CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS RELATED TO
STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

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SUMMARY

The main aim of the thesis was to investigate factors related to participation and academic achievement in university education with emphasis placed on the language, ethnic and socio-economic background of students.

The review of literature covered factors related to retention rates and educational performance in Australian secondary schools, students' educational aspirations, participation and academic achievement in higher education, and ethnicity and labour market experience. The consideration of Asian overseas students and age structures of ethnic populations in Australia in previous research on the participation of non-English speaking background persons in higher education was investigated.

A questionnaire survey was designed and applied to students who attended Chemistry I, English I and Economics I orientation week lectures at the University of Adelaide in 1990. The number of questionnaires returned was 818. Among other factors, students' birthplace, parents' birthplaces, language study and usage, ethnic identity, degree of social integration, socio-economic background, last type of secondary school system attended, type of financial support, and semester residence were established.

Questionnaire responses were analysed and in relevant situations, compared with Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data and data on 1985 entrants to South Australian higher education institutions available from previous research. Responses to the open-ended question 'What do you hope to gain from your studies at the university?' were also analysed.

The academic transcripts of students who supplied their institutional reference number (70% of the sample) were obtained and students' 1990 academic achievement data analysed in connection with the questionnaire data. A number of factors were investigated in relation to academic achievement including gender, age, semester residence, whether the student was enrolled in their first preference course or not, socio-economic background, type of secondary school attended, language background, ethnicity and degree of social integration. Factors for which differences in academic achievement were found were investigated again in relation to the 1991 academic achievement data of students who re-enrolled in 1991 to establish if these differences persisted into the second year of study.

Data on whether students enrolled in 1992 were also obtained to enable the cal-
ulation of proportions of students in 1990 who re-enrolled in 1991 or 1992. These figures gave an indication of those students who had most likely dropped out from their university studies.

A number of key findings were discussed in the thesis. Those from high socio-economic backgrounds were found to be strongly over-represented at the University whilst those from low socio-economic backgrounds were under-represented. The representation of those from state, Catholic and independent schools was found to be much the same as five years earlier, namely, those from state schools were under-represented whilst those from independent schools were over-represented. The representation of those from Catholic schools was about the same as for the South Australian population. Regarding ethnicity, it was concluded that, overall, those from non-English speaking backgrounds were not under-represented at the University of Adelaide.

A number of significant differences in academic achievement were found. Among them were that females performed better than males, those who relied on casual or part-time work as a source of income performed worse than those who did not, and those who were not enrolled in their first preference course performed significantly worse than those who were. Although the differences were not significant, other indications were that those from state schools were the best overall performers, followed closely by those from independent schools whilst those from Catholic schools were the worst performers.

The academic achievement of non-English background speaking persons as a group was found to be much the same as for those of English speaking background. However, those from non-English speaking backgrounds were more likely to re-enrol in later years. More specifically, those from a non-English speaking European background were found to be the worst overall performers for 1990 but the best performing group in 1991. Results also indicated that those from non-English speaking backgrounds who socially integrated performed better than those who did not.