A Study of University Transition Experiences of First and Non-first Generation Students

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Abstract

This program of research is an exploration into the experiences of both first and non-first generation students transitioning to university.

It is comprised of three consecutive and integrated studies. The first is a literature review to establish what is already known about the transition experiences of commencing students as well as the statistics and characteristics of these students. Based on the literature which identified a need to re-think firstly, the way non-first generation students are perceived to transition into university environments due to a number of significant changes to higher education environments and secondly, the demographics of first generation students due to an increase in diversity within this group, Study Two was designed to further explore these areas. Study Two was a qualitative study in which twelve commencing university students were interviewed and their experiences were analysed and interpreted to contribute to the field of knowledge in new ways.

An important result of Study Two was that prior experiences were identified as being the most influential factor in the ways students transitioned into university. Students who had had similar experiences to university study and knew what to expect transitioned more seamlessly than their peers. Since prior experiences were key to these students' realistic expectations and transition experiences, Study Three was then developed as a case study where a South Australian Senior Secondary University Pathway school was invited to participate as the case under study. This particular school was purposefully chosen as the structures and practices at the school were likely to mirror those in universities. The aim of Study Three was therefore to gain insight into ways schools can assist students with transition to university and whether or not this particular school was effective in doing so.

While this program of research confirmed existing knowledge regarding first generation students, it also discounted common assumptions and generalisations held in regard to non-first generation students and reinforced the need to explore both types of students further, particularly in relation to theories of cultural capital and entitlement. Study Two found that similar prior experiences to university study, rather than cultural capital, assisted the students in this study with their transition to university and that without prior experiences, regardless of first or non-first generation status or socio-economic status, students experienced difficulties and in some cases, dissatisfaction and disorientation during their transition. The Program also highlighted the need for schools and universities to work more closely together to better prepare school-leavers for university. School-leavers make up a large proportion of university commencers and would benefit from prior experiences which were similar to university study while still at school. Study Three uncovered the structures and practices in place in the case study found to be successful in preparing students for university study. The experiences of the

students who had spent time at the school were positive and mostly in contrast to those of the students with limited prior experiences similar to university in Study Two.

In summary, commencing students without prior experiences similar to university study have been shown to experience challenges and difficulties in their transition, even when they have a history of university study in their immediate family. During this period when difficulties arise, students may contemplate leaving and, without the right support, may decide to withdraw from their studies. For those, however, with similar prior experiences, transitioning to university is seen as a continuation of their education and embraced with confidence. These findings have important implications for universities and especially secondary schools in the assistance that can be given to facilitate effective transition.

Conference Proceedings Arising out of the Program of Research

Di Sotto-Hames, A. 2013. School to university transition: Can schools help? School of Education Centre for Research Education. Conference Proceeding, University of South Australia.

Di Sotto-Hames, A. 2014. Preparing students for an enhanced first year experience and beyond: A case study of a secondary school's approach to learning and teaching. Conference Proceeding, 17th International First Year in Higher Education, Darwin.

Di Sotto-Hames, A. 2016. Bridging the Gap – From Secondary Schools and other pathways to Higher Education. Conference Proceeding, Students Transition Achievement Retention and Success, Melbourne.

Di Sotto-Hames, A. 2017. Working with Blended Learners in Mathematics. Digital Futures / Digital Capabilities: Design. Create. Transform. Conference Proceeding, The University of Adelaide.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this program of research contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.



Angela Di Sotto-Hames

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Introduction to the Program of Research

Overview

This program of research concurrently explores the experiences of students who are the first in their family to undertake university study and the experiences of students coming from families where university participation has been somewhat of a tradition. The program begins with a literature review on student transition which sets the context and rationale for the rest of the program. The literature review is followed by a study on student perceptions of the university transition period and the program of research concludes with a case study examining how a university pathway school prepares its students for transitioning from school to university. A meta-analysis, included after the body of research, provides an overview of the program of research where overarching concepts are discussed and findings are summarised and consolidated.

Background

This program of research was undertaken during my employment as a Transition Officer at an Australian university. My previous role to this was in a teaching position at a disadvantaged school where the majority of students were the first members of their families to have aspirations of continuing onto higher education. I became interested in university transition after having several discussions with past students who had been accepted into university but had withdrawn after a relatively short time. I wanted to understand how I could, as a senior secondary school teacher, better prepare my students for university study. This led me to undertake study in a Master's Degree in Education and a one-year appointment as a Visiting Teacher within a university faculty school where I could see, first-hand, what would be expected of students once they entered university. It was after my employment as a Visiting Teacher and completion of my Master's Degree that I accepted the position of Transition Project Officer at another university and immediately enrolled in a Professional Doctorate of Education, specialising in the area of student transition in relation to family background and education. My employment has provided me with experience and insight in relation to student transition and experiences. Having worked at the school-university interface for much of my career, I have worked with many students from a variety of backgrounds and have developed an understanding of and an empathy for the challenges and issues students face during their transition period.

Furthermore, being a first generation student myself, I have a deeper level of understanding in relation to transition. Like a number of, but not all first generation students, my family background is working class. My mother left school at the age of 14 and my father at the age of

12. Both my parents immigrated to Australia during the 1960s with trade knowledge and were employed as a dressmaker and an electrician respectively. While my family was unable to provide me with an understanding of the culture and physical environment of higher education, they did provide me with an appreciation of the value of education for the sake of learning and for the sake of a 'good' job. When times became difficult I was always reminded of the value of education and the worth of learning. This was instilled in my upbringing from an early age and was an important aspect of my youth and development, albeit unusual in comparison with my friends and their families living in the same suburb.

My family background and career path have therefore led me to this research program. My aim has been to further develop my understanding in this area and to give back to the community by sharing and contributing the findings and the experiences of the students who have agreed to participate in this program of research.

Massification of Higher Education

Over the last 30 years, universities have undergone major change and restructure in relation to student intake, class sizes, delivery methods and technology (Pike and Kuh 2005, Schofer and Meyer 2005, Trow 2000). The transformation is a result of higher education massification in response to national government policies and agendas implemented in the late 1980s. Massification in this context is a concept used to describe the rapid increase in student enrolment which occurred towards the end of the twentieth century and the effects this had on the institution and its people. This process encouraged universities to rethink and redevelop the way they offer and deliver educational services, which as a consequence impacts upon the composition and characteristics of the university environment itself (Dzakiria 2012). Today, technology and innovation feature heavily in university environments and, as a result, flexible learning environments which include a mixture of blended learning and multi-media interfaces have become embedded within higher education systems and programs of study (Hornsby and Osman 2014, Kemp and Norton 2014).

Given this situation, it is difficult to refer to today's university environment as being 'traditional' in any sense of the word. While the physical environment for many institutions may still remain the same, the teaching methods, processes and student culture has changed (Pike and Kuh 2005, Schofer and Meyer 2005). It is difficult therefore, and problematic now, to understand the claims referring to 'traditional' students. Traditional students are labelled as having come from families where the higher education tradition is said to be passed down to them through the generations. They are said to have an understanding of higher education systems through the experiences of their parents. However, with the changes in universities occurring over the last 30 years or more, it is difficult to know how much experience, under these circumstances,

parents can pass down to their children. University transition for all students today is quite different to the transition experienced by previous generations. It is likely that traditional students today are operating and studying in university settings very different from the ones their parents and grandparents graduated in over two decades ago and are, as such, unlikely to be able to rely on the advice and knowledge of parents and grandparents in their new environments today (Trow 2000). So to some degree, traditional students are finding themselves in similar positions to first generation students, where expectations are, at times, unclear and norms and processes are unfamiliar, and yet in terms of completion, traditional students still out-perform first generation students by a significant margin. In this way, first generation students are significantly disadvantaged compared with non-first generation students for reasons still unclear, and there is need for further research in this area. This then provides incentive for understanding this study.

Non-First Generation Students

Non-first generation students, often referred to as 'traditional students' or 'continuing students', are students who have identified that at least one of their parents has a university qualification. More often than not, non-first generation students are classified as being traditional students, implying that higher education is a familiar tradition in their families and that they are accustomed to the norms and expectations of university study through the experiences of their mothers and/or fathers and, as such, are said to be advantaged over a students who have not experienced this tradition (Collier and Morgan 2008, Wells 2008b, Sullivan 2001). Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) reproduction theory in education is often referenced when speaking about the differences between first and non-first generation students. The researchers use the concept of cultural capital as an explanation for academic inequalities across the social classes. McDonough (1997) explains the concept of cultural capital as being symbolic, rather than as a tangible material resource. He argues that while cultural capital has no intrinsic value, it can be 'converted, manipulated and invested' in order to secure other highly valued and selected resources. Bourdieu (1996) claims that traditional students are born with, and continually develop, the necessary cultural capital which allows them to excel at university while first generation students have no such resource to rely on. Maritnez (1999) substantiates Bourdieu's claim in his dissertation, by reporting that students in his study who were classified as having cultural capital were deemed to be more successful than those who weren't.

According to Collier and Morgan (2008), cultural capital is acquired and passed on through family generations and interactions. Students from families where there is a history of higher education and an appreciation of academic qualifications are said to enter university with a

specific type of cultural capital that makes it easier for them to fit into the system. They have been described as being different from first generation students in that they are reported to have developed an instinctive understanding of processes and expectations (Sullivan 2001). University study for non-first generational students is often suggested to be an extension or a continuation of their high school experiences whereas university study for first generation students is often reported as an emotional and challenging transition from one type of learning institution to another (Collier and Morgan 2008). First generation students have been a minority in places of higher education for many years while non-first generation students have held the majority (Conrad and Gasman 2015) and it is only in recent years that the number of first generation students entering university has increased, closing the gap between first generation and non-first generation students, and creating change brought about by the diversification of students' background (Pike and Kuh 2005).

First Generation Students

First generation university students, sometimes referred to as 'non-traditional' or 'first in family' students, are students who are the first in their family to participate in higher education. Data on first generation students are collected by universities during the enrolment period. When enrolling, students are asked to self-identify in relation to being a first generation student, using a set of criteria outlined in the questionnaire presented to them. The most common definition is based on parental education, where a student is classified as first generation if neither parent has attended university. While the practice of recording information in regard to first generation university participation is still developing, many university institutions in the USA, UK and Australia now have a range of data which has provided information about first generation student access and progress. For example, in both Australia and the USA, approximately 40% of incoming higher education students indicate that they are the first in their families to attend university (Kift et al. 2010, Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). This number continues to grow in Australia and other international universities and, to date, has reached the point where this group in certain areas is the fastest growing sub-group to enter the higher education sector (Jehangir 2010, Kelly 2005).

While increasing enrolment advances the cause for social justice and educational equality, however, in terms of attainment unfortunately in Australia first generation university students are among the least likely sub-groups to complete university and earn a degree (Marks 2007). Marks' longitudinal survey followed the progress of 2287 students over a seven-year period (1995-2004). The study was conducted in Australia across several universities, where selected students were tracked in relation to university attrition and degree completion. After a seven-year period the data were analysed and categorised according to gender, region, indigenous

status, language background, father's birthplace, parental occupation and parental education. Marks reported that 70% of students from indigenous backgrounds had not completed a university program for the duration of the study. This sub-group reported the highest non-completion rate over the seven-year period. Students whose parents were identified as skilled labourers were the next highest non-completers in the study. Thirty percent of students in this group did not complete a university program over the seven-year period. Closely following this group were students whose parents did not complete high school. In this group, Marks reported that 28% did not complete a university degree during the seven years of the study.

Marks also reported on the completion and non-completion rates of students whose parents held a university qualification. It was reported that 15% of students whose parents held a university degree did not complete their own university degree. When we consider these sub-groups in relation to each other, it is clear that students whose parents did not complete high school or were manual labourers performed significantly worse (approximately 50% worse) than students whose parents held a university degree. Thus in general, this study along with others has confirmed that first generation students are significantly disadvantaged when compared with peers whose parents attended university, both nationally and internationally (Grayson 2011, Collier and Morgan 2008, Kelly 2005, Lohfink and Paulsen 2005, Choy 2001, De Graff et al. 2000, Katsillis and Rubinson 1990). However, the reasons why this is the case still require further investigation.

Purpose of the Program of Research

As an education practitioner across the school-university interface, a Professional Doctorate was undertaken with a focus on the community of practice rather than a Doctor of Philosophy which focuses on the community of academia (Muldoon 2010). The purpose of this Professional Doctorate Portfolio was to explore qualitatively the experiences of first and non-first generation students at a major Australian university in order to gain insights into and perceptions of the teaching and learning environment and to explore how students understand and cope with the transition into university study. This body of research contributes to my profession and my personal development but also to the academic field of university transition (Evans 2001) by exploring the experiences of first generation students alongside non-first generation students and examining how students find meaning in and make sense of new learning environments. As a professional doctorate, the research presents an integrative piece of work which provides insights into the professional context and complexities of teaching and learning and students' experiences of the transition to university study (Maxwell et al. 2003).

Significance of the Program of Research

As universities adopt new policies and processes and diversify their student population (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003), the gap between Australian first in family students attending university and traditional students attending university, is closing rapidly. According to the OECD, in 2012 approximately 41% of Australian students enrolled at university were first in family. This percentage has increased over the last decade, following a strong positive correlation between percentage of parents without higher education and the corresponding number of first generation students (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013). However, this gap is only closing in terms of access. The same cannot be applied to course completion as traditional students are still more likely to complete a university degree than first in family students. In Australia, non-first generation students who have at least one parent with a bachelor degree have a 15% chance of leaving university, whereas students whose parents did not complete secondary school and did not go to university have a 28% chance of leaving university. In other words first generation students in Australian universities are disadvantaged compared with others and at risk of leaving university early (Marks 2007).

First in family students in the USA and UK are similarly disadvantaged (Collier and Morgan 2008, Wells 2008a, Wells 2008b, Sullivan 2001). For example, even after controlling for other factors such as socio-economic status, age, race, academic and social integration, Choy (2001) in her ten-year longitudinal research into persistence and access in the United States still found that first generation students were on average, 15% more likely to leave higher education without a degree than non-first generation students. Choy and others attribute this to the fact that first generation students are unable to rely on parental advice to prepare them for university study by helping them identify and understand higher education norms and expectations.

To add to this, it has often been reported that students who come from families with limited access to higher education experience will know little of what to expect. They will find it difficult to manage time and workloads and may feel lost, insecure and out of control (Gibney et al. 2011, Reay et al. 2009, Christie et al. 2008, Thomas and Quinn 2007). First generation participants in Collier and Morgan's (2008) study readily acknowledged that they had fewer and sometimes no outside resources on which to draw in overcoming problems and hurdles. Terenzini and colleagues (1994) are adamant in their beliefs that students from families with university experience tend to see higher education as a continuation of their high school experience and that first generation students view higher education instead as a 'disjunction' in their lives, describing what they experience as something similar to 'culture shock' (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013). First generation students who have little understanding of higher education systems are said to have less capacity than other students to build onto existing knowledge and

so will find it more difficult and challenging to acquire new knowledges and new ways of learning (Collier and Morgan 2008).

For this reason, the experiences and perspectives of first generation students and the challenges this group has experienced, have been central to many research projects (King et al. 2015, Grayson 2011, Collier and Morgan 2008, Thomas and Quinn 2007, Terenzini et al. 1996). Much has been understood and established in relation to first generation students as many qualitative studies have focussed on the perspectives and experiences of first generation students in relation to university access and participation and, in particular, how their experiences are reportedly different from those of non-first generation students. While the depth of this type of research is extensive, the breadth, however, is somewhat lacking. For example, much is known about the demographic characteristics of first generation students as well as their personal and emotional journeys including the disposition of many of these students (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013, Mills and Gale 2011, Jehangir 2010, Stieha 2009, Gofen 2009). However, after an extensive review of the literature, it was found that most qualitative studies investigating first generation university participation limited their focus to firstly, first generation students and secondly, first generation students from low income families. There are very few studies on non-first generation or traditional students as a group unto themselves. This is interesting and noteworthy because in many studies regarding university transition, non-first generation students' experiences are often then taken for granted and students are assumed to have an understanding of higher education systems and expectations simply because their parents have experienced higher education (Stuber 2011, Christie et al. 2008, Mitchell 2007, Tranter 2006). There is an expectation that non-first generation students will transition seamlessly into university environments (Berger 2000), are more familiar with systems (Reay 2009), processes and procedures (Clegg 2011, Longden 2004) and better able to fit in and adapt to university culture (Watson et al. 2009, Thomas 2002) simply because their parents have attended university in prior years. These expectations are at times held accountable for the reason this group out-performs first generation students in relation to retention and degree completion (Southgate et al. 2014, Atkinson 2011, Choy 2001) without a thorough exploration of their experiences, particularly in the context of university changes that have occurred in the last decade. Non-first generation students today may be the first generation of traditional labelled students to graduate from the 'new' type of university (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, Trow 2000).

Furthermore, there are even fewer studies (Brandle and Hauberer 2015, Christie et al. 2004) which have investigated first generation students from high or medium income backgrounds, separate to or inclusively with those from low income backgrounds. As a result, the experiences of first generation students from high or medium income backgrounds have not been widely documented and information regarding their access and participation is limited.

In overlooking or at least undervaluing the perspectives and experiences of high to medium income first generation students and non-first generation students in general, the field in this area of interest has been potentially restricted and has thus provided an opportunity for new additional research to widen this field by adding to and enriching the existing work already performed in the area of university transition. The studies undertaken as part of this program of research, therefore, have purposefully included non-first generation students as well as first generation students with medium to high income levels so that more knowledge can be shared about these groups of students and further contributions can be made to increase not only the depth but also the breadth of understanding within the field of university transition and the professional development of staff pertaining to this area.

Structure of the Program of Research

This program of research was conducted in three stages and in three separate but connected studies which widely explored the transition experiences of first generation and non-first generation students commencing university study. The program has a broad scope, contextually placed in transition pedagogies and professional practices (Eckerman 2001). A Professional Doctorate undertaken at the University of South Australia requires the completion of three supervised small-scale research studies and a meta analysis that synthesises the findings from the three studies. This program of research is described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Study One encompassed a thorough general review of the current literature on first and non-first generation university students. Unlike a systematic review, a general review allowed for an exploration of a variety of literature which included experimental and non-experimental research studies (Cope 2014) as well as data from theoretical and empirical literature relevant to my professional development. A general review was chosen to include diverse data sources which would enhance a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Whittemore and Knafl 2005, Leitch and Day 2000). As a consequence, the literature review was dynamic in nature (Bolderston 2008) and provided scope and breadth to the program of research by establishing a thorough understanding of current findings and by identifying potential areas for further research. As part of the review therefore, results from previous studies were summarised and underdeveloped areas pertaining to the transition of students were identified. Thin areas of the literature were uncovered, namely, information regarding the university transition of non-first generation students and the experiences of first generation students of medium to high income socio-economic status, and discussed in relation to future research and professional practice implications, establishing the direction of the subsequent studies.

Study Two formed the next stage of the research program. It examined the teaching and

learning experiences of first generation and non-first generation students during their transition phase at a South Australian university and how they made sense of their new learning environment including how this impacted upon their study and engagement. This Study was undertaken to address underdeveloped areas found in Study One, providing breath to existing knowledge and depth to the development of professional practice (Muldoon 2010).

Study Two used a qualitative approach in examining the perceptions and experiences of first year university students who were in the first few weeks of beginning their degree. Thus the specific phenomenon in this study was university transition as experienced by participants who were both first and non-first generation students. Twelve students volunteered to be interviewed for the project. As part of the interview process the students were questioned on their parents' and other family members' education. Six students self-identified as being first in family at university while six were classified as non-first generation students as they indicated that at least one parent had a university degree. The interviews were broad in nature and open-ended to encourage students to focus on their individual experiences and spend time in areas of particular interest to the study (Grant and Giddings 2002).

Study Three was the final study of the program and carried through the theme of transition by focusing on the way in which one secondary school provided opportunities at the school to prepare students for university transition. It was a case study of a university pathway school in Adelaide, an Australia capital city, which explored the structures, processes and pedagogies in place at the school and the impact that these were reported to have had on students as they transitioned to university.

The Study focused on preparation for university which had evolved as a key theme in Study Two. It incorporated staff and student interviews, surveys and observations of processes and structures at a senior secondary school which endeavours to prepare students for university transition. Staff at the school were interviewed to explore their perceptions of what skills they believed students would need for a successful transition to university study and the sorts of opportunities they provided for students to acquire these skills. Ten members of staff were interviewed from various disciplines and sectors and data on structures and processes in place at the school were collected and documented. Year 12 students were surveyed at the end of their final year to determine how ready they perceived they were for university study. In the following year, five students who had graduated from the school were interviewed while still in their first year at university to explore their transition experiences and examine the effect that school staff, pedagogies and processes had had on their transition.

The meta analysis completed the requirements of the program of research for this Professional

Doctorate. It focused on a synthesis of the findings from the three studies in order to develop a set of claims about what has been learned about the transition experiences of first generation and non-first generation students commencing university study. The claims were placed in the context of my professional practice and the significance and relevance of the topic under investigation was located within existing professional knowledge. In more detail, this work is presented in sections that parallel the three studies that form the program of research and consolidate the findings in context. The three studies are presented in sequence followed by a section on my personal experiences, limitations of the program and implications for educational practice and future investigations. The meta analysis concludes by revisiting the significance of the topic and contributions to the field as a result of this program.

Study One:

Understanding University Transition

A Review of the Literature on First and Non-First Generation Students during the Transition to University with a focus on School-to-University Transition

Introduction

First-generation students are commonly defined by parental education and are at times referred to as first in family or non-traditional students. They are usually further defined as undergraduate students enrolled in a three or four year bachelor course who have indicated that neither parent has a university qualification. Non-first generation students are other undergraduate students who have at least one parent with a university qualification.

The transition period is the time taken for students to feel comfortable with their new situation and develop a sense of confidence and stability in this environment (Compas et al. 1986). For some students this may take a few weeks, while for other students it may need longer, sometimes up to a year (Tinto 1988). More recent work by Cheng and colleagues suggests that the transition period is usually six to twelve weeks but can be longer depending on the situation, in which university commencers begin their degree and try to understand and become used to the university environment and study (Cheng et al. 2015). The process is often experienced internally by students in their attempt to negotiate an unfamiliar path and understand the demands of the situation in which they find themselves.

This study was the first phase of the program of research. It reviewed the literature on first and non-first generation student transition in the context of current changes to university institutions, access and completion, by briefly reflecting on the history of higher education participation in regard to policy and reform. The review of the literature on university transition encompassed the transition of students from various pathways, including those entering from school, vocational education and training (VET), the workforce or from being unemployed. It examined the backgrounds of various student groups, their prior experiences and the way in which these groups operated within the transition period in their new study environment. Having considered the transition experiences of students in general, the focus narrowed and a more specific review was conducted on the transition experiences of school-to-university students. School-leaver experiences were discussed and a detailed review was conducted on the effects secondary school experiences have on university transition.

In summary, Study One, presented in three sections, considers firstly, the background of first and non-first generation students in transition to university, secondly, the characteristics and reported disadvantage of first generation students compared with non-first generation students in transition, and lastly, the influences of school of three important themes warranting further investigation.

Background of First and Non-First Generation Students

Historically Changing Educational Climates

In 1900 less than one percent of the global working age population was enrolled in higher education (Schofer and Meyer 2005). In Australia some seventy years on, this figure grew to three percent and by 2012, the percentage of the Australian working age population attending university had reached an all-time high of 25 (Norton 2014) and continues to grow under current recommendations and polices geared towards raising institutional access and participation targets in Australian universities. In the last decade universities have implemented numerous initiatives and programs (Alagumalai et. al. 2013, Gale 2009, James et. al. 2008, Lawrence 2005, Ramsay et. al. 1998) with the intention that by 2025 40% of young Australians will hold a three-year university qualification or higher (Bradley et al. 2008).

As a result, significant changes to universities and the way they operate have contributed to the increases in access and participation which occurred during the latter half of the century. For example, one of the most significant changes to Australian universities occurred in 1989 when the Australian Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) was introduced (Marks 2009). Under the original HECS, a $1,800 per annum fee was charged to all university students as a personal contribution to their education costs (Parliament of Australia, 2013). Prior to 1989, students had enjoyed a short period of 15 years where they received a 'free' university education, as a result of the 1974 decision to abolish long standing tuition fees which previously applied to all university students. However, in 1989, the idea of a free education was dismissed once again and university fees, renamed under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, were reinstated and still remain to this day (Norton 2014).

During this period of free university education in Australia, enrolments were on the increase but degree attainments were rapidly decreasing to the point where completions were almost at a stand-still. In other words, increasing numbers of students were being accepted into university but, once in, students seemed to enjoy the experience of a free education yet lacked the motivation or self-discipline to complete in minimum time (Norton 2014). Things changed, however, in 1989 with the abandonment of free education and the introduction of HECS throughout university institutions across Australia. Once students became financially responsible for their education, completing their degrees became a priority resulting in a sudden, rapid increase in degree completions. Universities now were experiencing high enrolment numbers and high completion rates, so much so that this era, after 1989, marks the fastest growing period of degree attainment in Australia's higher education history (Schofer and Meyer 2005). The introduction of HECS was thus a strategic initiative which served several purposes. Most importantly, the 'user pays' model helped kick start student motivation to complete degree requirements in minimum time, contributing to rapid increased growth in

university qualification attainment after 1989, but it also allowed for government finances to be channeled into other areas of higher education, in particular, into further strengthening access and participation programs (Marks 2009).

The importance of equality in higher education access and participation has grown significantly since the late 80s and 90s and in particular after 2008 when *The Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al. 2008) was undertaken to form the basis of the 'Transforming Australia's Higher Education System' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009) reform. The reform highlighted familiar inequalities in relation to access, participation and qualification attainment across the six following equity groups: Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) students, Indigenous Students, Students with Disabilities, Regional Students, Remote Students, and Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students. The reform also underlined economic development and productivity as an instigator for necessary future change. It determined that, for Australia to become much more globally competitive, greater numbers of specialist jobs were necessary and, in trying to cope with this demand, Australia's higher education system had to undergo further reform to increase higher education access and qualification attainment for graduates to help fill highly-skilled occupations necessary for future national growth (Commonwealth of Australia 2009).

While the reform encouraged university participation on the whole, it placed a great amount of attention on traditionally under-represented groups from the wider community to help fulfil the ambition for Australia to be more competitive across a number of industry sectors. Participants targeted as part of the Commonwealth reform, therefore, were those who under different circumstances would not have normally considered university study as an option. As a result of more successful campaigning under this reform, university enrolments experienced another spurt in growth. To put this in context, the growth rate from 2009 to 2012 was 21.3%, almost three times the rate of the previous three year period at 7.8%. This rapid increase in enrolments was attributed to changes in community aspirations from all sectors of the population. Many low SES students with no family history of higher education, who would not have otherwise considered a university pathway, made the decision to enrol in higher education institutions. This was also the case for many mid to high SES students, with no family history of higher education, who also under other circumstances would not have normally considered a university career path. The end result of this influx of students from all sectors of society increased university enrolments and diversified the student population, bringing about positive changes to first generation access in Australian universities (Edwards and Radloff 2013, Longden 2002) and closing the gap between first generation and non-first generation university participation.

Hornsby and Osman (2014) describe the process that universities have undergone as a result of

increased student enrolments as higher education massification. Trow (2000) makes a distinction between the culture of universities before massification and after. He speaks about the transformation of systems of elite universities into systems of mass higher education, where elite universities in conceptual terms signified a type of cultural membership '…marked by common bodies of arcane knowledge and cultivated ways of thinking and feeling' and mass higher education as being much more one dimensional '…oriented towards gaining useful skills and knowledge' (Trow 2000, p.1).

Teichler (2001) describes in more detail the changes to higher education that occurred as a result of massification and how universities went through a rapid re-structure, including changes to the student body and study environment as a result of the process. She specifically reported on student numbers outgrowing available resources and the impact this has had on teaching staff and the education environment. More specifically and consequentially, she reported on change in the learning behaviour of students, a shift in the role of the teacher towards an animateur, advisor, feed-back provider and controller, a more rapid turnover of knowledge and a spread of new technologies into the learning environment (Teichler 2001, p.5). Furthermore, Snowball (2014) and Allais (2014) reported specifically on the teaching and learning changes resulting from a diversified student population under the process of massification. Both described modern learning and teaching techniques, often digital, which have been adopted to cope with the influx of students, as being innovative and technologically advanced. Massification, therefore, triggered a rapid change in higher education which impacted a new generation of students in ways quite different from previous generations of students.

University Access and Participation Inequalities

Throughout the world, even as universities endeavour to diversify and increase student numbers from all sectors of the community, access rates for students from high socio-economic backgrounds still outweigh access rates for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Chesters and Watson 2013). In particular, we can see this occurring in Australia by examining current socio-economic sector percentages across the population. For example, in Australia the two ends of the socio-economic spectrum, namely the upper and lower quartiles, represent individuals with high and low SES backgrounds respectively. That is, approximately one quarter of the population is classified as high SES while one quarter is classified as low. As a result of outreach programs and the like (Alagumalai et. al. 2013, James et. al. 2008, Ramsay et. al. 1998), current statistics have revealed that while low SES student enrolments certainly have increased, so too have high SES enrolments (Gale and Tranter 2011). So even though efforts have resulted in increased enrolments across the board, they have done little in balancing the enrolments across the income sectors.

Currently in Australia, 42% of students from high SES quartiles participate in Australian higher education while only 15% of students from low SES quartiles participate in higher education (Bradley et al. 2008, James et al. 2008, Ramsay et al. 1998). Thus, in Australia, people from high socio-economic backgrounds are still approximately three times more likely to enter university than people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Access to and participation at university has always been, and unfortunately continues to be, significantly disproportional to sector population percentages (Gale and Tranter 2011, Reay 1998,) and despite continuous campaigning and outreach activities resulting in increases in low SES student numbers, percentages remain disproportional in Australia (James et al. 2008). Similar inequalities are reflected internationally, and as a result, concern for social justice in this area and academic quality and assurance continues to gain momentum worldwide and in alignment with Australian higher education providers and governing bodies (Reay 2001).

As universities continue to grow disproportionally, many students who have responded to university outreach programs and who perhaps under different circumstances would not have considered going to university as this pathway had never before been chosen by other members of their families in the past, will as a result have very little experience of higher education. Furthermore, in widening participation in this way, increases of participation come from all sectors of the community, including first generation students representing a variety of socio-economic backgrounds (Given and Smailes 2006). So while the majority of first generation students have previously been associated with low SES backgrounds, increasingly students are indicating that they are first generation university students associated with mid to high SES categories which continues to create demographic change to commencing student cohorts

(Southgate et al. 2014, Office of Undergraduate Retention 2014).

First Generation Students in the Literature

In most reported studies, first generation students self-identify by a set of criteria outlined in the content of instruments used in these studies. The most common definition is based on parental education where a student is first generation if neither parent holds a university qualification. This information is sought by using a questionnaire which requests participants to identify the highest level of education obtained by either parent (Marks 2007). However, the use of this set of criteria in describing a student as being a first generation student is not standard nor without problems. For example, a student residing with parents who did not attend university may have grandparents, siblings, aunts or uncles who did. One could argue in this case that this student is not first generation as higher education has very much been a part of the family, either nuclear, extended or in the past. Secondly, a first generation student in another country may have been differently defined from a first generation student in Australia. Therefore, caution must be exercised when referring to first generation students in general

terms.

With this in mind, Table 1 below provides information on the percentage of first generation students at university and across socio-economic levels in Australia and the US.

Table 1: SES Distribution of First Generation Students at University

Study	**First Generation Student Definition**	**Percent of FGS University participation**	**Percent of FGS University participation according to socio-economic status**
Baik et al. 2015 First Year Experience in Australian Universities	Does not have at least one parent with a degree	60%	91% - Low 9% - High
Choy 2001 Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment (US School-leavers)	Does not have at least one parent with a degree	65%	51% - Low 46 % - Mid 3% - High
Marks 2007 Completing University (Australian School-leavers)	Does not have at least one parent with a degree or diploma	49%	Unknown

In more detail, current 2014 statistics from selected universities in Australia revealed that between 60-64% of commencing university students indicated that neither parent had a university degree (Baik et al. 2015). This study provides some information about the proportion of first generation students entering university and the socio-economic status of these students, however, the SES categories used in this study were very broad. Only two SES measurements were available for student classification. Students were described as either having a high income background or low. In regards to quantity, the study published that 91% of first generation students came from low SES backgrounds, while 9% came from high SES backgrounds but the study lacked information on how the data may have looked across *four* SES quartiles and in particular, how the middle income sector was represented. In comparison, Choy's (2001) longitudinal study, from the US, on first generation access and participation was somewhat more comprehensive. Choy was able to report that 51% of first generation students in selected US universities came from low income households, while 46% came from middle and three percent came from high income households. By grouping students into three income categories rather than two, a sharper view of how the proportions are distributed can be seen. While the statistics in both of these studies are somewhat problematic and figures are therefore difficult to use for comparisons or generalisations, they nonetheless provide some

indication of how first generation students are distributed across the income levels. In Choy's study, almost half of all first generation students came from middle to high income households, while in the Baik et al. study, even though it is difficult to know exactly what proportion of first generation students came from middle to high income households, a significant proportion may have, perhaps even an amount similar to the proportion in Choy's study considering that the low SES category in the Baik et al. study would lend itself to middle SES. This is important to understand as it has previously been assumed that the majority of first generation students came from low income households. As universities change and student intakes diversify, cultures and backgrounds are many and varied. First generation students are now better represented across all levels of the socio-economic spectrum than ever before and their experiences must be explored and recognised.

Having considered university access and participation inequalities, the next section considers characteristics of first generation students in relation to disadvantages in university participation and completion. The section begins by considering the characteristics of first generation students in relation to university participation and the disadvantage they experience when compared to non-first generation students. It also considers theories and concepts in relation to first generation students and the influence of external factors on their transition experiences. Finally, it includes a discussion on past conclusions in relation to first and non-first generation students and the relevancy of them in current university settings which have undergone major change and diversification.

Characteristics and Disadvantage of First Generation Students

Characteristics of First Generation Students

Much qualitative and quantitative research surrounds the issue of first generation access, participation and retention on a global scale. Studies examining practical limitations and descriptors such as prior education, finance, family responsibility, geography and enrolment status (Reay 1998) abound. Some have studied the personality traits and characteristics of first generation students (Lohfink and Paulsen 2005, Lounsbury et al. 2004, Terenzini et al. 1994), while others have examined the emotional and psychological effects impacting first generation students through feelings of isolation, not belonging or difficulties fitting in (Christie 2009, Christie et al. 2008, Clegg et al. 2006, Christie et al. 2004, Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, Read et al. 2003, Reay 2001).

Looking back, early research on first generation university students focused primarily on the interplay between the student and the institution as a whole (Lawrence 2005, Tinto 1987). In particular, social and academic integration were, and still are, seen as key factors in course engagement and consequent completion. The theory of integration claims that whether a

student persists with their study or not is strongly predicted by their degree of academic and social integration. In other words, the more individuals interact with faculty and other students on various levels, the more they will come to learn and understand the processes, procedures and content of their disciplines, and the more they will feel comfortable and committed in applying themselves to their studies (Gibney et al. 2011, Buote et al. 2007, Tinto 1987).

More recently, universities keen to support student engagement and commitment have responded to this information by putting mechanisms and structures in place to support and encourage the integration of not only disadvantaged students, but all students (Fisher 2007). Such initiatives include support and practices whereby universities attempt to provide opportunities for new students to connect with and integrate into the university in general. These include faculty orientation workshops or activities, academic drop-in centres and whole campus events such as free barbeques, stalls, booths, club activities and free entertainment. Events such as these have been found to be beneficial to all students but in particular they have been found to have a positive effect on first generation students by providing opportunities that first generation students may not have otherwise received (Gibney et al. 2011, Mayhew et al. 2011, Chong et al. 2009, Rayle and Chung 2008, Buote et al. 2007, Friedlander et al. 2007). Unfortunately however, first generation students are known to be less involved with on-campus activities which may be associated with lower GPAs (Jamelske 2009).

Many first generation students are unlikely to be involved in extra-curricular events due to outside considerations in their lives such as family, employment, finance or geography (Soria and Stebleton 2012, Stuber 2011, Stieha 2009, Lohfink and Paulsen 2005, Pike and Kuh 2005, Pascarelle et al. 2004, Terenzini et. al. 1996) and see university purely as a pursuit of a career, having little interest in or affordability to become engaged in activities outside of attending class (Watson et. al. 2009, Engle 2007, Thomas and Quinn 2007, Christie et al. 2005). As a result, institutional initiatives and activities are more likely to benefit other students, those perhaps already advantaged, while having limited impact on many first generation students (Christie et al. 2004). So while these measures have been developed with the best of intentions, they are likely to have had minimal impact in terms of assisting first generation students' integration into university systems, perhaps even unintentionally creating further division between those labeled as advantaged and those who are disadvantaged (Grayson 2011).

As more research in the area of teaching and learning is undertaken on first generation students, richer insights into the experiences and perceptions of the learning environment are being discovered. First generation students are not only less likely to be involved with and participate in institutional campus initiatives, but also are among those who record the least positive classroom experiences out of all student groups (Grayson 2011, Laing and Robinson 2003, Bamber and Tett 2000). After financial reasons, perceptions of poor teaching is one of the

most common reasons for first generation withdrawal (Rhodes and Neville 2004). It is understood that first generation students have fewer interactions with faculty in the classroom, contribute less frequently to class discussions and are prepared to leave their program of study if they feel their needs are not being met (Soria and Stebleton 2012). Without further change, institutions in their current form may be ill-equipped to create successful learning spaces for this group, facilitating instead environments where first generation students feel invisible to both the curriculum and their peers and teachers (Spiegler 2013, Clegg 2011, Roberts 2011, Jehangir 2010, Yosso 2005).

First Generation Disadvantage

While research into first generation students is relatively new and continues to evolve, there are still many unanswered questions. For example, as noted above, it has been established that first generation students are now better represented across the socio-economic spectrum, albeit a more precise distribution is yet to be determined. It has also been established that first generation access and participation continues to increase and that this group of students is becoming the fastest-growing cohort in higher education (Jehangir 2010). Unfortunately, however, while this may be the case for access and participation the same cannot be said in regard to completion. First generation students in Australia are at significant risk of non-completion and currently form the second least likely subgroup to earn a degree after Indigenous students, depending on levels of parent education (Marks 2007). So while participation rates have increased in Australia, completion rates remain low when compared to other students. More specifically, statistics in Australia indicate that 85% of non-first generation students complete university education, compared with only 79% of first generation students which reduces to 72.1% if they do not have at least one parent who has completed secondary school.

Interestingly, even though first generation students in Australia are at a significant disadvantage, they are not formally categorised as a high risk equity group, but stand out as being significantly disadvantaged and at risk of attrition (Stuber 2010, Stieha 2009). In saying this, however, it is important to recognise that in some cases first generation students may have other characteristics that already place them in equity groups. For example, some first generation students in Australian universities may fall into the category of low SES, Indigenous or rural/isolated and receive support already available to these equity groups, even if not targeted towards first generation disadvantage. However, other first generation students, may not be associated with disadvantaged groups in any other way and consequently will receive no support what so ever. This is an important point as the socio-economic distribution of first generation students becomes more widespread across medium to high levels of socio-economic status.

For some time now, first generation university completion rates have been the focus of many qualitative and quantitative studies worldwide. For example, in the US and UK, there is overwhelming evidence that first generation students are less likely to achieve academically than their peers (Collier et al. 2008, Wells 2008b, Engle 2007, Marks 2007, Choy 2001, Sullivan 2001) who have at least one parent with a university degree. Similar to Australia, first generation students in the US are, on average, 15% more likely to leave higher education without a degree than non-first generation students (Choy 2001).

In explaining the disadvantage of first generation students, they have often been reported to have few resources on which to rely that would otherwise enable them to experience success, academic achievement and a sense of 'belonging' as others may do (Collier and Morgan 2008, Wells 2008b, Choy 2001, Sullivan 2001). First generation participants are reported to have fewer and sometimes no outside resources on which to draw in overcoming problems and hurdles compared with non-first generation students (Collier and Morgan 2008). In difficult times, first generation students and their families regard university education as a 'disjunction' in their lives rather than as a continuation of previous education which is generally accepted without question in most non-first generation families (Terenzini et al. 1994).

In comparison with their peers, first generation students are reported to undergo a dramatically different cultural transition to university study, sometimes described as confronting and intimidating in nature. Researchers have summarised that students with limited access to higher education experience know little of what to expect, how to manage time and workloads, and often feel lost, insecure and out of control (Gibney et al. 2011, Reay et al. 2009, Christie et al. 2008, Thomas and Quinn 2007). The challenges first generation students face compared with non-first generation students are often attributed to acquired levels of cultural capital. Cultural capital, linked to field and habitus (Bourdieu 1986), is commonly used to explain the differences of performance levels across first and non-first generation students.

Cultural Capital, Field and Habitus

The notions of cultural capital, field and habitus are key concepts situated within Bourdieu's (1986) framework of social capital and are often drawn upon in studies (Roberts 2011, Van de Werfhorst 2010, Christie 2009, Longden 2004, Matinez 1999) regarding first generation students. Bourdieu uses cultural capital, field and habitus to explain the unequal academic achievements of students originating from different social classes.

One way to view cultural capital is in the form of knowledge which is passed on through family members in order to secure other highly valued and scarce resources (McDonough 1997). It is

not something that is taught or explained, rather it is tacit knowledge acquired through social and family connections. A family's internal and social connections create a habitus for the members within. Habitus is what a person brings with them to a situation, a 'taken-for-granted' reaction within a field. The concept is often symbolic of a 'fish out of water' when a person's habitus does not match a particular situation or field (Tranter 2006). Cultural capital relates to field in that it is necessary for successful operation in a particular setting or field. Bourdieu posits that different fields require different forms of capitals to move and operate seamlessly within and that without knowledge or experience of the field, 'fitting in' can be difficult. Tranter describes the concept of field as a setting with rules attached to it, where often the rules are unspoken and not made explicit. She is of the opinion that to succeed in new settings or fields, one has to have, or at least develop, a 'sense of the game to understand how to thrive and win in the new field' (Tranter 2006, p.4).

Many researchers (Collier and Morgan 2008, Mitchell 2007, Tranter 2006, Wells 2008a, Martinez 1999) exploring first generation disadvantage choose a 'Bourdieusian' lens when deciding on a theoretical framework for their study to explain why some students excel in higher education while others seem to struggle. Van de Werfhorst (2010), for example, paraphrases Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) on social reproduction in the education system when he states that students from advantaged backgrounds do well in current educational settings because the culture within the institution matches the culture within their home and, furthermore, that students who lack the culture of institutions will find it more difficult to adapt to the new culture, will perform worse than their counterparts, will be rewarded less by teaching staff and will opt out of the education system more readily than others.

It is often said that students from more traditional backgrounds in academia, that is, students who are not first in family to participate in higher education, enter university with the type of cultural capital that makes it easier for them to fit into higher education fields (Collier and Morgan 2008). They are reported to be more familiar with university systems and have the means and the required habitus (James et al. 2015) to successfully deal with institutional processes and academic personnel. Collier and Morgan (2008) go so far as to say that traditional students are "prepped and groomed" for their experiences of university education, in ways not explicitly outlined, well before they arrive. Once on campus, 'students from a more highly educated background not only have a better ability to understand different professors' expectations but also a better ability to adjust their own behaviour to accommodate those differences' (p. 444). Collier and Morgan are of the belief that university success is achieved by understanding, and ultimately mastering, the role of university student and is associated with levels of cultural capital. The researchers conclude that non-first generation students possess a form of 'tacit knowledge' and 'pattern recognition' skills which gives them a certain amount of

confidence and allows them to understand expectations in the university system, leading to higher rates of graduation and better jobs on completion.

In contrast, first generation students are said to arrive at university with less understanding and less capacity to acquire new knowledge and ways of learning and consequently may not perform as well as those who come from traditionally educated families with the means and habitus to ease into university study more readily (Collier and Morgan 2008). Similar to middle class children who arrive at school with Standard English as part of their habitus, non-first generation university students are said to arrive at university with the necessary cultural capital to survive and excel in their future higher educational endeavours (Tranter 2006). So while all new students have to contend with adjustments to university study and new ways of learning, non-first generation students are said to have an advantage in not having to carry the extra burden of trying to understand the culture of the institution. First generation students are said to be alone in that they must contend with this aspect of their new environment as well as grappling with the academic content, while other students, more fortunate in possessing what is considered to be the 'right' capital, need only to concentrate on content (Martinez 1999).

Researchers concur (Wells 2008a, Mitchell 2007, Tranter 2006, Martinez 1999) that a student's cultural capital is positively significant for persistence and performance in higher education. So in explaining how first generation students adjust to the university environment, despite their unfamiliarity with higher education and lack of cultural capital, Mitchell developed the concept of a 'cultural capital facilitator' or significant other (Reay 1998). Cultural capital facilitators in Mitchell's study assisted first generation students with their adjustment to university study. First generation students, in Mitchell's study, who had been raised in households in which diverse social and cultural customs were the norm, were at a disadvantage when entering university environments. They lacked the particular type of tacit information and knowledge required for a smooth transition into university study. To compensate, cultural capital facilitators were at times sought out by first generation students in the transition process to assist them with their understandings of expectations and university culture. The cultural capital facilitators in Mitchell's study were mostly university staff who bridged the gap for first generation students, providing support, knowledge and guidance about the higher education system to first generation students who sought them out. Cultural capital facilitators realised that they held key information that first generation students needed and often found themselves offering additional information to students – information not necessarily asked for, but deemed instinctively important for student success. For Lei, a first generation student in Reay's (1998) study, her cultural capital facilitator was a customer at her father's take-away business, while for Phong and Anzar, it was their cousin and other family members who

provided critical information that helped bridge the gap, and provided encouragement and understanding of the workings of a university environment.

Studies that associate cultural capital with academic achievement determine that cultural capital, more often than not, is positively linked with academic performance and degree attainment (Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2008, Wells 2008a, Wells 2008b, Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, DiMaggio 1982). It is said that high levels of acquired cultural capital, measured in some studies by using a number of variables such as amount of books at home, place to study, museum visits, musical instruments in the home and parent involvement with their child's education, are associated with high levels of academic achievement. This type of cultural capital is transmitted from parent to child and is said to constitute entitlement and educational success (Tranter 2006, Sullivan 2001). Many have concurred with this conclusion and in addition have reported on inverse claims, suggesting that lower levels of cultural capital are positively associated with lower levels of persistence and performance (Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2008).

Higher Education Culture and Entitlement

Cultural capital, habitus and field may well be factors which contribute to non-first generation students advancing their education in certain fields while others do not (Wells 2008a). It has been said that students with the 'right' mix of social and cultural capital are more likely to feel an entitlement to higher education fields than others (Longden 2004, McDonough 1997). Higher education entitlement is closely related to Bourdieu's theory of social capital in that there is an expectation that non-first generation students will continue their education at university in the tradition of their family which can transfer to feelings of entitlement. Furthermore, higher education entitlement among non-first generation students has been attributed to student success and degree completion and for this reason, warrants inclusion and discussion in relation to student experiences of university transition.

Berger (2000) and Longden (2004) explored the concept of entitlement and belonging through the lens of cultural capital. They found that students, based on their culture and habitus, had different perceived entitlements to higher education. In more detail, students from lower social class backgrounds, sharing more diverse cultures, were less likely to feel that they were entitled to higher education, whereas students from more privileged backgrounds regularly admitted to having a strong sense of entitlement to higher education. Wells (2008b) argues that students with a strong sense of entitlement to higher education are more likely to see higher education and degree attainment as the norm and claims that the probability of completion is affected by the extent to which perceptions or habitus are related to feelings of entitlement and security.

In other words, students who experience greater levels of entitlement enjoy greater levels of success.

Tranter (2006, p. 1), from a family of university graduates, claims to have grown up with an 'unconscious sense of entitlement and certainty' towards university access and participation while others, for example, those at the other end of the spectrum who have no notions of entitlement (Devas 2011) experience significant feelings of self-doubt and are pressed to see tutors and support staff as their equals. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) have found that first generation working class students do not possess the same certainty or notion of entitlement in their choice of educational pathway as others and are intimidated to seek out faculty help and support to strengthen their understanding and knowledge of higher education.

It is not unusual for first generation students to lack a sense of belonging or entitlement (Means and Pyne 2017, Choy 2001) or to see interaction with faculty, which can easily trigger a sense of danger by the fear of accidentally exposing ignorance, as daunting and unnerving. First generation students are reported to perceive academic staff as being too busy to assist with concerns and questions and believe there is little interest in their academic or emotional wellbeing (Devas 2011, Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2008). As a result, first generation students often fall into the habit of having minimal faculty interaction and involvement with other students and the campus in general. The university environment itself is often reported as being an unfamiliar field and quite foreign to first generation students as it has not been part of the lived experience of their parents, their communities or themselves. Moreover, it is not part of their taken-for-granted way of being in the world with which they are familiar, comfortable or in which they feel they are entitled to participate (Tranter 2006, Read et al. 2003).

To add to this, claims that higher education has a particular culture, sometimes referred to as an elite culture, and that students who have a familiarity with and knowledge of that culture are more likely to succeed than those who do not, are common in the literature (Schmidt 2013, Noble and Davies 2009). To be successful in this field, it is said that an understanding of elite cultural codes of institutions is necessary and that students who are unfamiliar with these codes will experience difficulty in finding their feet and achieving educational success, often choosing to opt out early (Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2008, Maritnez 1999).

Alternative Views on the Influence of Cultural and Family Capital

One of the very first studies to contest the link between cultural capital and student achievement was conducted in Greece in 1990. The study, by Katsillis and Rubinson (1990), measuring students' cultural capital in terms of their family residence, SES, involvement in the

arts and public lectures, books and visits to museums. The data were categorised and analysed against the GPAs of corresponding students and it was revealed that cultural capital had no significant effect on students' GPAs. Kingston (2001) found that cultural capital in itself did not significantly account for higher grades in schooling. Kingston challenged DiMaggio's (1982) study which posited that students with higher levels of cultural capital are able to 'decode the implicit rules of the game' (p. 190) and are academically rewarded for their cultural position and the characteristics they bring to the institution. Kingston argued that students in the United Kingdom exposed to high levels of cultural capital do not automatically acquire favourable grades simply because of their status, but instead have earned those grades as they have become skilled debaters and critical analysts well before arriving at university by watching and listening to the social commentary taking place within their family networks.

Furthermore, a study (De Graaf et al. 2000) conducted in the Netherlands found that measures of cultural capital were not significant in any way when parents were highly educated. The researchers of this study found that parent education, rather than cultural capital, was associated with student academic success. In other words, even when parents hardly read to their young and rarely participated in excursions to the arts or were lacking in other measures of providing cultural capital opportunities but were highly educated, children in these families, despite their limited exposure to cultural capital, did well academically. Such students, similar to those in Kingston's (2001) study, were thought to live in academically stimulating environments where parents and associates acted as mentors and examples in their lives which ultimately provided a successful platform on which to appreciate higher education and resulting career opportunities (Lareau and Weniger 2003).

More recently, in 2010, Dumais and Ward (2010) reported similar results when they found that the importance of cultural capital diminished as students moved from the adolescent years into university study. Dumais and Ward found that ability, not cultural capital, had the greatest impact upon academic performance. This is an interesting result in light of other studies which have confirmed that ability above all else has the greatest impact on performance. For example, recent studies in Australia on school-to-university students have considered a student's Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (known as an ATAR and calculated by the University Admission Centre (Engagement 2018) in each Australian state to reflect a student's rank against other students in their state who complete studies in their final year of high school) in association with university achievement rather than cultural capital, and have concluded that high ATARs in Australia are positively associated with performance and achievement in later years (Kemp and Norton 2014, Edwards and Radloff 2013, Marks 2007). In particular, Marks found that completion of university courses is much more likely among high performing students and concluded that Year 12 final results presents the strongest correlation against expected course completion regardless of whether or not students were first or non-

first generation. This finding seems to be in contrast with previous ideas embedded within cultural capital arguments which were used to explain why some students perform better at university than others. The association, therefore, between cultural capital and academic achievement may not be as straightforward as first thought (Jaeger 2011).

Education in some families, for example, is seen as a priority and an expectation to achieve, even if it means financial sacrifices in order for children to continue and complete their studies. Parents in these families have a high regard of higher education, whether or not they are educated themselves, and endeavour to provide a home environment geared towards supporting educational achievement (Gofen 2009). This ties in with similar findings in several studies (King et al. 2015, Southgate et al. 2014, Martinez 1999, Pargetter et al. 1998) where successful students, those who persisted through the transition period even when expectations were unmet, often had someone in their extended family or among close friends or university staff who believed in the importance of education and their ability to succeed at university and encouraged them to do so.

Thus, there may exist an advantage in students having university-educated parents as they are generally more aware of the long-term benefits of acquiring a university qualification and hence regularly share this information with their children, validating their experiences and encouraging them to continue. Parents who have limited experience of higher education, on the other hand, tend to have less direct knowledge of the economic and social benefits of a post-secondary education and may signal that they prefer their children to work rather than pursue academic pathways, particularly if the child's income will ease rather than put pressure on family finances (Coleman 1988).This may be a reason why first generation students abandon their studies while non-first generation students persist.

First and Non-First Generation Students in the 21st Century

When discussing groups of students in terms of 'generations' it is convenient to classify students according to when they turn a certain age. For example, school-leavers in 2010 and onwards, who would have been aged between 18 to 20, are considered to be generation Y students or in some circumstances, generation Z, depending on how long after 1980 they were born (Wellner 2000, Cheng 1999, Janoff 1999). Most parents of Y or Z generation children would have been born between 1961 and 1981 and are classified as generation X (Ritchie 1995). This means therefore that generation X parents who had gained university qualifications would have done so anywhere between the mid-80s and early 2000, before significant change was introduced to university systems. Given that their offspring, Generation Y or Z, would have begun their university education around or after the turn of the century, non-first university students today (generation Y or Z) are experiencing university environments which must be

quite different from the ones their parents studied in.

Today, most universities have been transformed in some way to cope with large student intakes and new technological advancements (Akalu 2016). For example, Selwyn (2007) argues that expenditure on on-campus application of information and communication technology (ICT) has increased dramatically since its introduction as universities attempt to integrate ICT into all aspects of face-to-face teaching and learning. ICT is now used on-campus to facilitate learning through 'flipped classrooms', student webinars and discussions, adaptive learning programs, integrated response systems, smart rooms, real-time chats, virtual labs, robotics and problem-based projects (Adams Becker et al. 2017). Given the dramatic digital transformation of universities, arguments which place non-first generation students at an advantage because of past generational familiarity with university study and processes (Clegg 2011, Reay 2009, Longden 2004, Thomas 2002) become problematic. Under these circumstances it could be argued that non-first generation students have minimal advantage over first generation students in terms of parental assistance relating to prior information and expectations of university environments. Instead, where they may be advantaged is in having parents who understand potential social and economic opportunities and benefits of a university education and who will encourage the same for their children (Lee and colleagues 2004, Coleman 1988).

Comparing the Transition Experiences of First and Non-First Generation Students in the Literature

While studies investigating early university transition experiences on first generation students abound, no studies that specifically address the transition experiences of non-first generation students were found when undertaking this research. However, there are a limited number of studies which examine the characteristics as well as transition experiences of both first and non-first generation students. In these studies, the emphasis more often than not rested on first generation students, and in particular on how they differed from non-first generation students. Four studies which contribute to furthering the knowledge of personal characteristics and experiences of non-first generation students have been contrasted in Table 2.

Table 2: Studies which included First and Non-First Generation Student Experience

Study	Title	Year	Key Findings
Christie, Munro & Fisher Qualitative: 169 participants across four UK universities	Leaving university early: exploring the differences between continuing and non-continuing students	2004	Family expectations of a university education were higher when students had parents who had been to university. The researchers observed a danger in assuming students from traditional backgrounds have a reasonably unproblematic time at university and advised caution when discussing perceptions of university culture for first and non-first generation students.
Patiniotis & Holdsworth Qualitative: 32 participants - six focus groups across six UK school institutions	'Seize That Chance!' Leaving Home and Transitions to Higher Education	2005	Family expectations of university education were higher when students had parents who had been to university. First generation students were required to 'think outside' familial and community norms.
Pike & Kuh Quantitative: 3,000 US undergraduates nationally who completed the College Student Experiences Questionnaire	First- and Second-Generation College Students: A Comparison of Their Engagement and Intellectual Development	2005	First generation college students were less engaged overall and less likely to integrate into the college experience than non-first generation students.
Collier & Morgan Qualitative: six US first generation focus groups and two non-first generation focus groups	Is that paper really due today?'': differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understanding of faculty expectations	2007	First and non-first generation students experienced difficulties in time management and explicitness of expectations and written assignments. First generation students experienced problems with grammar and spelling and communication with faculty staff.

While the studies listed in Table 2 explore the experiences of transitioning students and happen to include non-first generation students, there remain few qualitative studies which intentionally capture the transition experiences of non-first generation students, simply for the

sake of exploring perspectives and understandings from their point of view in the context of current universities. For example, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) examined the experiences of 'the new' student at a post-1992 UK university in the context of government policies to widen participation. In this study, the authors did not differentiate between first and non-first generation students and instead stated that the 18 participants selected represented a diverse section of the cohort and that most of the participants were first in family students. Three main themes were explored and were connected to financial difficulties, confidence issues and institutional factors. The study concluded that all students experienced difficulties in relation to their studies without clarifying whether students were first or non-first generation. Most students admitted to a lack of confidence in speaking up during seminars or group discussions and acknowledged that they were struggling academically which was compounded by a generally perceived lack of support from the university for students who felt lecturers did not have the time to help them and felt administrative systems were difficult to navigate. The researchers reported that the difficulties for all students to study in 'underfunded and mass systems of higher education, where academic staff are under tremendous pressure to support more and more students…' were at play in this particular case and, furthermore, that such systems of education will continue to provide challenges for all groups of students studying in modern universities not just those who are first in family (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, p.610).

Christie and colleagues (2004) make the point that studies in this area, which focus on the transition of undergraduates, do not cover the whole spectrum of students when considering the experiences and perceptions students have of university study. The researchers claim that traditional or non-first generation students are all too often overlooked in the literature and their experiences taken for granted. As previously discussed, non-first generation students are generally expected to have a relatively unproblematic time at university, perhaps because their rates of withdrawals are lower than first generation students or perhaps because they once were a representation of the typical successful university student before universities underwent transformation, and are today still seen in this way. However, as few studies are dedicated to non-first generation students, little is actually known about their actual experiences at university and, ultimately, how they manage to out-perform first generation students academically.

As universities undergo major change and restructure, a 'taken for granted' position on non-first generation students becomes even more problematic, as expectations which may have once held, may now no longer be valid. Both Jaeger (2010) and Lareau and Weininger (2003) refer to the use of widespread *prima facie* presumptions in their discussions on cultural reproduction theory and recommend caution in future studies on university participation. As universities transform and adapt to the expansion of higher education, changing the traditional

university setting and experience from what it once was (Akalu 2016), non-first generation students today may be the first generation of traditional students to graduate from the 'new' type of university (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, Trow 2000). Hence, in some situations, both groups of students, first and non-first generation, may find they have limited family resources on which to rely in relation to familiarity and understandings of current university environments in their changed states, thus perhaps for the first time closing the gap between the experiences of first and non-first generation students. Should this be the case, more research to thoroughly explore the teaching and learning experiences of both first and non-first generation students throughout the transition period is necessary and vital for further development in this area of study.

Having considered the characteristics of first and non-first generation students in transition and theories relating to their transition, the following section considers the influence of prior schooling on the transition of students to university.

Transition Expectations and Preparation in Schools

This section considers the influence of expectations on transition experiences, the particular experiences of school-leavers, the influence of school-to-university preparation and type of schooling.

Transition Expectations

A person's belief in their ability to succeed at university can be influenced by a variety of experiences during the transition period. As students adjust to their new surroundings, their confidence and motivation can 'weaken' if they encounter experiences which challenge beliefs they hold about themselves and their abilities (Tinto 2017). Furthermore, self-belief, in relation to ability, can influence persistence and the way in which goals, tasks and challenges are addressed (Tinto 2017). For example, high levels of self-belief to succeed are said to be associated with persistence even when difficulties arise whereas lower levels of self-belief are associated with discouragement and often withdrawal from the situation encountered (Chemers et al. 2001). In this way, experiences during the transition period can alter a person's sense of belief in their ability to succeed at a task or in a particular situation for example when students enter university initially confident in their ability to succeed but then experience challenges that create and build doubt in their beliefs. In other words, without reassurance and encouragement, initial and subsequent negative experiences during the transition period can have a long-term effect on self-belief, persistence and ultimately, goal attainment.

This can be related to the concept of disconfirmed expectations. This concept is often studied in relation to goods and services to explore how expectations which have not been met can

ultimately affect product satisfaction (Zeelenberg et al. 2000). 'Confirmation' and 'disconfirmation' in relation to an expected reaction to a product or service can be explained and linked to satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the following way:

> *Confirmation* happens when the product or service performs as expected and leads to *satisfaction*. *Disconfirmation* happens when the product performance or service is less than expected and leads to *dissatisfaction.* (Bordia et al. 2006, p. 2)

The paradigm of disconfirmed expectations, therefore, is an outcome which is unpredicted, being either better or worse than anticipated, however, when outcomes turn out to be worse than expected, negative emotions can result. Furthermore, in many cases disconfirmed expectations are associated with the notion of disappointment and that disappointment in this situation can lead to feelings of powerlessness, tendencies to withdraw and turn away from the situation, sensitivity to future disappointments and a preference for safer alternatives (Zeelenberg et al. 2000). Of interest is how this might apply to university commencing students. Since 2015 to 2017, arguable the most common institutional factor which prompted students to consider leaving university early was that their expectations had not been met (Australian Government of Education and Training 2017). Expectations upon commencement are often unrealistic and therefore disconfirmed among new students, thus without encouragement to continue or significant others to endorse and validate education, new students may experience notions of disappointment and feelings of powerlessness which may constitute tendencies to turn away from the immediate situation and withdraw from higher education in search of safer alternatives, such as paid or domestic work.

Interestingly, students in the King et al. study (2015), upon commencement, were asked to rate and record how satisfied they expected they would be with their university experience. After a year, they were asked to rate, upon reflection, how satisfied they actually were with their university experience in the initial stages. On average, there was an 11.8% drop between expected satisfaction and actual satisfaction. In other words, students expected to be much more satisfied than they actually were. When asked about the effects this had on their decision to stay or leave, 30% of the students said that it had impacted significantly but sharing their concerns with university staff who validated their experiences had made a difference to how they felt about their studies and the importance of continuing.

This is not surprising when considering the decision patterns of consumer groups in relation to a product or service (Bohlmann 1996). When disconfirmed expectations are experienced, individuals can change their satisfaction judgements based on the satisfaction judgements of other group members. During post-discussion processes regarding the experience of using a product or service, highly satisfied members of a group tend to expect and encourage other group members to also be satisfied. As a result, members of the group will revise their

perceptions of a service or product based on knowledgeable information that emerges from the group discussion. In other words, if an individual in a group views a product unfavourably, which other members of the group hold in high regard due to prior experience or knowledge, it is likely that the group members will share their experiences and encourage a change of mind in the individual by endorsing and sharing positive information about the product (Bohlmann 1996). Of interest is how this behaviour may be linked to students and their experiences upon commencement of university study. In a similar way, if students who experience disconfirmed expectations in a negative way are linked with others who can share positive experiences, students may revise their perceptions of university and change their outlook on their studies and the environment. This may also explain why sibling experience of higher education is significant in satisfaction levels (Connor et al. 2001). Young people without siblings with higher education experience are less likely to be satisfied than those who have siblings with higher education experience to share information with and provide support and encouragement (Heath et al. 2010).

An important insight which can be drawn from these studies is the effect of the transition period on students and the impact of significant others. If students are not adequately prepared for the university environment they can experience a negative reaction during their transition which can lead to feelings of disillusionment and withdrawal and, if left unchecked, withdrawal from their studies to pursue safer alternatives. However, if information which is encouraging and influential is made available to students during the transition period, it may impact upon their decision to stay or leave. For example, if students are reassured and feel that they have made the right decision in pursuing university studies during times of difficulties they may be more likely to persist with their studies.

Transition across the School-University Interface

Transition to university can be difficult and challenging for students in general, so much more when students have not been adequately prepared. Attrition rates are high in the first year with many students departing early due to unfamiliarity with higher education systems and a lack of preparedness (Brinkworth et al. 2008, Turner 2004, McInnis 2001, Pargetter et al. 1998). While it is common for all students to experience some difficulties and challenges when starting university, school-leavers can come from a unique background where they have been closely monitored and highly supported throughout their primary and secondary years without, in many cases planning or preparation for the transition ahead (King et al. 2015, Pargetter et al. 1998). School-leavers make up the largest cohort entering university so, if they are to be assisted, it is important to understand the difficulties and concerns which arise as a result of their transitioning from this type of background. The studies in this section were therefore included as they provide insights into what difficulties and challenges school students face

when making the transition to university.

Concerns about not being adequately prepared arise when students enter university directly from school with little knowledge and understanding of what to expect of teaching and learning in their new environment or with the idea that university study is similar to senior secondary study (Brinkworth et. al. 2008, Keating 2006, Crisp 2006). Concerning attributes such as a lack of study skills necessary for higher education (Wingate 2006, Evans 2000) or social and academic support networks (McKavanagh and Purnell 2007, Tinto 2002), misconceived expectations (King et al 2015, Sheard et al. 2003) and an unfamiliarity with the discourse of disciplines and faculties (Lawrence 2005) can contribute to confusion and uncertainty during the transition period and into the first year. To put this into perspective, in 2009 approximately 60% of school-leavers in an Australian national study (Scutter et al. 2011) felt they had realistic expectations regarding the standard of work at university and the environment in general before arriving on campus. However, once on campus, only 30% of students in the study were found to have realistic expectations of university life which included an understanding of the demands of operating successfully in the university environment.

For many school-leavers, the university learning environment can seem foreign and in contrast to the atmosphere of pastoral care offered in most secondary school environments, and what is more, the sudden and sometimes unexpected decline in attention at university can be mistaken for a perceived aloofness or disinterest towards the student, creating feelings of confusion and distress (King et al. 2015, Gibney et al. 2011, Kift et al. 2010, Pargetter et al. 1998). In the study by Pargetter et al. it was revealed that most students felt particularly sensitive to the way in which academic staff related to them and to the extent to which active encouragement and interest was shown (Pargetter et al. 1998). One student towards the end of the study was surprised in her second year by how negative she felt only one year before. Upon reflection of her words in the questionnaire which was completed during the early stages of her first year she proclaimed;

> “On reading through my answers… I'm surprised at how negative and miserable I was feeling then. Things have improved dramatically since then."
>
> (Pargetter et al. 1998, p. 58)

Once on campus, school-leavers cannot help but make regular comparisons between school and university and become disillusioned with the differences between the two environments (Pargetter et al. 1998). The university teaching and learning environment is often perceived as being very different from the secondary school environment on a number of levels, particularly when students realise what it means to take full responsibility for their own learning while balancing other aspects of their lives such as paid employment and social commitments (Gibney

et. al. 2011, Kift et. al. 2010, Keating 2006, Pargetter et. al. 1998).

Often, the reasons why school-leavers feel unprepared in their transition to university are due to the teaching and learning cultures of universities in comparison to what they have been used to at school. Brady and Allingham (2007) suggest that schools at the senior level are placing more emphasis on students' final scores than on the development of critical thinking and independent learning skills. Fielding and Stott's (2012) interpretation of this is, that as a result of the focus on results, the type of approach Australian schools are taking is a 'spoon-feeding' approach. Fielding and Stott argue that this type of approach hinders the transition process. Furthermore, the formation of close staff-student relationships in small peer groups which often occurs at the school level is difficult to replicate in a university setting. So without prior warning of how universities operate, university school-leavers may expect the same level of attention and close contact with academics and peers as they experience at school.

Brinkworth and colleagues (2013) argue along similar lines. They believe that the increased assistance for secondary school students, due to the pressure on some school teachers to get students into university, may contribute to unrealistic expectations of what students will encounter at university. One university academic's experience in Fielding and Stott's study led him to the belief that 'schools teach students to be passive and very reliant on their teachers to scaffold their learning and compliance' (p. 13). Direct evidence of this can be seen in a study by Scutter et al. (2011) which reported on first year university expectations and experiences. It reported that the majority of school-leaver participants, expected university academics to spend up to 80% of their time in teaching-related duties while a further majority of 95% felt that feedback on drafts of their work would be important for their learning. Still a majority but slightly less, 68% percent of participants expected university teachers to provide students with all of the materials and resources required for their learning. Amazingly, in the same study 35% of students believed that there would be no difference between the learning environment at school and university. These statistics provide a useful insight into the way in which school-leavers form expectations of university based on their experiences from high school, particularly those from their final years when the level of assistance was significant. It is clear, therefore, that a significant proportion of school-leavers arrive at university unprepared and often overwhelmed with new experiences and conflicting expectations (Brinkworth et al. 2013, Scutter et al. 2011, Pargetter et al. 1998). School-leavers are often surprised at the expectations they initially have on arrival and become quickly aware that they are not as well prepared as they could have been, causing confusion, frustration and even anxiety for many students (Fielding and Stott 2012).

When 37 Australian Year 12 students in the Pargetter et al. (1998) study were asked about their preparedness upon entering university, only 31% believed that they were prepared for

university study. In a more recent Australian national study in 2015 (Baik et al.), it was reported that 51% of first year students had felt that their school had prepared them well for their first year of university study. However, the researchers of this study concluded that their survey responses were most likely biased in that the responses were skewed towards students who were succeeding rather than failing in their first year. The Student and Staff Expectations and Experiences Project conducted in South Australia determined that 46% of student participants believed that their school had prepared them well for university study (Brinkworth et al. 2013), a somewhat similar result to the national study, particularly when biases are taken into account. This shows that while it seems as though university preparation in schools may have improved, ultimately school-leavers continue to find the transition from a small secondary school setting to a larger university environment challenging, difficult and at times unexpected (Fielding and Stott 2012).

In 2014, Cantwell and colleagues provided a deeper understanding of transition by considering the intellectual demands associated with university-level learning which requires the student to engage in more complex and abstract thinking than what they have been used to. The researchers posit that secondary school education systems encourage the capacity to identify and evaluate concepts in a compartmental way, that is, only those concepts constrained to a specific context of learning are presented. Undergraduates are expected to act on the knowledge they acquire, rather than just reproduce it, and to contextualise and integrate it across disciplines. Cantwell and colleagues see secondary school education as a 'concrete and closed' system of knowing, and undergraduate learning as a higher mode of functionality where conceptualising and theorising within a discipline is mandate for success. Cantwell and colleagues conclude that the differences in education systems is problematic for students transitioning from one system to the other.

However, the researchers reassure that the issue of change in modality of thinking is not problematic for all, so the question regarding why some students are able to adapt to and find success at university while others are not becomes increasingly interesting, particularly when patterns emerge in relation to background and persistence. For example, in the study by Pargetter et al. (1998) the large majority of first year university students indicated that they were looking forward to the freedom university study offered and were sure of their reasons for wanting to participate in higher education. However, even though most students had a strong desire to do well and gain higher education qualifications, a large proportion left before completing their degree and did so in the first semester. Given that the majority of students arrived on campus with positive expectations and confidence in their decision to pursue higher education but yet became so disillusioned and disengaged so quickly, is of paramount interest particularly when students feel they are unable to continue and so withdraw from the situation. For those in the study who remained enrolled towards the end of their first year, only a very

small percentage upon reflection were able to view their high school experience as helpful and a good preparation for the transition to university study.

It is not uncommon for commencing school-leavers to fall into the trap of forming quite unrealistic expectations as they leave high school and look forward to starting university (Brinkworth et al. 2013, Turner 2004, McInnis 2001). King and colleagues (2015) reported from the Expectations and Experiences Project that 93% of the 8535 school-leaver participants, almost all of the participant group which incidentally included first and non-first generation students, expected to receive feedback on written drafts prior to submitting their final assessment piece. While this idea is not entertained in a university setting, it is very often insisted upon by the teacher at the secondary level. The practice of 'drafting' is quite common in secondary schools and often is a result of the processes and procedures that schools have adopted to help students achieve better results (Pargetter et al. 1998). It is interesting to note that the King et al. study did not differentiate between first and non-first generation students. So it would seem, therefore, that almost all school-leavers in the study (95%) believed that the practice of drafting at the school level would be adopted at the university level regardless of students' parental education and knowledge that this practice does not exist at university. For school-leavers, expectations of university study, are based on experiences of teaching and learning in the school system, regardless it seems of whether or not students have parents at home with university experience to guide and help them form realistic expectations before they arrive (Rutland et al. 2016, McEwan et al. 2015).

It has been argued for some time now that first generation students have more difficulties in transitioning to university than their peers and that, in many cases, first-in-family students only have the school system to rely on to further their understanding of higher education environments (Scutter et. al. 2011). This is plausible when considering the proportion of school-leavers in a recent study (approximately one third) who believed that their parents had limited understanding of what they did at university (Baik et al. 2015). While the students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to report that their parents had little understanding of what they did at university, it is interesting to note that a significant percentage of high SES students were of the same mindset (48% of low SES students compared with 25% of high SES students). The latter statistic lends itself to several interpretations regarding family education backgrounds of the high SES students in the study. The breakdown of first and non-first generation students who fall into the high SES category is unknown and therefore unclear if any of 25% of high SES students had parents who did not attend university and thus were not in a position to receive advice from parents, or if any of the 25% of high SES students *had* parents who attended university but due to the change in higher education systems, were not for this or any other reason in a position to receive advice from their parents. More research in this area is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of student background and transition experiences

and the best ways in which students can be better prepared for the transition period during their final years of schooling, particularly first generation students who may only have their school experiences to rely on.

Effects of Secondary School Experience on Transition

As students transition into university and strive to comprehend and make sense of their new education environment, there is a temptation and a tendency to draw upon their previous education in which they found comfort and success and where achievement from one level to the next may have been taken for granted (Brady and Allingham 2007). The tendency to draw upon previous experience is unhealthy for students if they have come from a learning environment in which they were under-challenged, regularly monitored and where simplistic ways of learning had been rewarded (Brady and Allingham 2007, Prosser and Trigwell 1999). Therefore the way students view learning in higher education and apply themselves to learning environments and to their study can play a major role in performance outcomes (Prosser and Trigwell 1999).

It is understood that students arrive at university with a variety of knowledge and a mixture of prior experiences and, upon entry, it is highly likely that they form immediate and unique perceptions of the learning environment based on these prior experiences. As such, if a student enters university with an established deep approach to learning, the student is more likely to perceive the new learning environment as affording a deep approach and thus is likely to adopt a deep approach to their own learning experiencing success as a result. If, on the other hand, a student enters university with an established surface approach to learning, this student will be more likely to perceive the learning environment as affording a surface approach and is likely to continue their learning using a surface or procedural approach. Unfortunately therefore, students who arrive at university with successful experiences of surface learning are likely to perceive their new learning environment as affording the same surface approach, which will, consequently, negatively influence the quality of their learning outcomes (Prosser and Trigwell 1999).

In addition, new students commencing university study with little understanding of their new learning environment consistently use comparisons of previous learning environments when describing their learning experiences at university (Keating 2006). For students transitioning from high school to university, these comparisons may act as a hindrance to their performance (Brady and Allingham 2007). In particular, when students have not been prepared for different ways of learning they most likely have become highly dependent learners, with little experience of applying deeper levels of thinking and understandings will be disadvantaged at university as they would not have had opportunities to learn in different ways. In other words, students who

have in the past been highly dependent learners at high school, have perceived the high school environment in a way that affords a passive approach and have been successful in this approach, are at risk of perceiving the university learning environment in the same way with negative consequences that will impact their achievement and performance (Fielding and Stott 2012, Prosser and Trigwell 1999).

The differences in learning and teaching across secondary and university institutions in terms of the way subject knowledge and content is shared and delivered in schools compared with universities is also problematic as students at the secondary level can be instructed in ways which are in contrast to methods used at university (Lewis and White 2002). For example, rather than building onto existing knowledge of undergraduates in relation to a topic, the practice in some universities is to teach topics without assuming prior knowledge, using methods unfamiliar to the students, which can lead to confusion and loss of confidence (Lewis and White 2002, Clerehan et al. 2001). For example, at the secondary level students are told to 'explain as if the reader doesn't understand'. Students are therefore, led to believe that they need to show what they understand rather than construct and build a detailed argument in response to a statement. Another example is the concept of 'critical analysis'. This concept is often foreign to school-leavers, so school-leavers will often revert to 'describing' when they should be 'analysing' when they come across this concept (Clerehan et al. 2001).

All students entering university from school need to adapt to new experiences and different teaching and learning environments. Classes at universities, for example, lectures and computer laboratory sessions, are foreign to most school students. The concept of 'tutor' is generally unlike anything they have ever experienced at school (Sheard et al. 2003) and so for many, the move from school to university can be confusing and fraught with anxiety and stress. In addition, the decreased attention at university compared with the high level of pastoral care offered to students in schools is an unwelcome and unexpected experience, often leading to disillusionment and disorientation during the first period of their transition (Pargetter et al. 1998).

School-to-University Preparation

Few schools have practices in place which prepare students for university study or credible programs which would be likely to develop independent learning skills. Too often independent learning is taken to mean, being able to work alone as schools in general do not fully understand the meaning of autonomous learning and, more generally, the importance of transition preparation (Pargetter et al. 1998). Schools have a tendency to see their roles as getting students through Year 12 and into university with the highest possible results and provide little preparation for students once they arrived at university. Furthermore, schools

seemed to have little understanding of higher education institutions in general and the skills and attributes commencing students would benefit from during the transition period (Clerehan et al. 2001, Macdonald et al. 1998). In general, secondary teachers indicate that they are aware of the risks students may face in commencing university but are not in a position or know how to address the risks and challenges that students are likely to face (Brinkworth et al. 2013, Clerehan et al. 2001).

The importance of school-to-university preparation is gaining momentum (Brinkworth et al. 2013, Turner 2004, Clerehan et al. 2001, McInnis 2001, Farrell and Farrell 2000) with growing pressure on schools to better prepare students for university transition and study, particularly if parents are unable to do so; however schools alone should not be held solely accountable for the preparation of students transitioning into universities (Pargetter et al. 1998). Universities have an obligation to take the lead in building mutually advantageous connections with schools and work together to understand and address transition concerns and needs. Ideally, university academics must see themselves (and be seen by schools) as a resource that can assist and share knowledge without assuming authority in the relationship (Noguera 1998, Pargetter et al. 1998).

School-university partnerships are paramount to secondary school programs which aim to prepare students for the transition-to-university study (Farrell and Farrell 2000). Programs, where secondary school teachers practise and experience using a variety of techniques and resources in collaboration with local universities, are beneficial to students intending to participate in higher education programs (Moore 2006). Many students rely solely on school counsellors and teachers to inform them about university courses and study, often in ad hoc ways (Scutter et. al. 2011, Collier et. al. 2008). Therefore, as student experiences and information at the high school level often form the basis of higher education expectations and understandings, school-university partnerships, if they are pursued, could have the potential to greatly assist students during the transition period. However, the development and success of school-university partnerships depends much on understanding the issues of transition and the willingness of schools and universities to embrace them (Brady 2002). Fortunately, schools and universities are beginning to see the benefit and necessity of working together towards common goals with interesting results (Brady 2002, Farrell and Farrell 2000).

Pargetter (2000) advocates that schools in collaboration with universities have a responsibility to assist students with the transition from one educational institution to the next and that it is in both of their interests to do so. After much consultation with schools and partnering universities, Pargetter identified five key areas facilitating successful school-to-university transition, summarised as follows:

1. Awareness – Students need to be aware that there will be serious transition issues to face, that they will have trouble organising their own lives, they may be lonely, and they will need to take positive action to ensure they are prepared for and cope with change. Parents also need preparation for continuing support of their adult student sons and daughters, and instructions about how to provide that support.

2. Early orientation – It is important that students are comfortable in and operate effectively in a university environment. This has two elements. First, during the secondary years there should be systematic opportunities to perform tasks and operate in ways typically associated with university study such as exposure to lectures, tutorials, library use, organisational tools, lab reports, time management and access to a variety of learning spaces within the school. Secondly, visits to universities, awareness of programs at universities and general familiarisation with a university campus should be part of the secondary program.

3. Course advice – It is important to ensure that quality and complete course and careers advice is provided with the involvement of students and parents. It is important that a course name conveys to the student genuine content about the nature of the course and the nature of the career at the end of that course. It is also important to accept that at some stages a student is not ready to make certain decisions, so options for courses with a range of career outcomes should be laid out, as well as highly targeted courses, encouraging multiple pathways which allow students to keep career direction under review.

4. Independent learning - An independent learner is a student who can largely, but with guidance and support, make the decisions necessary to learn. They need to have skills to decide how to involve themselves in learning activities, how to manage time and how to prepare for assessment tasks. This requires a high degree of self-awareness and personal management, as well as past practice at learning in different ways and evaluating the success of different learning styles. Such traits are often found in resilient learners.

5. Ongoing school support - Schools should provide support during the move beyond school and particularly during the transition period. A designated teacher could be an ongoing contact person for ex-students and their parents who are experiencing difficulties in coping with transition, providing advice and guidance to those who have needs or referrals when specialised help is required.

(Pargetter 2000, p.3)

While several studies are now emerging which are focused on the ways in which schools prepare students for university transition, and whether and to what extent a particular type of schooling has an effect on student transition experiences (Birch and Miller 2005, Dobson et al. 2005, Win and Miller 2005, Farrell and Farrell 2000), further research is still needed to gain deeper insights into the ways schools and universities can work together in preparing students for university transition. This is even more important when considering that cultural factors such as school experience and aspirations have become key predictors for Year 12 completion rather than parental education and occupational status as have been previously (Homel et al. 2012).

School-Leaver Transition

Available statistics (2011) reveal that 74% of all commencing higher education students in Australia complete their studies and gain university qualifications (Edwards and McMillan 2015). In other words, one in about four students who enrol in an Australian university as an undergraduate will leave their institutions without attaining a qualification. Furthermore, according to both national and international studies, approximately 60% of students who leave university before completion do so in their first year, and of those, 30% leave in the first semester. These statistics suggest that the transition period for higher education is a time of uncertainty, confusion and high risk for many students (Jackson and Read 2012, Pargetter et al. 1998).

In 2007, Marks' study on *Completing University* showed that approximately 80% of school-leaver students who enrolled in an Australian university as an undergraduate completed their studies, within a seven-year period, including those who changed courses or institutions. This figure is different from the estimate of 74% in the previous study as Marks' study included just school-leavers, whereas the Edwards et al. study involved commencing students from all sectors of the community, which included equity groups experiencing disadvantage. In Marks' study the data were segregated into multiple sub-categories with corresponding completion rates. For example, Marks' study revealed that, in general, students who had attended an independent secondary school were no more likely to complete a university degree than students who had attended a government school, and furthermore, that students who had attended Catholic schools showed a slightly higher completion rate than others.

When students were grouped by first or non-first generation status, non-first generation students were in a much better position in terms of university completion than first generation students, but when students were grouped according to ATAR scores, their scores became by far the greatest predictor for university completion. A strong positive correlation between ATAR and degree completion was found suggesting the strongest influence on university course completion was how well a student had performed at high school. Completion rates were very

high among those with high ATAR scores and much lower among students with relatively low ATAR scores. For example, 73% of students with ATAR scores slightly above average completed university, 80% of students with above average ATAR scores completed university while 94% of students who featured in the top ten percent of ATAR scores completed university. Marks suggests in his discussion that completion predictability may well be linked to higher ability students who are more able to cope with instructions and interpretations of what is required to be successful and how this is best achieved.

Type of Schooling

It is evident that there are some students who are better able to cope with the university transition period than others and there is also evidence that some schools produce students who are better able to cope in the transition period than students from other schools. Dobson and Skuja (2005) collected data from Monash University over a three-year period and found that type of school was significant in relation to university first year performance. In the Monash study, students entering university in similar ATAR bands were monitored and found to perform according to their school of origin. Once at university, students from government sectors consistently performed, on average, five units above students from independent sectors. Students from Catholic sectors also performed better than students from independent sectors but fared worse than the students from government sectors. This is particularly interesting considering that the majority of students from Independent schools would be classified as traditional type students, or non-first generation students, and most likely financially advantaged. In other words, students may enter university with similar ATARs but different prior experiences will affect their performance once on campus. In that particular study, students from government sectors out-performed students from the other two sectors and those from Independent schools performed the worst.

Interpretations of this data suggest that students from Independent schools have exaggerated ATAR scores due to the extra resources and assistance provided at their school but once on campus, without extra assistance, their academic situation becomes more realistic, and achievements are more aligned to individuals' abilities. This is consistent with findings that private schools are able to add value to students' final results but once on a 'level playing field', students from government schools tend to out-perform their peers for a variety of reasons (Birch and Miller 2005, Dobson and Skuja 2005, Win and Miller 2005). Another interpretation is that students from Independent schools have lower academic outcomes at university when compared with students from government schools with similar ATAR scores as students from government schools have learnt to be independent scholars, well before they arrived at university due to their personalities and the nature of their school, and so have an advantage over students from other sectors of secondary education.

Ongoing work in the area of school-to-university transition has shown that the experiences and understandings students bring to university have flow-on effects for their performance at university (Rutland et al. 2016, Fielding and Stott 2012, Turner 2004, Lewis and White 2002). It has been shown that type of schooling and individual institutional processes can provide advantages or disadvantages to student transition (Ashwin and Trigwell 2012, Birch and Miller 2007, Dobson and Skuja 2005). It has also been shown that students can benefit from certain strategies that they have been exposed to and have thus adopted at the school level, whether these have been intentionally implemented into the school's teaching and learning program to provide students with life-long learning skills for future pathways or whether acquired fortuitously or simply out of necessity.

Given that most students who depart early from university do so in the first semester, it would not be unreasonable to link early student departure with a misunderstanding of the learning environment and a mismatch of expectations, particularly when students are initially certain of their desire to participate in higher education but quite suddenly find themselves questioning their motivation (Pargetter et al. 1998). Preparation is therefore, key for successful university transition and can be achieved through school-university partnerships and strategies.

Conclusion

As universities grow in student numbers and the diversity of background and culture of students increases, literature contributions in the area of student transition for individual groups are also increasing. For example, it is now known that first generation students are positioned among one of the fastest growing cohorts in Australian universities, can come from a variety of low, medium and high income households and can attend both government schools as well as a variety of independent schools (Jehangir 2010, Kelly 2005). It is also known that first generation students are disadvantaged compared with non-first generation students in relation to university access and completion (Southgate et al. 2014, Engle 2007, Marks 2007, Christie et al. 2005, Choy 2001). While many studies have endeavoured to explore and examine demographics and characteristics which may lead to a better understanding of the situation, this topic is relatively new revealing inconsistencies and thin areas and as such are addressed in the following projects.

Three important themes warranting further investigation have been uncovered.

Firstly, while the majority of first generation students come from low income family backgrounds, a significant and increasing number come from medium to high income family backgrounds. First generation students who are classified as high SES at university are presumed to have advantage if they do not belong to any of the six traditional equity groups, yet they are evidenced to have disadvantage due to their first generation status (Southgate et

al. 2014, Marks 2007, Choy 2001). For this reason it is therefore important to consider the experiences of *all* first generation students across all SES levels, not just those from low SES groups to develop and broaden further understandings.

Secondly, many researchers are beginning to question the acceptance of traditional theories regarding first and non-first generation students (Jaeger 2010, Lareau and Weiniger 2003, Kingston 2001) in conjunction with the concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field, particularly after significant changes that occurred in higher education in the late 80s. While these changes have had a positive effect on university participation rates for first generation students, this group is still at a significant disadvantage in regard to university completion due to a variety of challenges and circumstances (Jehangir 2010, Marks 2007, Kelly 2005, Choy 2001) when compared with non-first generation students. Using cultural capital arguments, grounded in the history and tradition of university environments, to explain this disadvantage becomes problematic when the nature and characteristics of current higher education settings are very different from what they used to be (Selwyn 2007). It is important therefore, to explore possibilities of cultural capital influence on students in current university environments and in what ways a family history of university study may assist students transitioning to university.

As there are so few studies on non-first generation students (Collier and Morgan 2007, Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005, Pike and Kuh 2005, Christie et al. 2004) and limited information on their experiences and perceptions of the teaching and learning environment, it becomes even more important to give all students a voice, not just those who are first generation. The voices of non-first generation students have remained relatively silent in past studies as they are nearly always presumed to have advantage due to their parents' educational background and thus do not evoke as much interest in student equity discussions. While it may be true that non-first generation students may be advantaged by personal characteristics like persistence at university compared with first generation students, explanations may be out-dated and in need of further investigation. This is not to say that past explanations cannot be valid in current times, this simply suggests that more evidence is necessary to determine why non-first generation students still out-perform first generation students in modern universities which are quite different to the universities which non-first generation parents attended. Therefore, as federal funding continues to be made available to support disadvantaged students throughout Australian universities, it is imperative to investigate the experiences and perceptions of first generation students *and* non-first generation students as they transition to higher education in order to explore the reasons why one group may have advantage over the other.

Finally, the largest group of students (40% to 50%) to enter university each year enter directly from the school system (Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, cited in Pilcher and Torii 2018) and necessarily rely on their most recent educational prior experiences in this environment in developing expectations of what university will be like (Palmer et al. 2011). It is important to understand that prior experiences within schools have significant effects on transition processes at university (Fielding and Stott 2012, Birch and Miller 2005, Dobson and Skuja 2005) regardless of whether students are first or non-first generation; both types of students form unrealistic expectations depending on type of school. Once at university, some students are more likely than others to receive assistance if, for instance, they fall into one of the six formal equity groups, yet other students may potentially receive none whatsoever, even though their unrealistic expectations of university life will ultimately impact negatively upon their transition experience.

For this reason, more research in this fascinating area of school-to-university transition is also necessary on two accounts; firstly, for higher education institutions to recognise and understand the prior experiences of their commencing students and how they may be assisted during the transition period; and secondly, for secondary schools to understand student transition and how they may better prepare their exiting students for transition into higher education. Therefore, Study Two was designed to address all three points above by exploring the teaching and learning experiences of both first and non-first generation students and what effect prior experiences had on their student transition while Study Three was developed as a case study to gain insight into and understanding of the ways schools could more adequately prepare students for transition into higher education.

The following study set out to explore the ambiguity surrounding the experiences of non-first generation students in today's climate and to investigate the experiences of first generation students reported in the literature. Members from two distinct groups comprising first and non-first generation students were invited to participate in this study for the purpose of exploring and understanding their transition experience.

Study Two:

Exploring the Early Transition Experiences of First and Non-First Generation Students Transitioning to University

Introduction

Currently, a considerable amount of knowledge is known about the experiences of first generation students. This group has been the focus of many studies which have provided useful insight into the backgrounds, commitments, study habits, emotions and psychology of first generation students as they transition into university learning environments. Non-first generation students, however, differ in that they are less likely to be the subject of university transition studies. In investigations on university transition, the focus has been on the disadvantage of first generation students (Stuber 2010, Christie et al. 2008, Mitchell 2007, Tranter 2006). As a result, therefore, considerably less is known about the transition experiences of non-first generation students as they are rarely investigated. Having said this however, members from this group have been included in studies where family educational background was not a focus and where participants were not classified as either being first or non-first generation, with some very interesting results. These types of studies are useful when considering the general transition of students into university but provide little insight into the experiences of non-first generation students as a group unto themselves. Therefore, in order to increase our understanding of any differences in the experiences of these two categories of student as consistently reported in the literature, a qualitative investigation was decided upon for this project to have the best opportunity of realistically capturing the nuanced stories and experiences of both first and non-first generation students as they transition into university.

This study was guided by the following research question:

How do the lived experiences of first generation university students compare with the experiences of non-first generation students?

Study Two investigated the experiences of a sample of commencing university students during their transition into university study and the university environment in general. This study is presented in four sections. The first section discusses the method used in this study, the second section sets out the empirical field work undertaken as part of the study, the third section summarises and discusses the findings of the study and the forth section provides concluding remarks in relation to the findings of this work.

The students who participated in this study were six first generation students, those who were the first in their families to attend university, and six non-first generation students, those who were not. The scope of this study included student expectations of the teaching and learning environment, transition perceptions, perceptions of coping and performance, and interaction and relationship experiences. Participants, grouped by first and non-first generation status,

were asked about their initial expectations and experiences during the first semester of starting their degree and how they made sense of their new learning environment and the people in it as they progressed through the transition period.

Development of Questions through Literature Engagement

The previous study (Study One) reviewed the literature relating to university transition and uncovered a number of aspects requiring further study. The most problematic aspect is in relation to the disadvantage faced by first generation students. First generation students are up to 15% more likely to withdraw from university before completing a degree than non-first generation students, in Australia and worldwide (Southgate et al. 2014, Marks 2007, Choy 2001).

Up to now, in addressing the reported disadvantage of first generation students, the results and conclusions have often emphasised and highlighted the challenges this particular group faces. As a result, many accounts, experiences and stories of first generation students in current university environments have been recorded. However, in most cases, researchers have investigated only the experiences of first generation students and have relied on past references and findings about non-first generation students when on occasions, comparisons and conclusions about the differences between first and non-first generation students are made.

Non-first generation students entering university have often been thought of as having the 'right mix' of cultural capital to be able to readily cope in the system, strong family support and higher education experience in their families on which to draw as well as fewer outside obstacles in their lives such as long distant commuting, paid work and responsibilities in the home (Southgate et al. 2014, Atkinson 2011, Gibney et al. 2011, Stuber 2010, Reay et al. 2009, Christie et al. 2008, Mitchell 2007, Thomas and Quinn 2007, Tranter 2006, Choy 2001). However, as there are so few studies on non-first generation students in current university environments, it becomes difficult to know whether past references to this group, which may have once been valid, are relevant or current now, particularly with the increase in diversification of university systems, structures and participants.

While a small number of researchers have investigated both first and non-first generation students *concurrently* as part of general participant selections and there are some evidenced differences between the two cohorts, the number of studies are limited, highlighting the need for further investigation in this area. So while this type of research includes transition experiences of both first and non-first generation students, it does not offer a comparison of the types of experiences, and to a large extent nor does the literature. Put simply, the literature has not confidently revealed in what ways the perceptions and experiences of non-first

generation students differ from those of first generation students and, ultimately, why one experience seems to provide an advantage in terms of degree completion over the other. Therefore, the following three questions were formulated to address the main research question for Study Two developed from the literature to gain insights and contribute to understanding of the field.

Questions

1. In what ways are first generation and non-first generation students prepared for the transition into university study?

2. In what ways does a family history of university education assist students in making sense of their transition?

3. In what ways do students use prior experiences in making sense of their transition?

The first question was concerned with the understandings and expectations students have as they transition into the university study environment and how they cope with these. This question was posed to explore the aspect of preparation in relation to what students have heard about university study or what they were told the environment would be like. The second question related to the impact that family knowledge of university study environments may have had on the transition experiences of students and in what ways families provided support. Both of these questions stemmed from the literature which reported that first generation students have different transition experiences compared with others and perform worse than their peers due to family education and circumstances (Collier et al. 2008, Wells 2008b, Engle 2007, Marks 2007, Choy 2001, Sullivan 2001). The third question focused on the effect prior experiences had on students' attempts to 'make sense' of their new environment and was posed to explore the ways in which external factors influenced transition experiences.

Having outlined the process and rationale for the development of the research questions, the next phase of this study describes the methodology used to address the main research question guided by the three supporting questions and includes the approach to the study, design, methods of data collection and analysis.

Design and Methodology

A phenomenological approach 'understands' and 'gives voice' to the experiences and stories of participants (Larkin et al. 2006, p. 102). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a phenomenological, qualitative approach used to understand participants' lived experiences in context gaining insight and appreciation of their emotions and situations (Longwell-grice and

Longwell-grice 2008). This particular approach encourages the researcher to use his or her own experiences and intuition to enhance the authenticity of the findings (King 2014). This method is used to interpret and furthermore make sense of what a situation is like for a participant within a specific context in which the researcher has some experience. The process of IPA can be directed towards answering a research question formed as a result of a gap in the literature and the results can be discussed using existing literature and theoretical constructs (Larkin et al. 2006, Smith 2004).

There is a concept of 'less' being 'more' in IPA research which challenges the traditional relationship between 'number of participants' and value of research (Smith 2004). The advantages of smaller samples (no more than ten participants) are recognised for individual interviews whereas larger samples have been argued as being more appropriate for focus groups or comparison groups (Smith et al. 1999). Furthermore, in comparison studies, the exploration of one phenomenon from multiple perspectives can help the IPA analyst to develop a more detailed and multifaceted account of that phenomenon and contribute to the 'triangulation' of data (Elliot et al. 1999).

In addition, Seale (2010) prompts us not to overlook previously inaudible or ignored voices. He is of the opinion that methodologies should provide a legitimate space for those previously without voice. In considering Seale's approach therefore, an IPA methodology seemed most appropriate for the research questions developed for this study. IPA is committed to the examination of how people make sense of a life-changing experience (van Nieuwerburgh and Lech 2015). The analysis approach in this methodology, according to Smith et al. (2009), is unlike other qualitative analysis approaches in that it relies on the analyst explicitly entering into the research process with obvious caution and awareness of their personal positioning but, more importantly, with a familiarisation and relevant personal experience of the topic under study on which to draw for a deeper understanding of, and a stronger connection to, participants' stories.

Given the nature of this study and the questions asked in regard to the inquiry, the theoretical methodology chosen for this study was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, where the experiences and understandings of both first and non-first generation students were not, in any way, taken for granted but rather, heard, interpreted and validated in context (Grant and Giddings 2002).

Personal Positioning

Given the encouragement in IPA for the researcher to use his or her own experiences and intuition to enhance the authenticity of the findings, it is appropriate and necessary to acknowledge my own positioning on the topic under study.

Having undergone my own university transition without a history of higher education in my family, I can identify with first generation students. When reading about the experiences of first in family students I find my own experiences being recalled and revisited in details and various forms. I have my own 'lived' understanding of the many challenges that first generation students have been reported to experience and have myself tried to 'make sense' of an emotional and challenging school-to-university transition.

My background after completing university provides yet another perspective. Soon after gaining teaching qualifications, I began teaching in a disadvantaged secondary school, where due to the nature of the school, many of the students were without a family history of university participation. Most of these students, who then moved on to higher education, were first generation students at risk of attrition. It was difficult to watch students who once were excited and eager to be participating in higher education return to the school during their transition period with the information that they had withdrawn. This repetitive pattern was very concerning, and consequently, I developed a strong interest in the experiences of students as they transitioned from school to university. My interest in the experiences of these students led me to employment in the higher education sector working with first years, inside and outside of the classroom in a number of teaching roles and project work. It was during this time that I began this Doctor of Education in the field of university transition to better understand the experiences of students and how best to provide support to this group during the transition period.

Looking ahead, my biological children will not be first generation students should they decide to participate in university. If they do, the literature suggests that they will have a 15% higher probability rate of completion than I had. As a university-educated parent preparing my children for higher education and a satisfying career path, I can now see how different my experiences as a student were compared with my children's. Reflecting on my past, I see that my experiences have provided dimension and insight into the topic under study and have shaped my own personal understanding in the field.

At the same time, I am fully aware that my personal perspectives of being a first generation student and educator across the school-university interface may risk bias in this study, as meanings and understandings I formulate are likely to be interpreted through the biological lens of my own life (Halasa 2005). Potential bias in this study, therefore, needs to be acknowledged and clarified, as this process can create an open and honest narrative for readers and a personal process of checking for myself (Creswell 2003). Schutz (1994) believes that an openly subjective approach allows the researcher to be a partner rather than a neutral stranger in the data collection and analysis process and finds a balance between 'the loss of scientific rigour' and 'the gain of eliciting true meaning, by recreating the experiences of others through

co-operative enquiry' (p. 412). Dickson and Green (2001) remind us that research is never neutral as we cannot help influencing our inquiries by our own ideology and biases. In other words, 'the topics chosen, decisions made, kinds of questions posed, methods used, interpretations given and ways in which findings are reported and disseminated' are always dependent upon our assumptions, beliefs and values (Dickson and Green 2001, p.245). King (2014) also acknowledges this and takes the contemporary view that our experiences, particularly as phenomenological researchers, should not be denied, but rather made explicit to the reader for referral when validating the findings and the study as a whole. He suggests that we, as researchers, should understand our relationship with the data rather than separate ourselves from them. Schutz (1994) has long argued that an openly subjective approach allows the researcher to be in partnership with participants and to openly use personal experiences and understanding to uncover valuable meaning of truth. Schutz sees that there is an advantage when conducting an investigation in an area known to the researcher as the researcher is familiar with the boundaries and is able to work in a nuanced way within them and to glean and interpret valuable data and insights.

In using this advantage, however, the researcher must define his or her concerns and explain their worldview in relation to the topic under study within their field. The researcher must aim to be as transparent as possible, without casting aside beliefs and values, to explore and understand the impact the past has on the present (Callary et al. 2015). One way to achieve this is through a process of self-reflection which facilitates bracketing. Bracketing is a methodological tool in phenomenological inquiry that is designed to place the researcher's own beliefs and experiences in the open and to acknowledge the researcher's personal relationship with the phenomenon under study, particularly throughout the process of data collection and analysis, so that the researcher does not influence understandings and interpretation (Chan et al. 2013). Ahern (1999) expects researchers to make sincere efforts to reflect on and revisit existing values and assumptions while conducting phenomenological research so that they do not impose their own constructions on the interpretation of the experiences of others.

In understanding how my past experiences may impact on the present study, I have used a number of strategies discussed above to evaluate my position by identifying and acknowledging my values, experiences and expectations in relation to the topic and making these transparent and available. I examined my interest in the phenomenon under study, my reasons for being interested in the phenomenon and my relationship to the phenomenon in the development of a journal where I expressed my position within the study and provided ongoing clarity and explanation as reflective and reflexive insights came to mind.

Participant Recruitment

Students in this study were recruited from first year commencers in the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences at a South Australia university during 2012 to 2014. Students were made aware of the project via email and an attached information sheet. Contact was first made with students early in the second week of the semester. After gaining permission from the university, an email was constructed outlining the nature of the project and asking students if they were willing to participate. The email was sent, on my behalf by the university, to all commencing students in the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences with an attached information sheet and an included registration link. The email, in more detail, introduced students to the project, briefly explained the relevance of the project, outlined the timeline and asked interested students to register online for the study. Upon registering, students were asked to provide details such as age, address, telephone, email and best mode and times of contact. Personal information such as students' family income level, language and education backgrounds, parent and sibling education and enrolment status was also requested. This information was used to assess the appropriateness of participants for the study as it was important that the group was not too diverse in personal characteristics, educational background and culture. It was also important to determine whether the topic under study was central to each participant's experience (Seidman 2006).

Participant Selection

In determining suitability in the first instance, participant responses were examined. During the period between March 2012 to April 2014, 15 participants were interviewed.

Participants in IPA research are selected on the basis that they can provide insight and perspective on the phenomenon under study; that is, they represent an experience rather than a population. In order to develop an insight into the phenomenon under study, small homogeneous samples are necessary for meaningful results. Homogeneous samples are even more important when it is the intention of the researcher to draw comparisons between two groups (Smith et al. 2009).

Heeding this advice, participants selected as part of the study were purposely chosen due to the variety of differences within their classification. Twelve of the fifteen participants were selected to be part of the study.

Selection of these participants was based upon a number of characteristics important to the study. Three participants were omitted from the study as they did not represent the experiences being examined in this study. One participant was enrolled as a fully online student. This meant she was not studying on campus and was therefore unable to speak about her experiences of the university's physical environment. Another participant's interview information was unreliable as the participant provided a number of conflicting statements,

indicating that she was confused by the questions and rendering her interview data invalid. Lastly, a third participant had withdrawn from her course prior to the interview and so was unable to provide information on her ongoing transition experience.

The final selection criterion for participants was that they were between 18 and 60 years of age,

studying in similar disciplines. Smith et al. (2009) suggests that when using two groups in a comparison study, participants' characteristics need to be well matched across and within groups and only a small number of participants in each group should be considered. Participant students in this study were therefore divided into two groups of six, representing first generation students and non-first generation students. Within each group, a range of social-economic status levels was identified and although most participants in the study had arrived from school, a few indicated alternative entry paths.

Participant Profile

The twelve participating students were studying in their first year in the disciplines of Education, Media and Communication, Visual Arts and Psychology. Three males and nine females volunteered and participated in the study. Participants brought a variety of personal characteristics and experiences to the study, such as gender, entry path, language speaking background, family income level, living arrangements and areas of study. One important difference between the two groups, apart from family university background, was that there were three rural students among the first generation group while there were none in the non-first generation group. Table 3 shows participant profile information including participants' name (as a pseudonym), gender, family university background, self-nominated income group, cultural and rural background and area of study.

Table 3: Participant Profile Information

	First generation						Non-first generation					
Participant	Chrissie	Angus	Brody	Tina	Sally	Ali	Ryan	Kate	Lisa	Emily	Liz	Annie
Entry	ATAR	Mature	ATAR	Tafe	ATAR	ATAR	ATAR	Mature	ATAR	ATAR	ATAR	ATAR
Gender	F	M	M	F	F	F	M	F	F	F	F	F
Family university back-ground	nil	nil	Nil	nil	Nil	nil	father brother uncle cousin	father mother sister uncle	father mother cousin	father aunties grandmother cousin	mother father aunty uncle grandmother cousin	mother aunties uncle grandmother cousins
Self-nominated income group	Low	Low	High	Low	Med	Med	Low	Med	Med	Med	Med	Med
English Speaking back-ground	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Rural	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Discipline	Ed	Psych	Media	Psych	Ed	Ed	Media	Psych	Ed	Vis Arts	Psych	Ed

Data Collection

An IPA study involves highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts of a small number of participants. Accounts are usually heard via semi-structured interviews. As in Smyth and Hattam's study on voiced research (2001), I explored the ways students perceived their situations and what their experiences meant to them through the 'art of conversation' and 'purposeful dialogue'. I wanted to offer students a 'genuine space' which allowed them to feel safe to reveal their stories and truths as they saw them (Smyth and Hattam 2001, p.403 & 404). As the primary concern of IPA is attentive, detailed accounts of participant experiences, quality rather than quantity is the aim (Smith et al. 2009). In other words, when doing IPA, 'less is more' (Reid et al. 2005) where fewer participants studied and analysed at a deeper level are preferred over many individuals in a shallow and simply descriptive manner. With this in mind, I decided on the interview method to capture experiences in a way which is as close as possible to the students' experiences and stories (Grant and Giddings 2002). Creswell (2003) points out that using this method provides a 'rich, thick description' which adds to the ways in which

researchers can check the accuracy of findings and boost the trustworthiness and credibility in their analysis of qualitative data.

Participants were asked during the registration process to nominate times and a campus that was most convenient for them to participate in an interview ranging from 40 to 90 minutes should they be selected as part of the study and agree to participate. Contact was made by mobile phone short message service (sms) where time, day and location for the interview was agreed upon. Interviews took place in study rooms booked through the library on various campuses. Students expressed that they were familiar with the library and felt comfortable in the study rooms as they themselves had often booked them for their own private use.

The data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews were held at various times in the first semester of university commencement. They were designed to capture students' expectations, experiences and perceptions in the learning environment during the early stages of their transition to university. Interviews were intentionally structured to run according to the flow of conversation with no time limit and varied from 40 to 90 minutes. Seidman (2006) emphasises the art of open-ended, in-depth inquiry which allows a rich, deep and textured picture, while Rapley (2001) urges researchers to see interviewee talk as a product of specific interaction rather than just a reflection or a description of events outside the interview. Although the interview questioning was semi-structured in accordance with the topic of the study, on occasions I intentionally deviated away from the structure in order to create a comfortable atmosphere where students felt at ease and willing to share their stories. In developing purposeful dialogue during interviews, where appropriate, my background as a first generation student, interests and experiences were revealed providing participants with an honest platform from which to share their own experiences (King 2014). Once confidence and rapport were gained or re-gained, the interview continued according to the outline of the plan.

To help with accuracy and verification, conversations were digitally recorded. Notes were also taken during the interview process and upon reflection after the conclusion of the interview. Variations in participant expressions, tones and gestures were noted and any thoughts on meanings implied by these gestures were recorded in detail. The audio conversations were professionally transcribed and upon receipt were checked against the audio recordings for verification. After this process, transcripts were returned to participants for 'member checking' (Creswell 2003, p.196) for validity and to confirm that the conversations were accurately represented. Transcripts and audios were stored on usb devices in a locked filing cabinet until the data analysis process began.

Ethical Considerations

An information sheet was re-presented to all participants at the interview. Signed consent was sought and gained from all participants. Participant understanding was checked and, where necessary, clarified. Participants were informed that they were under no obligation to participate and that withdrawal or non-participation carried no consequences. Information collected was only identifiable until such a time after the process of analysis, when it became de-identifiable. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts to preserve student confidentiality, and information was stored in locked filing cabinets and labelled in a non-identifiable manner.

There were no previous or ongoing significant relationships or roles in regards to the participants and myself. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants were anonymous to other students and staff. The project did not impact upon the relationship between participants and the university, their studies or fellow students. There were no known risks to participants in any way. Furthermore, participants recruited or excluded from the project were not in any way disadvantaged. Results of the project were used in this thesis as part of the Professional Doctorate Degree; however, confidentiality of participants has been protected in the dissemination of the project's results. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve confidentiality and students have remained unidentifiable.

Furthermore, in regards to the welfare of students under study, Fielding (2004, p.304) warns about 'understanding the dangers of unwitting disempowerment'. He asks us to question, despite our best intentions, whether our interventions reinforce existing conceptions of students or empower them. Janks (2010), too, argues that positions taken-for-granted without caution in many cases may be mistaken for truth. Thus, in being cautious, I was aware of my own prejudices and my own biographical background and experiences regarding first generation and non-first generation students and the sensitivity surrounding a potentially emotional and challenging transition into a new learning environment.

Analysis

This section describes the process by which the data were analysed and themes were identified. These themes were generated from the data collected in the field work and are individually discussed in detail.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

According to Smith et al. (2009) IPA consists of five main steps. In brief the steps are as follows: data immersion, noting and commenting on the data, developing emergent themes case by case, developing connections across emergent themes case by case, and establishing patterns across cases.

In the initial stages of the analysis, I became very familiar with the data. Each transcript was read and then re-read again several times, immersing myself completely in the data. I began this phase by considering the data from the first generation students and then repeated this process for the non-first generation students. I listened to the recording of each interview while reading the transcript to revisit the tones, emotions and flow of the conversations. These steps were taken to ensure that the participant and his or her concerns were the focus of the analysis and that I was, as much as possible, immersed in their responses.

The process of noting and commenting commenced with a preliminary examination of the content and language used in the interviews. This step examined language and content at a very exploratory level. Working through the data, line by line, I noted anything of interest and began to identify ways by which the participant understood or thought about a certain issue. For example, I highlighted key words, assumptions, figures of speech and responses and phrases where the interviewee was clearly conveying points of importance. I expanded upon these notes with comments and possible interpretations of meaning for the participant. I checked for repetition, tone, metaphors and whether the participant struggled with certain concepts or was hesitant to talk about them. I also asked myself questions and reflected on my own experiences in relation to statements from participants. For example, one participant exclaimed, 'I wasn't expecting this'. When asked about what he *was* expecting he was unable to articulate it. In this situation, Smith et al. (2009) advises the researcher to reflect on our own experiences, where possible, in order to understand the processes or events that participants have experienced to arrive at the positions in which they find themselves. Engaging in this process helped me to understand and interpret the lived experiences of participants. I found my own experiences provided insights into the way students might have been feeling and why participants were almost 'speechless' when asked about what they expected university to be like. I noted any thoughts and insights I had in a column alongside relevant sections of each participant's transcript.

The next stage involved analysing the detailed comments developed in the previous step to identify emergent themes within each transcript. A careful examination was conducted on significant sections of each transcript which captured and reflected an understanding about that participant's experience. The focus was on capturing what was crucial to the participant at each point of the data and how this was positioned within the participant's experience as a whole. In naming themes, phrases common and important to participants were used.

The fourth step involved organising the themes of each transcript into clusters by drawing together those that were related and connected, producing a compact structure that reflected important representations and aspects of each participant's experience. The clusters, referred

to as super-ordinate themes (Smith et al. 2009), were named and identified according to the significance of the information grouped under them. This procedure was completed by using a case-by-case approach. Super-ordinate themes were then classified as recurrent if they were present in at least a third or more of the participant interviews (Smith et al. 2009)

The last step was establishing patterns across cases, and required separation of the two groups

under study. Again, the first generation group was considered initially followed by the non-first generation group. In each case an overview of the group's data was necessary. Within each group, super-ordinate themes were considered and examined for similarities and differences, patterns and recurrences. Themes that were significant in some way were represented as master themes (Smith et al. 2009) for each group. Interpreting and understanding the experiences of participants relied on the master themes and provided a basis for comparison.

Themes

A careful and thorough analysis revealed a number of recurrent themes. Six themes were dominant in the data and related directly to the transition experiences of participants commencing university study. These themes were as follows:

- Surprise
- Disorientation of Self
- Disorientation of Academic Knowledge
- Prior Experiences
- Technology
- Validation of Experiences

The first theme was one of Surprise and was linked to the two other themes of Disorientation. Participants expressed similar emotions of surprise or even shock upon entering university regardless of whether they were first or non-first generation students. Once students arrived at university, almost all, with the exclusion of two participants who had a good understanding of adult education from prior experiences, knew instantly that there was a mismatch between how they had visualised university to be and how it was being experienced and perceived by them. It was found that students relied heavily on previous experience when it came to developing their expectations of what the university study environment would be like. As students took in their new surroundings and realised their misconceptions, a disconfirmation of expectations followed with varying effects. As a result, participants became confused and unsatisfied with initial experiences and in trying to understand their predicament, students became disorientated with who they were, their personal circumstances and their cognitive ability. They reacted to the unexpected by looking within and questioning themselves rather

than focusing on what they needed to do. They questioned themselves in terms of their identity, motives, comprehension and ways of thinking. Furthermore, this process of self-doubt extended to academic performance which in turn affected confidence levels. Participants struggled with knowing how to perform and what was expected of them and were 'lost' for a period of time while their minds processed the reality of the situation.

In coming to terms with their situations, Prior Experiences in education, or the workplace,

become another key theme in the study. All participants reported on the influence of their prior experiences in relation to their present experience. The two participants who had prior experiences of adult education experienced a positive influence as a result. These students knew what to expect and what was expected of them and so consequently were able to concentrate more on their studies without having to work through a process of re-evaluation as was necessary for their peers. Other students who held unrealistic expectations about university tried to make sense of their new learning environment, by looking to the past for justification regarding their disillusions, and in particular, on what prompted them to make certain assumptions in the first place. Students reflected back on their prior experiences to explain how they arrived at their current mindset. Students described how learning had occurred at school or how workplace training had been conducted, and so were able to look back and reconcile how they had made the assumption that learning at university would be similar to how they had learnt in the past. Once students had gone through the process of understanding their actions and misconceptions, they tended to express feelings of disappointment and anger towards the situation with some students indicating that they felt misled or deceived in terms of what university would be like.

Another theme, Technology played a major role in participants' transition period. While it is often assumed students, and in particular younger students, are comfortable with using technology, this was not the case for the students in the study. Most participants in the study either lacked confidence, experienced difficulties or were unfamiliar with the learning management system in place at the university. Students reported experiencing difficulties accessing and understanding various online applications, activities and modes of information.

The last theme, Validation of Experiences was consistently threaded throughout conversations with participants. Despite university study being quite different from initial expectations and despite the hard work required to make adjustments to cope with the reality of the university environment, workloads, content and relationships, participants on the whole (ten) remained firm in their chosen university pathway. For these students, their experiences were worthwhile or validated in a number of ways by various support persons and structures, and through the validation of these experiences, students developed the motivation to keep going with their

studies. Students' motivation included needing to finish what was started, gain 'good' qualifications or please family and parents.

Two students did not report having the same motivation as the others and consequently, spoke often about withdrawal. Ali and Chrissie were first generation students, both with rural backgrounds. Both girls indicated that since starting their degree they had lost a significant amount of motivation and were unlikely to re-gain momentum. They were disappointed with their degree programs of study and indicated on several occasions that they had intentions of withdrawing. In discussions with the students, it was clear that they were not receiving the same kind of encouragement as other students. Both students did not report on receiving reassurance in relation to their situations or validation of their efforts, instead they worked in isolation and indicated that they felt their study and efforts were a waste of time and were doubtful they would complete.

The above six themes, extracted from the experiences of participants, are analysed in more detail in the next section.

Surprise

The first main theme was the element of surprise. Upon starting university, only two participants, Emily and Tina, had clear and realistic expectations about what university would be like. Emily was from a low income background but was quite familiar with university systems as many of her family members had university qualifications, including her father who had attended university while Emily was in high school and often accompanied him to university and campus events:

> *He was a [university] student but I have been to his classes and things, and when he was doing the maths he had to do like Foundation Studies. I was doing the same work at Year 12 at the same time – I was doing his practice test, he was doing mine – and I was still doing better than him! So I went to his holiday classes and I seemed to get everything no one else did!* (Emily)

Tina, who had transitioned from TAFE, was a first generation student who also arrived at university with realistic expectations. Tina revealed that her studies at TAFE had exposed her to the formalities of adult education and found that university was in many ways similar to TAFE:

> *My going to TAFE made a huge, huge difference. It was about gaining confidence and feeling, you know, assertive and all that kind of stuff. I learnt heaps. They did teach us like essay writing, all that kind of stuff. It's probably similar to Foundation Studies but in a different environment.* Tina

The other ten participants held unrealistic views of university which were often based on their prior education or other relevant experiences.

Upon first discovering that university was not as expected, students often felt confused, disappointed and frustrated. For example, Angus, a first generation mature-aged student, described how the expectations that he had held about university life left him feeling confused and shocked and how he then developed new perceptions of what university life was really like according to his initial transition experience:

> *I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I was actually quite shocked. I wish they [the university] would tell the truth because I think they, they don't lie but they just make it sound like it's going to be what it's not. I knew nothing about university really, only from what I'd heard or what somebody had told me when I was younger, so I had all these preconceived ideas about it.* (Angus)

Before commencing university Angus did not have a clear understanding of what university would be like. In the extract, Angus began by clarifying that he was unsure of what to expect. Prior to commencing, he formed his own picture of what university would be like, according to what he had heard through friends or the media. However, upon arrival, Angus's tone indicated that he experienced disappointment and even perhaps a perceived level of deception. By wishing the university would 'tell the truth', Angus implied that the university had deceived him in some way in terms of what to expect. He was expecting a positive transition experience based on the picture he had created in his mind and was surprised when confronted by a different picture.

In conversations with other participants regarding their first impressions of university study, many expressed initial disappointment, like Angus, which was linked to expectations developed prior to commencement. Chrissie, also a first generation student, spoke positively about her experience of looking forward to university but then negatively described her reaction once she realised university life was not as she had first thought:

> *I was definitely looking forward to sort of moving out and being able to have freedom and the whole uni feel sort of thing, and I was like oh yeah, cool, cool, cool. Yeah, I got here and it was like OK, first lecture, sit down, freaked out, ran out of there, went back home. I was scared shitless because the whole lecture room was packed. I was sort of like wow, and like I freaked out. It was so different.* (Chrissie)

Chrissie spoke of 'it' being different from what she had been looking forward to. She did not envisage the 'uni feel' to include crowds of students and packed lecture rooms, making her feel strange and overwhelmed. She had formed her own picture of the 'uni feel' to be a positive experience in general terms which included independence and freedom.

Brody also spoke about his initial experiences as 'being different'. He reflected on his first day at university and described it as being different from classes at high school. He described this realisation as being somewhat overwhelming:

> *The first day was pretty different. Like the classes are so much longer than back in high school, so that was definitely different, a bit overwhelming.* (Brody)

It is clear here that the element of surprise of the environment not being as students thought it would be, was closely related to their prior experiences. Students in this study based their expectations either on what they had heard about university or on a previous educational experience, as Brody indicated above.

Returning to Chrissie, during the conversation she went on to clarify further how she was feeling which was evident in the extract below and accounted for her lack of understanding in regard to specific aspects of university study by recounting on a school experience. Upon reflection, she recalled a particular time when she was still in school with a certain amount of frustration in regards to information sessions organised by the university. She implied that she would have preferred to have had information which would have been more useful in some way. She felt that the information provided did not serve her needs and felt let down and frustrated, in not having the information she perceived was necessary for her transition:

> *We had like three uni people come to our school and do their little talks and stuff but they were just talking about shit that I didn't really want to know about; stuff that I could just find on the internet. That's not what I want to know about, what I need to know about. I want to know what it's like!* (Chrissie)

Participants in the study reported initially holding high expectations in regard to making new friends and studying in a social context. When they arrived at university, however, to find a completely different setting, some were at a loss on how to manage the situation:

> *It was really quite unsettling actually, so I don't know, I had these little ideas about, you know, ... sort of getting with fellow students. I thought it was going to be more of a communal, I don't know, happy 70s thing. Like I'm really interested in different cultures and that sort of stuff, but everybody segregates. I really didn't think university … I thought university was supposed to be a mixing up of … that's how I remembered it when I was younger of people I knew who were going, and so that really shocked me.* (Angus)

There was also an expectation that the process of making friends would happen naturally in its own momentum. Tina, another first generation student, expressed a certain amount of disappointment based on what her expectations were, even though she had been a student at

TAFE and had been exposed to a tertiary education. Tina revealed that starting university was a big ordeal for her and that she was looking forward to interacting with her peers and teachers. However, upon arrival she was disappointed by her own perceptions of a lack of opportunities or willingness to interact in the way she was expecting it to happen naturally:

> *It was pretty full on. The expectation is that you're going to circulate with people, but it didn't sort of naturally kind of happen.* (Tina)

Sally expressed similar disappointment and even a degree of anxiety when she realised the difficulties of not being able to connect with someone. She also spoke about feeling a certain amount of nervousness in being alone and not circulating with people. She recalled being excited on the one hand but nervous on the other and often emphasised, during the conversation, that she was 'just' alone:

> *I was excited but I was pretty nervous because I was just alone. I felt everything was so difficult.* (Sally)

In this extract, Sally indicated that being alone had somewhat tarnished her excitement and to a certain extent, dominated and over-shadowed how she was feeling. The use of the term 'just' implied that she was consumed by the emotion of being alone and that this was the reason why she perceived everything to be hard.

Brody provided further insight into how he was feeling at the time when he first started going to lectures. He spoke about his attempt to make friends with other students and his retraction when he realised that the expectation that he would sit with the same people, as perhaps would be likely in a school setting, was a misconception. In relying on the attendance of others for comfort, he came to the conclusion that this was a somewhat false sense of security and so conscientiously made the decision to sit and work on his own, preferring to deal with the situation by becoming and remaining more aloof:

> *I started off sitting next to people I knew, and then I kind of freaked out that they might be sick or something, so I just kind of sat on my own. I was too nervous to talk to anyone, so I kind of sat on my own. I was like, I would just be quiet for the first bit.* (Brody)

Making friends was hard for Lisa too and was also an unexpected revelation. How to make friends was not something that she had thought about prior to starting university. However, once at university she realised just how much not being prepared in this way had affected her. She felt overwhelmed at not knowing anyone in her program and became reliant on some rather than others for social contact:

> *I guess it was really hard going into an environment where I knew nobody. That was like a pretty big issue for me. Yeah, it's really hard to make friends, but I guess it depends who you are with.* (Lisa)

It didn't seem to matter whether students were first generation students or not; both types of students expressed surprise, shock and dismay at what they actually found once they commenced their study. For example, Annie, who came from a large extended family where university study was common among immediate and extended family members and where participation was strongly expected throughout the generations, had 'heard' what university was like from family members but was unable to appreciate the reality of it. During the interview, when she was asked whether she felt prepared for university and knew what to expect, she responded in the following way:

> *I don't know, like I had no idea what to expect for workload. Mum said, you know, everyone told me you've got to read a lot, but I didn't think it was this much reading. I mean I didn't know what to expect from uni, but I didn't see this coming. Everyone says first year is the year you've got to get into the swing of things, but it has just hit me and it actually is really different from school and it really takes time for you to motivate yourself and get into this whole new swing of things. Oh my God, like there's so much, there's a lot to get used to!* (Annie)

Annie felt similar to Angus in the respect that they both were perplexed about their expectations regarding university. Angus and Annie were not able to articulate exactly what they were expecting university to be like but were able to articulate what they were definitely not expecting. It was clear that both students had not thought through or been exposed to experiences of what university would be like. Only when they experienced first-hand the specifics of the environment did they become aware of the reality of university life.

As the interview process continued it became more and more evident that it wasn't just first generation students who were expecting a particular type of experience only to be confronted by another. Liz, who even though had a family history of university study, was also somewhat overwhelmed with what she first experienced upon commencing university. Both her parents, with whom she reported having a good relation in regard to her studies, were university trained teachers. Yet Liz still expressed surprise and even panic at how she felt upon commencing university study:

> *At first it was a bit odd, it was just a bit like, oh, this is really different, I'm really sort of let go, there's no one on your back saying, 'Oh, remember you've got to do this. Remember this is homework. Remember this is this, and you've got to do this reading'. It was a lot more like, you're responsible for yourself. At first you're like, oh my God! There*

was a bit of panic at the beginning when, you know, you're seeing all the reading lists and things. I was like, when am I going to do all of this? (Liz)

Similarly, Lisa and Ryan, also both non-first generation students, were affected by their expectations and then their perceptions when they first arrived on campus as there was a lot to take in. Lisa observed,

There's a lot of mature-aged students. I really didn't expect that. (Lisa)

While Ryan recognised that for him, university study would need a different approach from what he had been used to:

There's a lot of readings and I've only just started because I didn't know about it. I've read about 5 sections out of 25 for one course. *I understand why they want us to read it but it's just getting used to the whole lecture, tutorial, the whole new experience of schooling*. (Ryan)

Despite having parents who were university graduates, both students expressed surprise at what they experienced in the first few weeks of starting university. Ryan spoke often about university expectations in relation to his knowledge of these expectations and how he might gain the knowledge required to be successful in regard to these expectations. Interestingly, during the conversation, Ryan expressed a certain level of uncertainty about how he might proceed; however, when asked if he would be seeking clarification and guidance from his parents, he indicated that he did not feel comfortable discussing his study at home. So while Ryan had an opportunity to receive help and assistance from home, he preferred to work through things in his own way, as many first generation students need to do out of sheer necessity. In some ways, this positions him side-by-side with many first generation students, without the advantage or academic privilege of having parents who reportedly are able to assist family members through the transition period.

In summary, this theme has highlighted various levels of surprise that students with little or no prior understanding of the university learning environment experienced upon commencing university. Participants in the study were not aware of the importance of having a good understanding of university study or the negative effects of unrealistic notions and expectations and thus did not seek to further their knowledge in relation to what university would be like. School-leavers, regardless of having parents who went to university or not, based their expectations on their Year 12 experience. Participants transitioning from the workforce based their expectations on workplace training or 'images' from their past, regardless, like the school-leavers, of whether or not they had parents who attended university. Non-first generation students were not seen to value their parents' experiences which were rarely accessed. Two participants, a first generation student, Tina, and a non-first generation student, Emily, had

realistic expectations of what university would be like as a result of direct prior experiences in an adult education setting and thus did not experience the same levels of surprise as the other students did.

Disorientation of Self

The second theme of Disorientation of Self was closely related to the above theme of Surprise.

As students attempted to make sense of their surrounds in times when their expectations did not match their perceived realities once on campus, they began to question who they were and what they had taken for granted. Almost immediately, once participants realised their misconceptions and that they had not thoroughly thought the process through, they began to question themselves on this as well as other aspects of their lives that they may have taken for granted in a similar way.

For example, during the initial transition period it became clear that students experienced a disorientation of personal identity and positioning, expressing confusion relating to who they were, their role at university and their reasons for being there. Chrissie describes initially feeling not quite right and to some degree out of place:

> *I felt a bit odd, like I just didn't feel like I was in the right place, right lecture room. I just didn't feel like I would be able to make friends because they were different from me. I just felt like a country bumpkin. I just didn't feel like I'd fit. I was just dressed in like pants, you know, top, I had my hood on, sneakers, and I looked at everyone else and I was like, should I have dressed differently? I felt really stupid.* (Chrissie)

There is a suggestion here, with Chrissie's repetitious use of the word 'just' that she is consumed with feeling out of place and confirms how she is feeling each time she raises another point. The repeated use of this word implies that no other emotion was important to Chrissie at the time and that these emotions of feeling odd or in the 'wrong' place or in relation to fitting in, were intense and dominated how she was feeling at the time. The experience had an effect on her confidence levels which decreased to the point where she questioned whether she was wearing the 'right' clothes and often reported feeling 'stupid' and insecure about going to university.

Questions and insecurities surfaced as a result of Angus's mismatched transition experience, too. Angus's transition experience made him seriously rethink who he was and how people might perceive him:

> *I'm actually gay, and the fact that I was, thought I was, quite comfortable with being gay, I actually found myself going back into the closet. I also felt old because I was just surrounded by what seemed to me sort of children, they were so young I couldn't get over it.* (Angus)

Angus described himself as a confident person who was looking forward to changing careers and was enthusiastic about gaining university qualifications. Upon entering university, however, Angus's confidence declined and he began to feel self-conscious about his age and sexuality. He perceived himself to be in a minority group which contributed to the way he was feeling insecure about his identity.

Ali, like Chrissie and Angus, also reported feeling out of place:

> *At uni I don't feel like myself, it's like I've put myself on hold and going, 'Right, I need to get this done'. I'm going from all of that [previous study at school] to university. It's like a mind-blower.* (Ali)

Six weeks into her program, Ali was still questioning her purpose at university and the emotions she was experiencing:

> *I'm still feeling like, why am I here? Most of the time I don't know what's required of me, I just rock up to my tute and hope I've done what I needed to do, and sometimes when I don't, you feel like a failure because you're like, I didn't know to go look for that. I didn't know I was supposed to do that. I'm still getting my head around what university expects of me, and how I'm supposed to get there. Oh my gosh, like they expect so much and I don't know how to do it. Is it me or is it how everything is?* (Ali)

Sally had similar thoughts to Ali and also questioned what her purpose and place was in her new environment:

> *They talked about what the subjects were as a whole but not really so much about what we had to do within it. I felt like it was just, well, what's my role?* (Sally)

As time went on, Sally became increasingly frustrated and anxious. The state of not knowing her place and how she was going to function was very disturbing and frustrating for her:

> *I sometimes felt like they took a while to tell us exactly what we had to do because I didn't really know. I just felt like I had no idea the whole time. I know we have to come up with what to do, that's our job, but they just seemed like they were talking about all this stuff and I didn't know what I had to do. They didn't make it very specific and I don't know if that's just me or … Like I don't know if it's because I'm a new university student*

or what, but sometimes I find that even just the language that they use is so confusing for me and I'll be, well, just say it more simply! (Sally)

Returning to Angus in another extract below, he expressed similar feelings of frustration to Ali. When struggling with the concept of not knowing, both students felt they had nowhere to turn so turned within to question themselves about the legitimacy of being a student at the university and what they were undertaking:

I didn't understand what my assignment was, and I was too scared to go ask. I felt like I was back at school, like I wouldn't ask, you know, and I knew I had to because that was my problem when I was at school that I never would ask, but I just felt like every time I asked something I felt really stupid, and so the more I did that and got funny looks at me, or what I thought were funny looks, it just made me more and more want to withdraw. It is a really funny thing, because when you're there and you're stressed out and, you know, you're freaking out about assignments and stuff like that, and you're thinking, oh my God, why am I doing this, why am I doing this? (Angus)

Liz, a non-first generation student, was in this regard no different from first generation students. She also struggled with who she was and what was going on around her:

At first it was like, I feel really young, I don't feel like I'm old enough to be here. And then like first going to the lecture it was very much like, this is weird, like yeah, you [the lecturer] are not talking to people, you're talking to everyone at once and you're not like answering questions and things like that. It's very weird. (Liz)

It became evident that there was a need among all participants to 'fit in'. Liz was in the majority age group of school-leavers and yet, interestingly, she expressed a certain amount of discomfort in perceiving that she was *too* young to belong. It seemed very clear that as students took in their transition experiences they struggled, sometimes unrealistically, with how they were fitting into the setting.

While Liz felt uncomfortable in perceiving herself to be of one particular age group, Kate, a mature-entry, non-first generation student, felt a discomfort in regard to being in another particular age group. She expressed thoughts of feeling slightly out of place which prompted her to question her motivation and commitment, which was triggered by the thought that she was from a different age group:

I'm also of a different age group than a lot of students that are coming here to uni. That's the first thing that I noticed that, quite frankly made me, not so much feel out of place but made me take stock and think, am I doing what I really want to be doing? Why am I here again? (Kate)

Upon entering the university environment, both Liz and Kate were immediately affected by perceptions of not belonging to a particular age group. Liz perceived herself to be young in relation to other students while Kate's perception was that she was older than the majority of the students. Both students were quite shocked about their observations and clearly not prepared for the diversity in age which was one of the first things that struck the girls, making them feel different in some way. The observation was unsettling to both girls and both hastily questioned whether they had valid reasons or rights to be at university in the first place.

As time went on, Kate offered further insight into how she was feeling. She did not feel her

peers saw her for herself, that is, as a fellow student. In a sense, she felt that only when she took on the role of 'support person' would she be accepted by her classmates. Liz expressed a sadness that her classmates failed to recognise that she too was a student who had similar questions and experiences regarding her study:

> *It's hard for me to break into a social group who's younger. Unless I sort of take on a role that's accepted, you know, the mother duck or, you know, the go-to person if you're having issues, the sounding board, not a fellow uni student who's going through the same dramas and hassles that they are.* (Kate)

The transition period for Angus was particularly difficult and disorientating and he struggled to come to terms with his new learning environment in many ways. At times he felt in control and had a good understanding of things while at other times he was beside himself in a panic with a sudden realisation that he had not been able to meet expectations but never really sure what those expectations were to begin with:

> *I thought I understood what was going on, but I was just frozen, I don't know why because all of a sudden it was like six weeks and I hadn't done anything. I just felt like I just couldn't do anything, it was really weird. It was just like, Oh my God, six weeks have gone past and I was in a total panic, I couldn't do anything.* (Angus)

Annie and Brody, similar to Angus, weren't completely sure how to handle difficulties either. Both students knew that they needed help but neither had the confidence or the self-belief to find out how to access the right help to improve their situations:

> *Yesterday I was sitting in class and I went, I don't know whether I can do this anymore. Like, you know, they give you the plan at the start of the year, the course outline and I guess looking at that would tell me, but I just do whatever they tell me. I'll just do that, I'll just focus on today's work because otherwise I'll just think, oh my God, there's going to be exams, there's going to be all these assignments. It's all going to hit me suddenly and then I'll freak out.* (Annie)

Brody, likewise, expressed concerns about what was expected of him, his role and how to function in his new environment. He perceived others to be in a better position than he was. He was too embarrassed to ask for help and to some degree blamed himself for his predicament:

> *At the beginning of the course, I was like, what the hell, I have no idea, but I just did it anyway. I was too embarrassed to ask for help. I was like, I'll just figure it out myself. It seemed like everyone else knew, so like why wouldn't I know?* (Brody)

Most participants in the study reported feeling uncomfortable by asking questions and

interestingly, when participants spoke about feeling this way, it was often followed by a comment which compared themselves against others in a negative light. Participants weren't sure where they stood in their new environment, constantly checking themselves against others:

> *I had difficult times at some points. I felt really embarrassed, I didn't want to ask [laughs] anyone, like ... everyone else seems to, they look like they know where they're going.* (Lisa)

Chrissie showed several signs of feeling disorientated during the transition period and did not feel comfortable in just being herself. She also compared herself negatively to other students. During the interview process, she showed signs that she perceived herself to be on an unequal footing in comparison to her peers. Previously she communicated feeling 'stupid' because she perceived herself to be dressed differently to others and in the extract below, she commented on her peers saying 'smart' things and hiding the fact that she did not know what they meant. Chrissie portrayed a certain amount of shame or guilt in being unfamiliar with terms or concepts referenced in her lectures and by her peers:

> *Every time like someone would say something smart in a lecture I'd kind of like secretly write it down and then I'd go home and Google it, like what does that mean?* (Chrissie)

Sally too felt that others were doing better than she was which led her to question herself and her ability:

> *There's a lot of people, they just sit there, some of them don't take notes, and I go, oh my God, how are they doing that, and I'm doing all this work. Am I doing it wrong, like why are they getting it and I'm not?* (Sally)

The early transition period for many students was a time of realisation and confrontation. Students were surprised at what they had discovered and at their lack of understanding in relation to their new study environment. Once students realised they had misjudged their

situation, students became upset and distressed which led to feelings of insecurity and disorientation. Students became disorientated with who they were and what their purpose was at the university, and in response to how they were feeling, began to question themselves on all aspects, including age, sexuality and appearance, and to draw comparisons and measures against other students they knew little about. Again, only two students, Tina and Emily, who had prior experiences of adult education, remained confident and in control of who they were during this period.

Disorientation of Academic Knowledge

When students were confronted by their misconceptions and misunderstandings of what to expect at university, they experienced feelings of insecurity and confusion about who they were and what they were feeling. It was one thing to deal with personal identities and self-positioning in the new environment but it was another thing to come to terms also, with the academic context and expectations of their courses. For some students, the struggle became too much and overwhelmingly difficult which led to, in several cases, a temporary mental break-down during the transition period.

Feeling insecure and/or confused was common for these commencing students. For example, Kate, who was very motivated and proactive in her role as a student, expressed a certain level of surprise at how she was finding that she was unable to piece together areas of her study. She explained that she was trying hard to keep up with the information presented to her and felt to some extent that, at the time, she was. However, when asked to recall recent information that she had read and thought she'd understood, she found she was unable to place that information in her reading or understanding of the topic. She was confused by the fact that she was unable to recall read articles and extracts and could not understand how on the one hand she could be so interested in a topic, and then on the other hand forget she had even read it:

> *So for Sociology I have to read on average 30 pages a week plus maybe one or two other articles. That's just the week-to-week reading, that's not looking at assignments and starting to read for your presentations. However, I'm actually trying to develop my own understanding of new theories, you know, frameworks, and reading all this stuff. I don't know whether I'm brain injured or something, but when I'm reading, I'm thinking that's really great, that's fascinating, I'm really into this. Come to the lecture - I can't remember that! Open it up - oh yeah, I did highlight that on page 177. I remember the page number but I don't remember what the page was actually about!* (Kate)

When Chrissie began to experience difficulties with the content and material in one of her courses, she lacked confidence and was confused about the process of seeking help. Chrissie

unrealistically perceived her lecturer to be too busy to help her and felt she would be bothersome if she tried to approach her. Chrissie spoke often about fear, inferiority and feeling stupid in relation to her studies and felt uncomfortable in her ability and herself in general:

> *I couldn't actually relate to her, like I didn't feel like I could go up to her and ask her, like I was kind of scared of her, kind of inferior. I just feel like I'm bothering her or the questions that I ask are kind of stupid.* (Chrissie)

On a number of occasions Brody seemed lost as to what was required of him in relation to his study and reported often on not knowing what he was doing:

> *I just figured that's what you do at uni, I don't know, yeah the whole time [during the first few weeks], I didn't really know what I was doing. You knew what you had to do, just not how to do it!* (Brody)

In the extract above, Brody was referring to the use of books in his assignment tasks. He was unsure about a number of things, such as whether or not to use a book, how to borrow a book from the library and how to reference it. He was reluctant to seek help from tutors or lecturers even though his questions were legitimate and staff would have been happy to answer his questions. He preferred to use a method of 'trial and error'. Below is more evidence of how Brody approached unfamiliar tasks during his transition period:

> *I had no idea what to do. I just kind of did it. It was pretty bad I remember, I didn't even do like referencing or anything, like I had no idea because they hadn't even … I'd just kind of go off, I didn't ask all that kind of stuff. Usually I'd read like the questions at the beginning of the course, and like, what the hell!, I have no idea, but then when I get to do the assignment I still find it, like yeah, I still have no idea, so I just do it anyway, and then it sort of comes together.* (Brody)

Ali also expressed tendencies of being lost in the conventions of academia:

> *They just assumed that you knew what academic writing was. Like through all the learn online things that I have to figure out, it's really hard.* (Ali)

Ali makes the point that there are many things which students need to 'figure out' for themselves. Upon commencing university, new students may miss important information regarding conventions and expectations or it may not always be forthcoming, however, either way, Ali's thoughts reflected the thoughts of the majority of interviewed students. Chrissie emphasises the same point in the extract below:

> *The feedback was not helpful at all. Her feedback was just marking me on punctuation and certain words I could have changed into the proper word, sort of thing, and I was*

> *like, what? I want to know what's wrong with it because you can't just give me a fail for punctuation and everything, so I didn't bother re-submitting because just the way she gave me feedback was well, what am I supposed to do? She didn't give me anything.* (Chrissie)

On the return of her assignment, Chrissie was confused and disappointed. She did not understand the rigours of academic writing and could not conceive that incorrect use of punctuation, grammar and vocabulary were grounds for a fail grade. She had clearly been provided with feedback on how to improve this type of task but was unable to comprehend what she had been told even though she was able to specifically report on it. Chrissie was disappointed in her perception that she wasn't provided with enough support or feedback and as a result turned away from the system and chose not to participate.

Kate revealed that she was having difficulties keeping to her study plans. She had set aside a certain amount of time for her readings but was finding that the tasks required more of her time. Not only was she having trouble completing the assigned readings in set times, but she was also under pressure to begin her assignments. Kate, like other students, found it difficult to perform in the way which was expected of her in her courses:

> *I know what we need to do, but what they're asking me to do in this particular course is not fitting with what I've set myself up in a timeframe to get done. With the amount of reading for the different courses I have, I am finding that I've only just sort of finished getting my head around the different readings for the three courses that I've done, then I might have a day or so before I start the new week, now I've got to try and find some time to start my assignments*. (Kate)

Angus quite clearly also experienced difficulties of not being able to perform as expected in relation to his studies which contributed to feelings of disorientation during his transition. Angus did not understand what was required of him academically. He did not know how to access articles or online information and did not understand the structure of how information was presented to him. As a result he 'panicked' and felt alone and lost:

> *It was actually quite … a lot of it I just didn't understand, didn't understand anything that was being fed to me, you know, so … When a teacher was speaking, that was fine, but yeah, when I started reading stuff I just had no idea what I was doing, and that's when I just … as the few weeks went on and I was getting more and more freaked out. By the sixth week I was in total panic. I had no idea what I was doing, where I was going. I was just by myself, didn't know anybody, so of course I felt alone.* (Angus)

Chrissie, a rural student who lived in a share house with two other people not previously known to her, recalled an incident in which she believed she had a mental breakdown. She explained how she felt lost in the academic content of her course, not understanding the concepts from one week to the next. She was so distressed at not being able to achieve her purpose that she was forced to leave her studies and re-group in terms of how she was feeling:

> *No one really understood what the teacher was talking about. I definitely didn't, because the course was all jumbled and just the presentation of it was kind of mixed and I couldn't link anything from the last week or the week before that. In the sixth week I was halfway through a massive essay and was just having a hard time with it, and I just ended up stopping and like literally rang a friend and said, 'Come pick me up, I can't do this anymore'. I had like a mental breakdown, like I cried and I just, I just couldn't, I was shaking, I just couldn't take it anymore. I went all the way back home to my family for the night and stayed there for the whole day as well, and I finally came back and tried to do my essay again*. (Chrissie)

There were many times when participants felt like they were lost in content and moving through the system without acquiring new knowledge. Both Angus and Ali expressed similar sentiments in relation to this.

> *Sometimes you can have an hour tute and you just think, what was that about? You know like you haven't really ...learnt anything, you haven't really done anything.* (Angus)

In the extract below, Ali spoke on behalf of her classmates:

> *Lots of the kids after we come out of the classes, we all go, what? like none of us understood, so I think maybe like for the first few weeks of first year get them [students] into a structure, or introduce them to how to use things, because [the lecturers] all just go, oh, learn them, like you'll be doing this e-portfolio, and we're all like, we don't know how to do that.* (Ali)

Ali expanded on how she felt during the transition period. She reported feeling lost and frustrated about what was required of her each week but found that in her disorientation she was confused about what she needed to know and how to ask for help in obtaining it:

> *Students ask a question and [the tutors] kind of, it's like you're just expected to know, like you just should know that, so it kind of makes you feel like you're putting them out ... just to answer your question. I mean, we had a week with a tutor who didn't rock up, and we were all just sitting there, and the next week we had the course coordinator, and then we had a new tutor ... and he was good, but it was very much,... we had no idea*

what was going on, and we'd ask a question - oh, well you should have read that up last week. It was like, you should have already done that. So it made it difficult for us because then we felt intimidated to ask another question, like, should we know that? Were we supposed to know that beforehand, or is he introducing something new? It made us feel really uneasy, yeah. There's a few tutors that are like that as well, ... lots of the time they just go, well, you should have asked that question earlier. It's like, well, you don't think of the question until you've done something! (Ali)

Ali expressed much frustration at not knowing how to work effectively in her new environment. She reported feeling lost within her studies, moving around in circles with no real understanding of what was required. She blamed herself for not being able to understand these requirements and did not feel confident or comfortable to ask for help:

It's due in a week, and then you go through all that studying and you get to the last day and you go, I don't know how to do it, but I've just got to do it now. I feel like I've let myself down, but I've been as organised as I can be, I just have to figure out how to sort it all out. (Ali)

Participants often opted to 'figure out' tasks themselves or sometimes amongst other students rather than seek help from their tutors or lecturers or even parents. On several occasions Chrissie reported not feeling comfortable with getting the help she needed from her lecturer. In the extract below she explained how asking another student left her feeling even more confused. She did not understand the nature of the task and was not able to approach it in a confident manner:

A couple of times someone who wasn't actually in my class helped me, but it was still a bit confusing because her lecturer would say something different, and I was like I just give up, I'm just going to do what I think is right and hand it in. (Chrissie)

Therefore, in summary, this theme illustrated the disorientation students felt towards their academic studies. Students were unfamiliar with a variety of academic requirements, conventions and assessment methods and did not have the confidence, skills or experience to ask for help or understand what they needed. Consequently, students blamed themselves by questioning their ability and cognitive skills in relation to a number of tasks and academic conventions, with some students going so far as to question whether or not they belonged or deserved to be part of the university. During this period, students articulated a variety of experiences and emotions such as bewilderment, frustration, uncertainty, procrastination and anger. Some students expressed a desire to opt out and turn away from what they had started while others pressed on for a variety of reasons. Tina and Emily did not experience feelings of

academic disorientation. While they found tasks challenging and reported having to work hard on them, they did so without mentioning any of the insecurities felt by the other students.

Prior Experiences

Prior experiences of students affected how they perceived the university which in turn influenced the nature of their transition experience. Participants in the study, had had a variety of prior educational experiences. Most participants entered university straight from school, while two others came from the workforce. Only one student entered from a TAFE environment. Students arrived with sometimes unrealistic expectations and perceptions of university based on their prior experiences. For those who arrived with misconceptions, as the realities of university set in students often compared and reflected on their prior educational experiences to help them come to terms with their new learning environment.

Tina and Emily both brought with them similar learning experiences. Both students previously attended adult education institutions. Tina came from TAFE while Emily completed Year 13 at an adult senior secondary school. Both students spoke favourably about their prior experiences assisting them at university.

In the extract below, Tina felt that her experiences of learning at TAFE gave her confidence and specific academic skills that have assisted her in her current learning environment:

> *I mean prior to going to TAFE I was a stay-at-home mum, suffered majorly from post-natal depression, etc., so I was at the point where I wouldn't leave the house. What I was doing was I got my Certificate IV in Women's Education, so therefore I was with women only and it was a very nurturing environment, it's about the women.* (Tina)

Emily had completed Year 13 at a pathways school which was different from traditional schools:

> *In Year 13, because that was a brand new school for me, I worked with teachers but I didn't know the people very well, and that school, it's a bit like university, no bells, no uniform.* (Emily)

While this experience helped Emily with the transition into university so did other prior experiences when she accompanied her father to university as a teenager.

Kate on the other hand, transitioned from a working environment where she was used to interactive learning processes, as both a student and an instructor. She found success in this environment and type of learning and compared these learning experiences with her current experiences:

> *I am used to having an interactive environment when I've been an educator or when I've been educated. You don't engage [students] by a PowerPoint presentation, have somebody talk to you about this information about what you're reading from week to week, and then you just sit there. It needs to be more dynamic*. (Kate)

In Kate's extract, she suggested that she was not engaged by her course lectures. She indicated that as an instructor she preferred to present learning material in an interactive manner and that this was what she was used to as a student. She implied that because of her prior experiences, she expected and preferred a more dynamic environment in comparison to the passive learning environment she was currently experiencing.

Angus arrived from a workplace environment as well, and spoke about his prior experiences as

being structured in most ways but with some choice as appropriate. He spoke negatively about other students who did not have the same type of discipline or structure that he had previously experienced and implied that he was unsure of how to adapt to this new situation which he was not used to. He expressed concerns that he was not comfortable in this environment, nor did he perceive himself to be respected in this environment:

> *There's no structure. For me I come from like a part structure and part not, and so I like to have a certain amount of structure, but I also like to have the freedom to be able to do other stuff, and I think you need to mix that in with both, you can't just have one or the other, and a lot of those younger students just don't have any structure whatsoever and so they just do what they want, they don't have respect for anybody, they don't have respect for the teachers, don't have respect for the other students.* (Angus)

Prior experience also distanced Ali from other students. Her previous experiences of living in a country town, where her parents ran the local post office, affected the way she felt and behaved on campus. Ali enjoyed her life in the country and often compared this way of life with her current life in the city, finding significant differences:

> *It's really different for me going from the country to the city. It sounds really nasty but I realise that some people are really selfish, like I'm used to people being so open, like happy and greeting, and you come up here and you ask someone a question and they're like, It's university, it's your own study. So it's different in that aspect, I've learnt to keep my thoughts to myself. If I have a good thought, I have to keep it to myself.* (Ali)

Ali arrived at university with a perception which was based on her experiences of country life. She reported that in her home town people were friendly and took pleasure in greeting other people and asking how they were going. Ali perceived people in the city to be more self-centred than what she was used to, as she expected to see the same behaviour as she did in the country

but when this wasn't forthcoming she assumed selfish behaviour was the reason. Ali's assumptions and perceptions affected the way she interacted with people, reporting that she did not feel comfortable interacting with others in her usual way and felt the need to keep thoughts and emotions to herself.

In regard to her current academic experiences, Ali had similar thoughts. She often reflected on

her previous educational experiences in trying to make sense of her situation. She did not understand why she received higher grades when she was at high school than she was receiving currently:

> *It's really different writing an essay from high school standard, where I'll get an A, to university standard now where I'm getting like Pass 2s. It makes us like second guess what we're doing.* (Ali)

Reflecting on past high school experiences were common. When Sally reflected on her past experiences at her previous high school, the tone that she used in her conversation was one of regret. She reported feeling comfortable about working together with her teachers at high school and acknowledged that she had taken this for granted as she soon realised that this would no longer be the case:

> *I've come straight from school. I suppose you can just quiz your teachers about everything and ask them anything, and that's not really what we do now so much.* (Sally)

Sally continued to speak about an incident that occurred while working on a group task. After submitting the task, Sally and other members of the group received unexpected negative feedback. When asked about the details of what had transpired, Sally had reported the following:

> *We'd showed [the group's assignment] to the tutor beforehand and he was like, yeah, that looks really good, and then when we got our feedback it was like so horrible – we'd only just passed. After that happened, I just wasn't as keen to listen to that tutor anymore because he frustrated me so much. I really didn't want his help anymore because it didn't work out.* (Sally)

This incident had a significant effect on Sally. In the past, she had been able to consult with her school teachers on her assignments. She understood her teachers' advice and knew how to modify her work in relation to the feedback. Sally had excelled in this environment for many years but now in her new environment, she was confused about the feedback she was receiving

and was reluctant to seek clarification. Instead, she made the decision to turn away from her tutor and limit her contact with him.

For Brody, reflecting on his past experiences and realising that university was different from school was an unexpected shock. He suggested that he preferred the school system with which he was familiar. He likened being at university to being alone and was confused about not being told what to do:

> *I had no idea what was going on, and it's like, because you're like all on your own kind of thing, it's not like high school where you can go to a teacher and they just do everything for you, they go, oh, you need to do this and you do that. Here, it's like you have to figure it out for yourself and I didn't like it.* (Brody)

Liz, like Brody entered university through the school system. Liz referred to her old school in much the same way that Brody did. She spoke about her teachers at her old school as being very familiar with students' characteristics and routines and contrasts this with how she found

the university environment to be:

> *Not only the style but the whole contact hours and everything is really different. For the most part it's much, much less sort of like close, like personal sort of thing. Like teachers (at school), you see them, you know, every day at school so they know you by name, who you are, who your friends are, etc. At uni they don't really have that.* (Liz)

Another school-leaver, Ryan, often reflected on and referred to his past experiences of learning and spoke in detail about the differences between school and university:

> *We have to be more creative, like more open-minded than when you're in high school. It was just do this, do that. Here... they want the individual's perspective of whatever the assignment is, they just don't want you to regurgitate the information. It's kind of like a whole different learning experience, like it's a whole different mindset, you're not just concentrating on one straight and narrow - it's a whole broad perspective. The academic writing is different from what I did in high school. The first assignments I did find a little difficult to transition from high school work. It is much different, you have to do Harvard referencing and all this kind of stuff. It's a whole new experience, like a whole new way of writing that I had no idea about.* (Ryan)

In general, participants showed a certain amount of insecurity when confronted with new ways of learning that was expected of them. Often students would reminisce about ways of learning in their past, particularly if students were successful and comfortable in using these methods. Students struggled to find a link between ways of learning at school and how they were

expected to learn at the time. Annie spoke about her experiences of using the online learning system at university and compared it to her experiences at school:

> *It's alright. Just sometimes ... there's a lot of online stuff as compared to school, and it's really different, and yeah, like I get a bit confused sometimes at how to do stuff online. Yeah, just because in school, you know, the only thing you do online is sort of research and emails, and that's it, and suddenly you have to do all this online stuff, it's a bit confusing.* (Annie)

Lisa had similar comparisons when she reflected on new ways of learning during her transition into university:

> *It's a lot more self-motivating really than a teacher telling you what to do. You don't get as much support as you do when you're in school. The teachers [at university] are all really different and they're quite different to teachers I've had in school. You are used to more support, and you're used to having like time to work on [things], and then handing in drafts and stuff like that. I like the idea of being able to hand in drafts, because a lot of subjects they can't even look at your drafts, which I think is quite hard because if you've got the complete wrong idea about what you're supposed to do, how are you supposed to know that? Yeah, it's just like it's a big change from what you're used to.* (Lisa)

Lisa became very descriptive when she further reflected on her experiences at university. Lisa, at times, struggled to make sense of her new learning environment. She talked about it being very different from the environment she had come from. For example, in the extract below, Lisa spoke about working with others in a group at university and compared this to when she worked with others in a group at school:

> *Just everyone like works differently, like when you're in school and you work in a group, even if it's chosen by the teacher, you know what everyone is like, and you know what everyone is good at, and with this [group], like I had just met these girls, and so I didn't know what [laughs] they would be good at.* (Lisa)

When going from the known to the unknown, participants showed a sense of discomfort and unease. Participants did not always embrace the situation and at times showed a certain amount of resistance. Chrissie's struggles were evident in the extract below as she tried to come to grips with the reality of a situation which seemed completely foreign to her:

> *It was a little bit hard to grasp what they were trying to tell us, like how we're supposed to do everything? It was kind of hard to grasp, from being from school, so the teachers kind of sit down with you and go through it with you, so the lecturer just goes, here it is, go do it!* (Chrissie)

Ali, too, expressed an almost disbelief at what she was experiencing in relation to what she had been used to. She was taken aback by the differences in what had occurred at school compared with what was required of her at the time:

> *We've been in high school for five years doing this and that, and now that's wrong? Year 12 is supposed to be preparing you for the future, but they're not, so it does make it hard.* (Ali)

Liz referred to an assessment task that confused her. At the time she was very confused about how she should go about completing the task. Her use of partial, incomplete and truncated sentences clearly emphasised her difficulties in trying to understand the given task:

> *They gave the template and the template was completely different to ... because it was like a practical, and so you'd do that in Biology or Chemistry or whatever, like do that in Year 12, and then this template was completely different format and it was ... and he, like on the forum he was giving ... people were asking questions on how to, how are we meant to set this one out, and like he's like, this sort of format. Oh, this is different, this is not what I'm used to!* (Liz)

The extract highlighted the difficulties students had when tasks and the environment were different from what they were familiar with. Students didn't seem to embrace the differences but instead were upset, constantly pining for what they had left behind. This contributed to the way, for example, Annie was feeling. She was unable to motivate herself as an independent learner in her new environment:

> *I'm finding the amount of out-of-class work a bit overwhelming. I've got really little contact hours, but a lot of out-of-class work. Like you're expected to do a whole heap of reading, you know, it's a lot of self-motivated work, you know, and just from school where you're constantly being pushed and told what to do, it's a bit hard especially having my lectures online, so you've really got to motivate yourself, and like I need to get into the swing of it, like I'm not there yet where I can sit down and go, alright, I need to focus and do this.* (Annie)

She understood the differences between school and university education but was unable to get into the 'swing' of things. She expressed concern that she was finding university study difficult as teachers at university are not in the habit of 'pushing' students to study or telling students what to do. Annie understood that independent study was required at university but was used to the school system where teachers actively encouraged work to be completed on time, monitored work before the due date and in some situations, disciplined students when they hadn't completed their work on time, providing motivation for students to complete tasks

before the due date. Annie expressed concern about how and when she would find the motivation required to focus and engage in her study without help from her teachers.

Prior experiences clearly had a strong effect on all participants and was the greatest factor which influenced students' transition period, much more so than family educational history. Participants who had prior experiences of adult education, like Tina and Emily, fared well during the transition period while students who did not have direct experience of adult education found it difficult to settle in and develop an understanding of academic conventions and processes in general. These participants also found it difficult to 'let go' of past experiences, often revisiting previous learning experiences in a more favourable light compared with their current experiences. This process somewhat helped students understand the new experiences that they were initially unprepared for and suddenly faced with. It was a way for participants to determine what university wasn't like. Tina and Emily had different prior experiences before starting university which provided them with an advantage. They spoke about their past learning experiences in a positive way, reflecting on certain aspects that provided them with the knowledge that they arrived at university with. Upon starting university both students knew what to expect and what was expected of them. As their expectations were confirmed their confidence grew, whereas in contrast, students who did not have prior experiences of adult education and thus held unrealistic expectations of university lost confidence as their expectations were disconfirmed and they were forced to re-evaluate their perspectives and the way they made sense of their new environment.

Technology

Technology was an interesting theme in the study. While it might be assumed that today's students in general, particularly younger students, feel comfortable with using technology, this was not the case for the students who participated in the study. All students interviewed reported having difficulties with the university's learning management system or were reluctant and hesitant to use the online features for a variety of reasons.

When Liz first encountered the online environment for one of her courses, she questioned the use of it:

> *I thought the forum? I was like, who's going to post on that, like why would you do that?*
> (Liz)

Liz had just completed Year 12 and was not used to engaging in online learning. The idea of discussing topics and concepts relevant to the course online with her colleagues seemed foreign to her. She was unfamiliar with online learning environments and had not yet comprehended the benefits of sharing knowledge through forums and posts.

Below, Ryan spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of online learning even though the concept was quite new to his experience. Ryan references 'these days' as a time different from his past where online learning did not exist for him:

> *You can hand up your assignments online, you get all the information online, you can get the books online, like these days on your tablet, whatever, and yeah like the books they say to get, you can get it all online, and especially with that e-Reader thing.* (Ryan)

Online learning and participation was not something that Annie was used to either. In the extract below, she revealed that she understood the concept of online environments but as she had never participated in such an environment she was unsure about the purpose and the scope of participating in this type of activity:

> *A lot of people seemed confused by it, a lot of the first years seem really confused by it. I have a friend, she's just doing the same thing [as me], she said, I've no idea. I've tried, I've asked people but no one can explain it in a way where it makes sense, sort of thing, so she's just writing everything up by hand. It's sort of like we know where they are but you don't know what to post or what the rules and regulations are, sort of, you know, what you're meant to post, that sort of thing, what you're allowed to post. It's a really big change from school where, you know, there's no online participation expected.*
>
> (Annie)

Students not used to learning management systems were confused and frustrated with not knowing how to use them to their advantage. Students reported giving up on the system and showed negativity towards this type of learning when it became too much to cope with:

> *The online stuff ..., like the website because it's just crap. Well it's so confusing, everyone was so confused, I don't know.* (Chrissie)

Emily, who had current exposure to university settings via her father, experienced different technology problems compared with other students. As, a recipient of Youth Allowance, she did not have private internet access. To access university sites online, Emily visited her local library where she was provided with free but limited internet access. This arrangement restricted what she was able to access and for how long. Below is an account of the types of problems Emily experienced when trying to access the university online environment:

> *I had trouble when it came to [enrolling], one because both Painting and Sculpture were completely full up before I could even get on to do it because when I first tried, the whole site crashed on me at the library down at Munno Para, because that was all the internet I could get at the time, it just crashed. I couldn't even get onto anything to do with the site, so two weeks later when it stopped doing that, I emailed in about getting, you*

know, exception to be allowed to be an extra student in that class, and then they emailed to say, Get online yourself, there's spaces, and I looked, this is like the next day, and some people had moved out, so that was like, oh lucky, there's this one spot in that one, two spots in the other one, I'll take one of each. (Emily)

This is an interesting extract as it shows that Emily was disadvantaged by her economic status at the time by not being able to have internet access at home and available as she needed it, but was advantaged by the fact that she has a prior understanding of how university systems work. She was well aware of available online procedures and options which would provide her with further opportunities to enrol in the course she needed to and used these to her advantage.

On the other hand, while Lisa had unlimited access to the internet as a learning tool, she was hesitant in her approach:

I spent a couple of weeks beforehand at home, getting myself familiar with the website, but it can be very daunting. You don't want to go in and click accidentally something wrong, and then realise ...I'm not used to using the internet as much, and using the online things as much. (Lisa)

Angus described having limited experience with technology before arriving at university and described the extent to which he was behind in what was expected of him:

I didn't know how to use a computer, so that was hard. That was the one thing, you know, all this new technology and I hadn't used any of that, and we were told I remember in the very first orientation day that you were expected to know how to use Word, and I didn't even know what Word was, so I just thought, you know, I didn't worry about that one. (Angus)

As others did, Ali reported a mixture of not knowing what to do online and a reluctance to participate. Her extract revealed that she was feeling insecure and to a certain degree, confused and intimidated by what others might think of her and by viewing others' points of view which were different to her own:

Everyone else can see your work, so you feel if you put something up and you're completely wrong, like they're going to be like, oh my God, this person's got no idea what's going on, whereas if you're doing it with yourself, and then you go to the tute, then you can go through it in front of you, instead of going, oh no, everyone's read that now and it was completely wrong, but I think it really makes you feel like not wanting to answer anything at all, like you just feel that you don't want to do it because you're like,

oh no, what if I get it wrong, and then you read someone else's and you go, oh, how did they get that. (Ali)

Ali went on to further clarify how she was feeling and why she was having difficulties:

We have learn online, it goes through week by week, but then one week you're supposed to know something else, and it was like, oh, you were supposed to go to the attached tab that's in your like e-portfolio, or something, but they don't say, check your e-portfolio, or something like that, so me being new to it all, I just don't know to go check these areas. So it makes that hard, and also like assignments and things like that, I don't know, like we haven't done anything at high school like digital posters or anything like that, it's all different formats, like doing a mind board, like a big board with things on it, and I've got no idea what that is, so when they go, do this on this topic, I go, what? (Ali)

This theme illustrated the frustration and doubt that students felt as a result of not understanding or using online learning systems previously. The majority of students did not understand or feel comfortable with how online learning systems were used as a learning tool. They felt vulnerable and intimidated by the use of it in certain capacities such as posting work for peer review, using software applications and navigating the course page. Access to the internet was a problem for one student, Emily, who did not have an internet service at home. However, even though Emily struggled to access the online learning environment, she was very comfortable with working in it once she was able to access it, as she and Tina had had previous experience with such systems prior to starting university.

Validation of Experiences

Most students who participated in the interview process expressed on a number of occasions that they wanted to complete their degree and be successful in their fields. Some expressed that they wanted success for themselves while others felt a need to please parents and those who had offered support.

During the interview process, Emily expressed her desire to go to university on a number of occasions, however she also recognised that university education had been a significant part of her family life and would continue to be so:

I wanted to [go to university] anyway, but dad kind of expected it. My father being a uni student himself on his second degree, doing like Economics, Business and now Science, I think it was always going to happen anyway. My aunt is also a midwife, so she's got a Nursing Degree, so, yeah it was always going to happen. (Emily)

Annie, on the other hand, reported that it wasn't her desire to attend university. She preferred to attend TAFE and study hospitality. However, Annie's family had high expectations regarding higher education and career paths which, Annie reported, was the only reason she was still at university:

> *I'm just sort of expected to fall in, you know, through the whole family. Yeah, when it came to me I told mum, I told her, I said, 'I'm not my cousins, it's not my thing', but I'm still expected, you know the expectation is still there that you will do well and graduate and finish your degree. Everyone just makes a big fuss of it, they're just going, you won't survive in life if you don't get a degree, and I just thought, well I may as well do it and make them happy.* (Annie)

While Kate, a non-first generation student, was certain that she wanted to complete university for her own satisfaction, she reported that her parents had been encouraging her in her ambition and that her parents had supported and assisted her in making the decision to go to university. This decision was financially difficult for Kate and as a result, she moved back into her parents' home to ease the pressure. Her parents welcomed the move and continued to provide support and encouragement:

> *So when mum and dad came to visit I spoke to them and I expressed my desire that I did want to go back to uni, the best way for me to do it was to do it fulltime, didn't want to do it part-time, it would take too long, and it was my mum and dad who came up with the idea, what is it you want to do? Research it. OK, researched it - Social Justice would interest me, I'm a nurse, been a nurse for 25 years now, it's an extension of that, looked at Social Work. I've worked with some brilliant social workers, spoke to a couple of them that I had worked with. They just said, 'Oh my God, you'd be brilliant, you've got to go do it', and yeah, three years later I said to mum and dad, I can't afford to do this fulltime because I can't support myself as well as do it fulltime, and mum and dad said, 'Well what about unis in Adelaide, there's three or four of them'. Got online, looked at courses, OK, applied to a couple of them, got my first preference, here I am! So mum and dad... I'm actually living with them, co-habitating with them at the moment. Yeah, mum and dad always ask me what I'm doing, and I go, 'Good question! I'll get back to you on that'.* (Kate)

Like Kate, Lisa also lived at home with her parents. She indicated that she enjoyed sharing her study and her university experience with her parents who had also studied at university and took an interest in what she was doing:

> *I like to show my parents, like essays and stuff and get them to read them for a bit, and I like talking about the stuff that I've learnt really, because it's, like it's quite interesting,*

and like there's things that you just didn't consider about teaching, and you didn't even know that they are real, and like yeah, I often share like the stories my tutors have told me because they're really interesting. (Lisa)

Both Kate and Lisa's parents may not have been able, or even asked, to assist their children with the content of their courses, but nonetheless, took a significant interest in their daughters' studies, continuing to endorse and validate their experiences during the transition period.

Liz indicated that she worked independently most of the time but sought assistance from her mother, who is a teacher, for grammar and spelling. Liz's parents were both university educated and also took an interest in their daughter's study. Liz was happy to receive assistance from her parents in relation to grammar and spelling, but preferred asking her friends to check for comprehension:

Mum is trained as an English teacher. So she checks like grammar and stuff before I send it in, but ... she can't check content. I work independently for the most part, but I have people around, like if we need to double check each other's work. Like quite a few of my friends are not in my course, so like I've got one particular friend who will read my work, and if she doesn't understand it, I figure then I kind of need to change it, because for the most part we got told, that someone who doesn't do this course should be able to understand it, otherwise you're presuming too much. So we sort of, we swap each other's work and check it and make sure that it makes sense to someone who does not do that course. (Liz)

Liz and her friends validated each other's work. The group in this way, checked that each member was where they needed to be which provided encouragement and confidence.

Other students wanted university success for themselves and self-validated their experiences by expanding on their knowledge and understanding of university systems and expectations in their own way. A prime example of this was the way in which Ryan was determined to make his experiences count. Since starting university, Ryan worked on increasing his knowledge and confidence. He recalled how at first he was almost fearful to ask questions regarding his study, but as time went on he realised that he was experiencing illogical thoughts which prevented him from seeking help and extending his knowledge. Once he realised this he became much more pro-active and determined to understand expectations and requirements. In the extract below, Ryan explained his thought processes around this:

Oh actually I did not understand [criteria rubrics] in the beginning and then, like in high school I wouldn't go up to the teacher and say I don't understand... because I thought they would just shut me down or something, I know they won't, but that's what I thought, but here the teachers just go and explain it very simply and yeah, now I just

fully understand it about what the assessment criteria is. So after the tutorial, I just stayed behind and said, 'What is this?'. I wanted to know both the wording and what to do with it, just to clarify, because I really want to nail it. (Ryan)

Interestingly, even though Ryan was not a first generation student as several members in his family are university graduates, he chose to work through his difficulties in his own way. Learning how to study at university was something Ryan believed to be necessary and worthwhile. While he may not have accessed information from family members on how to study at university, he may have seen, first-hand, the benefits of having studied and working through difficulties as they arise.

Like Ryan, Angus also wanted success for himself and worked hard to validate his experiences. He was extremely determined and motivated but often reported feeling confused and anxious in regard to the university study environment but did not let these feelings take away his hope or his determination:

I was just getting so anxious about it I was just feeling like I can't do this, I'm going to drop out, but a part of me said, 'No!' Seeing the counsellor was a big help. We tried to work out a bit of a timetable. I don't know, I just did it, I just managed to get through, and as the time went on I felt better about myself. (Angus)

In the extract below, Angus expanded on how he was able to overcome certain hurdles and make use of a support group which further helped to validate his efforts and experiences:

I just nutted through it, and then by that stage I'd got to know a few students and we were all sort of, we gave a little bit of help to each other, yeah, sort of thing. It was mainly us supporting each other, we didn't really access anything from the uni itself. (Angus)

Sally took confidence and encouragement from a support group as well. She was a first generation student from the country and tapped into her new university friends for support. The process of 'swapping' points of views seemed to help her keep going and feel that her thoughts and processes were valid:

We all send our essays to each other and work it out through that. (Sally)

Tina, a first generation student who transitioned into university from TAFE, recalled the reasons why she felt comfortable in her transition and what had helped her to keep going:

For me, part of the reason that I've really adapted to uni life, or being at uni, is actually Unilife. I actually have, from pretty much day one, gone into Unilife and just hung out with all the different people that hang out in there, so therefore I'm meeting people from

other disciplines, different ages, different walks of life, and they're probably becoming my core group, even though they're not part of my degree, if that makes sense? That's helped me and everyone else that I know in there, it's helped, it just, I don't know, I don't know why. It's like you don't have to be connected with anyone, you can literally, once you overcome just walking in the door, you can just go in there and just sit in there and someone will talk to you at some point. (Tina)

Unilife, a student organisation, had meaning for Tina. She clearly stated that being a part of Unilife had validated her experiences and provided her with encouragement and reasons to keep going in ways she was unable to voice.

Liz found strong reasons to be motivated as she needed to maintain a high GPA score. She

acknowledged that she did not want to settle for just a pass in her studies which validated her reasons for working hard even when faced with challenges:

I'm in the Honours stream, so I've got to keep up my GPA, and so someone in my group was like, oh, I just want to pass, like, well I don't want to just pass, I want to be able to get a high grade so I can keep up my GPA. (Liz)

Other sources of motivation were lecturers and tutors. Ryan, was motivated and particularly inspired by the teaching staff in his course. He was very interested in his study and reported being influenced by his teachers to do well. He acknowledged the fact that he was doing what he wanted to do and was very enthusiastic about gaining more knowledge in his chosen field:

Well, I did actually meet three of my teachers at the opening day, they're very mellow, they're very cool. They're very knowledgeable, and they're very likeable, which is I think what all teachers should be, yeah, like it influences you to do your work, you know what I mean, you don't just do your work and hand it up, you want to do your work. Like I said, this is really interesting, I do like this, this is what I want to study, want more knowledge out of. (Ryan)

Similar to Ryan, Kate expressed a strong desire to learn and acquire the knowledge which would help provide her with greater choices in life:

I'm here to learn and my emphasis, I think may be a little bit different to some of the others. One of the guys that was sitting beside me in my tute just before I came here, he was sort of mumbling and grumbling about the amount of reading and whatever else, and I would do that too, but I'm going, I want to be here because I want to be a social worker. I know what it's like to work in a job I'm not happy in, and I'm going to do the work to make sure I get the job that I want to do. (Kate)

The majority of interviewed students, reported that, on at least one occasion, thoughts of 'dropping out' entered their minds. When difficulties arose, most participants were able to validate their presence and efforts at university and move past thoughts of withdrawing, usually with the help of family or a self-determination from the realisation of future opportunities and a self-commitment they wanted to fulfil:

> *I've actually got to a stage now where I say that university is like a roller coaster, so for*
>
> *me it's up, down, up, down, but I know I'm always going to go back up again. It has actually been, it's quite stressful, it's really stressful at times, especially when assignments are on, but just, I don't want to drop out. I'd made this sort of monumental decision to do this and I just thought in my mind that this is my last chance, I'm not young, if I don't do it now I never will. I just was determined that no matter what, nothing was going to stop me, there's no way I'm going to stop coming.* (Angus)

When difficulties arose for Brody, he too resisted the temptation to leave in lieu of completing what he had started which, consequently, impacted on his motivation in a positive way and validated his reasons for being at university. He recalled on a number of occasions that his parents were also a motivating factor in his decision to stay:

> *I convinced myself, I was like oh, I may as well just stay. I just thought that I'm going to stick at this because, I don't know, I don't know why, I just wanted to. I figured I may as well do something, make my parents happy, do something constructive.* (Brody)

Leaving university when difficulties arose was not an option for Tina either. Like Brody, she had an almost innate desire to complete what she had started. Her determination was so great that she felt she had no choice in the matter regardless of whether there may have been other options for her or not:

> *I just had to push myself, I didn't have a choice. I wasn't about to, I'd already started, I wasn't about to sort of drop out.* (Tina)

While Sally did not report on having thoughts of withdrawal, she recalled a set back early on in her transition period regarding her first assignment which altered her views. She reported that she had spent a great deal of time on this assignment and had contributed a great amount of work to this group task but unfortunately Sally and her group received negative feedback on return of the assignment. It was the group's first assessment piece and all were a little overwhelmed with their efforts in relation to their final mark. Sally reported being devastated by the feedback and lost in relation to what was expected of her at university:

> *I went home and had a good cry about it, had a whinge to mum and dad, but after that it was like, instead of getting angry about it, once I got over that, I just decided to just try really hard instead*. (Sally)

While her parents were not university educated, they were very supportive of her and her studies. Upon return of the assignment she spoke at length about it to her parents, responded positively and came to the conclusion that she would try to learn from the feedback and apply herself differently to future assessment tasks according to the feedback. Even though Sally encountered negative experiences she did not allow them to dominate. She relied on her parents for support and encouragement to remind her of the bigger picture and to remain focussed on her studies. By listening to Sally's concerns, her parents provided support and validation that her efforts were worthwhile and that she was on the 'right' path.

Annie's situation was interesting in that she had lost her desire to be at university and yet she felt she could not leave for reasons of parental expectations and future employment security:

> *Yeah, like I told mum, you know, when I was going to uni I told mum, uni is not my sort of thing, I can't sit there and study, I'm more of a hands-on person. She said, 'Well, you're not going to TAFE', so yeah, I don't have a choice. I wanted to go to TAFE and do Patisserie Cooking, but yeah, it wasn't an option. I was a bit annoyed, but I guess there's a positive side to having a degree, yeah, get a stable job.* (Annie)

Annie felt a great deal of pressure to remain at university even though she had little desire or self-motivation to continue. Her family placed a high value on education which made her feel powerless, guilty and uncomfortable when she contemplated other options, and so consequently did not persist in her attempts to find an alternative career path.

Annie's mum was not the only family member who impressed upon Annie that a university degree is worth completing. On many occasions Annie tried speaking with other family members regarding how she felt about her studies. At one point, Annie tried speaking with one of her cousins who was close to her in age:

> *I tried talking to one [cousin] closest to my age but yeah, it doesn't help because they, you know, because they were in the situation where they went to the top uni and they did really well, and [you're] just sort of expected to fall in, you know, through the whole family, so yeah, no, talking to my cousins didn't really help. They do the same thing as parents. My family are probably not the best people to talk to about that. They'd just say, 'Oh well, it's part of life, you've got to do it'. I've tried with family and stuff, you know, when I said I'm only going to uni because I have to, it's not actually what I want to do.* (Annie)

Even though Annie felt she had a valid reason for staying at university, she had other ideas about what she would have like to have done. Family norms and expectations had a significant effect on Annie as she was unable to resist her family's beliefs in relation to her education even though she reported wanting to rebel against and confront the norms of her family. In reflecting on her emotions at the time, Annie recalled how she in part, fantasised about standing up to her family and going against their wishes but concluded by extinguishing any further thoughts or actions:

> *I always thought, you know, what if I tell them I'm not doing this exam? What if I tell them I failed the exam? or I want to pull out, what will happen? I know it's not an option.* (*Annie*)

Two participants in the study, Chrissie and Ali, did not experience what it was like to feel that their efforts and time spent at university were beneficial or valid in any way. They did not report on having friends, family or staff members who encouraged, endorsed or made them feel that it was worthwhile to continue. Nor did they feel themselves that their studies were benefiting them in anyway and often spoke about withdrawing.

Chrissie reported on numerous occasions that she was considering leaving university. Being a rural student, Chrissie had limited support while she was living away from home as a university student and unfortunately did not join a supportive and effective study group. Chrissie felt alone and hopeless and was reluctant to get help from staff:

> *It was a bit hard, everyone was trying to support each other but everyone found it hard because they were still trying to work it out themselves without getting confused.* (Chrissie)

Furthermore, in the extract below, Chrissie described why she did not feel comfortable in getting help from university staff. She reported feeling anxious and nervous about seeking help and became confused about the role of teaching staff. Chrissie described how she felt at one particular time:

> *My lecturer, she was always busy doing something and was a lot older so I backed away because of the whole respect your elders thing. I just don't bother, and I'll try and find another way.* (Chrissie)

Chrissie's experiences had a significant effect on how she felt towards her program of study. She did not feel that her program was suitable for her and demonstrated a sense of helplessness and a loss of confidence. She revealed how she felt about not wanting to do 'it'

anymore, referring to 'it' as her whole experience of university rather than one thing in particular:

> *Having motivation to actually go to uni and then engage in everything that they were telling us to do and stuff like that, I just found really hard, you know. I haven't actually been going to my classes because I just don't want to do it anymore, I don't want to be in this course anymore. Like I've changed, I don't want to like, yeah, I just don't see the point anymore, and the classes, I just feel like … I'm just wasting time and in my lectures and workshops and stuff I'm not learning anything.* (Chrissie)

While Chrissie made acquaintances in her classes she did not meet with fellow students to

discuss workload, content or university life in general. She found it difficult to return to her family home and felt compelled to work long hours in paid employment to assist with living and study expenses which impacted on her motivation to continue with her studies. She did not feel that her experiences in her program were valid or useful in any way or that she was doing the 'right' course, implying that she was unmotivated and disengaged with her studies.

Ali also discussed her decision to withdraw during the interview:

> *I was thinking about dropping out, because my family couldn't afford to keep me here and I'm not sure if I'm doing the right course at the moment because I felt tons of pressure on me. I'm going to be leaving Adelaide.* (*Ali*)

Ali's efforts and experiences had not been validated and she didn't feel she was doing the right course. She could see no reason to continue on. She reported having difficulties in her studies, received low grades and struggled financially. Her parents were not university educated and so perhaps were not able to understand her experiences, particularly as a university rural student living away from home. Ali did not report on receiving the same type of support and validation as the other students in the study did. For example, she did not report that finishing her degree would make her family happy as they believed a university education was worthwhile. Nor did she report on working through difficulties with others which may have built trust and confidence in what she was doing. She had come to the point where she questioned whether to continue or not and in her search for answers, she implied that her mother provided a certain amount of 'permission' to leave:

> *Why do I need to get this done? Like everyone goes, go to university, get a degree, and then you can go have a life. But now I'm like, why do I need to do that? Like I can have a life now and do study when I want to, and not just study when I don't want to. So now I'm like ... I said to mum I might [drop out], because my mum didn't do university, and she's just like, well, I didn't [go to university], see how it goes.* (Annie)

To sum up therefore, this theme highlighted that there were many different factors which contributed to students' motivation in regard to their studies. Mature-aged entry students displayed the greatest desire to succeed and remain at university even when challenged with unexpected situations. These students were certain about what they wanted to achieve. Some school-leavers were not as sure about their motivation as mature-aged students were, when challenged with difficulties, but continued on regardless as they were satisfied that their efforts would be worthwhile. They had the support of their parents who endorsed their education and, through their actions, communicated the value of it. Other students wanted success for themselves as they were aware if the social and economic benefits it would bring. Chrissie and Ali were different in that they could not find a valid reason to remain at university even though they had worked hard to get there and had put in much effort in their final years of high school. Both Chrissie and Ali discussed the prospect of leaving university due to the challenges they were experiencing and were not able to believe that continuing on was in their best interests or worthwhile. Parental expectations or discussions did not feature in their conversations nor did friends or other students as part of a support group, leaving the girls with few options in regard to helpful discussions on how they were feeling or future decisions.

Having analysed the themes generated from the field work, the next section of this study discusses these findings in relation to the main research question of the study via the three supporting questions and the themes identified from the transition experiences of first and non-first generation students of the study.

Discussion and Summary

1. In what ways are first generation and non-first generation students prepared for the transition into university study?

All students who participated in the study, bar two, reported having similar and somewhat negative transition experiences. These students reported feeling overwhelmed with what they had discovered once they had arrived at university, particularly as their expectations had not met the reality of their situations. Discrepancies occurred very early on in the students' transition with all exclaiming how 'different' university was. This was an interesting point as often students were unable to express what they were comparing it with, just exclaiming that it was different in some way. In analysing conversations, it was evident that students had not given much thought or put a lot of effort into finding out what university would be like, but instead made assumptions about university using prior experiences that were related in a variety of ways to learning or the environment in general. For some it was workplace training, for others it was the high school system of education while for others again, it was through media images and marketing. These assumptions they discovered were mostly false, affecting students in a variety of ways.

Ten out of the twelve students interviewed, five non-first generation students and five first generation students, reported having unrealistic expectations of the university environment. Both types had arrived at university not knowing what to expect and, as a result, felt insecure and uncertain about their environment. Even though non-first generation students had opportunity to speak to family members regarding the norms and expectations of university life, most did not report doing this and those who did have this opportunity reportedly chose not to consult their parents for a variety of reasons. As a result, students were faced with confronting experiences that were quite different from what they were anticipating. As this realisation set in, students looked within to reconcile differences between what they expected and what they actually experienced. This process was disorientating and debilitating for students and affected their confidence and motivation. Students often opted to go through this process alone, rather than to seek help from parents or university staff, while some even felt that they were to blame or somewhat responsible for the predicament in which they found themselves.

Therefore, when comparing how prepared first and non-first generation groups were, it

became evident that one group was no more prepared or advantaged than the other as students in both groups declared that the teaching and learning environment that they had entered was not what they expected and consequently, called on prior experiences in coming to terms with their new situation. Two students however, *were* prepared as they were not taken by surprise by the teaching and learning environment; they were confident about what to expect and what was expected of them, but their situation was not because of an advantage they were born with, it had to do with the nature of their prior experiences. The two students were more than adequately prepared for university, describing their experiences as being what they had expected. Tina, a first generation student and Emily, a non-first generation student, reported being familiar with post-secondary study environments. Tina had attended TAFE while Emily had accompanied her father to university during her teen years and also attended an adult secondary school, which was similar to a university environment, in her final year. The remaining students in each of the groups had similar experiences and expectations and remained on par with each other, regardless of the fact that one group was able to access parental advice on what university would be like while the other was not. In other words, non-first generation students were no more prepared than first generation students for the transition to university. Having parents who went to university had little or no effect on the preparation of students transitioning to university as it was prior experiences that dominated students' perceptions of what university would be like.

2. In what ways does a family history of university education assist students in making sense of their transition?

In this study, the initial transition experiences of first generation students were similar to the experiences of non-first generation students. Both groups were overwhelmed with what they encountered at university and both groups had unrealistic expectations regardless of whether or not they had family to turn to when forming their ideas and beliefs around what university would be like and so struggled to make sense of their transition. Only Tina, a first generation student, and Emily, a non-first generation student, had a clear and realistic understanding of

the environment and what was expected of them.

While it was clear that students who were able to access parental advice did not always choose to do so, students understood the value of education that parents held. Students were well aware of how their parents and family felt towards gaining further education and often felt under various levels of pressure to participate, continue and succeed. This was key in students' decisions to keep going, even when they were contemplating the prospect of withdrawing.

When students felt like they were doing the 'right' thing by themselves or their families, students continued on, even when faced with challenges and disappointment. This also provided them with a sense of assurance that their efforts and hard work were worthy and valid. Two students, however, were unable to feel this same sense of assurance that they were on the right path. They did not feel that their efforts or experiences were worthwhile or validated in any way by family members or others. When difficulties arose, they did not report on an assurance from others that what they were going through was worthwhile or valid in any way and so found it difficult to remain focused and motivated - as a result, they spoke often about withdrawing from their courses. When faced with difficulties and challenges, students who were re-assured of the benefits of university study by family or friends or significant others were more able to make sense of their transition experience, re-focus and continue on in their studies.

3. In what ways do students use prior experiences in making sense of their transition?

Prior experiences of the students in this study had a strong effect on how students made sense of their transition. If they had developed unrealistic expectations before coming to university based on their prior experiences, their transition experiences were unsatisfactory. If on the other hand, they arrived at university with more realistic expectations based on their prior experiences, they were very comfortable with their transition and able to immediately engage with their courses.

Students who arrived at university with misconceptions had made assumptions of what university would be like without investigating further. Once students were on campus and realised that their assumptions were inaccurate, they attempted to find ways to make sense of what had occurred to them. Students reflected on their prior experiences in a variety of ways to

understand why they may have made such assumptions in the first place. In going through this process students developed an understanding of what went wrong, followed by frustration at how this may have been avoided. As part of the process, they often commented on the university environment being different from what they had imagined. For example, school students often commented on the fact that they were no longer being 'pushed' at university, as is the case in schools, and left to their own devices. Mature-aged students had had prior experiences of workplace training which was conducted differently from university lectures while others had prior experiences of social communities and were expecting the same kind of interaction at university. Prior experiences played a large part in students' misconceptions of what is expected at university and, as a result, students experienced a number of challenges and difficulties in coming to terms with the reality of university life.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the 'lived experience' of commencing students and the 'meaning they make of that experience' (Seidman 2006). In doing so it became evident that those who had similar or prior experiences to university education were clearly advantaged in terms of knowing what to expect during the transition period. For example, Tina who had previously studied at TAFE and Emily who accompanied her father on campus when he needed to attend a university class or event, were both well prepared for what was expected of them when they arrived at university. For this reason, the first three themes discussed above did not apply to their transition. The element of surprise, followed by experiences of self and academic disorientation, were not part of Tina's and Emily's accounts of starting university even though they featured often in the accounts of the other ten students who participated in the study. It was evident that the other students all experienced some level of surprise which included perceptions of social interaction, personal appearances, course delivery, workloads and independence.

As a result of students experiencing the element of surprise upon commencement, students attempted to come to terms with firstly, how they were feeling as a result of misconceptions and secondly, how they had formed these misconceptions in the first place. Coming to terms with how students felt was more than simply realising that they had made a mistake. Students blamed themselves for their mistakes and began to doubt themselves not only on this account but on other aspects of their initial experience. As a result, students looked within for the answers and began to question themselves on who they were and whether or not they belonged at university at all. Many finally realised that their misconceptions were a part of, and stemmed from, their prior experiences.

Prior experiences had an effect on all students. There was a strong connection between prior experiences and expectations. Those who had had prior experiences similar to university study

knew what to expect at university and did not become disorientated as a result. Those who did not have prior experiences which might have prepared them for university study made false assumptions and had unrealistic expectations about what university would be like. Re-calling the words of one first and one non-first generation student, it is evident that what they were expecting was not realistic in current university settings:

> *I thought it was going to be more of a communal, I don't know, happy 70s thing. (FGS)*

> *A lot of subjects they can't even look at your drafts, … what if you've got the complete wrong idea about what you're supposed to do? (N-FGS)*

As a consequence, students were required to re-organise their thoughts of university and prior experiences which triggered negative effects such as feeling disorientated within themselves and in regard to their study. For example, students had a variety of issues associated with the use of technology. Issues included such things as access, confidence, knowledge of features and understanding tasks. One of the main issues that students faced was understanding the learning management system and how this supported their learning. Students were unfamiliar with learning online and, as a result, were hesitant to experiment and develop themselves as online learners.

When students realised the challenges that they were presented with, they experienced a range of emotions including frustration and anger and acknowledged that they had thought about leaving university at least once during this time. However, given these emotions, students who felt that their time and effort at university were valid in some way, through family members, fellow students or through their own perceptions, persisted. Those who struggled to understand the worth of a university education when difficulties arose discontinued, even though they had worked hard and had initially been excited to enter university.

In response to the main research question for this study, how do the lived experiences of first generation university students compare with the experiences of non-first generation students? experiences were quite similar for commencing students, regardless of whether they were first generation or non-first generation. Most students in both groups reported that they did not know what to expect upon entering university, indicating that they were unprepared and surprised at how they felt when they first arrived, and furthermore, revealed misconceptions falsely based on prior experiences, rather than on parental advice where available. Students in both groups also experienced similar difficulties and challenges and dealt with them in similar ways. However, the experiences of two first generation students differed from the others by what they received in terms of support and reassurance. Two first generation students did not receive the same levels of support and reassurance as others did which stood out as being a factor in the decision to stay or leave.

On the other hand, a further two students who *were* prepared for university study based their expectations on experiences which were similar to those encountered at university. The transition into university was smoother for these two students in comparison with the other students in the study for this very reason. This study showed that prior similar experiences are beneficial for students transitioning to university and can positively influence the perceptions and confidence of students in relation to their new learning environment.

The following study was therefore chosen to explore the theme of prior experiences further. As students entering university with an ATAR score form the largest commencing cohort, addressing university preparation within this group before they enter has the potential to provide positive transition experiences for a large number of students, particularly those with no prior university experiences in their families. Study Two revealed the transition benefits and success of students having prior experiences similar to university study before they arrive and so for this reason, university preparation in secondary schools was a consideration for Study Three. As a result, one secondary university pathway school was invited to be the focus of Study Three.

Study Three:

Preparing for University Transition -

A Case Study of a South Australian Senior Secondary University Pathway School

Introduction

While the number of students entering university via alternative entry pathways is increasing, students who make up the largest admission category are still high school-leavers (Palmer et al. 2011, Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, cited in Pilcher and Torii 2018) and yet this cohort is often reported as being underprepared as a result of their prior experiences (Fielding and Stott 2012, Brady and Allingham 2007). As such, an opportunity exists for universities and schools to work together to influence a large cohort in regards to university preparation. In addition, many first generation students have only their school experiences to rely on for information regarding university transition so further opportunities exists for schools and universities to assist a large proportion of, specifically first generation students in ways that their families are unable to. It is beneficial, therefore, for universities and schools to form effective partnerships which prepare more adequately students headed for university, given the positive effect familiarity and realistic expectations can have on student performance. The goal of Study Three, therefore, was to examine the practices and structures currently in place at a senior secondary university pathway school in Adelaide, South Australia, and determine the effect of these on transition experiences of graduates of the school.

A case study which was expected to provide exemplary university preparation was selected purposively so that the richest understanding of what practices and structures are necessary for successful transition to university could be obtained. Patton (1990, p.182) identifies a demand for case studies which 'demonstrate unusual manifestations of the phenomenon' such as outstanding or successful interventions, and this is particularly appropriate for the current study. The experiences explored in this case study were not dependent on a particular type of student as students arrive at the school from a variety of educational backgrounds which include home-schooling, private, public and Montessori education, and science, technology and sports specialist schools. Experiences created at the school as a result of the focus on university preparation were unique and different to experiences in mainstream high schools as traditional high schools do not specialise in university preparation, providing instead experiences aligned to other values and goals of more traditional school communities.

This study was guided by the following research question:

What perceptions of university preparedness do staff and students at a senior secondary pathway school hold and how are students prepared for university transition?

The focus was on the structures and practices implemented at the school to provide students with an effective preparation for successful university transition. The school was specifically established in partnership with a nearby university to provide insight into and experiences of university learning environments for students while still in secondary school. The school

established structures and practices, similar to those employed in universities, to provide opportunities for high school students to become familiar with university systems and ways of learning. It was the school's intention to assist students in their transition by endeavouring to equip them with realistic views and expectations of university life and study and an understanding of the environment into which they would be entering. The study examined the perceptions of students and staff regarding university preparation and the structures and processes put in place at the school to assist with university transition. The school offered the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) as well as intensive English classes for new arrivals wanting to eventually gain the SACE.

This study centred on the structures and practices employed by the school specifically designed and tailored to help create a successful transition between secondary and tertiary education. The study examined to what extent this may have been achieved and in what ways by examining several aspects of the school including its operation and physical environment. In more detail, the research examined perceptions of ten staff members of the skills required for university transition, pedagogies to provide opportunities for students to learn and practise these skills, structures and processes which mirrored university learning environments, students' perceptions of higher education preparedness before entering university and students' experiences of university transition after graduating from the school. Students involved in the study were from a variety of backgrounds including first generation and non-first generation, SES levels and discipline areas. Five students were interviewed and 21 participated in a survey to explore further the ways in which processes and structures at the school may have had influenced students' understandings of transition and assisted students with their preparation. In summary, Study Three was an exploratory case study, focusing on a secondary university pathway school in Adelaide, zoning in on pedagogies, processes and structures in place at the school and then on the experiences of graduates as they made the transition to university.

The following questions were developed to guide the inquiry in addressing the main research question for Study Three.

Questions

1. What strategies are in place at the school to assist students with future transition to university?
2. What are staff perceptions of the skills necessary for successful university transition and in what ways do staff provide opportunities for students to acquire these transition skills?
3. To what extent do current students at the school feel prepared for university study?
4. What are the transition experiences of past students of the school commencing university?

To respond to these questions, the following design was chosen and implemented. The methodology resulted in rich information and a deep understanding of all interested aspects in the school featured in this case study.

Design and Methodology

This project explored the teaching and learning environment that students at the school were exposed to and the students' perspectives on how well the school had prepared them for university transition. The approach taken was an exploratory case study (Yin 2003) which combined the methods of student and staff interviews, observations and document reviews, as well as a questionnaire survey to achieve a 'deep and rich' (Creswell 2003, p. 207) understanding of the structure of the school environment and the processes in place designed specifically to assist students with university transition. Merriam (1998) urges case study researchers to 'make sense' of the data by working through a structured process which consolidates the data, reduces them and categorises them to interpret what people have said in combination with what the researcher has seen and read. The information for this case study was gathered between 2012 and 2014.

This particular methodology was chosen to describe and examine a particular schooling environment developed as a preparation program for school-to-university transition. Chaiklin (2000) believes that the greatest benefit in doing case study research is the fact that multiple factors can be considered simultaneously. It allows researchers to see the whole as well as the parts and to move the parts around to create different combinations, thus highlighting aspects of interest (Chaiklin 2000, p. 48). In addition, a case study that uses a variety of data to explore a phenomenon within context ensures that the issue is not explored through only one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which produce a richer understanding of the case across multiple dimensions (Baxter and Jack 2008, Yin 2003). In this way, multiple sources of data can help in triangulating the evidence by confirming the outcomes gathered by other data (Stecher and Borko 2000, Tellis 1997).

Accordingly, the current study used a variety of data sources to explore and describe the processes of transition preparation employed by the selected school. In doing so staff interviews were conducted, structures and processes were observed and documents reviewed, current student survey data were collected and graduating students were interviewed in the following year during their transition period at university. The design was specifically chosen to gain a rich understanding of the processes and structures of the case and the perceived effectiveness of the preparation that students were exposed to at the school in the case study. The design was selected deliberately to explore an intervention phenomena and to describe the contextual conditions of the case (Yin 2003). Yin's (2003) suggestion, in studying an exploratory case study to describe an intervention, that the study need not be limited to one unit of

analysis was adopted. Yin advises that consideration of this type of design should be given to studies with more than one unit of analysis embedded within the case, depending upon the phenomenon under study. As Yin's suggestion was applicable to this study, three units of analysis became the focus for addressing the overall research question. These three units of analysis were staff pedagogies, physical environment, and perceptions and experiences of current and newly-graduated students.

Before undertaking qualitative research, however, Maxwell (2013, p.125) exhorts researchers to consider strategies for 'combating threats to validity in qualitative research'. Four of his eight strategies were applicable to this study. The first strategy was intensive long-term field involvement. Maxwell encourages a complete and in-depth understanding of the situation so that repeated observations and more conversation can occur. As I was an employee of the school under study for a reasonable period of time, continuous observations were part of my daily routines. I was also able to engage in conversations with students and staff at the school which provided me with valuable insights into the philosophies and operations of the school. The second strategy was the gathering of rich data. Maxwell stipulates that detailed and varied data are advantageous in that they provide a clearer picture of the situation and greater insight. This study captured data from four different sources including staff, school documents, current students and recently-graduated students. This point is also aligned with Maxwell's third strategy on triangulation, where the use of converging evidence from different sources and methods is encouraged. The fourth strategy applicable to this study was respondent validation. Maxwell encourages researchers to obtain feedback from participants in the case in order to lessen the misinterpretation of accounts and behaviours. In this study, all interview transcripts were emailed to participants to check for understanding and clarity, and draft versions of the study were sent to the Principal and Deputy for verification. The next section expands on how the research methods were implemented during this study.

Four methods of data collection were used: content analysis of school documents, observations, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey. Data collection using the first two methods of document analysis and observation were conventional in that they relied on visual, auditory and tactile cues, taking notes and then forming narratives based on what was seen, heard and sensed (Yin 1993). Public records were accessed including the school's webpage, a journal article written by the Principal and a chapter in a book written by the Principal and Deputy providing information about the intention and nature of the school, while personal emails were also available providing further information about structures and common practices at the school. The third method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with staff and students (Deibel 2011). Analysis of interviews was by four-step process (Cope 2005). The first step involved reading each transcript several times, making detailed notes in the margin and highlighting potential issues and areas of interest. In the next

step potentially important sections from each transcript were selected and individually grouped thematically to create a holistic portrayal of the person and provide a condensed version of what the person had said, using as much as possible the literal words of the participant. The third step involved cross-participant comparisons for general and unique themes. Similar underlying ideas, issues and concepts were cross-checked through participant examples and patterns in the data and supporting quotes were identified and located. In the final step the strongest, in terms of the most frequent, emergent themes were clustered and written up without consulting theoretical literature on the phenomenon under study to let the data 'speak for itself' (Cope 2005, p.179). Dominant themes in order of frequency were recorded for interpretation and discussion.

The interviews took the form of prepared key questions which were asked of every participant interviewed. The semi-structured form guaranteed a direct response to particular questions posed but also provided opportunities to expand on those questions and add new questions as appropriate. Each participant was asked to speak freely and openly about the topic at hand and was encouraged to elaborate and move back and forth between thought processes.

A questionnaire survey was the fourth method of data collection utilised in the case study. The instrument was a Likert scale university readiness survey, which was promoted to Year 12 students at the end of their final year. A six-point Likert scale was chosen as scales greater than three have been found to elicit more information from surveys according to Krosnick and Presser (2010). Hox (2008) agrees that longer scales based on more information from respondents are generally considered more reliable, however they should not be so long or detailed as to increase the likelihood of non-response. Hence, a six-point Likert scale was chosen to provide students with a variety of options and to elicit as much information as practical.

A mixture of both positively and negatively worded questions was decided upon to eliminate acquiescence bias which is the tendency of an individual to consistently agree to questionnaire items, irrespective of content (Costello & Roodenburg 2015). Costello and Roodenburg found that acquiescence bias is significantly correlated with age as well as level of education in that bias significantly reduces with age and education levels. One way of addressing acquiescence bias is to balance questionnaires by including a variety of both positively and negatively worded questions (Hutton 2017). Based on this information, therefore, and considering the age of the participants, the student survey was developed with an even number of positively and negatively worded questions.

The survey was used to provide a 'snap-shot' of student perceptions at a certain point in time. This snap-shot was useful in that it served more as verification than as a form of discovery (Baxter and Jack 2008, Gable 1994). The survey also elicited background information, such as

first in family and economic status, from the students to increase understandings and the richness of the data. The survey, together with other methods of data collection, was used to triangulate the evidence and confirm the outcomes prominent in the other sources (Stecher and Borko 2000, Tellis 1997). Combining quantitative and qualitative data gave greater breadth and depth to the analysis; however, this is only the case when the methods are integrated rather than used in isolation (Stecher and Borko 2002). Integration, therefore, was achieved by carefully considering each source of data individually in the first instance, but later collectively, with an overview of the whole case.

In summary therefore, the study involved interviews with staff to develop an understanding of teaching pedagogy, document analysis and observations of school structures and processes, survey questionnaires from students at the end of their final year to gauge the extent to which students reported they were prepared for university, and interviews with commencing university students who had recently graduated from the school in the previous year to obtain a sample of retrospective views on their preparatory experiences. In utilising these methods and obtaining this data, a case study, facilitating an in-depth and multi-sided approach, was employed to shed light on aspects of a purposely chosen pathway school which specialised in the transition of students to university.

Staff Participants

Staff interviewed in this study voluntarily agreed to participate. An introductory PowerPoint presentation was provided to all staff at the school in a general meeting. The purpose, design and expected outcomes of the project were explained and, in particular, aspects of the case study in which the school featured. At the presentation staff were informed that an email would be sent to all staff asking for volunteers to participate in semi-structured interviews. Staff were provided with details regarding the interview such as what types of questions would be asked, the duration of the interview and the location. Staff were also encouraged to ask any questions regarding the project or their participation. After the general meeting, an email was sent to all staff, reiterating the details of the study, asking them to register their interest and select a time that was appropriate for them to be interviewed. A consent form and ethics approval was included in the email. Staff who registered interest in participating in the interviews were contacted by email and a convenient time and place were arranged for the meeting. Ten of forty staff members (25%) volunteered to participate in the study.

While participating staff members were all teacher trained, a number of them had roles in other areas of the school, for example, in management and student welfare. Staff who volunteered for the study came from a variety of academic backgrounds, with some having achieved or currently working towards higher degrees. As part of the school's philosophy in preparing students for university transition, further study for all staff members was promoted

to assist teachers with current understandings of university systems and structures and, in particular, necessary skills for successful transition. Also, as part of the school's philosophy, staff were encouraged to participate in further study in areas which may be aligned with the school's charter and of benefit to the students. For this reason or other personal reasons, several staff members participating in the study were undertaking Masters degrees in Education and Social Sciences, concentrating on systems and concepts geared towards improvements in student learning outcomes.

Table 4: Academic Backgrounds of Interviewed Staff

Name	Teaching Discipline	Highest level of education attained
Ray (Management)	Science	PhD
Rada (Welfare)	Support	PhD
Vicky (Teacher)	Social Science	Masters (Undertaking PhD studies)
Bill (Management)	Science	Masters
Di (Teacher)	Humanities	Masters
Maisy (Teacher)	Humanities	Bachelor (Undertaking Masters studies)
Cartier (L&T)	Social Science	Bachelor (Undertaking Masters studies)
Flynn (Teacher)	Arts	Bachelor
Carl (Teacher)	Humanities	Bachelor
Sasha (Teacher)	Science	Bachelor

Participants were asked during the registration process to nominate highest level of education, area of employment and times when they would be available for a 30 to 60 minute interview. Contact by email was made soon after participants submitted their available times and arrangements were made to meet at an agreed time and place, usually the participant's office or a meeting room if sharing with another person. Data were collected via semi-structured individual interviews. Interview questions were developed to gain an understanding of the structures and systems at the school designed to assist with student transition, teachers' perceptions of skills and knowledge necessary for successful university transition and teachers' pedagogical practices used to provide students with opportunities to acquire these skills. Data collection occurred one year after I was employed at the school. By this time professional relationships between myself and most of the teaching staff had been developed where a level of trust had been established and I had felt comfortable in that I had 'earned my place' (Gillham 2010, p. 63) at the school. Semi-structured interview questions were posed to staff using naturally occurring conversational dialogue (Gillham 2010) to help them feel at ease in discussing their perceptions and practices.

To help with accuracy and verification, conversations were digitally recorded. Notes were also taken during the interview process and upon reflection after the conclusion of the interview. Variations in participant expressions, tones and gestures were noted and any thoughts on meanings implied by these gestures were recorded in detail. The audio conversations were professionally transcribed and upon receipt were checked against the audio recordings for verification. After this process, transcripts were returned to participants to check for validity and to confirm that the conversations were accurately represented. Transcripts and audios were stored on USB devices in a locked filing cabinet until data analysis began.

Current School Student Participants

On completion of year 12 final exams, approximately 183 Year 12 students at an end-of-year assembly were asked to respond to a survey immediately after the assembly. At the assembly, students were provided with brief information regarding the project and their potential involvement in it should they agree to participate. Students were directed to their emails for more information. A survey link, along with detailed project information, ethics approval and a consent form, were sent to students' email accounts.

Twenty one from a total of 183 students (11.5%) completed the survey. Survey respondents were between 17 and 19 years of age and included eight males and thirteen females; six indicated that neither parent had attended university while fifteen indicated that at least one of their parents had a university degree. The majority of first generation students were male while females made up the majority of non-first generation students (see Table 5).

Table 5: Surveyed Students' Age and Family University Background

First Generation			Non-first Generation		
Gender	**Age**	**Family university background**	**Gender**	**Age**	**Family university background**
Male	18	Sibling	Female	17	Mother
Male	18	Sibling	Female	17	Mother
Male	17	Nil	Female	17	Father
Male	18	Nil	Female	17	Father
Female	17	Nil	Female	17	Father
Female	17	Nil	Female	18	Father
			Female	18	Father
			Female	17	Mother/Father
			Female	17	Mother/Father
			Female	18	Mother/Father
			Female	18	Mother/Father
			Male	18	Father
			Male	19	Father
			Male	17	Mother/Father
			Male	17	Mother/Father

The survey was used to collect data regarding perceptions of university preparedness, and also to obtain background information regarding participants' family university participation and students' age. The first section of the instrument elicited demographic information such as age, gender and family educational background. The second section of the survey generated information on how prepared students felt they were for university study. The final section of the survey comprised two open-ended questions where students had the freedom to volunteer relevant additional information.

The instrument used was a 26-item questionnaire, using a Likert scale for closed questions that sought to investigate students' perceptions of how ready they felt they were for university study. Both closed- and open-ended questions were included - closed questions were used to collect quantitative data on students' readiness responses under each specific heading and two open questions allowed students to comment further on how they were feeling in regard to university preparation. The open-ended questions also helped to qualify their quantitative responses in the survey. The survey remained open for a two-week period and students were encouraged during this time to take part and complete the survey. Once the survey had closed,

participant information was exported from the survey face into an excel spreadsheet where the data were prepared for analysis.

School Graduates – University Commencers

The final stage of data collection took place in the following year. All graduate students (183) of the school were contacted by email in the following year during the university commencement period. The email outlined the purpose of the study, ethics approval, a consent form and a detailed information sheet regarding involvement and participation in interviews for the study. The email also provided an outline of potential benefits that participants may receive if they participated in an interview. The interviews provided students with opportunities to reflect on their transition so far and discuss any problems they may have been experiencing and the various forms of assistance available to them. Students received a registration link in the email which requested information regarding family background on university participation, family income levels and cultural background. Five students registered their interest and provided options regarding time and location for an interview. All five students were contacted in relation to a time and location for the interview and a booked study room at the university was arranged for the meeting.

The participants were five university commencers, comprising two males and three females, who were graduates of the school in the previous year (see Table 6). Four of the five participants were enrolled at the same university, although in different disciplines, while one was enrolled at a different university and also in a different discipline than the others. Four participants had at least one parent who held a university degree qualification, while one participant had no family history of university participation. Only one student identified with a low income background while the others identified with medium to high income level backgrounds and all but one nominated that they were from English-speaking backgrounds. It was not known whether the five interviewed students were among the 21 who had completed the survey on perceptions of university preparedness a few months earlier as the survey was anonymous.

Table 6: Interviewed Past Students' Background and Discipline Information

	Rennie	Sheryl	Fannie	Stella	James
Family members who went to university	Mother Father Aunty	Mother Father Aunty Uncle Sister Cousin	Mother Aunty Uncle Sister Grandfather Cousin	Father	None: First generation student
Nominated income level	Med	High	High	Med	Med
Area of study	Computer Science	International Studies/Law	Commerce	Behavioral Science	Veterinary Science

Participants were asked during the initial email to nominate times and a campus that was most convenient for them to participate in a short interview should they agree to participate. Contact was made by mobile phone short message service (sms) where time, day and location for the interview were agreed upon. Interviews took place in study rooms booked through the library on various campuses. Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews. Preparation for interviews included considered questions with prompts and probes (Gillhan 2010) to extract specific information on a topic and to ensure areas of interest were explored in depth. Interviews were held in the first six to eight weeks of first semester. The interviews were designed to capture students' expectations, experiences and perceptions of their learning environment during the early stages of their transition to university. They were also designed to examine and explore opinions on the ways in which the school had prepared these students for the transition period.

Interviews were intentionally structured to run according to the flow of conversation with no time limit (Seidman 2006) and varied from 25 to 45 minutes. In developing honest and purposeful dialogue during interviews and only where appropriate and helpful, my background, interests and experiences were revealed to participants to build and develop an honest platform from which experiences could be shared (King 2014). On occasions, as the topic was sensitive to some students, there was a need to gain participant confidence and establish or re-establish rapport.

To help with accuracy and verification, conversations in all interviews were digitally recorded. Notes were also taken during the interview process and upon reflection after the conclusion of

each interview. Variations in participant expressions, tones and gestures were noted and any thoughts on meanings implied by these gestures were recorded in detail. The audio conversations were professionally transcribed and upon receipt were checked against the audio recordings for verification. After this process, transcripts were returned to participants to check for validity and to confirm that the conversations were accurately represented for authenticity and also to promote trust and honesty among participants. Transcripts and audios were stored on USB devices in a locked filing cabinet until the data collection process began.

Ethics and Information

An information sheet was made available to all participants. Consent was sought from all participants and where under the age of 18, school principal consent was sought. Participant understanding was checked and where necessary clarified. Participants were informed that they were under no obligation to participate and that withdrawal or non-participation carried no consequence. Information collected via recorded interview was de-identified after completion of the study and no personal information has since been stored. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts to preserve student and staff confidentiality. For the duration of the study, information was stored in locked filing cabinets and labelled in a non-identifiable manner.

The study did not impact upon the relationship between participants, the school or universities. There were no risks to participants in any way. More specifically, participants recruited for the study were not disadvantaged by the school or either of the two universities in which the participants were enrolled. While results of the study were to be used in a thesis as part of the Professional Doctorate Degree in Education or in published academic papers, confidentiality of participants remained, at all times, protected in the dissemination of the study's results.

Personal Positioning

Upon commencement of this study, I was employed as a teacher at the school under study. Previously in my career, I had taught at the senior secondary high school level for fifteen years. My interest in school-to-university preparation led me to seek employment at the school as I was aware of the programs and structures set up to assist with transition and therefore wanted to be involved. Immediately prior to this position, I had been employed at a South Australian university as a Project Officer where I assisted students transitioning into the university. Having thoroughly reviewed the literature on university transition and having worked directly with students transitioning to university, I had developed a sound understanding of the school-university interface and the challenges which both staff and students encounter during the transition from one institution to another. This provided me with great insight and an expansive knowledge base on which to develop the current study in terms of questions, methods, types of

data and processes of collection (Gillhan 2010).

Being an employee of the school brought some disadvantage along with advantage. I was employed at the school for a two-and-a-half-year period and was at the school for one year before I began the data collection process. The data for this study were collected over the remaining one-and-a-half-year period. As a participant in the events under study, I was aware that Tellis (1997) has concerns for the potential bias to which such engagement could lead. He suggests that the researcher's actions may influence the events under study or participants' actions and thoughts during the research process and stresses that this must be taken into consideration during the data collection process. In doing so, I reflected that I was only employed at the school for a relatively short period of time and in an isolated department (namely International Students) which operated separately from the main school. While respect and trust were present and interchangeable in my relationships with all work colleagues at the school, I did not work there long enough to form close relationships with the staff or students in the main part of the school and did not partake in many of the events programmed in regard to preparation for transition. This became an advantage in the data collection process as it minimised the risk of assumptions and incidences of bias that may have occurred naturally when being familiar with individuals and involved in the planning and implementing processes regarding desired outcomes for students.

Analysis

Study Three was guided by four questions (see p. 105), developed to guide the inquiry by using relevant sources of data. The following sections are structured according to these questions and address each in turn using relevant sources of data, themes and appropriate analysis.

1. What strategies are in place at the school to assist students with future transition to university?

The school under study was established in 2002 as an academic independent school for students in Years 11 and 12. Strategies of the school included the provision of teaching and learning opportunities for successful transition between secondary and higher education. Founders of the school were concerned about the difficulties high school students faced as they made the transition to university. As a result, there was an intention to address the criticisms that schools were receiving for not providing students with the skills and understanding necessary to cope with the transition from school to university study. As part of the establishment process for the school, considerable research and communication was undertaken, which included a process of current literature reviews, discussions with university key staff, collaborative goal setting and creating documents and articles. The founding

members of the school determined that the following imperatives were necessary to prepare students for university study and to assist them in the transition period:

- provide opportunities for students to see how a university operates and to interact with academic staff
- provide skills and experience in relating to new people to help interaction
- incorporate the lecture and tutorial system for Year 12 classes
- provide excellent delivery of material in an entertaining and interactive manner
- develop skills in note-taking and active questioning
- provide excellent course counselling, encouraging students to build on their strengths and to make considered choices of career directions
- give students the opportunity to pursue an appropriate mix of subjects
- provide subject specialists, passionate about their subject areas
- give absolute priority to learning opportunities, allowing no interruptions to the time-tabled lessons
- provide opportunities for one-on-one interactions between teachers and students and encouraging students to take charge of their own learning by being confident in seeking answers to their questions
- provide blocks of non-contact time, within the time-table, which allow for students to make choices about their learning tasks

(Alagumalai et al. 2013, p.159)

The appointed Principal at the time spoke about his perceptions of the university study environment and implied that students who came from more traditional type schools, where daily activities and ways of learning were pre-determined, would have difficulties:

> The way in which subjects [at university] are organised and delivered differently, heavier workloads, limited contact with academics, restricted feedback, more sophisticated research requirements, the expectation of independent learning and need for self-management often make the transition from the controlled learning environment of school, highly problematic. (Holloway 2014, p.10)

The founders of the school held numerous and lengthy discussions with staff from a partnering university and developed ongoing working relationships across a number of disciplines.

The information below was gleaned from the Principal's and Deputy's interview transcripts, a published article about the school (Holloway 2014), information from a chapter of a published book written by the founding members of the school (Alagumalai et al. 2013) and my observations and inquiries at the school.

The school was designed around the following overarching question: “How can secondary schools better prepare their students for the demands of a university education?” (Alagumalai et al. 2013, p.156). In response to this question, the school focused on and documented development in the following areas and the ways in which a variety of strategies within each area would be employed, as well as the rationale for doing so.

Timetable Structure and Attendance

The school timetable utilises the hours of 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. Each full-time student is required to complete a minimum of 14 contact hours out of the 45 available hours. Contact times vary for each student on any given day and are dependent upon subject selection for each student. Students are encouraged to be productive during their non-contact hours, however, ultimately it is up to them to decide how they will use this time. Structuring the timetable in this way provides opportunities for students to experience a choice in when, where or if they decide to undertake personal study during non-contact times. Programs and principles are in place at the school to help students make productive choices about their personal study habits. These choices are developed through a dedicated student learning space, teaching pedagogies and a carefully-designed mentoring program.

Student Learning Space

Student learning spaces are equipped with computers, printers and photocopiers. Some spaces have discussion rooms and comfortable seating to facilitate student discussion, group work and teacher-student interaction. Student learning spaces are intentionally provided adjacent to staff working areas to provide ease of contact between student and staff, encouraging adhoc interaction and discussion. The location of the student space also provides opportunities for students to view staff working areas, so that the way in which staff interact and collaborate with one another as part of their daily routines in a working environment can be modelled and to observe appropriate behaviours expected in adult settings. The location of the student learning space is designed to encourage students to make productive choices regarding firstly, their study habits and secondly, the way they interact with others. Students are encouraged to work in these areas during their non-contact times and are reminded that it is a shared space for students and staff therefore appropriate behaviours are expected to be maintained.

Pedagogy and Communication

Worksheets for the sake of ‘busy work’ are avoided. Teachers are, instead, encouraged to challenge and extend student learning and knowledge. With regard to assignment drafting, a single draft may be accepted, however, rather than handing in a draft version of the assignment, it is preferred that students personally consult with their teacher during the teacher’s consultation time in order to discuss and argue points presented or not in the

student's work. Deadlines are fixed with no exceptions and concise diagnostic student assessment feedback is provided. Extensive online facilities within a learning management system are encouraged and available to staff to use including Turnitin for originality checks, online submission, file and audio uploads, quizzes, forums and chat rooms.

Professional Development

Staff members are encouraged to share their current professional learning pathways and interests with students and other staff. Every member of staff has been employed as a subject specialist and an expectation is that they are willing to share current findings, best practice and future inquiry with other staff members. Staff meetings are held every second week where day-to-day information is exchanged and new notifications are presented. Staff meetings incorporate a teaching and learning aspect where current research and conference findings can be shared. Staff are also expected to share new-found knowledge with students within the classroom and outside, promoting and modelling enthusiasm, curiosity and lifelong learning.

University Practices (lectures, tutorials, online learning)

The lecture/tutorial system is a strategic part of the school's education system. Students in their final year attend two lectures per week and a two-hour tutorial per subject. Two lectures in each subject are presented, where all students enrolled in the same subject attend the two lectures as a group each week. Students are then split into tutorial groups and attend a designated tutorial on the week's lecture material. The system is a replica of the university lecture/tutorial system where all students in the same course come together for lectures but are then distributed into smaller tutorial groups for discussion and practice. A variety of lecture theatres in the partnering university are used, dependent on student numbers, and for subjects with fewer students, the school drama space is used. All lectures are sound recorded and made available in the school online environment. Staff presenting lectures do so in teams to enhance the experience for students, providing different perspectives and to promote interaction and peer-to-peer collaboration. Tutorials are offered in smaller classrooms at the school.

To assist with learning, student participation in lectures is scaffolded. Initially, students are provided with topic headings on a subject template. During the first few lectures, students are asked to listen to the material, adding important dot-points under each heading as the lecture proceeds. After each lecture, students are advised to listen to the recording in case they missed any key points during the lecture. Students are asked to be prepared for tutorials by preparing questions from the lecture and being familiar with content and topics covered in the lecture. Tutorial sessions are two-hour, teacher-facilitated classes where students are encouraged, in small groups, to practice applications and consolidate new material.

Mentoring Program

The mentor program is designed to encourage and instil personal skills and attributes such as time-management, organisational, self-directed learning, social interaction, help-seeking behaviour and independent skills. Teachers work with small numbers of students to build and provide opportunities for students to develop resilience, self-awareness, independence and confidence in themselves. The mentor program begins on the first day of the academic year in year 11 and continues through to graduation over a two-year period. Staff and students meet every second week on a regular basis, either as an individual group session or as a whole of cohort session where presentations and guest speakers have been organised. Students are shown simple strategies for success such as using daily and weekly planners, setting time aside for external commitments, seeking help and communicating with individual teachers in regard to problems or improvements.

Overall, the founding members of the school identified a number of transition issues that they felt were necessary to address. In addressing these issues, members raised a series of questions regarding the experiences of secondary school students. In responding to the questions on which the school was founded, members used a number of strategies, including current literature reviews and conversations with associated staff from industry and the partnering university, which explicitly identified the ideal characteristics of a successful first-year learner.

The school determined a set of imperatives which they felt were necessary to achieve their goals (Alagumalai et al. 2013). These imperatives were integrated physically intellectually and socially throughout the school. By implementing the imperatives into structures and practices outlined above, students were provided with opportunities to develop and practise the types of skills necessary for a successful transition into university. This outlook relies on the perceptions that staff have about what skills they believe are necessary for successful transition and how they provide students with opportunities to learn these skills. Thus, the following question was considered to determine the ways in which students were prepared for university transition.

2. What are staff perceptions of the skills necessary for successful university transition and in what ways do staff provide opportunities for students to acquire these transition skills?

In addressing this question, ten staff were interviewed concerning their knowledge of transition skills and pedagogies that encourage the development of these skills. After interviewing members of staff in terms of how pedagogies and discipline content contributed to opportunities for students to acquire skills which would assist in their transition to university, the following areas were identified as being important for student transition:

- Independent learning
- Resilience and change management
- Time management and organisational skills
- Group work skills
- Study skills

Interviewed participants described why they felt these areas were important for student transition and described the types of opportunities they provided in their classrooms for students to acquire and develop these skills within each area. The following section analyses the perceptions the teachers held and the pedagogies employed in their classrooms and the school in general.

Independent Learning

It was evident from interviewing staff at the school that they had a perceptive understanding of the importance of being an independent learner in preparation for the transition to university study. All staff felt that students needed to know how to learn independently and distinguish the difference between simply completing tasks by themselves and being an independent learner. Staff considered that independent learning was not simply working on one's own, but also the ability to discover, re-discover, build upon and communicate new and existing concepts and ideas in ways relevant and appropriate to one's personal academic interest. Staff recognised that this was something students needed for successful transition into university or employment.

Different teachers at the school reported on different ways of teaching students to be more independent in their learning. Di spoke about working hard at finding the right amount of help for students. Her practice was to offer enough assistance to get students started and enthusiastic about a task and only then assist with strategies when or if they got stuck. While Di tried hard not to 'check-up' on students' progress, she actively encouraged and reminded students to seek help from her:

> *I have learnt now to back off and say, 'Look, if you really don't understand then come and see me'. Sometimes they don't know the questions to ask to get the information they're after so I'm constantly drawing up templates and saying, see what you can get out of it.* (Di)

Ray used the concept of a wheelbarrow to explain how he felt about students learning to become more independent. He believed, as Di indicated above, that students needed to be provided with a starting structure and then left alone to see where they can take things:

> *They need to be given, I liken it to the wheelbarrow, two arms of a wheelbarrow,*

freedom and responsibility, and that they need to be given time, but also the responsibility, to manage their time and resources, initially in a structured and perhaps scaffolded way, as they get more confident to take responsibility for their learning.

(Ray)

Teachers interviewed were very aware of the pressures some schools were under to 'spoon-feed' students in order to gain high results. Teachers at the school were adamant that 'spoon-feeding' was to be avoided at all costs as this practice does not provide opportunities for students to learn the skills necessary for independent and self-directed study.

Carl specifically spoke about his experiences at other schools in relation to the amount of pressure some teachers were under in regard to helping students achieve very high results, regardless of ability, which in some cases meant providing feedback, above and beyond what was appropriate. Carl reflected on his experiences at the school as being quite different from anywhere else he had worked:

I worked in an Anglican girls' school where you were under tremendous pressure to get the highest possible ATAR, tremendous pressure to get the girls through one way or another and if they don't do it, essentially you do it for them. We absolutely do not do any of that stuff here, they have to do it themselves. So they are learning to construct an argument, to question and discuss. (Carl)

Another teacher was also aware of the downfalls of providing too much help. While most of the time she left students alone to work independently, some of the time she felt it was necessary to step in and provide some guidance:

I try to avoid any kind of spoon-feeding, and even if kids are asking for that type of thing, I try and maybe give them a little tiny, tiny bit of help only for the ones that are feeling a bit anxious or too frightened to go out on their own. (Maisy)

Teachers were often aware of the need to balance the amount of help they provided with the amount of freedom necessary for students to become independent learners, particularly if previously, they came from a school where they were expected to provide high levels of support. While teachers understood the benefits of independent study, they found it a challenge to let students work things out for themselves but were determined not to give in:

I'm all the time thinking maybe they don't know. I always think I have to jump in and do something but I have learned now to back off and say, 'If you don't understand, come and see me'. (Di)

Staff at the school felt very strongly about preparing students for independent study in a variety

of ways. While some teachers took a step back in their attempt to help students become more independent, Sasha took a more critical, questioning approach which did not involve spoon-feeding or pampering of any kind. Instead, she encouraged her students to question themselves and each other so that eventually they would be able to determine their own learning needs and mode. Sasha was very passionate about students understanding the art of knowing how to be critical in the sense of questioning new knowledge, rather than just simply accepting information without exploration:

> *We are very critical about our learning. We criticise each other. I teach them how to criticise me. I want them to be critical learners and do independent study and not spoon-feed them. But little by little I feel confident just leaving them alone to find their own feet.* (Sasha)

Guiding students initially but then leaving them to work things out for themselves was a common strategy used to prepare students to become independent. Along the same lines, Vicky's practice was to use the first term only of Year 12 as a trial period. In this term only, all assessment pieces were formative in nature in that they were not counted towards students' final grades. This practice gave students the opportunity to experiment with tasks in terms of how they would demonstrate their knowledge after receiving continuous feedback on how to improve:

> *What I do in the first term is all formative. Everything you do then after, is summative, in terms 2 and 3. You make your mistakes early, you ask your questions, you learn from those mistakes. I'll help you as much as I can but after that, once we hit term 2, from there on in, it all counts. So you make sure you use that formative term 1 as your opportunity, to work out everything you need to work out about expectations. That seems to have instilled in them the fact, I'd better sort this out now. If I want to achieve, I better sort this out now, because I'm not going to get that opportunity later on, there will be no second opportunity later on.* (Vicky)

Vicky believed that this practice provided students with an understanding of what would be expected of them at the school and uni in their assignments once first term was over. Vicky implied that she was quite strict with assessment tasks after the learning period in term 1 and that students were aware of the need to establish good practices and habits early in term 1 so that they could become effective independent learners thereafter.

Staff at the school provided a variety of opportunities for students to understand the importance and the meaning of independent learning. Staff were certain of the benefits of independent learning and encouraged students to take charge of their learning in relation to all aspects including the acquisition of knowledge and materials, active participation and task

management.

Resilience and Change Management

Resilience and change management was a recurrent theme of the study. Staff felt that students who could willingly operate out of their comfort zone or 'feel uncomfortable or different in some ways, could be quite successful in university and beyond' (Rada). Staff recognised that the ability to be flexible and adaptable was an important characteristic that would support student transition into university and employment. Staff also understood that being able to adapt to new situations and performing in these different situations were skills which needed to be learned and practiced. For this reason staff provided students with various opportunities to operate out of their comfort zones and to practice new skills through group work, online journaling and 'taking tutorials'.

At the time of this study, Vicky was undertaking further study at university and therefore understood first-hand what university was like in the current climate. This was very important to her as she felt she could pass on her knowledge to her students. Being a student confirmed her thoughts about independent study, drafts and deadlines and the need to be resilient:

> *I'm a believer in tough love, because I'm still a student myself in the universities, I'm still operating in that environment and I know what tough love means. I know what they're going to confront and I want them to be ready for that. I don't want students to have any hidden surprises.* (Vicky)

Professional development was encouraged at the school, particularly in the areas of interest to the philosophy of the school and individual teacher. Rada enjoyed keeping abreast of current research in her own time and regularly reported her findings to staff via staff meeting presentations. She also enjoyed assisting with the development the school mentor program in which students took part each fortnight. In developing the mentor program, special attention was given to the characteristic of resilience. Staff considered it especially important for a successful transition into university or the workforce. In the extract below Rada spoke about a session in the mentor program and her interest in change management and how various strategies and techniques are able to assist students as they transition into different and sometimes difficult environments:

> *[The session] helps them develop strategies to maintain a 'changed' process. I like Prochaska and DiClemete. It's a spiral model where change is started, a course of change occurs and then you have a relapse. That relapse is a normal part of any change process, reflect and evaluate how things are going, to be able to adjust without throwing everything out the window.* (Rada)

Ray's philosophy around the purpose of the mentor program was similar to Rada's regarding the aspect of resilience:

> *It develops some sense of resilience, some capacity to enable them to stick with it, to work through even when the answers aren't easy, apparent, to keep on trying, that sense of determination, persistence, to enable them to succeed.* (Ray)

Both Rada and Ray understood the challenges students can face at university and the consequences of being unprepared for the change.

In regard to building such resilience in students, Maisy believed the situations students were confronted with at the school, which were typically different from what they had previously experienced, helped them develop new perspectives and experiences of adjustment and adapting to change:

> *I expose them to journal articles and get them to read them and then that influences and changes their points of view. And the fact that they have to go to different buildings and different rooms that are quite geographically different or apart, that helps them, and the fact that they're also with a cohort of students from so many different backgrounds and different schools, different socio-economic areas, that helps them as well because that's what it's going to be like at university.* (Maisy)

The very act of leaving their previous school to complete their last two years at the school was seen as helpful by many in fostering students' resilience:

> *Life is transition, life is flux, you know, and if you understand that it is constant change, and particularly now it's rapid change, then students need to be able to adjust to change. Their experience of the two years here is an experience of change and learning to adjust to change, so learning to be a learner, learning to think, learning to be able to accommodate and incorporate the material from outside with the person inside, and your talents and abilities and all that sort of thing, and find ways through changes and over hurdles and up and around hills and so on, that's the best preparation you can get. How better to be prepared for a world that's constantly shifting faster than we can keep up with it?* (Flynn)

Staff reported an astute awareness in relation to various aspects of university transition. They held informed views about the sorts of experiences students would face once they left the school, and so to prepare students more thoroughly, organised a variety of lunchtime sessions to help students with certain aspects of transition such as in this case, pathways that may not always seem obvious or easy to negotiate. Staff felt that it was beneficial to prepare students for situations that they would be likely to face at some point in the future but may not

necessarily feel comfortable in:

> *We offer every Thursday, lunchtime sessions for students to come in at lunchtime at the computers and we'll help them plan and have discussions. We speak to them in the SATAC sessions but also individually. I speak to them about what first year unfortunately is like for study, and generally you're not going to get the subjects you want to do, you're going to have to do some generalist studies and you may be not thrilled about that, but sticking to it rather than just dumping it.* (Rada)

Overall, staff felt strongly about the need to promote the characteristics of resilience to the student body and to provide them with skills that would assist with unfamiliar change. Staff understood the challenges that students would face in the transition to university and incorporated opportunities to acquire specialised skills in the classroom and outside via activities such as mentoring, group discussions and preparation workshops.

Time Management and Organisational Skills

Time management and organisational skills were also identified as recurrent and nominated as key attributes which would assist successful transition into university. Ray provided an overview for the way in which students were encouraged to become independent learners and responsible for their studies and tasks:

> *The school tries to develop the capacity for students to manage their own time effectively. They can appropriate decisions about their use of their resources at the time so that they're maximising their learning opportunities but they can't do that if they're being told what to do all the time. They need to be given, I liken it to the wheelbarrow, two arms of the wheelbarrow, freedom and responsibility. They need to be given time and also responsibility to manage.* (Ray)

Teachers at the school agreed that, one of the ways to provide students with opportunities to enhance self-reliance is to adopt a 'hands-off' approach. In the extract below, Cartier speaks about the school collectively using this approach:

> *We've always said that academic success comes with good organisational skills. It's up to them to find out when things are due and how to hand things up or what books they need and how to get it. So our hands-off approach in, figure it out for yourself, must give them that skill. Students come back and say, [the school] was the best thing for me. I understand time management of university life. I understand the pattern of university life.* (Cartier)

Another whole school initiative to encourage time management was to abandon the usual time

and lesson structure implemented in most schools. The school decided against back-to-back lessons and the use of a 'bell' to indicate change of class and adopted an 8am to 5pm day, where two-hour subject blocks were dispersed throughout the week. Carl spoke about how this system helped students to develop effective organisation and time management skills:

> *By implementing a time-table which spans across nine hours each day, rather than a very tight structured six hours which is the norm in conventional schools, students are encourage to be organised before, after and during the school day. For example, having the 8am – 5pm schedule with two, maybe even occasionally three, free lessons which can equate to five hour gaps between classes, students are encouraged to participate in private study during their free lessons as they may arrive home late on particular days or arrive early which means staying up late to study is not an option.* (Carl)

Staff believed that time management and organisation were key to successful transition. During the conversation, Di reported on her teaching practices which had a focus on organisation. She believed that to be able to succeed at university, students needed to be extremely organised as she understood through her own pursuit of post-graduate study, even the process of help-seeking becomes much more time-consuming and requires a higher level of organisation, particularly for secondary students who are used to simply putting up their hands when they need help:

> *In the university, the lecturers, they come in at different times and you have to make appointments to see them. So it is a great deal of organisation that's involved. I think that is the crucial thing. If kids are not organised, you know, they will have problems.* (Di)

Time management and organisation were identified as essential elements in successful transition. Staff at the school adopted a 'hands-off' approach in relation to the personal needs of students at the school as they were of the belief that this type of approach encouraged students to take responsibility for equipment, materials and time spent on learning. Staff believed that if students were left to their own devices they would find, by trial and error and with the help of carefully planned support, successful strategies to independently excel in their studies.

Group Work Skills

Working in groups was another skill which teachers believed was necessary for successful university transition. Teachers at the school saw not only a need for students to engage in group work but also that students first needed to understand the physical and dynamic demands of group work. Di reported teaching students the basics of group work and peer-to-peer interaction. She described below, how initially she needed to physically move students

into place to facilitate group work sessions and to monitor the dynamics of the group:

> *A lot of our kids haven't learnt how to interact, and when you tell them, OK, now get into groups, they really don't know what to do. So I have had to physically move furniture, physically say, OK, you sit here, you sit there. Now appoint a leader. Now what's the role of the leader? And get them to do that kind of team working, and to understand that everybody has to prove his or her weight. It's a very powerful thing, group work, especially when they're doing projects, like now they're going to do presentations on Friday, they have to understand, and you can clearly see who are the ones who want to sit out and don't want to interact, and who are the ones who say, OK, I give up, you're not doing anything, I'll just do it myself. If they don't get it right now, they'll get a rude shock when they go into university, when they have to actually start working with other people and sometimes from different areas.* *(Di)*

Maisy too understood the demands of group work from a student's point of view and what would be required of them at university, so also provided opportunities for her students to learn interpersonal skills and the way in which a group interacts most effectively:

> *I have a whole list of stuff that we go through about how to interact in a group and how to not take things personally. If somebody has a different opinion to you it doesn't mean they don't like you, it just means their opinion on this topic is different and that, you've got to listen to everybody's opinions, those types of things that we take for granted, point out to people, and making sure everybody has a say. So then I have them run a tutorial, OK, like at university, and they do a lot of group work where I set an aspect of something and then they all have to come back together and combine the information, and it's presented to the class so that each group will present an aspect of something that we're learning to the class and then altogether it makes up the whole topic we're learning.* (Maisy)

Upon reflection, Flynn too understood the importance of working together and realised how transferable to any situation, the skills in his subject were, particularly those which required a collaborative effort:

> *One of my subjects in particular is so group-work based by its very nature, that it couldn't be better preparation for a lot of the stuff that is expected [at university], so that in actual fact it's skilling people.* (Flynn)

This practice was also an important aspect of Cartier's classroom as she also understood the importance of students working in groups and provided them with explicit opportunities to practise their skills:

> *We're doing project-based learning ... but we're backing it up with some content-driven stuff, some theories, so that they've got some stuff to hang on to, stuff that they can be tested on and they feel comfortable with, but the project is very open-ended, and they can come up with their own solution.* (Cartier)

Working in groups, communication and interaction were skills which teachers believed would prepare students with what they needed at university. Staff at the school integrated group work into their subject areas and provided students with opportunities to practise and acquire these skills to develop communication, interaction and their confidence.

Study Skills

Other particular study skills were also identified as being specifically significant and necessary for effective independent study. For example, note-taking, journaling, online learning, communication and listening skills were named as being important for students to function effectively at university both independently as well as collaboratively.

One teacher reported the ways in which she encouraged students to practise the task of note-taking. Maisy provided explicit instructions on how to note-take as some students had not had prior opportunities to learn or practise this skill:

> *If you're going to put up your slides on MyUni, then [students] take notes from what you're saying because they know the PowerPoint is going to be up there, and you have to tell kids to do that, they don't know that, or some know how to do that, and others don't. You have to say, 'OK, the PowerPoint is here, it's going to be up on MyUni, so what then do you think you're going to be writing down?' and I say, 'The title probably of the slide, so you know which slide, goes with the notes that you're writing down'.*
>
> (Maisy)

Effective note-taking was an important skill that Bill also wanted students to develop further. He provided students with a template to fill in during lectures so that students could develop an understanding of what to write:

> *The kids start off with a template with blanks, you know, in your first few lectures fill in the blanks. Then they'll get to a stage, create your own template or create your own notes, so they go through a bit of learning process as to what to do. We say, 'You never ever take everything off the screen'. We have changed our PowerPoints quite dramatically so that they are in fact minimalised with regards to the word content.* (Bill)

In developing note-taking skills, students were scaffolded through the process until they felt comfortable in the practice of taking notes of the key points. The same approach was also taken

with the practice of academic writing. Staff identified the need for 'good' academic writing skills and endeavoured to provide students with a high level of skill and a variety of forms:

> *I've had discussions with colleagues here at school but also a number of discussions with students and past students and I've also engaged in quite significant discussions with academic staff at the university, asking them, what is it that they want? I recall for example, a very interesting conversation with a Professor of Applied Maths, and I said, 'What is it you want?' And he said, 'I want them to be able to write'.* (Ray)

Ray had been in regular contact with colleagues at university as well as with past students of the school and as a result of his conversations considered it important for students to be able to clearly explain and express themselves in every discipline. Another teacher who reported a similar conversation with a colleague working at the university spoke about the importance of good writing skills and so embedded specific writing components within his course to provide students with opportunities to practise and improve their writing skills:

> *I mean in my area one of the key, a friend of mine who is a university lecturer, one of the things that he complains about a lot, is that many secondary students come into his courses with really ordinary writing skills for the level that they need to write at. Now because I'm an English teacher that matters to me, so I have a designated academic writing component that I include in all of my year 11 and 12 teaching for the long-term purpose of skilling students with much greater literacy skills and academic writing skills for when they need it.* (Flynn)

Other types of writing skills were also identified as being important. Being able to keep a journal was an important skill that Cartier believed would assist students at university, particularly the ability to use an electronic journal in an online environment:

> *We made journalling summative last year in Psychology, and we got a backlash at the end of the course, the students didn't like it, but I feel a bit like, like toughen up, you know, journalling is fine. It's like discussion board contribution, which they often don't want to do, or Wiki contribution of any sort.* (Cartier)

Working in an online environment was another part of the school's goal in providing opportunities for successful transition. Staff understood the nature of university learning environments and were aware of the challenges students face when unprepared for online learning. Sasha provided a variety of learning opportunities for her students which included a component of online learning:

> *The homework done online has some advantages because that system is a tutorial system. It's like talking to the student right on the spot. If they, for example, do*

something wrong or click a wrong answer, it's not simply telling you that you're right or wrong, it's challenging you – I'm going back to that critical thinking – it challenges you until you get the right answer, so it leads you through hints, through giving you little, you know, statements about the answer until you get it right. I think a major part of success in Physics is doing your own independent work. (Sasha)

Choice and self-direction were concepts which Di also wanted her students to understand. She provided guidance and support but ultimately stepped away from assessment items to allow her students to have the final decision on how they wanted to work through topics. She regarded learning and accessing information in diverse ways necessary for successful university study and so in encouraging this, allowed students to use a certain amount of autonomy in her classes:

If they have a preference for a certain way of accessing information or learning, that would be considered a modality. Basically that's what happens, they have a certain level of autonomy in deciding how and the manner in which they want to learn. (Di)

The ability to find articles, journals and books and be able to find their way around a university library was also recognised by teachers. As part of the partnership between the school and the university, staff and students had access to the university library which they made full use of:

I take them to the [university] library and show them where everything is. I make sure they know how to borrow a book, because they all pretend like they do, and of course, you get there and they don't know what they're doing. (Maisy)

Exam etiquette was yet another skill which the school thought was necessary for students to understand. The school wanted to make sure students were clear on what they were able to bring into an exam and staff were consistent with exam procedures so that students would understand the importance of being prepared and organised:

One of the nice techniques we've now engaged and we're going to do it for another year, is we've used the university invigilators in the exams. So for example this year they were telling the story about second year Economic university students; about half a dozen of them brought in the wrong type of calculators, they weren't approved calculators. The calculators were taken away, no negotiation. No, so this time I took all [non-compliant] dictionaries away in the exam. If they weren't compliant then, no - this is what would happen to you at university. (Vickers)

In general, all participating teachers had a connection with the university, either through being a current higher degree research student themselves, through workplace associations as part of the university partnership permanently in place with the school or through relationships

formed through industry connections. Knowledge was also gained from students who had returned, after graduating from the school and commencing university study. A few interested teachers undertook their own research to gain a more informed understanding of the ways students could be better prepared for university and beyond and shared their knowledge with the rest of the staff.

Staff had clear perceptions of the types of skills which would help students to make a successful transition to higher education. Foremost was the ability to learn independently. Staff believed this was key for doing well at university. Time management and organisation were closely related to independent learning. Staff believed students needed to be organised to be able to manage their learning and access help. Group work and communication was another area which staff thought students would benefit from and they therefore built in opportunities in the classroom for students to practise and acquire these skills. Other skills were also considered important for transition including note-taking, academic writing and online learning. Lastly, resilience and change management was an area that the school felt needed attention. Staff understood the challenges that students would face once at university and wanted to prepare them in ways other than just academically. Staff were well aware of the need for students to be resilient in the face of difficulties and challenges, persist and feel comfortable in situations which would be unexpected or different from what they had previously experienced.

So far, the first two questions for Study Three have focused on staff at the school – what their perceptions were of the skills necessary for successful university transition and what opportunities they considered they were providing for students to develop the skills necessary for successful transition to higher education. The next two questions examine the students' perspectives on how well they believe they had been prepared for university study and the nature of the students' transition.

3. To what extent do current students feel prepared for university study?

In total there were eight males and thirteen females who completed the survey regarding perceptions of university readiness. The respondents six students who reported having parents with no university background and fifteen students who reported having at least one parent with a university qualification. As the numbers for first generation students were small, no comparisons between the groups were made and also as the total number of participants who completed the survey was low, the results can only be indicative of the perspectives of the students in this particular case. The ages of respondents ranged from 17 to 19 (see Table 4).

Table 5 displays all student responses to the survey and weighted averages. The table is divided into two sections separating the positively and negatively worded questions. Weighted averages were calculated for responses to each question where 1 on the Likert scale was

Definitely Not True and 6 on the Likert scale was Definitely True. The number of responses for each item was multiplied by the Likert scale number and divided by the total number of responses to calculate a weighted average. The questions in the table below have been ordered in relation to their weighted average which appears in the last column and the question number according to the sequence in the actual questionnaire appears in the first column. Positively worded questions were ordered from smallest weighted average to highest, while negatively worded questions were ordered from highest to smallest weighted average.

Table 7: Current School Students' Reported Readiness for University

Question – Positively Worded (Weighting)	Definitely Not True (1)	Very Probably Not True (2)	Probably Not True (3)	Probably True (4)	Very Probably True (5)	Definitely True (6)	Total	Weighted Average
11. I understand the difference between a lecture and a tutorial					2	19	21	5.90
12. I know what I have to do in lectures					4	17	21	5.81
18. I know what it means to be an independent learner				2	7	12	21	5.48
14. I know how to negotiate my way around an online system			1	3	7	10	21	5.24
17. I'm able to direct my own learning		1	1	1	7	11	21	5.24
3. I know how to negotiate my way around a university campus				4	9	8	21	5.19
6.I am aware of the need to balance study, paid work and social time			1	3	8	9	21	5.19
1. I feel confident about starting university			1	4	8	8	21	5.10
5. I can manage my time effectively	1	1	2	6	8	3	21	4.33
10. I feel confident to make new friends at university	1	2	4	4	6	4	21	4.14
9. I feel comfortable to introduce myself to others	1	3	5	5	3	4	21	3.86
22. I know how to explore other options if I choose a different career path	5	1	2	3	6	4	21	3.76

Table 7: Current School Students' Reported Readiness for University

Question – Negatively Worded (Weighting)	Definitely Not True (1)	Very Probably Not True (2)	Probably Not True (3)	Probably True (4)	Very Probably True (5)	Definitely True (6)	Total	Weighted Average
7. I'm not confident of finding my way around the campus	11	8		1	1		21	1.71
21. I'm not sure of the course requirements for my career path	11	6	1			2	20	1.90
16. I will feel uneasy about approaching academic staff for help	7	9	3		1		20	1.95
8. Sitting in a large lecture room full of other students I have never met before will unnerve me	9	5	5		2		21	2.10
2. I don't know what to expect at university	3	13	2	3			21	2.24
13. I'll feel uncomfortable participating in tutorials and workshops	5	10	3	1	2		21	2.29
4. I'm unsure of the academic challenges that I'll face once I start university	1	9	7	4			21	2.67
19. I don't enjoy working in a study group	2	8	3	3	2	2	21	2.90
20. I don't think I will feel comfortable to join a club, society or organised group	3	7	3	4	2	2	21	3.05
15. I won't feel comfortable posting my work online for everyone to see	2	3	7	2	4	32	21	3.57

Areas of Interest Emerging from the University Readiness Survey

In analysing the information in Table 7, a number of themes were recurrent and emerged as being important. Students considered that they understood the physical and online university environment extremely well. They indicated that they knew what to do in tutorials and lectures and felt comfortable participating in both. They also reported that they were able to direct their own learning and understood what it meant to be an independent learner. Students indicated that they were comfortable in seeking help from academic staff and knew what type of academic challenges they would be likely to face.

Students were not as certain about interactions with other students. They indicated that they were slightly worried about introducing themselves to other students, making friends, joining a club or society, working in a group and posting their work online for others to see. This is a concern as this aspect of university life is paramount to students' development and ultimately, success at university (Krafona 2014) and furthermore, assists students during the transition period. This result is also very surprising as students who enrol in this particular school do so in Year 11, usually not knowing anyone, and so are encouraged to socialise and connect with other new students in a very short time.

Further concerns reflected in the table were two other aspects of transition, time management and change of program options, where students indicated they were not comfortable. Students did not always feel confident that they would be able to manage their time, even though they indicated that they were aware that the need for a study/work/life balance was necessary and, furthermore, there was a mixed response when students were asked if they would know how to explore other university degree options if they needed to modify their choice of program.

Overall Readiness for University

In response to the first open-ended question, 'How ready do you think you are to attend University?', the majority of students (n=18) replied in a positive way, indicating that they felt 'very ready' or 'generally ready' for university. Six students described feeling more ready than their peers at other schools when comparing themselves with those who did not attend the school. For example, one student wrote, '*Quite ready, and much more ready than most of my peers who have attended traditional schools'*. Another student wrote, '*I think I am more prepared than other students coming from a traditional school background purely based on the structure of [this] environment*' and *'without [this school] I would literally not know how uni works. Now everything is much less daunting and more exciting*'.

The second open-ended question elicited responses about what was needed for successful transition. Most students listed a number of key characteristics that staff had also listed as being important such as being an independent learner and a good time manager and communicator. One student responded in the following way when asked what was needed for successful transition: 'Self-directed learner, manage time, seek assistance when required and plan ahead'. Another student considered that 'self-determination, willingness to study and work with others and on one's own' were needed for successful transition. Interestingly, no one referred to the characteristics of resilience or dealing with change in the face of difficulties, even though staff at the school had put a lot of effort into this area to provide opportunities for students to acquire these skills.

Overall, the current student responses confirmed the evidence collected in the staff interviews on the ways in which the school prepared students for transition into university. The majority of students indicated that they understood both the physical and online environment that they were about to enter and what would be expected of them once they did. All students indicated that they knew the differences between a lecture and a tutorial but were uncertain of the types of challenges that they might face. Only a few indicated that they would feel comfortable interacting with others, both socially and academically. In general students perceived they had been prepared well for university study and were confident in their knowledge of what to expect. Students also indicated that they were aware that the school had provided them with opportunities to acquire skills which they would otherwise not have had at a different school and understood these skills would assist them in their transition to university study.

In summary, three quarters (76%) of the students confirmed that they very definitely or very probably felt confident about starting university and were quite certain that they knew what to expect upon arriving at university. Less however, were confident about what academic challenges they would face and how to go about changing courses if they required this and even fewer felt comfortable with posting work online for others to read or joining a club or society.

In this section students' perceptions of how well they felt they were prepared for university were examined and analysed. Students perceived that certain skills and attributes would be necessary for a more successful university transition based on their experiences at the school and felt that, in general, they had acquired these skills. The next section follows on from this and addresses the fourth sub-question by analysing the accounts of recently-graduated students from the school, who at the time, were experiencing the transition period as university commencers.

4. What are the transition experiences of past students of the school commencing university?

All the recently-graduated students of the school were emailed and invited to participate in this phase of the study which would involve a short questionnaire and interview. Five students responded to the email and agreed to take part in this phase. During the interview process, students were asked to reflect on how they felt their transition was progressing as they responded openly to semi-structured questions. Students recalled and described their initial emotions and spoke honestly about their experiences on arrival and as they encountered a variety of situations as part of their transition. After all students were interviewed responses to the questionnaire and interview questions were examined and analysed. Similar experiences were grouped into six themes and explored in more detail in the following section.

Recurrent themes identified from the analysis of their responses were as follows:

- Independence
- Self-directed Environment
- Help-seeking
- Engagement
- Prior Experiences
- Resilience

Independence

When Fannie spoke about her transition from school to university she acknowledged that it had not been completely seamless and expressed a certain kind of freedom in having to figure things out for herself. She implied that she was ready for the independence required at university and was willing to keep learning as she went:

> *The transition was not so clean that you don't really notice it, but yeah, learning how to do things like scheduling, like getting around your timetable, doing all of that - finding out how to do that yourself with your friends and everything, that's kind of liberating because of not having someone to hold your hand, getting that timetable going for you.* (Fannie)

While some students may have found this situation uncomfortable, having attended the school where students were encouraged to take control of their learning, Fannie was able to embrace this independence, gain new skills and furthermore, found it liberating. As a result of Sheryl's experiences at the school, she felt that she had gained important independent social skills which assisted her during her transition period. She explained that by moving schools part

way through her secondary education she had had to step out of her comfort zone to make a new start. She reported that this experience helped her with the transition into university:

> *I think it is a big thing [making new friends] because at [the school] at the beginning we all had to just talk to someone, you had to put yourself out there and just like say, hi, this is my name, whereas I know a lot of people from mainly private, like elite private schools, have said, 'Why isn't anyone talking to me?' and I said, 'Because have you introduced yourself, have you said 'Hi, my name is ... I'm studying this, what are you up to?' whereas at [the school] you had to do that because nobody knew each other, you just had to*. (Sheryl)

Stella referred to the way she viewed the independent skills of other students in comparison to her own. For example, she spoke about her cousin who completed Year 12 at a different school to her. Stella reported comfortably working independently towards the end of Year 12 and as a result, feeling comfortable as a First Year university student. In the extract below she noted the discomfort her cousin had felt in having to work independently for the first time:

> *I have a cousin the same age as me, she was at [another school] and by the end of Year 12, I was not getting drafts, I was doing my own thing, but she would still get full drafts, everything would be drafted. I mean it was obviously good for her at the time [laughs], but now that we're at uni, I'm very comfortable drafting my own work, and I know what to look for and that, whereas it really perplexes her as to why [tutors] don't draft [laughs].* (Stella)

Sheryl saw herself as being in a different position to other students. She indicated that she felt comfortable with being in control of her own work and with the level of support available at university but perceived others did not feel the same way. She implied that other students were not as confident as she was in their studies and were looking for higher levels of support which included one-on-one meetings or drafting written assessment pieces:

> *I think the support offered to you is different to what people want, but what I think a lot of people are used to are teachers doing full drafts, and they're like, nobody is drafting my work, and it's like, yeah, academic honesty, integrity! I think [students] from a lot of those elite private schools are struggling with that because they're often used to having that safety net of the teacher reading it, saying, no, you need to change it, but here [at university] it's up to you to decide whether you want to present it like this or not.* (Sheryl)

Being familiar with the environment and knowing what to expect provided graduate school students with more independence and more options in terms of how they would operate at

university. Students had a certain amount of independence and confidence to function easily within the system by already knowing what was expected of them and effective strategies to balance and manage their time and workloads. Stella reported feeling very comfortable in her new environment and when asked about how she felt about her transition she responded positively using words such as 'easy' and metaphorically likened the transition to 'moving in'. The use of these words implied that she was at ease and 'at home' in her new environment and did not need to spend time or energy on making sense of what was expected of her at university:

> *It was easy to move in and I managed to be working more [in paid employment] and still studying, so I think [the school] gave me that, like because I feel so comfortable going to uni and it's not such a big deal. It doesn't really feel like such a big deal to me, like it's quite similar to [the school] so I feel more comfortable to, you know, pick up more hours at work and like do volunteering. So for me I can fit in more because I'm used to the environment.* (Stella)

All participants understood the meaning and importance of being independent. James reported finding the first year quite difficult but showed signs of persistence and recognised that to improve, engagement was key. He also recognised that independence is paramount in this type of environment as it is up to the individual to be motivated and want to succeed:

> *It's a lot tougher than Year 12 and Year 11, you have to be more involved and if you don't want to do it, there's no point being here.* (James)

All five students understood the importance and necessity of being independent. Participants perceived others to be lacking independence which boosted their confidence as they felt they were at an advantage in comparison to others they knew. Students understood the challenges associated with starting university and recognised that concepts at university were at an advanced level but knew that they needed to take responsibility for their own learning to remain successful in their studies.

Self-Directed Environment

When speaking with Sheryl, it was interesting to see how the school's 'hand-off' approach had an effect on Sherly, as the importance of being self-reliant and pro-active regarding materials and attendance for effective learning was almost second nature to her:

> *[The school] forced you to be organised and get your stuff together, you know, your school is not going to provide you with all your books on your first day, like go and get them, try and get prepared, know the names of them, sort of thing, like, so yeah,*

I learnt that, and then I did that at uni. I was pretty proactive in getting my textbooks, I got them before uni started. I was trying to find out what my textbooks were before they were released because I'm organised. And then with classes, well I mean at [the school] we learnt it was important to go to your classes, like if you didn't go, you didn't benefit, that was just simple. (Sheryl)

When discussing the importance of attendance at lectures and tutorials, Sheryl also noticed the differences between her study habits and her friends'. She revealed the attitude of many her friends when it came to lectures as follows:

Everyone is like, oh yep, I'll watch it online, yep, watch it online, and they don't! It happens to everybody I know, like they say, 'Watch it online, and they never do'. (Sheryl)

Rennie's attitude was similar to Sheryl's. They both understood the importance of being a self-directed learner and the necessity of attending all lectures and tutorials:

I'll get to every single lecture, that's one of my goals. (Rennie)

On lecture attendance, Fannie also showed signs of being a self-directed and independent learner and understood the importance of attending lectures and tutorials which had been instilled in her while at the school:

If you don't go to the lectures, don't go to the tutes, don't do any work, you're not going to get called up and not going to get called up, it's just going to be you fail or pass. [The school] prepared me for that, you know, they want you to do better, they show you this is how you do better. (Fannie)

Experiences of self-directed learning were also reflected in Stella's comments. She reflected on the benefits of her experiences as a self-directed learner at [the school], where she had had to learn how to be disciplined and in control of her study commitments:

Because I had such long days, like I had a lot of 8.00am-5.00pm days and I was told so much by teachers, use your time at school, don't get distracted and I just got everything done then. When I was at home that was home, I was doing what I wanted, but when I was at school I was studying. It took me a while to get that routine but, yeah, I did kind of get into it. (Stella)

James also spoke about the importance of being a disciplined learner, particularly as higher order subject knowledge and theories were required. James was able to recognise that, for him, certain concepts were more complex at the university level which meant that he needed to put more time in to make sure he understood the foundations of what he was studying:

> *It's a lot more directed towards yourself, you have to put a lot more effort in. I feel like I'm taking a lot longer to learn things.* (James)

Operating in a self-directed environment requires students to understand and determine exactly what is required of them. Sheryl reported that she was aware of what was required of her to be successful in this type of environment and went one step further in acknowledging that each individual is responsible for their own success. She expressed her relief that she had developed good motivation and self-directed learning skills prior to commencing university:

> *It's up to you if you do the readings, it's up to you, if you speak in a tutorial, it's up to you to come to lectures, take notes, even like revising as well, and like retaining all the information you learn, that's up to you. I'm very thankful for [the school] making it self-directed, because I had to learn how to be self-motivated all through Year 11 and 12, so by the time I got here I was like, oh well, I know I have to be self-motivated and I've had practice at it.* (Sheryl)

Help-Seeking

Students who took part in this phase of the study, reported feeling comfortable in getting help when and from where they needed to. James reported enthusiastically about being able to access support at the university. He knew where to access this support, its benefits and the consequences of not getting help:

> *Getting help, it's pretty right over here, because we have like the Maths Learning Centre, we have a little other Maths room, we have actually a Computer Science Help kind of thing, where other students in third and fourth year help out, yeah I use the facilities because otherwise [laughs] there's stuff that you just can't get your head around.* (James)

Fannie also reported feeling confident and comfortable in tapping into number of resources and collaborating with others when she was in need of help, especially with friends and classmates:

> *Yeah, my friend is at uni and she helps me through a lot. I'm pretty good [at asking for help] – tutors, classes, yeah, ask my friends. I know a lot of people who are doing*

Commerce with me. I study with people that do the same course and we say, I need help with this or that and they've got a few thoughts. (Fannie)

All five students were comfortable and confident in knowing how and where to access help at university. Sheryl was able to list a variety of academic support services relevant to her discipline and was comfortable seeking support as she needed:

I'm pretty settled in understanding like where to go and ask for help. I think the uni has a lot of systems for seeking help, like they have the Learning Hub and then they have like support staff, and Ask [the university], and I mean like so many online forums it's like, it's so much in your face that you're like, alright! (Sheryl)

Upon further speaking with Sheryl, she expanded on this topic in relation to the Law Library. She reported that when seeking help from the Law Library, her requests for assistance were not received as an imposition in any way and were in fact a source of 'joy' for support staff. The perception that Sheryl held in relation to the way support staff reacted so positively to her requests indicated that she was at ease with asking for and receiving help:

The Law Library have this like function where you can request an item and they like bring it to you and explain it, so we had like a Law Library session, that's awesome, now I know where to use it. So I've gone to Library Help a couple of times and just asked them like, 'Can you help me find this book?' And they're really approachable, they're like, 'What can I help you with?' and they get excited when someone comes and talks to them! (Sheryl)

The point that Sheryl, not only, regularly accessed help but found her experiences to be 'awesome', sets her apart from other students who are reluctant to ask for help and so refrain from this support as they misconceive that staff may perceive them in a negative light. Both Sheryl and James had developed an understanding that help-seeking was a behaviour expected, encouraged and a necessary part of study programs as a result of their experiences in the school. Locating student work areas adjacent to staff areas in the school was an effective strategy which encouraged students to approach staff for help and provided opportunities for collaborative behaviours to be modelled and developed.

Engagement

All participants spoke, at some point, about the importance of engagement with their course and their teachers. Lecture and tutorial attendance and contributions in class were discussed as being necessary for student understanding, asking staff for help was seen as crucial for student learning while collaborating with others was another way to gain knowledge and understanding. For example Fannie, saw the importance of campus engagement and was keen

to join in with others who shared her interests:

> *I joined the drama club and now I've made friends from that club.* (Fannie)

Sheryl understood the importance of engagement at university. She spoke about the extent to which she became involved at her previous school and the benefits of engagement as a result. When asked about her involvement within the university, she spoke at length about the benefits of being involved in the teaching and learning environment and in regard to clubs and societies:

> *I've always talked to my teachers, talked to the counsellor, talked to everybody, I'm always talking to people and getting the most out of it and it pays off so much, like you're ahead of everyone else because you know what's required of you, and then you know where to find the things and then you also like know how to achieve. I think like the clubs are pretty cool too, like my friend is in one and they meet all the time, they have fundraisers, and she loves it, and she's made good friends. I've now joined the Theatre Guild!* (Sheryl)

Prior Experiences

The transition from school to university for these students was relatively smooth. They understood the environment in which they were entering and were prepared for the changes that they would encounter. One noticeable change for students was the characteristics and pedagogies of the teaching staff. Students often referred to teaching staff at the school as being more caring and professional while staff at university were seen as more distant:

> *I think [university staff] are a bit different. I don't think I like them as much, I think I preferred them at [the school]. I think the teachers were much more available, not just in like physical time, but in times of like understanding what they meant, and almost projecting like an image of caring, like here they stand there and they deliver content, but they're not very personal ... they'll teach and then walk away and you'll never speak to them.* (Sheryl)

While students reported a noticeable difference between the school and the university, students were not negative about the change and in most cases the change was often embraced. Students seemed to enjoy the challenges of the new environment and were comfortable putting in more effort where and when it was needed:

> *It's challenging but they [university teaching staff] are a bit different from [school] but still good. The workload? It's a lot higher. I was surprised at that, yeah, but it's stuff I enjoy so it's good. Like our group project, we worked well the first time we were set*

into groups – very satisfied with how I'm doing at the moment. (James)

All students made comparisons between their prior and current experiences, especially in regard to teaching staff and group work. Having reflected on the differences, students showed a certain level of resilience towards the situation. James spoke at length about his perceptions of university lecturers and also his expectations of what he thought university would be like. Even though James experienced certain challenges, he acknowledged the situation and decided to work with it rather than against it largely because of his enjoyment of the discipline:

> *The teaching, it's less personal, a lot less personal, but that's one thing I enjoyed about [school], was how friendly the teachers were. The university has a long way to go with its lecturers in the courses that I'm doing, like most of the lecturers aren't very experienced, and they're very hard to understand. All the teachers at [school] just knew how to talk to students, and teach, but the university lecturers don't really know how to communicate best. And honestly, I thought university would be a little bit easier, I thought there'd be less work, all the terminology changed and I had no idea what was going on. It's completely different, just everything changes but you know what? It's OK, because I'm actually doing what I enjoy.* (James)

Stella was also comfortable with adapting to the university environment. Even though her experiences with her prior education did not always match those of her current situation, she reflected on the differences and made the most of her personal characteristics in dealing with her new situation:

> *I think at [the school] there's still the level of interaction, like you can kind of be like, what's that mean? Right, and although at uni they ask you like, do you have any questions? - It's more the accepted norm [laughs] not to ask questions, like they'll refer you to the topic guide or like they'll ask you, have you read the textbook? Whereas at [school] they were very like, oh yeah, come to my office and see me, and that, whereas at uni, I feel it's definitely more like, you sort that out, but that's ok. I mean, my kind of personality, that's how I operate best anyway, doing my own thing.* (Stella)

Prior experiences at the school had helped Fannie and Rennie with what they had to encounter at university. In the extracts below Fannie explained how the use of an online learning system at her previous school had helped her at uni while Rennie referred more broadly to the experiences at his previous school and how he benefitted and learnt from these experiences to the point of feeling confident about his current work ethic:

> *I have online sessions for one of my classes and a weekly assignment, and that's it,*

everything is online, your lectures, so you just get everything, everything from MyUni, and knowing how to work with MyUni has helped. (Fannie)

Both students reflected on their prior experiences when coming to terms with their new learning environment and on the confidence they had gained by their experiences at the school:

At [school] you were by yourself too but this is another level of it. I'm not really sure how I'm doing at the moment but in my experience, if I keep working hard, I'll know what to do. (Rennie)

On reflection, Stella too expressed reassurance about her prior educational experiences. She reported on her perceptions of the ways in which other students were coping with academic expectations and conventions and took comfort in feeling secure in the knowledge gained at her previous school:

At orientation, they had heaps of like 50-minute lectures on academic writing, referencing, and stuff like that, so I went to a few of them and then when I was there I was like, oh yeah, I know all this, whereas everyone around me was kind of like, oh, I don't know what this is, but I was like, yeah, I've got my head around this, I know this. I'd been at [the college] and so it wasn't anything new. Like I think [the school] really hammers in your referencing, so like it makes sense to me how to reference, whereas everyone else was really struggling. Yeah, like they also did one on critical thinking, and when they were going through that everyone else in the room was asking questions, and I was like, isn't that kind of ...? For me it was just like common sense. (Stella)

Even when students were progressing well in the transition period, prior experiences were still reflected on. Some experiences were looked back on with gratitude while others were used for comparisons. The only prior experiences that did not match students' current experiences were in relation to the interactions with teaching staff. Students perceived teaching staff at university to be less personal that teaching staff at the college. However, the students in this study did not dwell on their observations once made, instead they acknowledged and accepted the situation and adapted to the change.

Resilience

Resilience was a key characteristic that staff perceived students needed to be successful at university. All five interviewed students portrayed this attribute in many ways. This was

particularly seen in the previous theme in the way students dealt with prior experiences differing from current experiences.

Fannie reported on her current experiences in working in a group. She understood the nature of group work and was a little uncomfortable with the way her group was progressing. She acknowledged how she was feeling but moved forward by focusing on the positive aspects of learning new things rather than on the negativity of how the group was functioning:

> *Got put in a group, and it's a bit random, and there are a few people that don't do work and there are people that do and that's the luck of the draw. It does get a bit hard to grasp everything, but it's interesting having new things to do and learning new things.* (Fannie)

Sheryl expressed very similar sentiments to Fannie. She referred positively to the dynamics of her Politics group. She spoke enthusiastically about wanting to work with her group and then showed a pro-active approach when faced with challenge:

> *With my Law group it's really good, like we've done a couple of assignments together and that worked really well, and then for my Politics group, we'd caught up a couple of times, but then last night we were like, alright, we'll come in for dinner, we'll grab some food together, we'll sit down and nut this thing out, and that was really cool last night, like we had fun and we got our head around the thing and we made a plan. One of the girls is like, 'Oh, I'm a C grade, can't do any work, I can't come to the meeting', and a few people were frustrated but I was like, oh well, I'll just move past it, let's move on, there's nothing you can do about it [laughs].* (Sheryl)

The students in this study did not panic when faced with challenges. They remained calm and level-headed in situations and stayed positive in working towards initial goals and solutions. This theme was found to overlap with the previous theme where James spoke about the changes that he had experienced at university in comparison to school but immediately realised that changes were insignificant as he was actually doing what he enjoyed. Similarly, in the previous theme, when Rennie expressed some concern in regard to his progress, he immediately reflected on his success at the school and reassured himself that if he worked hard he would know what to do. The positive attitudes of these students reflected resilience and an adaptability to work with situations that were not always ideal or straight forward.

Although the number of students interviewed was small, their data provided rich information in

regard to their transition experiences as a result of attending the school. This study was designed to examine the practices and structures at a senior secondary university pathway school and to explore how students may have benefited from them. After speaking with the five students and upon analysing their data, the impact of the practices and structures at the school was clearly evident on all students. In all aspects of the transition process, students referred repeatedly to the school in regard to helping them with their understandings and foundation knowledge of the university system and the teaching and learning environment.

Students were very comfortable with the physical environment of the university; they knew how to locate their classes, what was required in lectures and tutorials, and from where they could access help. They were also aware of the need and the ways to self-manage and direct their own learning and materials. Furthermore, students were familiar with academic conventions such as referencing and writing modes and with the need to establish a deep approach to their learning rather than relying on surface learning or memorising.

All these interviewed students exhibited a certain amount of confidence. Even though students were challenged by the content of their courses, they knew what they needed to do in order to increase their understanding and knowledge such as seeking help through support services or simply asking library staff for assistance. There was no evidence to suggest that students were overwhelmed with their experiences or disorientated as a result of university not being what they had expected, as had been the case in Study Two. Furthermore, a few of the students were reassured in relation to the observation of other students in the initial transition period. These students felt advantaged as they were already familiar and comfortable with using a number of academic conventions which were introduced to them while they were at the school. This 'head start' gave them confidence and a reassurance that they were on the right path.

Only two students mentioned family background in regard to their transition experiences. Both Sheryl and Stella reported that their parents had attended university but stressed that this had happened a long time ago. Both students were somewhat dismissive of their parents' university experiences as, to them, they seemed irrelevant. The students were concerned with the length of time that had passed since their parents had attended university and implied that, as a result, there would be little benefit in drawing on their parents' experiences. Students had made an assumption that their parents' experiences were too far removed from their own situations to be viewed as helpful for their courses. Sheryl expressed this clearly when she explained, '*My dad went to uni, but like that was a long, long time ago*' (Sheryl) while Stella implied that her parents' experiences were too different to be beneficial to her:

My mum had been to uni, but she hadn't finished her degree, but she had done

that when she had all of us as kids, but dad did a trade at school, and then later he went to uni, so even he had a different experience of uni obviously [laughs]. (Stella)

No evidence was found to conclude that family background was a major influence on these students' university transition, however there was strong evidence to suggest that prior experiences had the greatest effect on their transitions. Students spoke often about their prior experiences and the ways in which they perceived they were advantaged by their attendance at the school. It was clear that students had been effectively prepared for university transition by the school in that their expectations upon commencing university were realistic, they understood what was required of them, knew how to achieve success and were comfortable in their surroundings and their knowledge. Each student, despite content challenges and levels of difficulties, was determined to continue on and embrace their situation. These students exhibited traits of resilience and were motivated to make the most out of the challenges that they faced. Students in this phase of the study understood the demands of academic applications and important strategies for successful learning, such as attending lectures, taking notes, participation, help-seeking and consolidating material.

Discussion of Findings

Study Three was developed to address the following research question:

What perceptions of university preparedness do staff and students at a senior secondary pathway school hold and how are students prepared for university transition?

In answering the main research question, the discussion begins with the last supporting question (question 4), traversing back through the other questions. This sequence was decided upon as the overarching response from the students to the main question was that the school had *indeed* prepared them well for the transition to university which was useful to establish early.

4. What are the transition experiences of past students of the school commencing university?

Five recently-graduated students of the school, who were enrolled at university at the time, were interviewed in relation to their transition experiences. All students reported a relatively smooth transition with few initial challenges. None reported experiencing surprise or disorientation as a result of unrealistic expectations and instead reported experiencing the university environment as they thought they would. Of the five students interviewed, four were non-first generation while one was the first in his family to attend university. In this phase of the study, these distinctions had no effect on university expectations or preparation. James, a

first generation student, had formed realistic expectations about the university environment, as did the other four. All students felt confident and comfortable in their transition to university, often measuring their confidence against other students who were new to adult learning environments and were taking some time to come to terms with their perceptions and misunderstandings. School graduates in this study often made references to their prior experiences in appreciation of aspects of their transition that they knew would have been difficult without assistance. For example, they were often grateful for the time management and independent study skills that they gained at the school. Overall, participants felt that their experiences at the school had prepared them well for university study and were satisfied with their progress during the transition period.

3. To what extent do current students feel prepared for university study?

Year 12 surveyed students felt that the school had prepared them well for university study even before they had arrived at university, with responses of final Year 12 students proving to be indicative of the experiences reported by past students during their university transition period. These students considered that they were prepared for university study in a number of ways. The majority of students were confident that they knew what to expect, would be able to direct their own learning, manage their time and negotiate their way around the university environment. They had experienced a different way of learning to what they had been used to and recognised that they had taken their learning to another level and understood the benefits this would bring as they felt they had acquired new ways of learning which would be needed at university. In the open response section, students elaborated further by expressing how they felt they were advantaged from their experiences at the school, particularly in comparison with other students from traditional school environments. Students understood the conventions of academic writing, how to manage time, and the importance of learning independently. In sum therefore, students felt confident that they were well prepared for the demands of university study.

2. What are staff's perceptions of the skills necessary for successful university transition and in what ways are opportunities provided to students to acquire these skills?

As a result of the interviews in this phase of the study, it was evident that staff at the school were well informed in regard to the skills and knowledge necessary to assist students in the transition to university study. Staff reported gaining valuable knowledge from various sources which included themselves as current students and researchers, colleague connections through partnering universities, and industry contacts which provided a basis for determining the types of attributes that would assist students with university transition. Student attributes nominated for successful transition by school staff included being an independent learner, able to manage time, organisation, resilient and able to work collaboratively. Staff endeavoured to provide

opportunities for students to acquire these skills as part of their subjects and extracurricular activities and also in the way they interacted with them as co-learners.

Some opportunities were built into the school academic guidelines such as the 'one draft' policy, which provided students with one opportunity to receive feedback in regard to their work. Other opportunities rested with the teachers themselves, such as restricting the amount of prompting and reminding close to assignment due dates, a 'hands off' approach which involved holding an expectation that students will come to class with the correct equipment and materials and exposing students to journal articles and research papers. They wanted students to learn that, once at university, they would be responsible for their own learning and what this would look like.

1. What strategies are in place at the school to assist students with transition to university?

Opportunities were also considered when planning the physical environment of the school. Structures and processes, which mirrored the university environment, were incorporated into the design. For example, founding members of the school understood the importance of independent study and so designed an environment where students, with guidance from staff, would need to be self-disciplined and reliant upon themselves. As a result, the school was not established, as most traditional schools tend to be, with traditional classroom buildings in a restricted area, instead, the school utilised various city buildings in close proximity to the partnering university. There were no school grounds as such, and it was up to students to attend classes when and where they were scheduled. Classes adopted adult education hours from 8am to 5pm, with no bells to remind students to go to class. Students were unsupervised outside of classes and were free to spend their time as they thought fit. Students were mentored and counselled in this environment to help them make productive choices and the adjustment between the structure of their old system of schooling and their new environment.

Relationships between staff and students were also rather non-traditional. Students referred to staff by their first names and studied in the same areas where staff were located to encourage student/staff interactions for support and for staff to model appropriate behaviours. Staff were also required to nominate subject consulting times to encourage students to plan their days in regard to how and when they would complete tasks and to develop help-seeking behaviours along with responsible learning habits. Staff also participated in the mentor program and extra-curricular activities designed to support and guide students on how to become self-sufficient and resilient when expectations were not being met.

Lastly, pedagogy was also considered in establishing the school. In the final level of schooling,

classes were offered as lectures and tutorials. Students were guided and supported in adapting to this type of system and encouraged to independently study the lecture material before participating in tutorial activities and discussions. This system also included the use of the school's Learning Management System.

These four questions collectively contributed to the addressing of the main research question developed for Study 3, namely, In which ways and to what extent do staff and structures at an Adelaide senior secondary university pathway school prepare students for the transition to university? It can be concluded here that students felt they were very well prepared for university before they arrived and confirmed this, upon arrival. Staff were aware of the skills that students would need for a smooth transition and were providing students with a number of opportunities to learn and practise these skills. While some skills were in relation to academic conventions, for example skills such as note-taking or referencing, key skills centred on awareness and responsibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this Study was developed in response to the literature and Study Two. The literature revealed much information pertaining to the challenges students face in the transition to university, particularly students who are unprepared. The information collected and analysed from Study Two confirmed these challenges for students who were unprepared. As many of the students in Study Two who were unprepared were school-leavers, school to university preparation is brought into focus and questioned in regard to best practice. Study Three therefore located a school with a focus on university preparation and explored the school's methods of endeavouring to prepare their students for further study at university.

The structures and practices at the school were effective in providing opportunities for students to understand the university environment before arriving at university and assisted students' understandings of what to expect at university and what would be expected of them. This was achieved by providing an environment which mirrored the university environment including similar timetabling and scheduling, lecture and tutorial classrooms dispersed across multiple sites, freedom for students to manage their own time, tutor consultation times, pedagogies and tasks which promoted independent learning, blended learning environments and group work and collaboration. As students of the school, they were made aware of the importance of being prepared for university study which was indicated in the final year survey results. The results also indicated that students had a good understanding of the university environment and what would be expected of them once they arrived.

All five of the recently-graduated students of the school, who were interviewed as university commencers, reported that the school had prepared them well for the transition. It would

seem therefore that preparation for university is a key factor, as in this study it has been shown to have an effect on students' wellbeing and performance upon commencement . These students were comfortable transitioning to university study and confident in their ability to succeed at university as they had a good understanding of how to achieve this, particularly when compared with other students, such as the majority of those in Study Two, who were unprepared and disorientated as a result.

The skills and understandings that had been in evidence of these students were not present in the majority of students in Study Two. For example, all students in Study Three understood the nature of self-directed learning and how to apply themselves to course material and tasks immediately upon entry to university. In comparison, the majority of students in Study Two were still grappling with the notion independent learning in a self-disciplined environment well into the transition period. This had an effect on both groups in the following way; the students from Study Three gained confidence in their ability to transition smoothly into the environment when they compared themselves to others having difficulties, as it re-enforced that they were correct in their approach and safe in their knowledge. Students from Study Two, bar two, *lost* confidence in themselves and their abilities as they realised they lacked understanding and knowledge of their new learning environment and as a result, became disorientated and disgruntled with their situations. The two students who were exceptions in Study Two, were familiar with post-secondary education environments and as a result did not report the same experiences as the others. Their experiences were similar to those of the students in Study Three.

It is clear therefore that preparation for university is key as it has been shown to have an effect on students' wellbeing and performance upon commencement. One way to assist students with preparation is through the school system. As the majority of students still enter from the school environment, preparation in this context is most beneficial and would reach a large proportion of university commencers. The structures and processes at the school featured in this case study were shown to be effective and beneficial for students as they made their way to university and, therefore, must be considered by others who are serious about preparing their students for university study.

The Meta Analysis:

An Overview and Analysis of the Program of Research

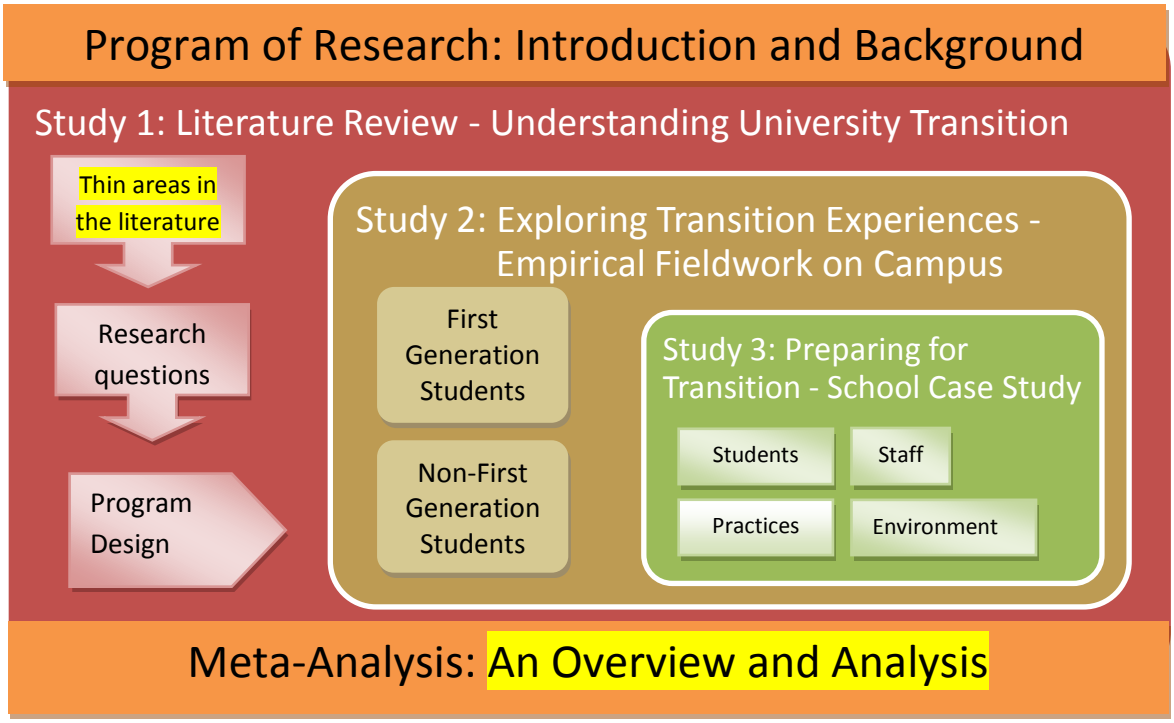
Introduction

This program of research was a reflective, practitioner-oriented mode of research, developed within an Australian context (Skamp 2009) with a focus on transition pedagogies and professional practices (Eckerman 2001). This Meta Analysis section is a requirement of the Professional Doctorate in Education at the University of South Australia and incorporates an overview and analysis of the three studies completed as part of the program of research. Zubizaretta (2009) suggests that it is important to take an overview or 'meta-analysis' of the program of research by reflecting on not only the findings but also the process of program compilation. In addressing this point, the Meta Analysis is divided into five sections, namely: Connections between the Components of the Studies, Reflections on the Program of Research, Using Personal and Professional Insights to provide a Holistic Overview of the Program of Research and Analysis of the Findings, Implications for Professional Practice, and Directions for Future Research and Conclusion. Each section contributes to the understanding of the whole program, initially by considering the compilation of all its parts and then by taking a *meta* view (Fulton et al. 2009) within context where the entirety of the research is examined in regard to individual practice, the profession as a whole and the wider community.

Connections between the Components of the Program of Research

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the way in which each study is 'layered' and connected, combining to form a program of research.

Figure 1: How the Various Components in this Program of Research are Connected



Connection of Components

Study One was the first study completed in the program of research. It provided a platform and background understanding for the two studies which subsequently followed. The study comprised a literature review examining university transition. It included an analysis of both qualitative and quantitative studies focusing on a variety of dimensions of university transition, identifying areas where the topic of university transition would benefit from further research.

The literature review provided a synthesis of findings from research in relation to the transition experiences of first generation students. A major theme from the literature examined university continuation and degree completion. The literature suggests that first generation students are disadvantaged compared to non-first generation students and is currently dominated by studies on first generation students. As indicated in the figure, Study One provided a backdrop for the remaining two studies and the meta analysis. These remaining works addressed thin areas in the literature regarding university transition and preparation.

In addressing thin areas in the literature, the second study explored the transition experiences of *both* first and non-first generation students as studies including both groups for comparison purposes were found to be lacking in the literature. Study Two was designed in an attempt to address some of the assumptions often made in regard to first generation and non-first generation students. It was qualitative in nature involving a mixture of first and non-first generation students, school-leavers and mature-aged students and focused on learning experiences during the transition period over the course of the first semester.

This study found that prior experiences of students were reported to be the key factor affecting the way they transitioned into university, regardless of whether or not students were first or non-first generation students. Students with prior experiences similar to what was required at university were able to transition directly into the environment while students without similar prior experiences had difficulties during the transition period which affected their academic performance, confidence and self-esteem.

Upon finding that prior experiences similar to university study had the greatest positive impact on the transition process, Study Three was formed to explore this aspect further. Study Three focused on the theme of prior experiences and investigated the ways in which a senior secondary pathway school endeavoured to provide students with a learning and teaching environment which would be similar to what is experienced at university, designed to help them with the transition period once they arrived.

The results obtained in these three studies supported and complemented each other and provided an overarching portrayal of transition experiences and perceptions of first and non-first generation students, key outcomes in relation to prior experiences and directions for further investigation. In the following sections, each study is summarised and reflected upon and brought together by discussing key outcomes in relation to existing literature and theoretical constructs (Larkin et al. 2006, Smith 2004).

Reflections on the Program of Research

Study One examined current outcomes and findings relating to the transition of university students. The review began by incorporating a wide spectrum of experiences and situations from a variety of incoming students in regard to age, socio-economic status, pathways and background, which provided an overview of current issues and challenges in university transition from a variety of locations and countries such as, but not restricted to, Australia, United Kingdom, United States of America, Europe and China.

Quantitative studies were common and provided information on the characteristics and demographics for different types of transitioning university students, including first and non-first generation students, and affirmed that first generation students, on average, were 15% less likely than non-first generation students to complete a degree once started. Qualitative studies were also common, however, few studies were found which included both first and non-first generation students, making it difficult to find qualitative accounts which comparatively illuminated the differences between the two groups.

Part of the review was dedicated to the transition area of school-to-university. Given that school-leavers are still the largest group to enter university (Palmer et al. 2011), secondary schools have an opportunity to influence future outcomes for a large proportion of students (especially given the massification of higher education) by understanding the process and nature of university transition and developing ways to better prepare their students for university study well before they arrive.

Upon completion of the literature review, several questions were raised in relation to the characteristics and experiences of first and non-first generation students when transitioning into the university environment and whether or not they are still relevant in current university settings. The experiences of first generation students were often chosen to be the focus of studies as it was intuitive that this group may be disadvantaged in several ways. One of the disadvantages that this group was said to have was in relation to their socio-economic status. Most students from this group were depicted as being economically disadvantaged compared with non-first generation students. While this may have generally once been true, more recently with higher education widening participation agendas, this may no longer be the case; the diversity of students has increased from all sectors of the community and across all income levels, suggesting that a significant number of first generation students may now also come from medium to high income backgrounds (Office of Undergraduate Retention 2014, Southgate et al. 2014, Choy 2001). Another disadvantage that this group was found to have was in relation to university degree completion. Participation has proven to be a risk for many first generation students around the world (Marks 2007, Thomas and Quinn 2007, Choy 2001, De Graaf et al. 2000, Katsillis and Rubinson 1990) and regularly questioned in regard to why this group is more at risk than others.

A common theory used to explain the disadvantage of first generation students has been Bourdieu's Social Reproduction theory (1986) which determines that, when applied, cultural capital is passed down through family generations of university participants, enabling and ensuring recipients the same success as the generation before. Many use this theory in conjunction with a prima facie approach (Jaeger 2010, Lareau & Weininger 2003) in suggesting that non-first generation students have the 'right' cultural capital to succeed in their studies

and that first generation students lack this cultural capital as their parents do not have access to it and, hence, are not able to succeed in the same way as non-first generation students. Other theories used to explain the disadvantage of first generation students branch out from the cultural capital theory into areas of 'entitlement', (Wells 2008b, Longden 2004, Berger 2000) where students who experience greater levels of entitlement are more likely to succeed, and into 'working class ideals' (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2007) which suggest that first generation students are likely to have experiences of sharing and working together rather than independently in a self-regulated environment.

Although widely accepted, the dominant theory of cultural capital is problematic when placed in the context of current university environments, diversification and new technologies for three reasons. Firstly, significant changes to universities over the past two decades have limited the amount of 'useful' information or up-to-date cultural capital that parents are able to pass on to their offspring. Secondly, as the nature of first generation students changes, classifying them as socio-economically disadvantaged or working class has become unrealistic. Thirdly, due to the limited number of studies on non-first generation students, it is difficult to make any statements about this group at all, especially statements in comparison with first generation students. The next section expands on this and other areas for further research.

While there is an abundance of research on first generation students, little exists on non-first generation students and, although it is assumed that first generation students lack the necessary cultural capital to succeed, there is also the corresponding assumption that non-first generation students *have* the necessary cultural capital to succeed. As there are very few non-first generation studies, it has become increasingly difficult to rely on the cultural capital theory as it has not been visited in recent times across either cohort. Universities have changed (Hornsby & Osman 2014, Longden 2002, Teichler 2001) in how they expect students to learn and in the types of capital now necessary for success. Previous forms of cultural capital may still facilitate success to some degree but it is unknown how much influence this has on current students. The same can also be said about other theories regarding the differences between first and non-first generation students. Without examining both cohorts together in current university climates, it is difficult to draw conclusions about why one group performs better than the other. Further research therefore is necessary to examine the transition experiences of all students, both first and non-first generation, through a lens not necessarily pertaining to Bourdieu, to bring other explanations to light regarding the disadvantage of first generation students in regard to degree completion.

The second study in this program of research was developed in response to the literature review and its outcomes, concentrated on the transition of students, in general, to university. This study set itself apart from other studies on university transition in a variety of ways. Firstly,

both types of students, first and non-first generation, were invited to participate in the study and interviewed. Secondly, while family income levels were recorded, participant selection in this study was not dependent upon this information and was inclusive of a range of socio-economic sectors of the community. This study was designed to include the experiences of all types of students, first and non-first generation students and not just low income first students or students with disadvantage which is often the norm in other studies.

In analysing the data of this study a number of themes emerged. It was found that the concept of *'disconfirmed expectations'* (Zeelenberg et al. 2000) formed a major part of these students' transition experiences. Most students arrived at university with a set of expectations, which in most cases were simplistic and unrealistic. Students, consequently overwhelmed with the reality of their situations, were not always able to articulate what they were expecting when they arrived at university; however, most were able to voice what they definitely were not expecting. As students discussed their transition experiences in more detail, it became evident that students felt the effects of disconfirmed expectations. Zeelenberg and colleagues (2000) describe the paradigm of disconfirmed expectations as outcomes which are unpredicted and, furthermore, worse than anticipated. The researchers posit that negative emotions and insecurities can result when outcomes turn out to be worse than expected. Furthermore, they suggest that in many cases, disconfirmed expectations are associated with the notion of disappointment, can lead to feelings of powerlessness, tendencies to withdraw and turn away from the situation, sensitivity to future disappointments and a preference for safer alternatives. Ten out of the twelve students in this study stated that they had experienced a range of emotions which were similar to what was reported in the Zeelenberg et al. study (2000). Most were surprised with what they had discovered at university and became disappointed with how it made them feel. For many, their experiences were worse than expected which, indeed, led to negative emotions and insecurities. Students then went through a process which left them feeling disorientated and frustrated, and in line with the students in Zeelenberg and colleagues' study, many felt powerless with tendencies to turn away from the situation.

In trying to come to terms with the reality of their situations, students often revisited prior experiences to find a connection between how they had viewed the learning environment and how they actually found it to be. In other words, when students realised that university study was not what they believed it would be, they went through a thought process which compared past experiences, which may have been used to form expectations, with what they had actually encountered. For most it was their secondary school classroom environment, while for others it was workplace training or marketing images of universities on which students based their expectations. Once students realised that they had misjudged the university environment, they felt disappointment and desperation, often expressing frustration and even resentment in their tones and nuances at having been misled in some way. The effects of misjudging what

university would be like were far reaching. Students became disorientated with who they were and what their role at university was, often attempting to find blame in others' actions but more often in themselves, and questioning whether or not they deserved to be at university at all.

In making sense of new learning environments, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) suggest that students' prior learning experiences are key. These researchers posit that if a student enters university with established ideas of learning, students will expect to be able to continue with this particular approach to their learning. So for example, if students enter university with a surface approach to learning, one that is simplistic and procedural and in which they have been successful in the past, students will be more likely to perceive the learning environment in the same way, thus creating potential conflict between how they perceive the learning environment to be and what it actually is like.

The opposite applies to other students who have had prior experiences which have been similar to the learning approach in their new environment. For example, these students continue to apply themselves using a deep approach to their learning and thus, transition more easily into the university study environment where this type of learning is encouraged and expected (Brady & Allingham 2007). Students in this study who did not have prior experiences similar to university study did not understand what was expected of them once they entered university. They became insecure in their environment and lost trust and confidence in themselves and their academic abilities. On the other hand, the two students who had prior experiences similar to university study, one first generation and one non-first generation student, both from low income backgrounds, knew what to expect and what was expected of them and gained, rather than lost, confidence during the transition period.

Non-first generation students did not stand out as largely being more prepared than first generation students, even though the participants in the non-first generation group were able to access parental and family advice regarding university study and the environment. This is consistent with findings in the Australian National Student Experience Survey review (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2017) which reported no differences in Quality of Educational Experience and Quality of Teaching between first and non-first generation students. Furthermore, non-first generation students in Study Two did not reveal a 'tacit' knowledge of how universities operate or a cultural capital which prepared them with what to expect. These attributes are often described in the literature as being key in setting non-first generation students apart from first generation students and yet, in this study, there was little evidence of students having these attributes during their transition phase. This is not surprising to Dumais and Ward as in 2010 these researchers reported a diminished effect of cultural capital as students moved into university study. The researchers found that more often

than not ability not cultural capital had the greatest impact on performance. This is interesting as there have been many studies in Australia which have confirmed the case for ability, above all else, having the greatest impact. Studies in Australia have determined that high ATARs, are positively associated with performance and achievement in later years (Kemp and Norton 2014, Edwards and Radloff 2013, Marks 2007).

Overall, participants in both groups experienced similar emotions and reactions to situations they encountered in the transition period but the extent and levels of these reactions varied according to the individual and did not depend on first or non-first generation status, rather they depended upon the individual. Some first generation students were extremely overwhelmed with their new learning environment but so too were some non-first generation students. Similarly there were students from each group who misjudged the environment and were surprised by certain aspects but were not as fazed by their discoveries as others were.

Another interesting theme that came out of this study was Technology, as it is relatively new to universities and it was informative to understand how students cope with this aspect of their transition. Without prior experiences of learning management systems, students had difficulties with its features. It is often assumed that students, particularly young students, are comfortable with using technology or exploring new digital capabilities in communication and media, yet most students in this study were hesitant in doing this as part of their university courses. They were skeptical of the benefits and felt intimidated or vulnerable to post responses or personal viewpoints.

As online learning systems and current learning technologies are relatively new to education, digital learning would not have been part of the experiences of most parents of first or non-first generation students. Parents of non-first generation students who attended university after completing high school would not have had an opportunity to understand and pass down information regarding this aspect of transition. Therefore, this brings into question again, the amount of tacit knowledge or cultural capital that non-first generation parents are able to pass onto their children. The use, therefore, of technology in students' programs added another level of difficulty to the transition period.

The difficulties, overall, for two students were enough to contemplate leaving university. The two students who were first generation students, indicated that they would not continue on with their enrolments. While this was something that other students on occasions thought about, particularly after a negative experience, they were eventually able to see the sense in continuing and did so. Those who were motivated to remain at university were encouraged by family members, friends or simply wanted success for themselves as they already understood the value of their education and the freedom and career options it could potentially bring.

Bohlmann (1996) explains differences in decision outcomes, in regards to a product or service, in terms of 'post-discussions' with other individuals who are highly satisfied with the same product or service. Bohlmann found that, during post-discussion processes regarding the experience of using a product or service, individuals in a group can change their satisfaction judgments based on the satisfaction of others who are highly satisfied with the same product. Individuals in the group will compare their experiences and encourage a change of mind by endorsing and sharing positive information about the product or service. In response to this feedback, individuals will revise their perceptions of a product or service based on knowledgeable information that emerges from the discussion process.

Bohlman's findings offer reasons for why some transitioning students, who had worked hard to secure a place at university, decide to leave while others make the firm decision to stay. The ten participants in this study who indicated that they would remain at university, despite the difficulties in their transition, perceived that their efforts were validated and worthwhile. These thoughts came from within their personal experiences, whether that was through discussions in the workplace or school environment, with parents or through observations in general. For example, students, who were still dependent upon parents, often spoke about family support and a need not to disappoint. These students understood that their parents were investing heavily in the belief that a university education was important and worthwhile.

Gofen (2009, p. 104) explains how parents of first generation students can help their sons and daughters 'break the cycle'. Parents in her study had strong beliefs about education, and even though they lacked higher education experience themselves, they provided a home environment geared towards supporting educational achievement. This resonates with similar findings in several other studies (King et al. 2015, Southgate et al. 2014, Martinez 1999, Pargetter et al. 1998) where it was found that successful students, those who persisted through the transition period even when expectations were unmet and difficulties arose, knew someone in their family or among close friends or even university staff who believed in the importance of education and their ability to succeed at university and encouraged them to continue. Siblings were another source of encouragement. Siblings also had an impact on their brother's or sister's satisfaction levels. Connor et al. (2001) found that young people without siblings with higher education experiences were less likely to be satisfied than those who had siblings with higher education to share information with (Heath et al. 2010) and provide support and encouragement. Along the same lines, Lee and colleagues (2004) posit that higher education endorsement is important for persistence and that university educated parents are generally more aware of the long-term benefits of acquiring a university degree and hence, regularly share this information with their children. Parents who have limited experience of higher education tend to have less direct knowledge of the economic and social benefits of a post-secondary education and may signal a preference, after school, for paid work over further

education, particularly if the child's income will ease rather than strain the family financially (Coleman 1988).

In conclusion, this study highlighted four major themes:

1. Prior experiences similar to university study greatly assisted students in the transition period.

2. Non-first generation students were little better prepared for university study than first generation students.

3. Students who perceived their time and effort at university were worthwhile, even when difficulties arose, had strong tendencies to continue.

4. First generation students had fewer 'post-discussion' opportunities to debrief with others who could encourage and validate their experiences.

While sample sizes in this study were small, these findings are important as they provide valuable contributions to understandings about student transition. First, prior experiences were reported to have had an important influence on transition experiences, regardless of whether or not students were first or non-first generation students. Students who arrived at university with similar prior experiences to those of university study were familiar with what to expect and were therefore more confident in themselves and their abilities. When students arrived at university unprepared by falsely basing their assumptions of what university would be like on images, workplace training or secondary school, they were surprised at what they found and consequently, became disorientated, disappointed and frustrated, which negatively impacted their attitude and performance.

It is often claimed, however, that non-first generation students, as a result of parental education, are more prepared for university study than first generation students, who do not have access to parent advice. While acknowledging the research involved only small numbers of participants, the evidence obtained from participants in Study Two did not support this claim. All students reported being unprepared to a certain degree, unless they had prior experiences similar to university study. Prior experiences, rather than parental advice, were the key to a more successful transition.

In challenging periods, students who were self-motivated or who were able to debrief or hold 'post-discussions' with family members or others who invested in and valued education and were able to be persuasive about the benefits of a university qualification, decided to continue their studies despite experiencing significant challenges and difficulties during their transition period. Those who were not able to be self-motivated or experience meaningful conversations

with others who understood the benefits of a university qualification gradually saw fewer reasons to continue their studies after experiencing difficulties and repeated set-backs. It is in this way that non-first generation students may be advantaged in regard to staying on and completing their studies, as they may have more opportunity to interact with others who have been to university and who understand the economic and social benefits (Lee et al. 2004, Coleman 1988). Therefore, as generally first generation students have fewer friends and family members who have been to university, this may be a contributing factor in explaining the differences in completion rates among first and non-first generation students and calls for further research.

In answering therefore, the main research question of Study Two, "How do the lived experiences of first generation university students compare with the experiences of non-first generation students during the transition to university?", it became evident that the lived experiences of first generation university students were similar to those of non-first generation students. First generation and non-first generation students alike reported that they were mostly unprepared for university study and suffered a variety of consequences as a result. Parents were claimed to have had little influence on the preparation of their children for university study. Instead, prior experiences were reported to be influential and, furthermore, similar across both groups. As students progressed through the transition period, they encountered a number of challenges and were required to make sense of their new learning environment in their own way. Most students, who were having difficulties, found opportunities to speak to parents or others who understood the benefits of persisting and completing their degree. When students felt that their efforts were valid and worthwhile, they made the choice to continue. However, if students were not able to justify or see the benefits of their efforts in difficult times, they saw no reason to continue. Two first generation students in this study, out of 12, had limited support from family and friends who they could speak to in relation to university experiences and consequently, independently made the decision to discontinue with their studies.

The school in Study Three was initially set up to address concerns regarding the high number of high school students who enter university unprepared. The founders of the school were keen to provide an entry pathway into university using a structured and carefully planned approach that would prepare students for the next stage of their education.

Structures and practices at the school mirrored as closely as possible many of those found in universities. For example, classes at the school started at 8am and ran until 5pm and student attendance was only monitored in classes in which they were enrolled. Students were given the freedom to organise their own studies but were regularly checked and guided through mentor sessions and counselling. Other aspects of the school included a lecture/tutorial system in the

final year to prepare students for this type of learning at university and teacher consultation hours to encourage students to seek help when needed.

Pedagogies used at the school were based on principles identified as being important in successful transition. Identified skills and knowledge for a successful transition included independent and online study, organisation, time management and resilience. Staff believed that these attributes would assist students with the transition into university study and beyond and spoke at length with students about what would be expected of them once they arrived. Knowing what to expect at university proved to be extremely beneficial for students. Pargetter (2000) identified five key concepts facilitating successful school-to-university transition which included Awareness, Early Orientation, Course Advice, Independent Learning and Ongoing School Support and which formed part of this school's practices and outcomes.

The surveyed students, upon completion of their final year, reported high levels of confidence in being prepared for university and that they were comfortable in making the transition. Not only did they understand the physical environment and how to navigate their way around the campus but they were also familiar with academic conventions, such as those used for referencing and online environments. Students often commented that concepts at university were more sophisticated than what they were used to but that they had expected this to be the case and were keen to work hard to increase their understanding and knowledge.

During the transition period, all students, both first and non-first generation, felt that their prior experiences at the school had prepared them well for university study. As in Study Two, students did not refer to parents or family in terms of preparation, and it was their prior experiences which they always referred to when speaking about their level of comfort in their new learning environment.

These newly-graduated students were well prepared upon entering university. When compared with the students who participated in Study Two, these graduates displayed nuances of speech and gestures that set them apart from the majority of the other university commencers who took part in the previous study. There was a certain amount of 'casualness' to their presence at university, numerous times reporting that they felt comfortable in their surroundings and on campus. None of the participants reported being surprised or disappointed during their transition period, nor did they feel disorientated in any way as others did in Study Two. They understood the environment that they were entering and like, Tina and Emily in Study Two, bypassed negative and frustrating experiences felt by others who were not as prepared. They did not question their roles at university or become confused about their identities, and while their transition experiences were not without challenges, they remained excited and knew how to apply themselves to their studies.

The school featured in this case study was unique in that staff at the school had a sound understanding of how university environments operated as they were either still students themselves undertaking higher degrees, or they were in close proximity to and had regular contact with university and industry personnel. The school mirrored the university environment by adopting, for example, a lecture/tutorial system, 9-5pm timetabling and staff consultations. Furthermore, the school had formed a partnership with the adjacent university which increased the opportunities of understanding university study (Peel et al. 2002) when compared with more traditional schools. Staff at the school gained first-hand knowledge of what type of attributes and skills would assist students when they arrived at university and had a good understanding of how they would provide opportunities for students to practise and acquire these skills. While it was challenging for staff to step away from old habits of 'over-helping' students, they realised that for students to gain skills such as independence, time management and self-discipline, students needed to learn them in their own way, through guidance and repercussions when their decisions worked against them.

In addressing the main research question of Study Three, "In which ways do staff and structures at a South Australian senior secondary university pathway school prepare students for the transition to university?", the school provided students with learning tools and concepts similar to what is expected at university and the opportunities to become familiar with what would be expected of them when they arrived at university. All the university commencers, who were past students of the school, confirmed that they were prepared when they entered university and had a good understanding of how they were expected to operate in the environment. Students reported the environment being similar to what they had experienced at school and their transition as a continuation of their education rather than a disconnect (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013) where new ways of operating and understanding needed to be learned and developed.

Using Personal and Professional Insights to provide Analysis of the Studies and an Holistic Overview of the Program of Research

Using Personal Experience to Make Sense of the Findings

During the time taken to complete this program of research, I have had the opportunity to watch my three children grow and enter high school where they are currently making subject choices regarding university pathways. Should they successfully complete their secondary education, they will commence university as non-first generation students. I watch their progress with interest as I reflect on my own experiences as a first generation student at the same age. The path I negotiated to achieve a university degree offer and then completion was not an easy one and I often wonder why my sister and I both persisted at university when many

first generation students withdraw.

While my parents were unable to assist with content or processes in relation to my university education, they were able to assist by reminding me about the benefits and the importance of further education whenever I contemplated leaving. My father had left school at the age of 14 but had a great love of learning. My mother, too, had left school at 14 and along with my father, encouraged the idea of learning in our home. This was quite rare among my friends in the area where I grew up. Education in my home was seen in the same way as seen by the families in Gofen's (2009) study - a priority, even if it meant financial sacrifices in other areas. For example, books for university in my household were paid for first before other expenses were considered. Studies involving first generation students (King et al. 2015, Southgate et al. 2014, Martinez 1999, Pargetter et al. 1998) have shown that those who persist are often encouraged by family members or significant others who believe in education and the importance of learning. I can confirm that this factor was a strong influence in my decisions to remain at university when difficulties arose for me. I did not want to disappoint my parents by leaving university before I completed my degree so pressed on even when the situation seemed impossible.

Looking back, I now realise the situation was much more complex. I often spoke about 'taking a break' from study or coming to the realisation that university 'wasn't for me' but each time was promptly and sensibly diverted away from this path by both my parents. I realise today that in these conversations with my parents I, like others (Zeelenberg et al. 2000), was desperate to 'turn away' from the situation. University was not as I expected and as I had not joined a study group or felt comfortable making contact with faculty staff in case they should see what I still did not understand, I felt, as others did, lost, insecure and out of control (Gibney et al. 2011, Reay et al. 2009, Christie et al. 2008, Thomas and Quinn 2007). When students in Study Two felt this same way, I was reminded of my own situation and of the outcomes in the study by Zeelenberg and colleagues (2000) where disconfirmed expectations led to feelings of disorientation and frustration which in turn led to tendencies to want to turn away from the situation.

Watching my children plan their university pathway, I am amazed at the way in which they are preparing themselves. There has always been an assumption that they will go to university and over the years they have become familiar with the environment, as did Emily in Study Two. I have worked in university settings for some time now and when they were small, took them to work with me during their holidays. Fortunately, my workplace was very family-friendly and my children occasionally accompanied me when I needed to meet with various Deans and Program Managers at the time. My children's experiences are very different to mine. In accompanying me to many university events and being introduced to a variety of university staff, they have

shown a level of comfort in this type of setting that I had never felt.

They have also watched, while I progressed with my thesis and asked questions about what I am writing. I have enjoyed explaining and discussing readings and findings with them whenever they are curious, particularly when I am researching an area in relation to students' stories and emotions. These experiences were similar to the experiences of non-first generation students in Kingston's (2001) study, where these students were considered to live in academically stimulating environments in which relevant literature and discipline content was shared and discussed with interest.

My children have been privileged in having opportunities presented to them to gain a realistic understanding of what university will be like should they decide to go. I look back at my understanding of university study at their age and see a marked difference. However, I also see a glimpse of how they might arrive at university with unrealistic expectations. The school that they attend has a pastoral care focus which gives assistance, support and encouragement when difficulties arise. While this provides students at the school with the support they need to reach their potential, it may be an aspect of the school which students will have difficulties in functioning without. While I try to prepare my children for the realities of university, the freedom as well as the self-discipline, I wonder how much they take in. I understand that without similar prior experiences to university study, they will experience challenges in their transition period. However, I also understand that when these challenges arise, they may become disorientated and disgruntled with the situation, and that I will be able to encourage them to continue and provide them with the knowledge that what they have invested in is worthwhile and worthy, as did my parents when I thought I could no longer continue.

What We Have Learned

First generation students' disadvantage has been described in various ways and attributed to a variety of causes that has shown to be problematic in this program of research. Students' disadvantage is often over-simplified by implying that they are 'culturally deficient' as they do not have university participation as part of their family history. As a result, they are often assumed to be unable to acquire the cultural capital needed to succeed at university and this is used to explain their consequent leaving of university early. The difficulty with this explanation is that there is no *recent* evidence to suggest that this is still the case; it assumes that this outcome is somewhat 'set in stone'. Cultural and social capital may have contributed to the success of students in the past when universities followed a 'standardised' approach to teaching and learning and families were able to share experiences which could confidently assumed to be unchanged. However, due to technological advances and diversified approaches to teaching and learning universities have undergone radical change which would not have been experienced by previous generations of university students. This leaves non-first

generation students in similar positions to first generation students; neither group is advantaged as family culture and history of traditional universities will not prepare students for what is to be expected in current settings.

This, therefore, calls explanations that rest on the notion of culturally deficiency into question,

and as shown by the findings from this program of research that non-first generation students' experiences are no different to first generation experiences. The findings show that both groups of students can lack the necessary cultural capital needed to understand the university environment upon commencement of their studies. Both groups of students enter university unprepared and with similarly unrealistic expectations and only those who have prior experiences similar to university learning environments ultimately have the necessary cultural capital to transition smoothly. This program of research does not argue that first generation students are without disadvantage as it is clear they are significantly disadvantaged. Rather, this program contends that current evidence in explaining the disadvantage is lacking. With so few studies on non-first generation students, comparisons between the two groups are difficult and this makes assessing why one group out-performs the other problematic.

This program of research was significant as it considered both groups of students; first as well as non-first generation students. It determined that a key reason why first generation students leave university early be a product of the ways in which they interact with others during the transition period - who may endorse, encourage and expect them to continue when difficulties arise. Zeelenberg et al. (2000) found that individuals change their satisfaction judgements based on the satisfaction judgements of other group members; that individuals will revise their perceptions of a service or product based on knowledgeable information that emerge from others who have used the service or product in question. Building on from this, group members were found to be family or significant others who were known to transitioning students. However, for first generation students, such group members may not exist. First generation students may be less likely to be acquainted with individuals who have attended university and therefore, who are able to offer this endorsement or encouragement, whereas the opposite applies to non-first generation students. These students are more likely to have these types of relationships which provide encouragement and endorsement. The effects, therefore, of these relationships rather than, as first thought, an inherited tacit knowledge of university systems passed down by family members is key in the advantages non-first generation students experience over first generation students. Thus family culture and capital may well account for the advantage non-first generation students enjoy in comparison to first generation students, but in ways different to first thought.

Interestingly however, if students are self-motivated and determined to succeed, which resonates with the findings from Harris and Miao (2012) where personality was shown to affect

student learning, these relationships are less important and become less important again when students are prepared, that is, if they have had prior experiences similar to university study. There is a significant difference in transition experiences of students with prior experiences similar to university study compared to those of students without. Prior experiences have been found to be instrumental in how well a student transitions into a university environment, regardless of whether they are first or non-first generation. For this reason, schools and pathway providers can have a large impact on assisting students with transition as students entering from these avenues comprise the largest group of students commencing university.

The opportunities provided to students by schools and pathway providers can contribute to students' success through their use of similar university teaching and learning experiences. These experiences, carefully designed to simulate a university environment, can prepare students for what will be expected of them once they arrive in that environment. Students who take advantage of the opportunities provided to them by these environments have the potential to be better prepared for the transition to university. They can know what to expect, can be more familiar with university systems and structures and understand the nature of academia. When students have similar prior experiences to university study, their transition experiences are likely to be as expected and smoother than those without. Given this, there are great opportunities and benefits for schools and pathway providers to work together with universities to have a significant impact on the transition experiences of the majority of students entering university.

Limitations of the Program of Research

Study One, a literature review, was completed early in the process and was the starting point for the program of research. It largely sought to explore and understand the university transition experiences of first and non-first generation students and hence was a small scale study. This literature review was a general literature review rather than a systematic review. General literature reviews are not designed to be replicated but rather to contextually understand and explore the topic of interest.

Study Two was an investigation in which 12 commencing university students were interviewed and where only three disciplines from one particular university were included. Research studies with small numbers of participants from specific areas such as this are argued to be limited when generalising to other populations or situations (Creswell 2007). However, to gain a rich understanding of the experiences of transitioning students, it was necessary to strike a balance between the depth and therefore length of each interview, and the number of interviews and access to multiple disciplines.

For this reason, these experiences cannot be representative of other disciplines, nor other

universities. Individual characteristics were quite different from one another too. For example, from the six first and six non-first generation students, three were rural, three were mature-aged and two were from a non-English speaking background which may have impacted upon the way students experienced the transition period. However, working with both a small number and a variety of students within an IPA framework provided an advantage as with this methodology the researcher and the reader are encouraged to focus on the phenomenon of interest and use their personal and professional experience to make sense of the data and connections between the analysis and prior understandings and knowledge. In doing so, Reid and colleagues reassure that 'less is more' (2005, p.22). So in using my experience of being the first in my family to participate in university and working with a range of students transitioning to university, I consider that this study has been very effective in providing an understanding and interpretation of the detailed accounts and experiences of the 12 students who are different from each other in many ways but similar to each other in their journey to undertake university study.

The case study which featured next in the program of research was not selected randomly and for this reason may be viewed as a limitation. The school featured in Study Three was not representative of mainstream schools nor was it used to *generalise* a phenomenon of interest; instead, it was deliberately chosen to 'demonstrate an unusual manifestation of [a] phenomenon' (Patton 1990, p.182). The school was a university pathway school which was purposefully designed to offer students a senior secondary education while at the same time a preparation for university study. Students who enrol in this school expect to continue their education at university and have chosen this school specifically to assist them with the transition.

The participants in Study Three were limited in number in order to obtain a rich portrayal rather than a large quantity of data. Ten staff members responded to the invitation to participate, 21 current students completed the university preparedness survey and five recent, school-graduated university commencers volunteered to share their experiences in the final phase of the study. While the number of student participants was low in both methods of data collection, the information gained contributed valuably to the exploration and description of the study. Malterud et al. (2016) discuss the concept of 'information power' in regard to sample size of qualitative studies. The researchers suggest that sample size in qualitative research may be guided by information power rather than saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1999) which is specifically tied to Grounded Theory research, and that with sufficient information power, lower numbers of participants are necessary. For example, a study will need the least amount of participants when the study aim and sought-after participant experience is specific and when the interview dialogue is strong (Malterud et al. 2016). As the aim of this study was specifically an exploratory and descriptive study with well-prepared interview processes and

early rapport eliciting clear and informative dialogues, information power was able to be achieved with fewer participants. In regard to the number of survey respondents, the data were used to provide a 'snap-shot' of student perceptions at a certain point in time. This snap shot was useful in that it served more as verification than as a form of discovery for this particular case (Baxter and Jack 2008, Gable 1994).

In relation to the population of students at the school, the vast majority enrolled in this school were highly motivated, committed and focused on a university pathway. These students were not typical secondary school students. The majority of students who attended the school were mostly non-first generation students as their parents understood the importance of education and the advantages likely to be created at the school. Therefore, this study was limited in the knowledge that the student population most likely had arrived at the school with a number of advantages which may have had an impact on final results. In particular, the transition experiences of these students were positive and confirmed that the school had prepared them well for the transition. As these students were highly motivated and focused on their career goals, they may have had positive transition experiences regardless of which school they attended. In saying this, however, these students constantly attributed aspects of their transition experiences and preparation to the school, particularly when they compared themselves to others who had come from mainstream schools and were not as prepared as they were. This suggests that while the population pool potentially may have limited the results in some ways, the students themselves knew exactly what was necessary for a successful transition and were intuitively aware that others had not acquired the same skills and understandings as they had as a result of attending the school. It showed that staff and structures at the school explicitly assisted students with the transition to university in a variety of ways.

So while, participant numbers were low, the data were useful for the process of triangulation and used in parts to piece together and consolidate the overall outcomes of the school and the effect the school had on students. The focus in this study was on the practices and structures embedded in the school for university preparation and how effective these were for students during the transition period. This case study explored the ways in which this specific school, and in particular, staff, understood the skills and attributes necessary for successful transition and the effects this had on graduating students.

Implications for Educational Practice

The transition to university has been shown to be a time of uncertainty and risk. Universities are aware of this risk and endeavour to assist students during this period in a variety of ways and, while retention rates are increasing, there is further opportunity to assist in other ways. This program of research sheds insights, useful to higher education institutions and pathway

providers, which suggest that some practices and policies are worthy of attention.

Higher Education Providers

This program of research has confirmed that first generation students can no longer be generally classed as having low socio-economic status as they have become diverse in their characteristics and demographics. They still, however, remain significantly disadvantaged in relation to retention and may not have any support available to them while at university as they may not be incorporated with any of the six equity groups currently established in Australian universities. For this reason, independent, specialised support, acknowledging prior experiences of first generation students during the transition period, would be beneficial for students, staff and institutions as a whole.

In addition, this program has revealed that when students become disorientated with their situations, having a support mechanism in place where they are encouraged to continue, reminded of why they began higher education in the first place and the value of their choice despite initial difficulties is beneficial; particularly for first generation students who may not have family or friends who can offer this type of support. Academics and staff in areas such as student experience and services armed with this knowledge have an opportunity to provide students with encounters where they may interact with others and engage in such conversations with specific support persons.

Pathway Providers

This program has also highlighted the ways university pathway providers can prepare students for university. With approximately half of the students entering university from pathway programs, having an understanding of the needs of students and providing opportunities for students to acquire the skills and attributes they need for higher education transition is paramount to their success. As has been traditional, many pathway providers focus on academic achievement and entry scores for higher education. Therefore, as higher education is the goal for many pathway students, it can be said that success is only achieved, therefore, when students arrive at their new learning environment prepared and committed to their goal. There is a need, therefore, for pathway providers to realise that student learning and achievement can occur in a variety of formats and environments and that higher education preparation can be achieved alongside and without compromising academic excellence.

Increased Partnership between Higher Education and Pathway Providers

In preparing students for university study, by working in partnership between providers is extremely effective, particularly as it has been shown students rely most on prior experiences when negotiating the transition period. There is a need and a benefit for higher education

providers to reach out to pathway providers in relation to the ways in which students can be better prepared for transition as they understand that the challenges students face during the transition period may lead to early departure. There are also benefits for pathway providers to be open and flexible in their pathway approach, as students become more aware of the difficulties of being underprepared for higher education environments and may base their choice of pathway provider on these principles. While continuous committed relationships between pathway and higher education providers are ideal, teaching and learning conversations with colleagues across institutions, through direct contact or conferencing, are necessary for gaining an understanding of where students are going and where they have come from.

Directions for Future Research

In moving forward, there are three main directions for further research that would advance knowledge in the area of transition from school or other pathway providers to higher education. First, it is important to continue to explore and identify the transition experiences of *all* students in order to re-establish the challenges and difficulties students contend with in current higher education settings. Much research has focused on the transition experiences of first generation students without considering the experiences of non-first generation students. It is important to understand these experiences alongside first generation students' experiences in order to determine if and how they are different.

Second, further research is necessary to determine how best to help first generation students during the transition period. As they are not formally classified as an equity group perse, there is opportunity to define this group and the most appropriate support necessary for improvements in their retention and performance. Thus, there is a need to further explore the socio-economic backgrounds of first generation students, and the types of support from which first generation students would benefit. As significant changes in higher education have occurred over the last two decades and with recent incentives to widen university participation, student demographics have changed (Snowball 2014, Allais 2013, Edwards & Radloff 2013). As a result, the numbers of first generation students entering university across all socio-economic situations, particularly those from mid to high levels, have increased, challenging the notion that first generation students are generally associated with low socio-economic backgrounds.

While many universities in Australia acknowledge and specifically target the needs of first generation students in ad hoc ways (Scutter et. al. 2011, Collier et. al. 2008), first generation students have not yet been formally defined as an equity group and so may only receive limited support in comparison with other students in formalised equity groups, such as, Indigenous students, those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students from rural and isolated areas, those with disabilities or from non-English speaking backgrounds, and women in

non-traditional areas of study. So while some first generation students may be a part of other recognised equity groups, and therefore may have access to a variety of support, other first generation students, who do not fall into such categories, will receive no support what so ever, even though their disadvantage is known and formally documented. This is an important point to be made as mid to high income level first generation students may potentially be at greater risk of non-completion due to their socio-economic status being *higher* than expected. There is a need, therefore, to increase awareness of first generation characteristics and attrition and to know how best to provide formal support to this group before they decide to leave university.

Third, higher education-pathway partnership is another area which would benefit from further research. Studies determining how well students from these types of partnerships transition to university environments and how to maximise their experiences are needed to assist pathway providers with an understanding of the ways in which they may be able to better equip their students for university study.

Conclusion

The First Year Experience of university students continues to be an area of great interest. Universities are keen to understand this experience and to increase the level of satisfaction of their students during this important transition. The financial cost alone of attrition in Australia is over one billion Australian dollars each year (Adams et al. 2010) while the emotional cost to students and staff alike can be devastating. As universities endeavour to reduce the monetary and health costs of attrition, more research is called to consider students' experiences and the effect they have on their studies and ultimately, retention.

Within a context where universities are rapidly evolving the ways in which they offer courses of study the experiences of students from both advantaged and disadvantaged first in family settings warrant closer attention. The program of research presented in this doctoral work recognised the need to explore the transition experiences of both groups in order to better understand how or if their experiences differ from each other and what this means for the important areas of transition and retention of students.

This research also serves the field of teacher professional practice and developing our understandings of the knowledge and skills necessary for teachers to support university preparation. For the wider community, it provides understanding and insight into the experiences of students when they begin university and the ways in which students might be better prepared for the transition period and supported through their studies.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet

This project has been approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact the Executive Officer of this Committee, Tel: +61 8 8302 3118; Email: Vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au

University of South Australia

The Division of Arts, Education and Social Sciences (EASS)

Information Sheet for Student and Staff Participants

You are invited to participate in a research project titled, *Widening Participation – the teaching and learning experiences of first generation and continuing* students. The research is being carried out by Angela Di Sotto-Hames (Master of Education by Research) as part of a Professional Doctorate qualification in Education.

The aims of this project are to

- examine the academic transition of first-generation and continuing students to university
- Explore their classroom experiences
- Identify ways of better supporting and improving experiences

If you consent to being a participant in the study you will be will be asked to reflect on your experiences in the classroom and asked to complete an online survey regarding your experiences and your opinions in relation to learning in a university setting. Your responses are anonymous will be kept confidential at all times. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Participation is entirely voluntary so you are under no obligation to take part in the study. During the survey process you may withdraw from the research at any time without any impact on your position, treatment or care.

You may benefit from participating in this study by reflecting on your own experiences to better understand your position as a learner within a university setting. There are no risks to participants of this research.

All information collected as part of the study must be retained for five years. All records containing personal information will remain confidential and no information which could lead to identification of any individual will be released. Information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a lockable office in a secure building. The office is always locked when unattended. Interview transcripts will replace your name with a pseudonym to preserve your confidentiality. Audio recordings of interviews will be filed on usbs and computers securely stored.

The researcher will take every care to remove responses from any identifying material as early as possible. Likewise individuals' responses will be kept confidential by the researcher and will not be identified in the reporting of the research or elsewhere, unless required by a tribunal or court of law. In transferring information by email or internet, the researcher will take every precaution for information to remain private but cannot guarantee the confidentiality or anonymity of material.

A Summary of the findings will be made available and a full report will be available upon request.

For further information or in the event of concern or problems, please contact:

- Ms Angela Di Sotto-Hames MEd (Research), Ph: 8302 4899
- Professor Roger Harris, roger.harris@unisa.edu.au, PhD, Ph: 830 26246
- Associate Professor Michele Simons, Michele.simons@unisa.edu.au, Ph D, Ph: 830 24529

This project has been approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact the Executive Officer or this Committee, Tel: +61 8 83023118; Email: Vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au

Appendix B: Consent Forms



Consent Form

University of South Australia

This project has been approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact the Executive Officer of this Committee, Tel: +61 8 8302 3118; Email: Vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au

CONSENT FORM

Project Title Widening Participation – exploring the teaching and learning experiences of first generation and continuing students.

Researcher's name & contact details Angela Di Sotto-Hames. Email: angela.disotto-hames@unisa.edu.au. Ph: 8302 4899

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that I will be audiotaped during the interview
- I understand that the tape recording will be filed on usb/computer files and will be securely locked in filing cabinet or on secured computer in lockable room.
- I agree that the data provided may be used for additional research purposes.
- I agree to maintain confidentiality of interview discussions and preserve the identification of other participants.

Participants under the age of 18 normally require parental consent to be involved in research. The consent form should allow for those under the age of 18 to agree to their involvement and for a parent to give consent.

Name of participant……..

Signed…….**Date**…….

I have provided information about the research to the research participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved.

Researcher's signature and date……..

This project has been approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact the Executive Officer of this Committee, Tel: +61 8 8302 3118; Email: Vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au

CONSENT FORM (Under 18)

Project Title Widening Participation – exploring the teaching and learning experiences of first generation and continuing students.

Researcher's name & contact details Angela Di Sotto-Hames. Email: angela.disotto-hames@unisa.edu.au. Ph: 8302 4899

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.

- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.

- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.

- I understand that I will be audiotaped during the interview

- I understand that the tape recording will be filed on usb/computer files and will be securely locked in filing cabinet or on secured computer in lockable room.

- I agree that the data provided may be used for additional research purposes.

- I agree to maintain confidentiality of interview discussions and preserve the identification of other participants.

Participants under the age of 18 normally require parental consent to be involved in research. The consent form should allow for those under the age of 18 to agree to their involvement and for a parent to give consent.

Name of participant……..

Signed…….**Date**…….

Parent signature.....**Date**.....

I have provided information about the research to the research participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved.

Researcher's signature and date……..

Appendix C: Information Request for Study Two

Study Two: Request for Participant Details
(collected as part of invitation to participate email)

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1. I am the first person of my
    - immediate family
    - extended family
    - distant relatives
    - not applicable

to attend university

2. The following people in my family went to university
    - My father
    - My mother
    - My aunty
    - My uncle
    - My sister
    - My brother
    - My grandfather
    - My grandmother
    - My cousin
    - Not applicable

3. I attend at least one class on campus
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not applicable

4. I come from a non-English speaking background
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not applicable

5. I come from a
    - low income background
    - medium income background
    - high income background
    - Not applicable

6. I am available for an interview on any
    - Tuesday
    - Thursday
    - Friday

Appendix D: Interview Questions for Study Two and Three

Interview Questions – All Participants in Study Two and Past School Students in Study Three

Understandings and perceptions of the teaching and learning environment during early university transition – Topic Questions

I intend to study the transition journey, first year students undertake as they enter university and more specifically how they encounter the teaching and learning environment. I will attempt to understand the 'lived experience' of entering students and the 'meaning they make of that experience' (Seidman 2006, p.9). I would like to follow the stories of up to 16 students (8 first generation students and 8 continuing students) to explore the challenges students encounter in their transition and how they make meaning and sense of the experiences that they are faced with.

1. Tell me about your first few weeks at uni
2. What do you understand by learning?
3. Tell me about your experiences in the classroom
4. What is happening in the classroom?
5. What are some of the challenges you face?
6. What do you perceive as learning in your classroom?
7. Are your understandings of learning consistent with what you are experiencing?
8. How is your personal learning going?
9. Are you surprised at this?
10. What were your expectations?
11. How is it making you feel?
12. How do you interpret these experiences?
13. What do you understand from these experiences?
14. Would you like to add anything more?

Appendix E: Student Survey Questions for Study Three

Year 12 School Student Survey Questions

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1. Please specify your gender:
   - Female
   - Male

2. Please specify your age:
   - 17 years
   - 18 years
   - 19 years
   - 20 years

3. Please tick highest level of parental education:
   - Less than Year 12 Certificate
   - Year 12 Certificate or equivalent
   - Vocational/Trade Certificate
   - Diploma
   - University Degree
   - University Post-graduate Degree
   - I don't know

The available responses for the following questions were:

- Definitely True
- Very Probably True
- Probably True
- Probably Not True
- Very Probably Not True
- Definitely Not True

4. feel confident about starting university
5. I don't know what to expect at university
6. I have no clue of the academic challenges that I will face once I start university
7. I am aware of the need to balance study, paid work and social time
8. I know all about time management
9. I don't feel confident that I will be able to find my way around the campus

10. Sitting in a large lecture room full of other students I have never met before will unnerve me
11. I feel comfortable to introduce myself to others
12. I feel confident to make new friends at university
13. I still don't know what independent learning is
14. I am able to direct my own learning
15. I have been an independent learner for some time now
16. I feel uneasy to approach university staff for help
17. I understand the difference between a lecture and a tutorial/workshop/seminar
18. I know what I have to do in lectures
19. I feel awkward to actively participate in tutorials and workshops
20. I feel comfortable being part of a study group
21. I know how to negotiate my way around a university campus
22. I know how to negotiate my way round an online system for administration or enrolling purposes
23. I wont feel comfortable posting my work online for everyone to see in courses
24. I wouldn't feel comfortable joining a club, society or group
25. I know the requirements of my career path
26. I know how to explore other options if I choose a different career path

Open Response Questions

1. What has helped you understand the university environment?

2. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your transition to university study?

Appendix F: Staff Interview Questions for Study Three

School Staff focus questions

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1. What does school to university transition mean to you?
2. Are you aware of any difficulties students experience during the transition period to university?
3. What skills do you think students need to perform successfully during the transition period?
4. What is meant by independent learning? Examples?
5. What sort of independent learning is necessary for university study?
6. What pedagogies and practices embedded in your teaching develop independent learning skills? Examples?
7. Are you aware of different modes of learning at university? Examples?
8. Are there opportunities in your classrooms for students to experience different types of learning? Examples?
9. Do you think students benefit from being exposed to different types of learning? Why?
10. Do you provide opportunities in class for students to develop other transitional skills?
11. How important is time management for your students?
12. Do you teach time management skills?
13. Are you aware of student diversity in the school? What type?
14. Do you take into consideration student diversity when you're teaching? In what ways?
15. Would you say your classroom is inclusive? Examples?
16. Are you involved in or are you aware of practices, systems and policies at the school that are designed specifically to prepare students for university life?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to add?