a teacher, potentially that reflective practice is something that you look upon every day?*
- b. *And would that assist you to do better and research a little bit more for the next piece of assessment?*

### **WHAT UNI OFFERS**

*So, we'll just move on to the last couple of questions about your learning through the first semester and your lecturers.*

1. *What have they done to engage you in your learning?*

#### **Prompts**

- a. *What strategies have lecturers used that worked for you as individuals?*
- b. *Online learning activities?*

c. Multimedia interactive activities, for example, YouTube clips?

2. *How did that engage you?*

3. *Would you say that this style of teaching builds a staff–student relationship?*

4. *Do you feel that university is a competitive environment?*

Prompt

a. If so, how?

## **CLOSING STATEMENT**

*Thank you everyone. If there is nothing more to say, then that draws us to the conclusion.*



## Appendix E

### Consent Form (Student)

*Copy for Participant (Student) to Keep*

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THEIR FIRST YEAR AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY

**PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR:** Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin

**STUDENT RESEARCHER** (if applicable): Katie O'Brien

I ..... (*the participant*) have read (*or, where appropriate, have had read to me*) and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in (Please tick your choice). You may wish to participate in both or just one.

- Semi structured in depth focus group interview

- Semi structured in depth individual interview

Both will be audio taped and I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time (without adverse consequences). I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

My contact details are:

Mobile:

Student email address:

SIGNATURE .....

DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (or SUPERVISOR):.....

DATE:.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE:.....

## Appendix F

### Semi-Structured In-Depth Individual Interview Protocol (Students)

#### Before turning the tape recorder on:

1. Explain the purpose of the interview.

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, I am interested in understanding how you experience your first year at university. I am going to be asking you questions about your personal experience and ideas that came from the focus groups that I thought were interesting to explore further.*

2. Consent Process: Ask each participant if s/he has not already completed consent forms. Participants sign a copy of the consent form for them to keep and for the Interviewer to keep (2 copies in total). In all cases, tell the participant:

*Before we begin the interview, I want to remind you that participating in this study is voluntary and your responses are completely confidential. At any point during the interview, if any of you would like me to turn off the recorder, just tell me to do so. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?*

#### Turn the recorder on

*It is XX date at XX time. This is Katie O'Brien and I am interviewing one first-year student every half an hour in semi-structured in-depth individual interviews.*

*I am going to ask a few introductory questions to begin the interview and then move to more targeted questions about your experience at university this year so far.*

#### PRIOR TO ATTENDING UNIVERSITY

*I'm now going to ask a question about Orientation Day.*

1. *What are your thoughts regarding Orientation Day?*
2. *How did it assist you prior to starting classes?*
3. *Were you aware that the university sought to assist you prior to university commencing?*
  - a. *If yes, what did the university provide?*

#### STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AFTER ONE SEMESTER OF STUDY

##### Experience

1. *Do you think you were ready to enter university when you did?*

## Prompts

- a. Has it been as you expected? Why or why not?
2. *Does your entrance score, OP, ATAR or other results show a true reflection of your capability?*
  - a. Can you share with me your journey prior to entering university?
  - b. What results do you strive to achieve?
3. *How does life fit around your study and vice versa?*
4. *What motivated you to come to university?*
5. *What motivated you to become a teacher?*

## Learning

1. *What strategies do you use to assist your learning?*

### Prompt

- a. How has time management played a role in your university attendance?
2. *Do you have any things that might assist you in your independent learning that you find beneficial?*
3. *Do you get stressed about university study?*
  - a. If yes, what causes you stress?
4. *Tell me what you see as a major challenge in first year so far?*

## Engagement

*I'm going to ask you a few questions relating to your engagement in your first semester of study.*

1. *What subjects do you like the best?*

### Prompt

- a. Why do you think it's the best?
2. *What subjects do you like the least?*

### Prompt

- a. Why is it the least enjoyable?

## Friendships

*I'm going to ask you about forming peer networks and friendships at university.*

1. *How have you formed relationships at university?*
2. *How have these relationships impacted your learning?*
3. *How have these relationships impacted your engagement in classes?*
4. *How have these relationships impacted your attendance?*

## Assessment

*I'm going to ask you some assessment related questions now.*

1. *What's the hardest piece of assessment you have undertaken?*
  - a. Why?
2. *What sort of feedback did you receive?*

Prompts

- a. Written?
- b. Verbal?
- c. Positive?
- d. Negative?
- e. Ways to improve your work?

## WHAT UNI OFFERS

*So, we'll just move on to the last couple of questions about your learning through the first semester.*

1. *Have you used Academic Skills in your first year?*

Prompts

- a. Why?
- b. Why not?

2. *How many workshops or sessions that the OSS ran did you attend?*

Prompt

- a. Why?

3. *Have you used the library to assist you with assessment?*
4. *How many lectures and tutorials did you attend for each of your subjects?*
5. *Were you engaged in the classes?*

Prompt

- a. How were you engaged?

## CLOSING STATEMENT

*Thank you everyone. If there is nothing more to say, then that draws us to the conclusion.*

## Appendix G

### Semi-Structured In-Depth Individual Interview Protocol—Case Studies

#### Before turning the tape recorder on:

1. Explain the purpose of the interview.

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. In the previous interviews, you related strongly to (Sense of Belonging or Peer networking and diverse social groups or Engagement in and outside of class).*

*The following questions are going to probe your perspective further.*

2. Consent Process: Ask participant if s/he has not already completed consent forms.

Participants sign a copy of the consent form for them to keep and for the Interviewer to keep (2 copies in total). In all cases, tell the participant:

*Before we begin the interview, I want to remind you that participating in this study is voluntary and your responses are completely confidential. At any point during the interview, if any of you would like me to turn off the recorder, just tell me to do so. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?*

#### Turn the recorder on

*It is XX date at XX time. This is Katie O'Brien and I am interviewing one student per half an hour for the semi-structured in-depth individual interviews (case studies).*

#### PATHWAYS TO UNIVERSITY

1. *What has brought you to university?*
2. *What was your career prior to university?*
  - a. *Stay at home parent?*
  - b. *School leaver?*
  - c. *Non-recent school leaver?*
  - d. *Previous university experience?*
3. *What was your pathway to university?*
4. *Did you receive good career advice during school?*
  - a. *What advice was given?*
5. *How supportive is your family of your study?*
6. *How did you feel when you got accepted into university?*
7. *Did you always consider being a teacher?*

## UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES

*How was Orientation for you?*

1. *What programs have you been involved during Semester One?*

Prompts

- a. Mentoring programs?
- b. Academic Skills workshops?

2. *Have you formed groups and friendships with other students?*

Prompts

- a. What sort of people are you drawn to?
- b. Is forming friendships a priority for you?

3. *Have you developed relationships with your lecturers?*

4. *Do you attend classes?*

5. *Do you engage in classes?*

- a. How?

6. *What approaches best support your learning?*

## ACHIEVING RESULTS

1. *What are the results you strive to achieve?*

2. *What pushes you to achieve good results?*

3. *How important is succeeding at university to you?*

4. *What's your motivation?*

5. *How do you perceive your commitment to university studies?*

6. *What do you find the most difficult to juggle?*

7. *Have you used Academic Skills or the library to assist you with your studies?*

8. *What other strategies do you use to assist yourself with assessment?*

Prompts

- a. Notetaking?
- b. Highlighting content?
- c. Researching journal websites?
- d. Study groups?

## CLOSING STATEMENT

*Thank you for participating. If there is nothing more to say, then that draws us to the conclusion.*

## Appendix H

### Semi-Structured In-Depth Individual Interview Protocol (Non-Academic Staff Member from Office of Student Success)

#### Before turning the tape recorder on:

1. Explain the purpose of the interview.

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am interested in understanding how first-year students experience university. I am going to be asking you questions about your experiences when first-year students come to see you at the Office of Student Success, Academic Skills.*

2. Consent Process: Ask participant if s/he has not already completed consent forms.

Participants sign a copy of the consent form for them to keep and for the Interviewer to keep (2 copies in total). In all cases, tell the participant:

*Before we begin the interview, I want to remind you that participating in this study is voluntary and your responses are completely confidential. At any point during the interview, if any of you would like me to turn off the recorder, just tell me to do so. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?*

#### Turn the recorder on

*It is XX date at XX time. This is Katie O'Brien and I am interviewing one non-academic staff member from the Office of Student Success.*

*I am going to ask a few introductory questions to begin the interview and then move to more targeted questions about your experiences when first-year students come to see you at the Office of Student Success.*

#### ACADEMIC SKILLS

1. *What does the university do to assist first-year students?*
  - a. Orientation Day?
  - b. Other programs?
2. *I know that Academic Skills offer workshops. What are they?*

#### Prompts

- a. Academic Skills workshops?
- b. Attend tutorials in some classes?

- c. Writing workshops?
- d. APA referencing workshops?
- e. Drop-in sessions?
- f. Exam preparation?
- g. Assignment writing?

3. *How often do the workshops run and how long?*

4. *How do academic staff respond to the students' requests for individual assistance?*

### **CHALLENGES FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS FACE**

1. *What are some of the major challenges first-year students come to you with?*

2. *At what point in the semester do students start to visit Academic Skills?*

3. *What sort of students come for assistance?*

Prompts

- a. Non-recent school leavers?
- b. School leavers?
- c. Student with high OPs or low ATARs?
- d. International students?
- e. Indigenous students?
- f. High achieving students?

4. *When students receive feedback from their lecturer regarding "please see Academic Skills", do students come to you and identify this lecturer recommendation?*

### **STUDENT /STAFF RELATIONSHIPS**

*I'm now going to ask a question about what staff might do to assist students.*

1. *What do you see that lecturers or other staff members do to also assist the first-year students coming in?*

### **CLOSING STATEMENT**

*Thank you for participating. If there is nothing more to say, then that draws us to the conclusion.*



## Appendix I

### Semi-Structured In-Depth Individual Interview Protocol (Non-Academic Staff Members from Orientation Committee)

#### Before turning the tape recorder on:

1. Explain the purpose of the interview.

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am interested in understanding how first-year students experience university. I am going to be asking you some questions about Orientation Day.*

2. Consent Process: Ask participant if s/he has not already completed consent forms.

Participants sign a copy of the consent form for them to keep and for the Interviewer to keep (2 copies in total). In all cases, tell the participant:

*Before we begin the interview, I want to remind you that participating in this study is voluntary and your responses are completely confidential. At any point during the interview, if any of you would like me to turn off the recorder, just tell me to do so. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?*

#### Turn the recorder on

*It is XX date at XX time. This is Katie O'Brien and I am interviewing one individual non-academic staff member from the Orientation Day Committee.*

#### ORIENTATION DAY

*I'm just going to ask you some general questions regarding Orientation Day.*

1. *Please describe what Orientation Day is about and how does it work?*
2. *Who else is involved?*

Prompts

- a. Internal people from other faculties and marketing?
- b. Who are the external members of the community?

3. *Is there a program?*

Prompts

- a. What does the program involve?
- b. Are there any online, lead-in programs?

4. *What does ACU wish to achieve?*

5. *Is there much feedback from the students regarding Orientation Day?*
6. *What does the university do with the feedback?*
7. *Are the students actually getting what is advertised?*
8. *What are the students' expectations of Orientation Day?*
9. *Does Orientation Day provide a window to connect with other programs on campus?*

**Prompts**

- a. Sports programs?
- b. Clubs and associations?

10. *How are the students connected after Orientation Day?*
11. *How does Orientation Day assist with transition into university?*
12. *Does the university capture the engagement of first-year students?*

**CLOSING STATEMENT**

*Thank you for participating. If there is nothing more to say, then that draws us to the conclusion.*

## Appendix J

### Human Research Ethics Committee Approval Letter and Original Email

Dear Applicant,

Principal Investigator: A/Prof Denis McLaughlin

Student Researcher: Ms Katie O'Brien

Ethics Register Number: 2013 157Q

Project Title: STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THEIR FIRST YEAR AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY.

Risk Level: Low Risk 2

Date Approved: 17/10/2013

Ethics Clearance End Date: 31/12/2014

This email is to advise that your application has been reviewed by the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee and confirmed as meeting the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. This project has been awarded ethical clearance until 31/12/2014. In order to comply with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, progress reports are to be submitted on an annual basis. If an extension of time is required researchers must submit a progress report.

Whilst the data collection of your project has received ethical clearance, the decision and authority to commence may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the ethics review process. For example, your research may need ethics clearance or permissions from other organisations to access staff. Therefore, the proposed data collection should not commence until you have satisfied these requirements. If you require a formal approval certificate, please respond via reply email and one will be issued. Decisions related to low risk ethical review are subject to ratification at the next available Committee meeting. You will only be contacted again in relation to this matter if the Committee raises any additional questions or concerns.

Researchers who fail to submit an appropriate progress report may have their ethical clearance revoked and/or the ethical clearances of other projects suspended. When your project has been completed please complete and submit a progress/final report form and advise us by email at your earliest convenience. The information researchers provide on the security of records, compliance with approval consent procedures and documentation and responses to special conditions is reported to the NHMRC on an annual basis. In accordance with NHMRC the ACU HREC may undertake annual audits of any projects considered to be of more than low risk.

It is the Principal Investigators / Supervisors responsibility to ensure that:

1. All serious and unexpected adverse events should be reported to the HREC with 72 hours.
2. Any changes to the protocol must be approved by the HREC by submitting a Modification Form prior to the research commencing or continuing.
3. All research participants are to be provided with a Participant Information Letter and consent form, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee.

For progress and/or final reports, please complete and submit a Progress / Final Report form: [www.acu.edu.au/465013](http://www.acu.edu.au/465013). For modifications to your project, please complete and submit a Modification form: [www.acu.edu.au/465013](http://www.acu.edu.au/465013). Researchers must immediately report to HREC

any matter that might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol eg: changes to protocols or unforeseen circumstances or adverse effects on participants.


Please do not hesitate to contact the office if you have any queries.

Kind regards,

Kylie Pashley  
Ethics Officer | Research Services  
Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) Australian Catholic University

THIS IS AN AUTOMATICALLY GENERATED RESEARCHMASTER EMAIL

Original email

2013 157Q **Ethics** application approved! 

---

**From:** Kylie Pashley <Kylie.Pashley@acu.edu.au> on behalf of **Res Ethics** <Res.Ethics@acu.edu.au>  
**Sent:** Thursday, 17 October 2013 3:08 PM  
**To:** Denis McLaughlin <Denis.McLaughlin1@acu.edu.au>; Katie O'Brien <Katie.O'Brien@acu.edu.au>  
**Subject:** 2013 157Q **Ethics** application approved!

**This message has been archived. [View the original item](#)**

Dear Applicant,

Principal Investigator: A/Prof Denis McLaughlin  
Student **Researcher**: Ms Katie O'Brien  
**Ethics** Register Number: 2013 157Q  
Project Title: STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THEIR FIRST YEAR AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY.  
Risk Level: Low Risk 2  
Date Approved: 17/10/2013  
**Ethics** Clearance End Date: 31/12/2014

## Appendix K

### Information Letter to Students

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

**PROJECT TITLE:** Student experiences in their first year at an Australian university: A case study.

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin

**STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Katie O'Brien

**STUDENT'S DEGREE:** Doctor of Education

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

#### *What is the project about?*

The research offers you an opportunity to share your opinions about your first-year experience at university. The research is important as it may contribute to further research in this area and it may contribute to better understanding how students engage with their first year of university study.

#### *Who is undertaking the project?*

This project is being conducted by Katie O'Brien and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Education at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin.

#### *Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?*

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research. However, if you feel that you do not wish to participate, then there is no obligation and no consequences.

#### *What will I be asked to do?*

You will be invited to volunteer to participate in this research. If you participate you will be required to:

- Participate in a 30-minute audio taped focus group **and/or**
- Participate in a 30-minute audio taped individual interview.

The types of questions asked will relate to how you approach university study and your university experiences. You will be invited to volunteer to participate in the focus groups and interviews at the end of Semester One, with the expectation that both will be conducted before Semester Two begins. The focus groups and interviews will take place in the office of Katie O'Brien (GC.10) and will be determined later by appointment at a mutually convenient time and date. A request will be sent at the end of Semester One via your student email address, together with two Consent Forms (one for you to sign and keep, and one for you to sign and return to me). Please see attached Consent Form.

#### *What are the benefits of the research project?*

The benefits to the participants will be that they share in hearing the experiences of other first-year students at an Australian university.

#### *Can I withdraw from the study?*

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without

adverse consequences. Non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your ongoing enrolment or results.

***Will anyone else know the results of the project?***

The study or parts thereof may be published in Australian or International Educational Journals and final thesis. Participants will not be identified in any publications. Responses are reported in coded form and confidentiality will be maintained.

***Will I be able to find out the results of the project?***

The final thesis will be made available for those students who participated. It will be the decision of the participants to follow up this process.

***Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?***

Questions regarding this research should be directed to me at [katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au](mailto:katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au); (0410109307) or my Principal Supervisor, Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin (07 3623 7154); [denis.mclaughlin@acu.edu.au](mailto:denis.mclaughlin@acu.edu.au); or:

Faculty of Education  
Australian Catholic University  
PO Box 456  
Banyo Queensland 4014

***What if I have a complaint or any concerns?***

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (approval number 2013 157Q). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

Chair, HREC  
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)  
Australian Catholic University  
Melbourne Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
FITZROY, VIC, 3065  
Ph: 03 9953 3150  
Fax: 03 9953 3315  
Email: [res.ethics@acu.edu.au](mailto:res.ethics@acu.edu.au)

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

***I want to participate! How do I sign up?***

If you wish to participate, please sign and return the consent form as soon as possible to [katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au](mailto:katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au). I will then contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time and date. Your participation or non-participation in this research does not disadvantage you with your continued study. Your identity in all aspects of this research remains strictly confidential.

Yours sincerely,

Katie O'Brien

Denis McLaughlin

## Appendix L

### Information Letter to Staff

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

**PROJECT TITLE:** Student experiences in their first year at an Australian university: A case study.

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin

**STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Katie O'Brien

**STUDENT'S DEGREE:** Doctor of Education

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

#### *What is the project about?*

The research offers you an opportunity to share your opinions about first-year student experiences at university. The research is important as it may contribute to further research in this area and it may contribute to better understanding how students engage with their first year of university study.

#### *Who is undertaking the project?*

This project is being conducted by Katie O'Brien and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Education at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin.

#### *Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?*

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research. However, if you feel that you do not wish to participate, then there is no obligation and no consequences.

#### *What will I be asked to do?*

You will be invited to volunteer via email to participate in this research. If you participate you will be required to:

- Participate in a 30-minute audio taped individual interview.

The types of questions asked will relate to how students you teach approach university study and their university experiences. You will be invited to volunteer to participate in the interviews at the end of Semester One, with the expectation that they will be conducted during Semester Two. The interviews will take place in the office of Katie O'Brien (GC.10) and will be determined later by appointment at a mutually convenient time and date. A request will be sent at the end of Semester One via your staff email address, together with two Consent Forms (one for you to sign and keep, and one for you to sign and return to me). Please see attached Consent Form.

#### *What are the benefits of the research project?*

Staff will have the opportunity to share their experiences at an Australian university.

#### *Can I withdraw from the study?*

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences. Non-participation or withdrawal will not affect our ongoing working relationship.

***Will anyone else know the results of the project?***

The study or parts thereof may be published in Australian or International Educational Journals and final thesis. Participants will not be identified in any publications. Responses are reported in coded form and participants are non-identifiable for confidentiality.

***Will I be able to find out the results of the project?***

The final thesis will be made available for those students who participated. It will be the decision of the participants to follow up this process.

***Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?***

Questions regarding this research should be directed to me at [katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au](mailto:katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au); (0410109307) or my Principal Supervisor, Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin (07 3623 7154); [denis.mclaughlin@acu.edu.au](mailto:denis.mclaughlin@acu.edu.au); or:

Faculty of Education  
Australian Catholic University  
PO Box 456  
Banyo Queensland 4014

***What if I have a complaint or any concerns?***

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (approval number 2013 157Q). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

Chair, HREC  
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)  
Australian Catholic University  
Melbourne Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
FITZROY, VIC, 3065  
Ph: 03 9953 3150  
Fax: 03 9953 3315  
Email: [res.ethics@acu.edu.au](mailto:res.ethics@acu.edu.au)

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

***I want to participate! How do I sign up?***

If you wish to participate, please sign and return the consent form as soon as possible to [katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au](mailto:katie.o'brien@acu.edu.au). I will then contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time and date. Your identity in all aspects of this research remain strictly anonymous and confidential.

Yours sincerely,

Katie O'Brien

Denis McLaughlin



**Appendix M**

**Consent Form (Staff)**

*Copy for Participant (Staff) to Keep*

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THEIR FIRST YEAR AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY.

**PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR:** Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin

**STUDENT RESEARCHER** (if applicable): Katie O'Brien

I ..... (*the participant*) have read (*or, where appropriate, have had read to me*) and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree/disagree to participate in:

- Semi structured in depth individual  interview

Both will be audio taped and I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time (without adverse consequences). I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

My contact details are:

Mobile:

Staff email address:

SIGNATURE ..... DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: .....

DATE:.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE:.....

## Appendix N

### Spectrum of Engagement Self-Assessment Tool (SOESAT)

Thank you for participating in the Spectrum of Engagement Self-Assessment Tool (SOESAT). This questionnaire has a 5-point scale, 5 being the highest where you *Strongly Agree* with the statement to 1 being the lowest where you will *Strongly Disagree* with the statement. There are three dimensions of engagement within the SOESAT. These are Personal, Social and Academic and are related to your experiences in your first semester.

During your first year, it is my goal as a Lecturer of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) students, and as the First-Year Experience Coordinator and the Mentor Program Coordinator to offer you as much support as possible. Before you complete the questionnaire, please provide the demographic details as well. I appreciate your time in completing the details below.

Your name:

Your age:

What was your ATAR?

What was your OP?

Are you the first in your family to attend university?

Are there any other teachers in your family? Who?

Do you present as a non-recent school leaver?

Do you present as a recent school leaver?

What is your highest qualification received? (For example: Certificate 2, Certificate 3)

Have you attended TAFE, university or other pathways to assist with entry into university?

Have you applied for Adjustment factors through the university? If yes, how many did you receive?

Have you registered for disabilities support?

## Spectrum of Engagement Self-Assessment Tool

Personal dimensions of engagement: Reflective of who you are as a student					
Please consider and respond to the following statements on your personal engagement at university	Strongly Agree 5	Agree 4	Neither 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
I attended Orientation Day					
I am involved with the peer mentor program and became a mentee					
I am motivated by my learning groups					
I am motivated to study with peers					
I have developed a student identity through interaction with others					
I feel validated by staff in class through my interactions					
I feel validated by students in class through my interactions with them					

Social dimensions of engagement: Enhancing social experiences					
Please consider and respond to the following statements on your personal engagement at university	Strongly Agree 5	Agree 4	Neither 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
I have formed study groups to support my learning					
I have formed friendship groups to support my learning					
I am involved with sport clubs					
I am involved with social clubs					
I am involved with the student association					

Academic dimensions of engagement: Enhancing academic experiences

Please consider and respond to the following statements on your personal engagement at university	Strongly Agree 5	Agree 4	Neither 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
I am establishing a study–life balance					
It is necessary to seek advice from the Office of Student Success (Academic Skills) staff					
Developing study habits/strategies, e.g. time management, is important to me					
Even though I may have entered university with a low entry score, I believe that I should seek advice from Academic Skills					
I believe there is a stigma associated with seeking advice from Academic Skills					
Engaging lectures and positive strategies assist with my learning					
Positive learning strategies provided by my lecturer support my learning					
I believe that written feedback assists with my learning					
I believe that verbal feedback assists with my learning					
Group work is beneficial					

### Summary of Self-Assessment Levels of Engagement

Please add each score to quantify where your engagement levels fall.

<b>Personal score:</b>	<b>35–25 High engagement</b>	<b>24–17 Middle engagement</b>	<b>16–0 Low engagement</b>
<b>Social score:</b>	<b>25–19 High engagement</b>	<b>18–11 Middle engagement</b>	<b>10–0 Low engagement</b>
<b>Academic score:</b>	<b>50–41 High engagement</b>	<b>40–25 Middle engagement</b>	<b>24–0 Low engagement</b>

Personal

Score out of 35

Social

Score out of 25

Academic

Score out of 50

What engagement conclusions have I reached?

What engagement priorities need to be actioned?

Thank you for participating in the SOESAT.