“Should I stay or should I go?” First semester students’ experiences in a tertiary institution in New Zealand.

Janet Malcolm

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

Unitec Institute of Technology
2013
Declaration

Name of candidate: Janet Malcolm

This Thesis/Dissertation Research Project entitled “Should I stay or should I go?” First semester experiences in a tertiary institution in New Zealand is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of Master of Education.

Candidate’s declaration
I confirm that:

- This Thesis/Dissertation/Research Project represents my own work;
- The contribution of supervisors and others to this work was consistent with the Unitec Regulations and Policies;
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ABSTRACT

“Should I stay or should I go”, a song by The Clash (1982) sums up the dilemma some students face when they begin their journey in tertiary study. This research explores the experiences of a group of students from one cohort in their first semester of a Bachelor Degree programme for early childhood education. In particular it examines what enabled the students to be successful, what barriers they faced and what motivated them to keep going.

This qualitative single case study utilised a range of data collecting tools. The methods used were a questionnaire for students; a student focus group and an academic staff focus group. Each data method was analysed, coded thematically and reported separately before being discussed in themes.

The findings of this research reveal that the participants experienced some challenges that were predominately external to the institution. What kept them in the programme was the significant level of support received from their Academic Advisor; the academic staff, their peers, the cohort system and their families. The students’ motivation to stay was primarily intrinsic in nature. Their positive attitude towards their studies and pride in their progress enabled them to keep going.

The main barriers identified by the students were related to personal circumstances and were often a combination of factors rather than one single factor. However, there were also a number of institutional barriers identified. These were the perceived differences between the satellite campus and the main campus regarding the levels of support; joining an existing cohort of students; and the differences between the student’s cultural capital and the cultural capital the institution trades in.

Amongst the implications for this research is that support is critical to retention and success. Therefore it is recommended that this institute conducts a feasibility study to investigate the cost of providing this level of support against the cost of attrition and a centralised support system. Pastoral care plays an important role in retention and success. An indication from this research is that first year students need
lecturers who are pastorally minded and are culturally responsive to their needs. Another recommendation is that professional development be provided for staff regarding supporting students with serious personal issues. This research has also shown that there is a need to address the issues students face when they cross-credit into the programme from another institution, specifically in relation to the induction process.
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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Statement of concern

‘Should I stay or should I go? If I go there will be trouble, if I stay it will be double” (The Clash, 1982). These lyrics are pertinent to the dilemmas many first year students face in tertiary education. Students enter university, polytechnic or other tertiary institutions full of hopes and dreams of a better future. They expect to increase their knowledge and skills in order to become gainfully employed and to improve their lives and the lives of their families. They come with the intention of being successful and do not intend to fail, and yet a significant proportion face issues which make them ask “Should I stay or should I go?” (The Clash, 1982).

The commitment to study is a considerable one, and the first year of tertiary study can be extremely challenging, especially since the widening of access to and participation in tertiary education (Leathwood, & O’Connell, 2003). Today many students not only face a new academic culture but also have to deal with family and work commitments, financial pressures and differences in language and culture (Kinnear, Sparrow, Boyce & Middleton, 2008).

The first year can be a make or break year for students and is widely recognised as a critical period for retention and success (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin & Bracken, 2000; Jansen & van der Meer, 2007; McInnis, 2001; Pittaway & Moss, 2006). Students who drop out tend to do so in their first year of study (Jansen & van der Meer, 2007; McInnis, 2001). It is this first year of study and the experiences students face that is explored in this research.

Personal experience and interest

My interest in the first year student experience has arisen out of my own experiences as a student. As a young woman I lacked confidence in my own academic ability. This lack of confidence stemmed right back to my failing the ‘eleven plus’, an exam at the end of primary school in the United Kingdom that determined which high school you would attend. I also failed the New Zealand ‘School Certificate’ exams and had to repeat my fifth year at secondary school, which resulted in my failing
English a second time. It wasn’t until I worked with a group of women as an adult in an early childhood setting that I started to believe in myself and began to think that if these women could do it then maybe I could too. My journey as a tertiary student began with self-doubt and concern about my ability to complete the programme but I was fortunate to have lecturers who not only challenged me but who were also supportive and believed in me.

Reflecting on my own experiences has enabled me to have some understanding of the issues that students face. However, in saying this I realise that for some students coming into tertiary study is considerably more challenging than my own experience. Being European and speaking English as my first language has given me some ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1973) that has helped me to be successful and complete my studies. Cultural capital is similar to a currency. This currency is what is valued from a person’s upbringing that enables them to trade in their own context/community. This currency can be used in different contexts as long as the currency is familiar. Issues arise when there is a difference in currency/cultural capital. This is explained further in the review of the literature, chapter two and again in the discussion of the findings in chapter five.

As a result of my own experiences I have wanted to ensure that others have a smooth transition into new environments. In 2004 I undertook a small qualitative case-study to examine the induction processes at one Auckland childcare centre as part of my Graduate Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership (Malcolm, 2004). The intention of my research project as part of my Graduate Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership was to improve the experiences of new staff members at the centre. The project introduced me to the rigor of research but also enabled me to identify a desire to hear the voices of others who may struggle in new environments and to advocate on their behalf. It is not enough to draw on my own experiences; rather I must hear what others have to say about their experiences.

In 2004, I became a lecturer in a large tertiary institution with a diverse community. I was fortunate to have studied for my Diploma of Teaching in this organisation, which gave me some understanding of the culture of the organisation to begin with, but I
still found the transition process from student to lecturer a challenging one. In this environment there were procedures in place and a team of people who supported me in my transition into the institution as a lecturer which enabled the induction process to run fairly smoothly. What surprised me though during this transition from teacher to lecturer was the kindness and support shown to me by students. They empathised with me and were gracious, allowing me the time to adjust to the new role of lecturer. In my role as lecturer I hope that I can continue that kindness to new students coming into the classroom and programme.

After settling into the role of lecturer and teaching for two years I was appointed Year One Coordinator for students entering into a Bachelor Degree programme (early childhood education). During this time I have witnessed students struggling with personal issues and the academic rigor of a degree and have supported these students. I have seen students withdraw and wondered if there were other strategies I could have employed to help these students to complete their studies and be successful. I also wondered how many other students had considered withdrawing but who had stayed, and what had helped them to persist. What was it that motivated some students to keep going?

Soon after becoming the first year coordinator I was fortunate enough to attend the 9th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference in 2006 and this fuelled my interest in supporting first year students. This conference gave me an inkling into the breadth and depth of discussion on the topic and raised in me a desire to consider conducting research in my own community.

**Context**

The retention and completion rates of first year tertiary students are widely recognised as an issue for the academy worldwide (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006). There are annual conferences in Europe, America, Canada and Australia that deal specifically with the first year experience in tertiary study, with one based in the USA that has been running for 31 years, called the ‘Annual Conference on the First Year Experience’ (National Resource Centre, n.d.). Closer to New Zealand is the ‘International First Year in Higher Education Conference’ (First Year Higher Education Centre, 2011) which has been going for
15 years and has its base in Australia (previously known as the Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference). There is also a plethora of literature on the subject. Despite all this discussion, retention and completion rates continue to cause concern (Brunsden et al., 2000; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2003; Krause, 2005). According to Scott and Smart (2005), the New Zealand rate of completion in all Bachelor Degree programmes in 2005 was close to 50 percent. More recent figures put the New Zealand completion rate at 58 percent which is the fourth lowest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Scott, 2009). Scott however, argues that this result measures completion in a traditional manner and does not take into account New Zealand’s high incidence of students studying part-time and/or changing track. But it is still of concern that over 40 percent of students undertaking a Bachelor Degree programme in New Zealand do not complete their studies (Scott, 2009). The majority of students who drop out do so in their first year or soon after (Jansen & van der Meer, 2007; McInnis, 2001). It is commonly agreed that the first year of tertiary study is problematic, given the high dropout rate and the concern that first year students are more likely to have “social, emotional, health and financial problems” than other students (McInnis, 2001, p. 106).

Retention and success is not simply a matter of implementing a few strategies; rather it is a complex issue that requires on-going research, debate and discussion. There is still much to be learnt about student retention and how best to support students especially in their first year when they are more at risk of failure (Pittaway & Moss, 2006).

While there has been a great deal written about retention and success internationally, there is still a lack of literature on the subject in New Zealand (van de Meer, 2011; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003). Zepke et al. (2005a) point out that individual institutions can address their own unique retention challenges, by investigating and finding their own ways to solve them. Krause (2005) and McInnis (2001) support this, recommending institutions investigate their own students in order to develop processes and practices relevant to that institution. Bryson and Hand (2007) and Haggis (2004) concur, with the recommendation that researchers
refrain from making generalisations, rather they should provide a rich description of individual contexts.

**Overview and methodology**

In this research my aim was to find local solutions for one institution by providing an insight into the experiences of its first year students and the challenges they faced in a field-based early childhood education Bachelor Degree programme. Another aim of the research was to inform my own practice as a first year coordinator so that I can improve the experiences for students I work with.

This research investigated and provided an insight into the experiences of Bachelor Degree students who studied early childhood education in a New Zealand tertiary institution. It allowed an understanding of what is needed for them to be successful and complete their studies and of what barriers they faced.

The methodology I used for this research to understand the students’ perceptions about themselves and their experiences is a qualitative case study using a range of tools for data collection and analysis. This case study looked at one specific cohort of students in one programme at a satellite campus, who were identified as having a 30.55% attrition rate in their first semester. Out of 31 students, one withdrew and seven stopped attending class and did not complete their studies. The retention rates for this group were concerning hence this research. What were the experiences of these students? Finding out why students do not complete their studies is problematic since many students who did not complete are difficult to contact. Instead this case study investigated the experiences of students who continued on in their studies despite other students withdrawing.

As noted above, the key aim of the research was to investigate and gain an insight into the experiences of these students and to explore what is needed for students to be successful and complete their studies. The main question for this research was:

What do the experiences of first semester students from a Bachelor Degree programme (early childhood education) reveal concerning success and completion?
This main question led to the following subheadings:

- What factors do students identify as having enabled them to successfully complete their first semester?

- What factors do students identify as barriers they face in their first semester?

- What factors do the staff on the Bachelor Degree programme identify as enabling students to successfully complete their first semester and what barriers do the students face?

- What motivates students to be successful in their studies?

To find the answers to these questions two key methods were used to collect the data. These methods were: a questionnaire; and focus groups. A questionnaire was given out to student participants from the chosen cohort which was followed by two focus groups. One focus group was for students who had participated in the questionnaire and who had agreed to take part. The second focus group consisted of academic staff who were involved in teaching or supporting the chosen cohort in their first semester.

The main themes identified in the data were:

- The significance of the support the students received in their first semester. This support came from the Academic Advisor, their peers, friends, family and lecturers;

- The strong benefits of a cohort system which had small classes where the students were able to support each other and build relationships;

- The multiple definitions of success. This was seen as much more than passing assessments and completing the programme. Success was also
defined as: just being on the programme, persevering, attending class, giving it your best, having confidence and being motivated;

- The diversity of motivational factors which included: passing and failing assessments, proving to themselves and others they could succeed, wanting to make a difference in children’s lives and gaining motivation from family, friends and class colleagues;

- The barriers students faced such as: limited access to resources, family commitments, financial and health concerns, internet access, joining an existing cohort, and differences in cultural capital.

These themes will be discussed fully in the thesis.

**Thesis Outline**

This thesis has six chapters. This chapter has introduced my own educational journey, my role as a first year coordinator and my interest in supporting first year students in tertiary study. It has presented the issue of retention and success of tertiary students in their first semester of study and explained the importance of finding local solutions to the problems by listening to the voices of the students and their lecturers through a qualitative methodology.

Chapter two reviews the literature on retention and success and looks at the cost of attrition for all involved. It examines the different theoretical perspectives underpinning retention and discusses specific factors that enable students to be successful and examines the barriers students face in their first semester.

Chapter three describes the research design used. It discusses the case study and includes the epistemology that underpins the research. It also introduces the setting, the participants, the methods used and the ethical considerations and issues faced.

Chapter four identifies the findings that emerged from the data collected. This is presented in the same order the data was gathered and begins with the
questionnaire. This is followed by the student focus group and finally the academic staff focus group. Data from both focus groups are presented in thematic form.

The main themes from chapter four provide the basis of a discussion for chapter five and incorporate relevant literature. The final chapter, chapter six, concludes with the limitations of the research design; a summary of the research; suggestions for future research; and recommendations for the institution where the research was conducted.

In this research The Clash (1982) song “should I stay or should I go” is a metaphor for the dilemma some students face when coming into tertiary study. The students in this research have persisted in their studies despite some of them considering withdrawing and having barriers to overcome. It can be difficult for students to ‘go’ once they have started, with the cost of leaving significant both financially and psychologically. However, the decision to stay can also be costly as the song goes “if I go there will be trouble, if I stay it will be double” (The Clash, 1982).
CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction
As noted in the first chapter, there is a plethora of literature into the subject of retention and success. This chapter draws the literature together to identify the issues students face in their first year of tertiary study over four sections.

An overview of the New Zealand Education political climate in which this research is situated is relevant and will be discussed in the first section. The second section discusses the cost of tertiary study and the benefits to the various stakeholders. It also draws attention to the diversity of the student body and provides a brief summary of some of the issues students may face. Thirdly, this review examines the different theories that have dominated the ongoing discussion on retention and success. And finally, factors that influence retention and success are identified and examined. These factors are: pre-entry preparation; finance, employment and family commitments; relationships; learning communities; student engagement; teaching and learning; student success; persistence; and motivation.

Retention and success in the New Zealand context
Throughout the western world governments are requiring increased accountability in tertiary education in return for funding (Zepke et al., 2006), with the emphasis on retention and completion (Zepke, et al., 2005a). The New Zealand Government spent approximately $5.4 billion in 2009/10 on tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 2011a), approximately 1.7% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Ministry of Education, 2011b). This was above the OECD average of 1.2% but when the expenditure for student loans, scholarships and grants are deducted the GDP is equal to the OECD average (Ministry of Education 2011b). According to Scott and Gini (2010) New Zealand spent nearly double the OECD average on financial aid (such as loans) to tertiary students. With this huge investment there is growing pressure to ensure a healthy return.

The New Zealand government’s focus for this return is evident in their Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2009) which describes the expectations for tertiary providers, using key words such as ‘relevant’, ‘efficient’ and
‘effective’. These terms are used repetitively throughout the document and highlight the importance of getting the best return for public money. “A key driver to improve the efficiency of public investment in tertiary education is to improve course and qualification completion rates” (p. 10) and the New Zealand government “expect to see better course and qualification completion and progression rates for students as a result of higher-quality teaching and learning, and more effective and culturally responsive pastoral care” (p. 13). However, the question needs to be raised “what is culturally responsive pastoral care?” Nowhere does the Ministry of Education explain what this means, what it looks like in practice and how this can be done in a tight fiscal climate.

A focus on completion and qualifications is evident in the introduction of the Education (Tertiary Reforms) Amendment Bill 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2007) which shows the shift from participatory based funding to funding based on outcomes which are designed to meet the needs of the stakeholders. A push to see a return on taxpayers’ money has seen the introduction of performance-linked funding in 2010, which was introduced by the Tertiary Education Commission (2010) to improve outcomes and provide increased value for money. Performance-linked funding for tertiary providers is based on four performance indicators: qualification completion rate; course completion rate; retention; and progression (Tertiary Education Commission, 2010). The information from these indicators is published and tertiary providers are ranked accordingly (Tertiary Education Union, 2010). There is widespread concern that publication of this information will result in league tables which can be over-simplified, misleading and damaging (Hill, 2010; Tertiary Education Union, 2010). Steven Joyce, Minister of Tertiary Education in 2010 also suggested that tertiary education providers may be required to ensure students go onto successful employment after completing their studies as part of the performance indicators (Binning, 2010).

Tertiary providers are under increasing pressure to meet these outcomes or risk financial penalties. This is also reflected in the global environment where Tinto (2005a) noted that in some cases institutions are not only financially accountable for the completion rates but are publicly ranked on quality (with completion rates being one of the indicating factors).
Tertiary institutions have a responsibility to provide quality teaching and learning and are expected to produce students who are equipped with the skills, knowledge and qualifications that are considered valuable to society (Scott & Smart, 2005). Failing to produce such students damages the institution’s reputation and can have financial consequences. This is supported by Yorke and Longden (2004) who note that resources put in place to recruit and enrol students are wasted when students withdraw.

Benefits of retention and success

The cost of attrition and non-completion is a significant issue and warrants investigation as to how institutions might adopt practices that will improve retention and success. However, there are also many benefits that come with retaining students and seeing them complete their courses of study beyond simply the financial. Not only is it cost effective for students to stay and be successful, it is good for the economy and society in general. “To succeed in global competition, it is well recognized that countries must have a well-educated population and a highly-qualified workforce” (Ma & Frempong, 2008, p.1). In New Zealand the Ministry of Education (2011a) see tertiary education as a way of equipping students “for a life in a knowledge economy” (p. 1). Tertiary education is important for a growing economy, an “economy that delivers greater prosperity, security and opportunity for all” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 8).

Clearly students who complete their courses are more employable and able to contribute to the economy but Yorke and Thomas (2003) suggest that there are many more personal and societal benefits, including “promoting citizenship and social cohesion” (p. 64) and students who succeed see themselves as healthy and less likely to suffer depression. “The research even suggests that graduates are more inclined to be actively involved in community and voluntary groups, tend to have more egalitarian and anti-racist attitudes, and to have greater faith in the political process” (Institute of Education, 2001, as cited in York & Thomas, 2003, p. 64). Furthermore “education is the great equalizer” (Seidman, 2005, p. xi) and can address issues of social justice (Rhodes & Nevill, 2004; York & Longden, 2004). Thomas and Quinn (2007) suggest that tertiary education is “associated with
privilege and enhanced life opportunities, including improved social standing, employment and earnings, civic participation, cultural engagement, health and life expectancy” (p. 1).

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek (2006a) argue that for students to live an “economically self-sufficient life and to deal with the increasingly complex social, political, and cultural issues” (p. 1) that they face today, some form of tertiary education is needed.

**Cost of non-completion**
The benefits of students completing their programmes of studies and being successful are extensive and yet in New Zealand over 40 per cent of students do not complete their studies (Scott, 2009). The cost of non-completion is not only a monetary issue for governments and tertiary institutes but is also of concern to individual students. Not only do they personally suffer a financial loss but this loss can continue long after withdrawal due to student loans/debt. They can also suffer psychologically. Withdrawing from tertiary study can negatively affect students’ self-esteem and self-confidence (Heagney, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Yorke and Longden (2004) go on to suggest that students who withdraw seldom do so lightly, and have often spent months thinking and stressing about it before finally making the decision to leave. When students enter into a programme, they sometimes face financial or other challenges which result in a dilemma: “Should I stay or should I go?” Determining the factors that help or hinder a student during this decision-making journey is one of the central tenets of this research.

**Student diversity**
Widening access and increasing participation has seen a change in who the ‘student’ is. The student is no longer a white middle class male who has no disabilities, no money worries and no domestic responsibilities (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003). Today students are diverse and may come from low socio-economic backgrounds; have disabilities; be mature students; come from minority ethnic groups and may not have gained qualifications from school (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003). These students from diverse backgrounds are often referred to as ‘non-traditional’, ‘other’ or
‘minority’ students despite the fact that they now make up the majority of the student body.

In the move from an elite to a mass higher education system, it is these students that represent ‘the masses’: homogenized, pathologized and marked as ‘Other’ compared with existing students who are perceived to be there ‘as of right, representing the norm against which the others are judged and may be found wanting’. (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003, p. 599)

As Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) discuss, some suggest that letting in the ‘masses’ results in lowering the standards, increasing the dropout rates and dumbing down the courses. The results of non-completion and attrition are often put down to the students not having the pre-requisite skills, knowledge and dispositions, a concept known as deficit theorising, where the blame is put on the individual students. This notion of blaming the student lets the institutions ‘off the hook’ (Thomas, 2002, p. 424). However, Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) propose that the problems do not lie with the individual students but rather are “constructed through poverty, social inequalities, racial and other forms of discrimination, the lack of respect accorded to working-class people and the culture and practices of universities themselves” (p. 600). Thomas (2002) suggests that instead of ‘blaming’ the student the question should be asked “in what ways can institutions support non-traditional students to succeed?” (p. 425).

This diverse group of students differs from the ‘traditional’ student and can have many more pressures facing them that can be barriers to success. They may have family responsibilities, financial pressures, work commitments, and may be facing cultural and language differences (Kinnear, Sparrow, Boyce & Middleton, 2008). These complex issues that students face have been identified as factors in student failure (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007). Thomas (2002) suggests that accessing tertiary education for these students is more of a struggle than a right and recommends investigating ways to support them to succeed.
Cultural capital
Some of these ‘non-traditional’ students come with different cultural capital and learning needs (Zepke et al., 2005a). The term cultural capital was first coined by Bourdieu (1973) to explain the inequalities in class-based societal systems that are not clearly evident or explicit, but are based on culturally relevant skills, abilities, preferences, tastes, and norms that are used as currency in society. Cultural capital represents what is considered of value to the culture and can be viewed in a similar way to financial capital where the currency (capital) can be spent in different contexts as long as the context accepts the same currency. Problems exist when the currency/capital in the classroom is different to the students’ currency/capital, which can result in students being disadvantaged. Moreover the currency traded is always the currency of the dominate culture.

Winkle-Wagner (2010) refers to the metaphor of a card game to illustrate cultural capital. The cards a person holds in their hands are from two sources, the first cards are the ones the person is dealt (these represent what a person acquires through their background and sometimes by education). The second source of cards is gained by exchanging and requesting them (these represent deliberate acquisition through education). The notion of cultural capital suggests that some players are given a better hand to start with. Winkle-Wagner not only challenges this but suggests that questions need to be asked about who decides on the rules, which game is played and what cards hold value.

Thomas (2002) refers to the work of Bourdieu and suggests that education systems favour ‘white middle-class students’ and this perpetuates the cultural capital of a few. Robbins (1993) summarised Bourdieu’s ideas and argued that ‘working class’ students are disadvantaged and that middle-class students are given “structurally preferential treatment which was a kind of cheating” (as cited by Thomas, 2002, p. 431). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) likened middle-class students’ cultural capital as enabling them to feel like “a fish in water: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted” whereas for the ‘non-traditional’ student they feel like “a fish out of water” (as cited by Thomas, 2002, p. 431). Thomas goes on to say that students from diverse backgrounds will be more successful and persistent when the tertiary provider is inclusive and values
difference and celebrates diversity. Many institutions now have diverse student cohorts but their stories have not been heard (Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton, & Cullity, 2008). The student participants in this research are a cohort who come from diverse backgrounds and their stories are shared and discussed in the chapters that follow.

In order for students of all backgrounds to be successful and stay to complete their studies, it is important for them to not only access the cultural capital in the classroom but it is also important that the classroom accepts and trades in the students’ cultural capital. Yorke and Thomas (2003) suggest that “both curricula and pedagogy need to be amended” in response to the diverse student body (p. 68). This notion that institutions need to adapt to the diversity of the students is supported by new theories being constructed about tertiary education and retention and success. These new theories are discussed in the next section.

**Theories underpinning retention and success**

Retention and success are complex issues that cannot be addressed by a single solution. A range of theories have been put forward to address these complex issues. Some suggest a multi-theoretical approach is needed. This section of the review examines two major theories: firstly Vincent Tinto’s theory of student departure; and secondly the recent development of a theoretical framework that incorporates the concepts of both integration and adaptation based on the research by Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby and Zepke (2004).

Braxton and Hirschy (2005) promote a multi-theoretical approach to the problem of attrition and non-completion, also supported by Yorke and Longden (2004), who suggest that a variety of theories have relevance. Braxton and Hirschy present a review of four conceptual models before exploring Vincent Tinto’s model. The first of the four models is the economic model, where the costs and benefits are weighed by the student and if the costs exceed the benefits then the student may withdraw. This model is underpinned by the human capital theory where personal investments in tertiary study can bring returns for the student (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). The second model is organisational, which examines the role of the organisation, its structure and its behaviour and how this affects attrition. The third model is
psychological which focuses on psychological characteristics and processes, for example, aptitude, motivational states, dispositions, and attitudes of the student in relation to retention/attrition. Finally Braxton and Hirschy (2005) describe the sociological model, which examines the influence of the social structure on student retention/attrition.

Tinto (1993), like Braxton and Hirschy (2005), describes a variety of theories that underpin student departure. He points out that until recently psychological models have been used to explain student departure, and these models have tended to place the problem with the individual student, seeing the student in a deficit way. Tinto suggests this ignores the impact of the context and absolves the institution. At the other end of the continuum from psychological theories Tinto (1993) suggests there are a number of environmental theories which examine the social, economic, and organisational influences on students’ behavior (Tinto, 1993). These theories, like the psychological theories, could absolve the individual student of all responsibility. It is evident then that a multi-theoretical approach is needed.

**Tinto’s theory**

Tinto’s conceptual framework for student departure incorporates both psychological and environmental theories. Some literature refers to Tinto’s model as sociological but Yorke and Longden (2004) suggest that some components, such as student commitment and goals, imply psychological aspects. Yorke and Longden point out that their intentions in their book are mainly consistent with Tinto’s model, but suggest the psychological aspects of Tinto’s model are limited. They argue that because a student withdraws this does not necessarily imply a weakness on the student’s part.

Braxton & Hirschy (2005) suggest that Tinto’s theory on student departure “is the most tested, revised, and critiqued in the literature” (p. 66), with many authors continuing to refer to Tinto’s work (Braxton, 2000; Brunsden et al., 2000; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2003; Krause, 2005; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Rhodes & Nevill, 2004; Scott & Smart, 2005; Skene, Hogan & Brown, 2006; Wilcox, Winn Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2004; and Zepke, et al., 2003).
Tinto’s theoretical model on student departure, asserts that departure occurs when students fail to integrate into the social and academic worlds of the institution (Brunsden et al., 2000). His approach suggests that it is the level of integration between the student’s personal characteristics and attributes that influence commitment to course and institution on the one hand, and the characteristics of the university on the other hand, which determine decisions about persistence or withdrawal (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2003).

Tinto’s (1993) model has six progressive phases: student pre-entry attributes; early goals/commitment to study; institutional experiences (both academic and social); integration into the institution; goals/commitments to the institution; ending in a departure decision. Figure 1 below shows a simplified form of Tinto’s model of departure.

![Tinto's model of departure](image)

**Figure 1 Tinto's model of departure (Yorke, 1999, as cited in Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby, & Zepke, 2004, p.3)**

Tinto’s model of student departure is based on integrative theory and is assimilative in nature, where the student is expected to fit into the institution (Prebble et al., 2004). As a result this model has come under a lot of criticism (Zepke et al., 2003). Tinto’s theory is limited in his belief that students need to ‘break away’ from previous associations in order to be successfully integrated (Ma & Frempong, 2008). “Critics have argued that many postsecondary education students, especially religious and minority ones, depend exactly on traditional ties and associations to gain spiritual, cultural, and even material support that sustains them through postsecondary education” (Ma & Frempong, 2008, p. 5). It is no longer enough to integrate and
assimilate students into the institution. What is needed here is a new approach that does not blame the student but looks at what institutions can do to adapt to the changing nature of the student body. These newer theories regarding institutional adaptation have influenced this research and the recommendations made.

A new way forward

Braxton (2000) suggests that critics are in one of two camps, the first is revising and improving Tinto’s theory and the second involves starting from scratch with new theories. Prebble et al. (2004) argue that in their view many take Tinto’s theory and retain the integrative aspects and this continues the assimilation. They suggest that others discard Tinto’s theory and start afresh using adaptation, where the institution adapts to fit with students. This is similar to Braxton’s (2000) view who posits that the focus should be on institutions adapting and fitting around the student instead of the student integrating into the institution.

There is a growing body of literature that demonstrates both integration and adaptation. These models focus on

supporting students from diverse backgrounds to succeed within a dominant academic and social culture on campus, in order to increase the representation of these groups; whilst on the other hand, promoting cultural change in the tertiary institution to make it more welcoming to a broader range of students. (Skene et al., 2006, p. 3)

Leach and Zepke (2003) after reviewing research on the impact of support service on student outcomes propose a new discourse is emerging. They suggest that Tinto’s model is being challenged, with the introduction of institutional adaptation to meet the diverse needs of the students. In the summary of Leach and Zepke’s review of the research, Rivers (2005) highlights the findings which include 13 propositions which have been put into two categories. The first 10 propositions relate to Tinto’s model of supporting students’ integration into an institution and the last three propositions relate to institutions adapting to meet the diverse needs of the students.
Integration and adaptation are also advocated by Prebble et al. (2004); Rivers (2005); and Skene et al. (2006) as a framework for addressing issues of retention and success. With the increasing diversity of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of tertiary students in New Zealand, greater attention should be paid to practices that adapt to this diversity rather than requiring all students to adapt to a standard set of expectations. For this research the intention was to hear the voices of the students’ and academic staff and to make recommendations based on the concepts of integration and adaptation.

Factors of retention and success
Zepke et al. (2005a) in their New Zealand research found that “a considerable proportion of students in each institution considered full or partial withdrawal” (p. 15). The retention of students in their first year of tertiary study is crucial to their success and completion of the course. Students in their first year are more at risk of failure and this period can predict ongoing success or failure in further study (Pittaway & Moss, 2006). This section of the literature review identifies and examines the factors that influence retention and success. They are: student success; pre-entry preparation; finance, employment and family commitments; relationships; learning communities; student engagement; teaching and learning; persistence; and motivation.

Student success
Success is often taken for granted to mean the completion of a course or qualification. While Thomas and Quinn (2007) have referred to success as retention and achievement, they suggest that different providers define it differently. But there appear to be few authors who are explicit in its definition. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek (2006b) however, are clear in their definition and do not limit it to completion and qualifications: “By student success, we mean academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and postcollege performance” (p. 1). Adding to the notion that success can mean satisfaction and acquisition of knowledge, Yorke and Longden (2004) suggests that students who do not complete or achieve a
qualification may still be successful as a result of developing new skills and increasing their confidence.

Kuh et al. (2006a) go further and suggest that there are also ‘elements’ of success such as “appreciation for human differences, commitment to democratic values, a capacity to work effectively with people from different backgrounds to solve problems, information literacy and a well-developed sense of identity” (p. 6) which are harder to measure but are significant. They go on to argue that academic and social self-confidence and self-esteem are important elements of success especially for non-traditional students. This notion of success then is not only about gaining qualifications and gaining employment but it is also about students believing in themselves and seeing themselves as autonomous and lifelong learners. However, individual students have their own concepts of success and these must be taken into consideration. Students’ own views on success are an essential part of this research project.

**Pre-entry preparation**

Students who are unprepared for tertiary study are more at risk of withdrawing (Jansen & van der Meer, 2007). Many students have a shaky start in tertiary study and this can be because of a number of issues, including initially obtaining information that is inaccurate, choosing the wrong course or not being able to do the course they want, and being unaware of the amount of work and time involved in tertiary study (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). In an Australian study conducted in seven universities, one in five first year students wanted to change their course and one in five withdrew from one or more subjects, with almost one third of students unable to get into the course of their first preference (McInnis et al., 2000). In a study conducted by Yorke (1999, as cited in Yorke & Longden, 2004) 39 per cent of students who withdrew indicated that they did so due to choosing the wrong course. Zepke et al. (2003) propose that academic counseling and pre-enrolment advice should be made available to address these issues.
With the increase in students working part-time, some students lack an understanding of the workload required in tertiary study and this can lead to difficulties managing these (Pittaway & Moss, 2006). Pittaway and Moss (2006) suggest that one of the most effective ways to address this is to increase students’ awareness of the workload and expectations of the institute/university before they commence and during orientation. Zepke et al. (2005a) in their research with New Zealand students also wrote about workload and highlighted that 32 percent of students who considered leaving did so because of workload. Zepke et al. (2005a), in contrast to Pittaway and Moss, advocate for the institutions to ensure students have manageable workloads.

Another issue that students face in their first year is the academic rigor of tertiary study. Tinto (2009) suggests that many students are not prepared for this. However, Einfa1t and Turley (2009) argue that if students develop the necessary academic and literacy skills in their first year they are more likely to continue in their studies (as cited in Hooley, Morrison, Thomas & Marrs, 2011). Providing academic support early on is vital for students to stay in the programme. The question arises as to whether students know what academic support is available to them, and to what extent do they access this support? I was interested in exploring the students’ responses to this in my research.

Finance, employment and family commitments

McInnis et al.’s (2000) research found that students were spending less time on campus and worked longer hours in paid employment. Thomas (2002) provides evidence that highlights in 1999/2000 a quarter of all first year students were working more than 16 hours a week. Many students work out of necessity. Education is no longer free and many students leave tertiary study with huge debt. According to Heagney (2008) finances or lack thereof is a major concern for some students and this is one of the main reasons students withdraw.

Due to the changing face of the ‘student’ there are now many who have family commitments. It is no longer the young white middle-class male with little or no responsibilities that who makes up the majority of students, instead it includes mature students, many with family commitments and responsibilities, who may have
disabilities and who come from diverse backgrounds. A survey conducted by Callender (2002, as cited in Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003) revealed that ‘non-traditional’ students, such as minority ethnic groups, single parents and students from low socio-economic groups, had more concerns about their financial situation than did other students. In the New Zealand context Zepke et al. (2006) note that the main reason students withdraw is due to employment requirements, family commitments, and poor health. Zepke et al. (2005a) note in their research that 49 per cent of the students considering withdrawing and 42 percent of students who withdrew gave the reason that there was too much going on in their lives. With the growing diversity in the student population these issues are unlikely to diminish and as such are of particular interest to this research.

**Relationships with others**

Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure highlighted the importance of integration into the social and academic worlds. Social support is paramount to students’ retention and can have a powerful effect on the wellbeing of students (Rivers 2005; Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al. 2005). Zepke et al. (2003) suggest that retention and outcomes improve when institutions are concerned with the total wellbeing of the student and when they facilitate social networking outside of the classroom, although they caution against too much social activity as this can have an effect on academic outcomes. However, Tinto (2012) argues that because students have such busy lives with working, and commuting to their institution, the social support must come from within the classroom which becomes the students’ community. This notion of the classroom being the students’ community is discussed further in this chapter.

Wilcox et al. (2005) describe the experience of becoming a student as “constructing a new identity” (p. 712), where the student negotiates between the life they have left behind and the new life in tertiary study. They suggest that the support students get from their peers and staff helps in this negotiation. It is paramount for students to developed friendships with other students to enable them to gain emotional support (Krause, 2005; Tinto, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Wilcox et al.’s (2005) research found that out of the students who withdrew, three-quarters of them had difficulties making friends. Thomas (2002) suggests that when students do make friends and feel connected to the institution they are more likely to stay.
However, Zepke et al. (2005a) advise caution and argue that there is no evidence to suggest that socially isolated students are less likely to succeed than those who form friendships.

Students’ wellbeing is nurtured when they feel that they belong. The institution should be a place where students feel respected and valued for who they are. This involves celebrating diversity and allowing students to be themselves (Thomas, 2002). For friendships to occur, Prebble et al. (2005) suggest two types of actions: the first is providing suitable facilities for social interactions to occur and the other is providing special courses that bring students together into learning communities. Tinto (2000) believes that the classroom is a small community where learning is the central theme. He argues that while some students may form relationships while residing on or near campus, many others will only meet other students in the classroom. Membership into the classroom community can extend into the wider community of the institute (Tinto, 2000). This research has explored the relationships students have with one another and the level of support this provided. This is of particular relevance since the students are all members of one cohort that stay together for the duration of their studies.

**Learning communities**

Tinto (2000) explains that in their most simple form learning communities are where classes and students are grouped together in a way that enables students to all study the same material and connect with one another on a regular basis. In this research the term cohort is used instead of learning community but is similar in definition. Tinto suggests that while learning communities may vary there are three things they have in common. The first is ‘shared knowledge’ (p. 84), where the students construct shared experiences through all taking the same courses together which are interconnected. The second is ‘shared knowing’ (p. 84). This is achieved early on in the course with students getting to know each other personally and constructing shared knowledge together involving both social and academic aspects. The third thing learning communities have in common is ‘shared responsibility’ (p. 84). Learning occurs in collaborative groups where students are dependent on each other and where students are responsible to each other.
Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that students were more academically and socially engaged in learning communities and were more likely to persist in their studies. Students in learning communities saw themselves as receiving more encouragement and support and learning more (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). This support comes from each other, and helps to establish friendships (Tinto, 2000). Learning communities help students to integrate both socially and academically; an important aspect of Tinto's theory. Zepke et al. (2005a) recommend that institutions and staff should focus on fostering positive relationships, and establishing learning communities is one way this can be achieved. Unfortunately “most students continue to experience college as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others, and they engage in solo performance and demonstration in what remains largely a show-and-tell learning environment” (Tinto, 2000, p. 82).

The student participants in this research are all students from one cohort/learning community who stay together for the duration of their three year degree. However, sometimes students who fail a course or who come in from other programmes are required to join an existing cohort of students. Exploring the cohort system/learning community is another central tenet of this research.

**Student engagement**

A key factor to student success and retention is engagement (Crosling et al., 2009; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; Moir, 2010; Radloff & Coates, 2011). Bryson and Hand (2007) provide a review of the literature on engagement and suggest that there are some authors who regard student engagement simply as the active participation of the student in the classroom. Radloff and Coates (2011) also comment on a basic definition of engagement, where the focus is on the student being on task, but suggest this was a traditional view and there are now broader definitions. Bryson and Hand (2007) acknowledge other authors, such as Koljatic and Kuh (2001) who have a more contemporary view with more emphasis placed on the interactions between the faculty and students, and between students when discussing engagement. Additionally they suggest others recognise engagement as a dynamic and multifaceted issue.
Zepke, Leach, and Butler (2010) support this notion of it being dynamic and multifaceted and argue that engagement is influenced by numerous factors including the students’ active involvement and emotional commitment to learning; a focus on student motivation and effort; the role of the environment; the lecturers interactions with students; the interactions between the students; the structure and culture of the institution, and the external influences such as family and work commitments. This is supported by Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005) who include “institutional factors, the role of academic staff and classroom practices, and the role of peers and social involvement in the first year” (p. 34) as influences on engagement. The notion of engagement as being more than just students participating in academic activity is consistent with other authors who argue that engagement also includes the non-academic and social aspects of the student’s experience (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008; Tinto, 1993, 1997). This is supported by other authors who argue that a sense of belonging is crucial for engagement to occur (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; Schuetz, 2008).

To fully understand engagement, it is worth looking at the antonym, which could be dis-engagement or non-participation but Bryson and Hand (2007) use the term alienation. Students face the pressure of having to adapt to the academic requirements and join a new social group. This new environment may have very different values and beliefs to the student and can result in the student feeling alienated. Students who felt alienated and who did not feel a sense of belonging were less likely to enjoy study and more likely to withdraw (Bryson & Hand, 2007). This feeling of alienation can be likened to the feeling of being “a fish out of water” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 as cited in Thomas, 2002, p. 431) and is a major tenet of the cultural capital theory.

Bryson and Hand (2007) advocate that to develop a sense of belonging in students, teachers need to be actively engaged in building a rapport and strong relationships with students. Barnett and Coate (2005) suggest that engagement goes beyond strategies and techniques, and suggests instead that it is a “democratic-critical conception” which leads to success as an active citizen through participation and dialogue (as cited in Zepke et al., 2010, p. 2).
Teaching and Learning

Good teachers are a key factor in retention (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kinnear et al., 2008b; Prebble et al., 2004; Scott & Smart, 2005; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2004; Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Zepke et al., 2005; Zepke et al., 2003; Zepke et al., 2006; Zepke et al., 2010). Zepke et al. (2010) in their study looking at what engagement is and what influences it found that “teaching and teachers are most influential in engaging students (p. 12). This finding was also identified by Bryson and Hand (2007) who argued that teachers need to establish a learning environment that is inviting; collaborative; and challenging; where there are high expectations on the students and where teachers are available for dialogue. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) also found similar findings in their research suggesting that the environment the faculty provided had a powerful effect on student engagement and learning. Teachers then have a huge responsibility to provide a culturally safe environment for students and their beliefs and actions impact on how engaged the students are (Zepke et al., 2010).

Prebble et al. (2004) clearly outline what they see as the responsibility of teachers:

Good teachers: respect students; are fair and unbiased; culturally sensitive; approachable, available, helpful and caring; motivate their students; are interested in, excited and enthusiastic about their subject; use good verbal skills to explain it well and give ‘real life’ examples; are well organised; set clear goals and standards, use appropriate assessment and emphasise students’ independence. (p. 66)

Zepke et al. (2003) also comment on what good teaching is and come up with similar recommendations but also advocate “setting manageable workloads, using a variety of assessment methods [and] giving prompt and full feedback” (p. 3).

Good teaching takes time, and Yorke and Thomas (2003) highlight the dilemma that some teachers face with the pressure to both teach and conduct research and the effect this has on the structure of relationships between the teachers and students. This tension is also discussed by Wilcox et al. (2005) who found that some teachers felt it was not their role to provide pastoral care or to be involved in the retention of
students. They highlighted that this view was made worse by the time constraints and the conflicts they faced between their teaching and research roles. I was particularly interested in the provision of academic and pastoral care and the possible tensions academic staff face in balancing these different roles.

**Persistence**

Retention and persistence are sometimes seen as one and the same thing and while “retention is concerned with how long a student persists in their studies” (Scott, 2005, p. 4) they are not the same thing. Retention is how institutions measures the number of students who continue on in the programme, whereas persistence is what the student does to remain in the programme or as Hagedorn (2012) suggests “institutions retain and students persist” (p. 85). Retention is of benefit to the institution whereas persistence has benefits to the students (Tinto, 2005b).

So why do students persist? What helps them to be persistent? Tinto (2012) puts it simply, the more involved the students are both academically and socially the more likely they are to persist and succeed. Crosling, Heagney, and Thomas (2009) come to a similar conclusion suggesting that student interactions with their peers and with their teachers results in persistence and improves retention.

A different view on persistence is found in the notion of self-theories which reflects the concept that students construct theories about themselves and that these theories then influence how the student thinks, feels and behaves. Dweck (1999) believes that the self-theories that students construct about intelligence influence the way students approach learning. Dweck used two terms when discussing students’ self-theories about intelligence: ‘incremental beliefs’ (p. 2) and ‘entity beliefs’ (p. 3). Dweck believes that students construct theories about themselves across a spectrum from entity to incremental. York and Knight (2004) simplify Dweck’s terminology and replace them with ‘fixed beliefs’ and ‘malleable beliefs’ (p. 27). Students with fixed beliefs (entity beliefs) believe that the intelligence you are born with is fixed and they seek to confirm their beliefs by focusing on performance based goals. Goals they know they can achieve. Students with malleable beliefs (incremental beliefs) on the other hand see intelligence as not fixed, so challenges
can be opportunities for learning and with effort more can be achieved. Students who have more malleable beliefs are more inclined to persist (Yorke & Knight, 2004).

Yorke and Knight (2004) propose that the lecturers’ self-beliefs about intelligence have a significant bearing on student retention and suggest that this needs to be investigated further. Dweck (1999) believes that it is possible for students to move from ‘fixed beliefs’ towards ‘malleable beliefs’ and one way to do this is to start new early learning experiences by grounding these in what students are already good at. This research project does not investigate this but it does ask students what motivates them to keep going and their responses are discussed in relation to self-theories.

**Motivation**

Students persist when they are motivated and students’ motivation is affected by their self-theories. If a student has a fixed belief about their abilities, when they do not achieve their goals they can lose motivation. However, students who have a more malleable belief about their abilities are more likely to stay motivated even when they don’t succeed (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Another way of looking at motivation is through the lens of self-determination. This self-determination theory is a theory of motivation, where the student is motivated and fully engaged when the following three psychological needs are met: belonging; competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000 as cited by Schuetz, 2008).

Schutetz (2008) summarizes the three psychological needs, firstly suggesting that a sense of ‘belonging’ is the need to be connected to others through supportive and caring relationships where the student feels valued (p. 311). This can result in long-term engagement where the student develops competence and autonomy. This concept of students needing a sense of belonging has been widely acknowledged as an important factor for engagement (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; Schuetz, 2008). Zepke and Leach (2010) argue that it is not the responsibility of the student to seek a sense of belonging. Rather, it is the institution that needs to adapt their culture to make students feel they belong.
Secondly Schuetz (2008) explains the notion of competence as students being effective and performing well by “exploring and trying to master the environment” (p. 311). Zepke and Leach (2010) argue that when students feel competent they were more motivated to participate in active learning even when they had Experienced failure. They go on to say that academic competence is enhanced when students participate in collaborative learning. Schuetz concurs with this and suggests that when students are supporting others and are receiving support from others, their sense of belonging and their feelings of competence and autonomy grow.

The third psychological need that Schuetz (2008) explains is ‘autonomy’ (p. 311). Autonomy is part of self-determination, and includes the desire to be self-organised, to make one’s own choices and to have control of their own behaviour. Schuetz (2008) goes on to say that institutions need to provide environments that foster autonomy by providing choice and allowing the students the freedom “to pursue own agendas in a supportive structure that sets clear expectations” (p. 312). Zepke and Leach (2010) argue that when students work autonomously, feel competent and relate to other students and the lecturers they are more likely to be motivated. These psychological needs are intrinsic in nature and are influenced greatly by the extrinsic environment.

Intrinsic motivation comes from “internal self-controls” which involves engaging for self-enjoyment and self-satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand is driven by the desire to gain something outside of the individual (Pisarik, 2009, p. 1242). However, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are not exclusive and more often than not a student may be motivated from within but the reason that they are enrolled in tertiary education is to receive the award at the end. Individuals have different motivations for persisting in their studies and this research seeks to explore these motivations.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed relevant literature regarding the issues students face in their first year of study. Historically students were typically young white middle-class single males with no or few responsibilities. Today’s students are diverse with many coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and many have family and work
commitments and face differences in culture and language. Conversely governments in the western world are concerned with fiscal policy and are requiring an ever-increasing accountability in exchange for funding. Consequently tertiary institutions are under increased pressure to retain students and achieve high completion rates. The cost of attrition and non-completion for all stakeholders is high.

There is a plethora of literature about retention, success and the issues that students face and this body of literature continues to grow. Much of this literature focuses on the common factors students face in their first semester which include: preparedness prior to entry; personal issues students face such as family, work and financial commitments; relationships with other students; contributing to learning communities and being engaged; teaching and learning and the role of the lecturer; and the notions of success, motivation and perseverance.

A range of theories address the issues of student attrition and non-completion and the model preferred for this research is of integration and adaptation advocated by Prebble et al. (2004). After listening to the voices of students and the academic staff involved with these students, this research has examined the findings in relation to the relevant aspects of the integration and adaptation theory.

Highlighted in the literature was the call for researchers to find local solutions specific to individual institutions. This research has explored the issues for one cohort and made recommendations based on the findings of this research.
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

Introduction
In this chapter the methodological approach and research design that underpins this research is discussed and justified. It explains the methods and procedures followed and discusses the importance of reliability, validity, trustworthiness and triangulation. Ethical considerations are also explained.

Research questions
The key aim of this research is to investigate and gain an insight into the experiences of one cohort of students, as well as to explore what is needed for students to be successful and complete their studies. The main question for this research is:

What do the experiences of first semester students from a Bachelor Degree programme (early childhood education) reveal concerning success and completion?

This main question led to the following sub-questions:

What factors do students identify as having enabled them to successfully complete their first semester?

What factors do students identify as barriers they face in their first semester?

What factors do the staff on the Bachelor Degree programme identify as enabling students to successfully complete their first semester and what barriers do the students face?

What motivates students to be successful in their studies?

Methodology
The underlying ontological view for this research is one of constructivism. Guba and Lincoln (1990) assert that constructivism distinguishes the human world as different
to the physical world and as such must be studied in a different way (as cited in Patton, 2002). The constructivist believes that

Because human beings have evolved the capacity to interpret and construct reality—indeed, they cannot do otherwise the world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense, as the sun is real but is “made up” and shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs. (Patton, 2002, p. 96)

This does not mean that constructivists believe that people construct reality itself but that people construct knowledge about reality (Patton, 2002).

Constructivists (also known as constructionists) believe that social phenomena are constructed by society’s members and that this construct continues to be revised (Bryman, 2004) and results in multiple realities (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2002) concurs, calling it social constructivism and claims that individuals seek to understand their world by developing subjective meanings from their experiences. Creswell suggests that individuals can hold multiple meanings and these meanings are formed through interactions with others. It is these multiple meanings that student participants have formed about their experiences in their first year that I was interested in and wanted to explore and make explicit. As a constructivist researcher I also needed to recognise as Creswell suggests that my interpretation was also a construction where I made sense of and created meaning from the meaning of others.

This notion of constructing meanings fits with my epistemological beliefs of viewing knowledge in a personal and subjective manner. My intention was to explore the students’ reality through their sharing of personal experiences and beliefs. This involved subjectivity and interpretation. This epistemological stance can be referred to as interpretivism (Bryman, 2004). Interpretivism is also referred to by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) as a paradigm.

**Interpretive Paradigm**

This interpretive paradigm fits well with my ontological and epistemological beliefs because as Cohen et al. (2007) suggest “the interpretive paradigms strive to
understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors” (p. 26). In this research I have sought to explore the students’ and academics’ understanding about the experiences of students in their first year of tertiary study. When researcher and participants co-construct meaning together from multiple realities this is known as a constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This research was designed to find out how individual students viewed their first year experience in a Bachelor Degree programme. I was interested in how they constructed their reality, what enabled the student participants to be successful, what barriers had the students faced and what motivated them to keep going. I wanted to explore their reality and as Cohen et al. (2007) suggest, for each of the participants this realities is constructed differently. Constructivist-interpretive researchers seek to capture these differences through describing, analysing and interpreting the complex perspectives to make sense of the participants’ socio-cultural contexts (Borko, Liston & Whitcomb, 2007). This constructivist-interpretive paradigm led naturally to the conducting of a qualitative research methodology using a case study research design.

Qualitative research

Qualitative researchers view reality as being socially constructed and seek to gain an insight into the individuals’ perceptions of their world. Qualitative research is bound by the context and focuses on a small number of participants in order to share their experiences with others. Because it is constrained by the context, generalisations cannot be made (Mutch, 2005). Instead qualitative research is seen as a meaning-making process (Crotty, 1998). Thus, qualitative research emphasises words instead of quantification in the collecting and analysing of data (Bryman, 2004).

The qualitative research methodology is appropriate for this research because I explored the experiences of a small group of first year students in one cohort. The data collected provided me with a rich thick description. I was aware that this was an inductive process and I needed to be open to whatever emerged from the data. Bryman (2004) suggests that qualitative research is constructionist, interpretivist and inductivist. Contrary to deductive research, where research sets out to prove a theory, inductive research involves research generating theories (Bryman, 2004; Tolich & Davidson, 2003; Wellington, 2000). Theories are generated from the data collection and analysis process and are firmly grounded in this process. The purpose
of the theories is to explain why things happens the way they do and to help us understand complex situations in a clearer and easier way. In qualitative research these theories are generated from the data. However, it is naive to think that the researcher has no theories prior to conducting the research. Therefore it was crucial that I acknowledge my own prior knowledge, assumptions and theories and put these to one side as best I can in order to be open to hear the voices of the participants (Bryman, 2004). In this way my own understanding and beliefs could be challenged and I could construct new meaning and theory from the findings.

**Research design - case study**

Because this research investigated student experiences at one tertiary institution a case study design was appropriate. Case studies are often chosen as a strategy when conducting qualitative research (Stake, 2000) especially when the research asks ‘how?’, ‘who?’, ‘why?’ or ‘what?’ questions (Yin, 1994, p. 13). A case study involves the examination and analysis of a single case often with a location such as an organisation (Bryman, 2004). Cohen et al. (2007) concur suggesting that a case study is “a bounded system” (p. 253) and Merriam (1998) agrees seeing “the case as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). Mutch (2005) suggests that a case study could be a person, a setting or a concept that is bounded and provides rich description of that case. In this research the ‘case’ that was studied was one cohort of students enrolled in a Bachelor Degree programme in one tertiary institution. Yin (1994) describes a case study as being well-suited when the phenomenon’s variables cannot be separated from the context. This applies to this research where the students’ experiences are bound to the context. This applies to this research where the students’ experiences are bound to the context. Merriam (1998) argues that there should be limits around the number of people involved and the time frame. In this research the number of people involved is limited to the students in one cohort and the academic staff who taught this cohort.

**Characteristics of case studies**

Case studies can be identified by their characteristics. Merriam (1998) provides three characteristics, ‘particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic’ (p. 29). ‘Particularistic’ refers to the focus the case study has on a situation or phenomenon, making it particularly relevant for practical problems. This research sought to find out what the
experiences were for one cohort of students and the case study design lends itself well to this.

The ‘descriptive’ characteristic of a case study refers to the rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon that the case study provides. This description provides an insight into a specific social reality (Cohen et al., 2007). Data was collected for this research through a questionnaire and two focus groups. The first focus group involved the student participants from the chosen cohort and the second focus group involved the academic staff who had taught this cohort.

Finally the ‘heuristic’ characteristic refers to the illuminated understanding that the case can provide. Stake (1981) highlights this notion of ‘heuristic’ suggesting that “previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied” (as cited by Merriam, 1998, p. 30). This can provide insights into how things get to be the way they are. The intention of this research is to provide such insights so that recommendations can be made to improve the experiences for first year students and result in an increase in retention and success.

While there has been a plethora of research on the topic of retention and success in tertiary education there are calls for researchers to give more prominence to the individual context (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Haggis, 2004; McInnis et al., 2000; Zepke et al., 2005c). Bryson and Hand (2007) suggest that when the focus is on a smaller individual context the data can be richer and more complex, giving more emphasis to diversity rather than making generalisations. This is supported by Zepke et al. (2005c) who suggest data gained from single institutions, as opposed to multi-institutional studies, may find answers to retention problems more easily.

**Types of case studies**

Stake (2000) suggests there are three types of case studies: ‘intrinsic case study’; ‘instrumental case study’; and ‘collective case study’ (p. 437). An ‘intrinsic case study’ is one where the researcher wants to get a better understanding of the case in question. The researcher is interested in this case alone and not because of how it may represent other similar cases. This type of case is not trying to produce
theories, it is chosen because this particular case is of intrinsic interest (Stake, 2000). An ‘*instrumental case study*’ is chosen when the researcher wants to provide insight into a phenomenon or to provide another perspective of the phenomenon and is of external interest, adding to existing knowledge on the phenomenon (Stake, 2000). The final type of case study is the ‘*collective case study*’ which examines the phenomenon in several cases, and the cases are chosen to help understand and theorise the phenomenon in the wider context (Stake, 2000). My research is first and foremost intrinsic but also draws on the instrumental case study. The purpose of the research is primarily to investigate students’ experiences in one institution, and how this can contribute to the improvement of retention and success in that institution; an intrinsic model. But it is also hoped that through this research recommendations will be made that will be of value to my own practice, to other academics and to institutions who may have similar problems; an instrumental model.

Case studies are both process and product orientated. Firstly case studies are a method of collecting, organising and analysing data, a process of inquiry (Patton, 2002) and secondly they are designed to provide comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information about the case in question, producing a product (Patton, 2002). This is also espoused by Stake (2000) who says that a case study is both a process of inquiry and a product of that inquiry.

**Advantages of case studies**

Being able to investigate one cohort in one institution has a number of advantages. Firstly this research provides a descriptive picture or story about the experiences of one cohort of students in a Bachelor’s Degree programme in one institution and offers a holistic portrayal of retention in this institution. Burns (2000) suggest that case studies provide intense and rich subjective data that can shed light on phenomena, and its variables. The information gained from such data can lead to improvement (Merriam, 1998). Case studies can provide a real insight into the situation/phenomena and may provide valuable information that can help with understanding other similar situations (Burns, 2000; Cohen et al., 2007). This real insight may hold the key to new understandings and contribute to building theory (Burns, 2000) about retention in tertiary education and can help with developing further research. I have attempted to write this case study in everyday language to
make it easier for readers to understand, enabling it to have wider audience and making the findings more accessible (Cohen et al., 2007).

**Criticisms of case studies**

Despite the benefits of using case study as a research design, there is a lot of criticism of this approach, with some academics suggesting it lacks respectability and legitimacy (Cohen et al., 2007). One of the major criticisms of the case study is that it can only describe one situation and the findings cannot be generalised to other situations and as such does not have external validity (Bryman, 2004). This criticism is often based on the belief that generalising theory is the only valid aim of the research but this is not the intent of the case study (Burns, 2000). Stake (2000) suggests that “the search for particularity competes with the search for generalizability” (p. 439) where the focus of the case study is on the unique atypical characteristics of that study and not on obtaining generalisations. This does not mean that the researcher avoids generalisations, rather the generalisations are in the context of their case, they are drawn from within the case where the researcher summarises complex meanings into reports where readers can draw their own conclusions (Stake, 2000). Stake also suggests that case studies can contribute to generalisations but warns researchers to focus on the case itself and not to commit to generalising at the expense of the case.

This case study focuses first and foremost on the programme and the institution where the research has been conducted, with the intention of improving the practices and procedures. Nevertheless my hope is that I will find meaning for my own practice as a lecturer on a similar programme. It is also my intention to share this research with others through a conference and articles, however, I will clearly state that the findings are contextually bound, and leave it up to the audience or reader to interpret and create their own meaning. As Burns (2000) notes many advocates of case studies believe that the readers of the report are the ones who generalise based on their own interpretation and meaning making from the report.

Another criticism of case study is that they are not able to be easily cross-checked and the researcher could be subjective, selective, and biased in selecting the data and in the interpretation (Burns, 2000; Cohen et al., 2007). Merriam (2000) argues
that the researcher is often left to rely on their own skills to collect, collate and analyse the data and that an unethical researcher could skew the findings based on their own biases. The opportunity for the researcher to advance their own views and beliefs is strong while external checks are weak (Burns, 2000). Because this research is part of a master’s programme I have been accountable to my supervisor and have followed the ethical processes required. The processes and protocols of this research are clearly stated in this report to insure reliability and validity.

This research was time-consuming and I ended up with a plethora of data to analyse, which Burns (2000) says is another flaw of the case study and this can make it extremely difficult to avoid selectivity and bias. I was aware of this and to counter this I met regularly with my supervisor to discuss the data and the themes that emerged.

**Reliability**

In research, the notion of something being reliable in the traditional sense, is when it can be reproduced and gain the same results in a different context and at a different time and by different researchers (Davidson & Tolich, 2003a). Quantitative research draws its strength on its ability to be replicated (Davidson & Tolich, 2003a). In case studies reliability is not possible in the traditional sense, and indeed is pointless because the very essence of a case study is its uniqueness (Janesick, 2000). Instead Burns (2000) suggests reliability relies on “dependability that the results make sense and are agreed on by all concerned” (p. 465). To improve reliability I have tried to make the process of the research explicitly clear in this report, and ensured triangulation took place. Davidson & Tolich (2003a) highlight that unlike quantitative research, qualitative research provides a “precise (or valid) description of what people said or did in a particular research location” (p. 34) and its validity is strengthened by triangulation. To provide that validity and triangulation I used a questionnaire that included some quantitative data. I have endeavoured to be true to the participants by capturing their voices verbatim in the findings chapter. I have intentionally kept my interpretation and critique for the discussion chapter. Merriam (1998) suggests that providing rich thick descriptions helps the reader to “determine how closely their situation matches the research situation and hence, whether the finding can be transferred” (p. 211).
**Validity**

Validity refers to the researcher measuring what they set out to measure (Mutch, 2005; Bryman, 2004). Burns (2000) describe validity as the researcher giving a detailed account of how the research was carried out, in conjunction with triangulation. Validity involves the way the research is designed and conducted; how it is selected, what methods are used and how they are interpreted (Burns, 2000). Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that validity in qualitative research “might be addressed through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher” (p. 131). They go on to propose that with qualitative research validity is not an absolute state. Instead the researcher should strive to “minimize invalidity and maximise validity” (p. 131). I have minimised invalidity by making the whole process visible in a systematic way and working closely with my supervisor.

There are many types of validity but the main types are; face validity, construct validity, internal validity and external validity. Face validity is very much as it sounds, on the face of things or from a quick glance the research seems valid. On the surface it seems valid. Babbie (2007) defines face validity as “that quality of an indicator that makes it seem a reasonable measure of some variable” (p. 146). Construct validity requires multiple sources of evidence and the establishment of a chain of evidence that connects parts together. Cohen et al. (2007) describe construct validity in qualitative research as demonstrating “that the categories that the researchers are using are meaningful to the participants themselves” (p. 138) and suggest that they should reflect the actual experience of the participants. Internal validity in qualitative research relates to whether there is a good match between the data collated and the theories the research develops (Bryman, 2004). The internal validity of this research is the checks made by my supervisor, by the markers of this research and by the readers. Finally external validity relates to generalisation as discussed in the criticisms of the case study as a research design. These types of validity have their origins in quantitative research and come from the premise that there are absolute truths (Bryman, 2004). Some writers argue that qualitative research should be judged by different criteria (Bryman, 2004). Lincoln
and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2004) propose an alternative criteria; trustworthiness.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2012) trustworthiness has four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (p. 390). Credibility is similar to internal validity, but because there are several possible accounts of an event or phenomenon it is checked for credibility by submitting the findings to the participants for validation (Bryman, 2012). The participants in this research were given a copy of the relevant focus group transcripts to check and to make changes if they wanted to. Transferability is similar to external validity and refers to the encouragement of ‘thick description’ which provides others with the foundation to make their own judgements about transferability (Bryman, 2012, p. 392) (see criticisms of case studies). Dependability is similar to reliability and involves adopting an ‘auditing’ process. This means the researcher keeping all documentation of the research process and having peers audit this documentation to check that procedures have been followed (Bryman, 2012). Because this research is part of the fulfilment of a Masters degree I had the support of my supervisor and shared the process and documentation with her. Confirmability is linked to objectivity and while objectivity is impossible in qualitative research confirmability relates to the researcher showing ‘good faith’ where the researcher has kept their overt bias, values and theoretical ideas out of the research (Bryman, 2012).

**Triangulation**

At the heart of validity is the notion of triangulation (Davidson & Tolich, 2003a). Triangulation refers to the use of two or more different methods of data collection to study some event or phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2007). In qualitative research triangulation attempts to provide different views of the phenomenon from more than one perspective. “Essentially, if different sources of information are saying the same things, then the social researcher can have greater confidence that the findings are valid” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003a, p. 34). In order to understand experiences no single method can be used, instead qualitative researchers use a range of ‘interconnected interpretive methods’ in an attempt to gain more understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 19). This small scale case study has collected data
through a mixture of methods. These methods are a questionnaire, and two focus groups. The questionnaire was given out to 19 students from one cohort and from this group seven volunteered to take part in a focus group. To try to effect some triangulation another focus group was conducted with four academic staff who had taught the cohort.

**Research methods**

While this research is based on a constructivist, interpretivist epistemology I have chosen to use a range of methods for data collection and analysis. The methods used are a questionnaire (accessing both qualitative and quantitative data) and two focus groups (qualitative method). My rationale for using these methods was threefold: to provide some triangulation; for the quantitative data in the questionnaire to inform the focus groups; and to gain demographic information about the student participants (Creswell, 2002).

Because this research is essentially qualitative and is constructive, interpretive and inductive (Bryman, 2012) it was crucial I kept an open mind to hear the voices of the participants. I was conscious of my own theories and beliefs about retention and success and the need to avoid bias by putting these to one side while collecting and analysing data. This research is not about my own journey and beliefs but about the students in one cohort in their first year of a Bachelor's Degree programme and the academic staff who taught them.

**Setting**

This case study was conducted on a satellite campus in a tertiary institution in New Zealand. It has looked at one specific cohort in this institution who had just completed their first year of a Bachelor Degree programme. The reason this cohort was chosen was because it was similar to my own setting giving it relevance for my own practice. Ideally I would have preferred to have conducted this research with students I taught but this would have been extremely challenging ethically.

The key aim of this research was to investigate and gain an insight into the experiences of a small group of students in one cohort and to explore what is needed for students to be successful and complete their studies. This small scale
case study has collected data through a mixture of methods, qualitative and also supported by some quantification of the data. These were:

- A questionnaire given to 19 students in the chosen cohort
- A student focus group consisting of seven students who had filled out the questionnaire and
- An academic staff focus group consisting of four people who had taught the cohort in their first semester

The questionnaire and focus groups gave me plenty of data to analyse and ensured triangulation (Cohen et al., 2007).

**Questionnaires**

Questionnaires are a useful tool for collecting information from a large number of participants (Bryman, 2004; Mutch, 2005) and are useful for providing structured data that can be comparatively easy to analyse (Cohen et al., 2007). There were only 21 students in the chosen cohort but I wanted to hear from as many of the students as possible and the questionnaire was the most appropriate method. However, as Bell (2007) points out questionnaires are extremely difficult to design and the researcher needs to know exactly what it is he/she wants to find out before any method can be chosen. My decision to use a questionnaire was three-fold; firstly it was to gain an understanding of who the students in the cohort were, for example, their age, ethnicity, gender, and academic history. Secondly the questionnaire was designed to find out more about their experiences, such as, did they consider withdrawing? What support services were they aware of? Did they access services? And thirdly the questionnaire was used as a tool to identify students who were interested in taking part in a focus group where they could discuss their experiences in more detail.

When designing the questionnaire I carefully considered what it was I wanted to know (Hinds, 2000). Because this research was investigating students’ experiences in their first year in relation to retention and success I wanted to make sure the questions I asked were relevant and covered the research question and sub-
questions. I was conscious of some of the issues that researchers face when designing questionnaires. Bell (2007) and Cohen et al. (2007) provide some guidelines for writing questionnaires suggesting that care needs to be taken with the language used. They warn against asking leading questions, questions that are biased or easy to misinterpret, and double-barrelled questions. I took this advice and spent some time looking at the questionnaires used in other research projects. This helped me with the wording and types of questions to ask and how to present the questions.

I decided on a combination of both open and closed questions. The open-ended questions gave the student participants the opportunity to write short answers about their own experiences. Cohen et al. (2007) suggest open-ended questions are useful when investigating complex issues which are not easily answered, and where the answers may be unknown. Open-ended questions can also provide a richer form of data. There can be limitations to using open-ended questions, especially if a lot of information is sought and the questionnaire is too long. This can result in the participants skipping questions or shortening their responses (Cohen et al., 2007). Open-ended questions can also take longer to collate and interpret.

Closed questions on the other hand are more focused, quicker to complete and easier to collate and interpret (Cohen et al., 2007; Hinds, 2000). However, they do not allow the respondents to make any explanations about their response and there is the potential for bias in them (Cohen et al., 2007). One type of closed question used a lot in my questionnaire was a Likert scale. This scale allowed me to make a range of statements that the student participants could rate. The advantage of using a Likert scale is that they can provide information about the attitudes, perceptions and opinions of the participants (Cohen et al., 2007). To produce the best results from the Likert scale I provided a comment box at the end of each Likert scale. The downside to this was that when the participants wrote in the comment box it was not always clear which statement the comment referred to.

I decided on a format of four sections with 24 questions in total. They were:

1. Background information;
2. Questions using a five point Likert scale;
3. Questions with an open response; and
4. One question on taking part in a focus group.

The first section consisted of 12 questions that provided information on the demographics of the students for example their age, ethnicity, gender, academic history. It also provided some information on their employment and study habits and on whether they had considered withdrawing from the programme and why. This was to construct an understanding of who the student participants were and their circumstances.

The second section consisted of seven subsections on the students experiences in their first semester of study. These subsections covered the following seven topics using a five point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree): 1. Prior to starting the programme; 2. Engagement with the transition into the institution; 3. Engagement with peers; 4. Institutional support; 5. Academic engagement; 6. Outside influences; and 7. Student views on success. At the end of each Likert scale there was a box for comments as noted above.

The third section of the questionnaire had a mix of closed and open-ended questions that required the student participant to write a written response. And the final section was a tearaway section that asked the student participant if they were interested in taking part in a focus group (Appendix A).

Delivery of the questionnaire
A week before the questionnaire was given out I met with the cohort of students in their class and explained my research. I gave out an information sheet (Appendix B) explaining the research design to each student and what would happen to the information if they agreed to take part. I also discussed confidentiality (Bell, 2007). On the day the questionnaire was given out there were 19 students present. Again I explained the research and the ethical considerations, and provided opportunity for students to ask questions. All 19 students agreed to take part and signed consent forms (Appendix C). I collected the consent forms and handed out the questionnaire but left at this point and the class lecturer collected the questionnaires and returned
them to me once they had finished. It is important to note here that I, as the researcher have no direct connection to these students apart from meeting with them for the purposes of this research.

All information was anonymous. The last question of the questionnaire asked participants if they were interested in attending a focus group. The participants that were interested were asked to provide their name and to tear off the perforated form and hand this in separately to the questionnaire. All participants were asked to tear off the perforated form to ensure anonymity for the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was then analysed by manually entering all the questionnaires into the programme SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey, 2012). SurveyMonkey is an online survey tool that allows users to generate reports, and create excel spreadsheets. From the SurveyMonkey programme excel spreadsheets were created. This enabled the data to be easily transferred into graphs and percentages. I also utilised memoing to analyse the data that SurveyMonkey did not generate. This involved writing on post-it notes on individual questionnaires highlighting areas of interest and asking questions for further follow up.

**Focus groups**

From the questionnaires five students expressed interest in attending the student focus group. The focus group was to take place straight after class four weeks after the questionnaire. Only three students who had originally shown interest in taking part in the focus group turned up. One had left to travel overseas and the other was unwell. When other students heard there were only three participants four more students volunteered to take part. There were seven students in total who took part in the focus group. These students all filled out consent forms (Appendix D) and were again given information about the research.

A focus group is a group interview which discusses a specific issue with a small number of participants, and where the participants interact with one another to construct meaning (Bryman, 2004). The participants are selected because of their relationship to the phenomena being investigated (Bryman, 2004). Focus groups are useful because they are time efficient and can gather information about people’s
experiences, thoughts, feelings and ideas about the phenomena (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Mutch, 2005). They enable the researcher to explore the experiences and opinions of a small number of people quickly. Krueger (1994) suggest that focus groups can also increase the sample size of qualitative data without requiring a dramatic increase in time.

One of the biggest advantages of focus groups is the synergy of the group, where group interaction stimulates more discussion about a given topic or issue and where thoughts and ideas are bounced off one another. Krueger (1994) argues that “inhibitions often are relaxed in group situations, and the more natural environment prompts increased candor by respondents” (p. 34). Focus groups are also socially orientated which fits well with a constructivist paradigm.

Another advantage of focus groups is that they allow the researcher to probe and find out more. The researcher can ask for clarification and ask for more information. This probing allows the researcher to explore unexpected issues that may not be possible in other forms of data collection (Krueger, 1994).

For this research there were two focus groups. The first consisted of seven student participants who were part of the chosen cohort (discussed above). The second focus group consisted of four academic staff who had taught the chosen cohort of students in their first semester. Five academic staff were invited but one was not able to take part. Two administrative staff were also invited to participate because they had been involved with the students in their first semester. One administrator was unable to attend and the other did not respond to the invitation. All of the academic staff were given an information sheet outlining the research (Appendix E)

Both focus groups had very similar questions (Appendix F & G). The only difference was that the students talked about their own experiences while the academic staff talked about what they perceived were the experiences for students.

The members of each focus group were known to each other. The students had been together for at least one semester and the academic staff had all been teaching
in the same programme for at least one year. The academic focus group took place six weeks after the student focus group.

**Data analysis**
The focus groups lasted for 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The data gathered from the focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis (Mutch, 2005). Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research. Initially I analysed the transcript through coding the quotes into categories. Coding involves the process of collating the data into categories that make the data meaningful (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Loftland, 2006). Davidson and Tolich (2003b) recommends coding while transcribing and making notes about the overall quality of the data collection process, which relates to Lofland et al.’s “memoing”. Memoing involves writing down key ideas about the data and the categories chosen and how these categories are connected to each other and may even include noting down the process and procedures followed when collecting the data (Lofland et al., 2006). Davidson and Tolich (2003b) recommend analysing each set of data after each method, which will enable the researcher to draw on the results to reformulate the instruments used to collect subsequent data. When analysing data it is important to adhere to issues of validity and trustworthiness (see previous sections).

**Ethics**
“An ‘ethic’ is a moral principle or a code of conduct which actually governs what people do” (Wellington, 2000 as cited in Mutch, 2005, p. 76). As a researcher I am in a position of power and what I do with the information gathered can impact on the participants.

All Master’s research must follow the ethical process each institution adheres to. So my first consideration was to meet the ethical requirements of Unitec. Because I was conducting research in another institution it was also important to meet their ethical requirements. As Cohen et al. (2007) argue all research and potentially each stage of the research may be a source of ethical problems so it was imperative that I identified all possible issues and took steps to ensure I met ethical standards. The following are the steps I took to ensure I met my ethical obligations:
• All participants were fully informed about all aspects of the research and consent was obtained before the participants took part (see appendices B-D)
• All participants were free to choose whether they participated or not and were able to withdraw at anytime.
• Permission was sought and gained from the institute and the specific faculty to conduct the research (and follow their ethical requirements)
• At no time did I deceive or coerce participants
• All data provided was kept confidential and anonymity was provided by the use of pseudonyms and by making sure any identifiable features where not included. While I was able to guarantee anonymity of the participants I was not able to provide confidentiality within the focus groups due to its shared nature, however, I did make it clear in the focus groups their ethical responsibility to each other to maintain confidentiality.
• The participants were not asked questions outside the research topic
• Participants were informed they could contact the Research Supervisor or the Unitec Research Ethics Committee Secretary to address any concerns they had via the information sheet which they kept.
• Participants were informed of the time frame the research was to be kept for and how the findings will be disseminated (based on the criteria in Mutch, 2005).

In the interest of validity I emailed all participants of the focus groups and sent them the relevant transcript for them to check and to make changes as necessary. Two of the student participants were asked to clarify something they had said because it was unclear on the audio tape. The participants were invited to email me back within a two week period before I started the analysis.

All data collected is kept securely under lock and key in a filing cabinet and will be stored for a period of five years to ensure ethical procedures are followed. After the five year period the data will be destroyed. Bryman (2004) highlights the importance of maintaining confidentiality of research documents to uphold the rights of the participants to be protected from harm.
My research involved Māori participants and as such I sought supervision from an appropriate Māori Kaiārahi. I met with this person on two separate occasions. Both of these meetings were informal where we discussed the research and I shared the documentation (questionnaire, information sheets, consent forms and focus group questions).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the ontological and epistemological beliefs underpinning the research and outlined the research design whilst also addressing issues of validity and reliability. The data collection methods were discussed along with how the data was analysed. It finished with a discussion of the ethical issues I needed to address.
CHAPTER FOUR - FINDINGS

Introduction
The primary focus of this research is to investigate and gain an insight into the experiences of first year students in one cohort undertaking a Bachelor Degree in early childhood education at a satellite campus of a New Zealand tertiary institution. This research focuses on exploring what is needed for success and completion and to explore factors that have enabled students to be successful and what barriers the students faced in their first semester.

Three phases of data collection were undertaken. The first phase was a questionnaire given out to one cohort of student participants. This contained both quantitative and qualitative data. The second phase was a focus group with students who had completed the questionnaire and who had agreed to take part and the third phase was a focus group with academic and support staff. Both of the focus groups were qualitative. Quantitative methods describe a phenomenon numerically, while qualitative methods describe a phenomenon using rich descriptive words (Mutch, 2005). This chapter analyses the findings from the three phases of data collection.

Questionnaires
The first phase of data collection for this research was a questionnaire. This questionnaire was given out to one specific cohort of students in their first semester. The research investigated the experiences of these students in their first semester. What enabled them to be successful, what barriers did they face and what motivated them to keep going?

The questionnaire was designed for three reasons. Firstly the questionnaire was used to give some background information on the demographics of the students in this cohort, for example their age, ethnicity, gender, academic history. Secondly the questionnaire was designed to find out about the students’ experiences in their first semester such as: did they consider withdrawing; were they aware of the support services; did they access the support services; what had enabled them to be successful; what barriers did they face; and what motivated them to keep going?
Thirdly I wanted to identify those who would be interested in taking part in a focus group where they could discuss their experiences in more detail. The questionnaire can be viewed as Appendix A.

This cohort had 21 students in total. A week before the questionnaire was given out students were given an information sheet explaining the research design. On the day the questionnaire was given out there were 19 students present. All 19 students agreed to participate. They signed consent forms and filled out the questionnaire.

There were 24 questions asked with a combination of open and closed questions. Some of the questions asked were followed with an opportunity to make comment or with another related question. The questionnaire was divided into four sections which were:

1. Background information;
2. Questions on the students experience using a five point Likert Scale (strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree);
3. Questions that required a written response; and
4. A final question that asks the participant if they would like to take part in a focus group.

It is important to note here that the questionnaire provided a lot of rich data and not all of the data collected and analysed was used in this thesis. Some demographic information has been provided along with the data that relates to the research questions.

**Background information**

This section provides some information about who the student participants are in this research and is presented in pies/charts that illustrate patterns in the quantitative data collected.

**Age and gender**

19 students completed the questionnaire. Out of the 19 there were 17 female (89.5%) and two male (10.5%). The participants ranged in age from 18 – 52.
are under the age of 25, 26% are between the age of 25-39, and 32% were 40 and over (Figure 2).

![Age of participants](image)

**Figure 2 Age of participants**

**English as first language**

Ten out of the 19 participants had English as their first language (52.5%) while nine stated that English was not their first language (47.5%) (Figure 3).

![4. Is English your first language?](image)

**Figure 3 English as first language**

**Ethnicity**

Students were asked to choose one ethnicity they identified with the most. They had the option of 32 ethnicities to choose from with an additional box to put any other ethnicity not available. 31.5% of the participants identified themselves as New Zealand European (six participants); 21% as Indian (four participants); 10.5% New
Zealand Maori (two participants); 10.5% Samoan (two participants); 10.5% Korean (two participants); 5.25% Australian (one participant); 5.25% Malaysian (one participant); and 5.25% Tongan (one participant) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4 Ethnicity (n=19)**

In Figure 5 the pie graph shows all the Asian ethnicities combined into one single group and all the Pacifica ethnicities combined into another single group.

**Figure 5 ethnicity**
**Highest qualification prior to enrolling in the Bachelor Degree programme**

Students were asked what qualifications they had prior to coming onto the programme. 18 student participants answered this question. One student participant skipped this question. The qualifications ranged from a school certificate to a Masters degree. The most common qualification that students came into the programme with was a level 4 certificate in early childhood education, followed by a level 5 nanny certificate (Figure 6). Three students have already achieved an undergraduate degree or Master’s degree from overseas. The two Master’s degrees were in subjects not related to education. It is not evident from the data collected how these degrees translate to New Zealand qualifications.

![Figure 6 Qualifications](image)

**First in the family to enrol in a Bachelor Degree**

Nine out of the 19 participants said they were the first in their family to enrol in a Bachelor’s Degree (first generation students) (47.5%) (Figure 7).
Hours working in an early childhood centre/paid employment

Students on the Bachelor Degree programme are required to be in paid or voluntary work for a minimum of eight hours a week in a licensed early childhood centre. Participants were asked how many hours a week they worked or volunteered in a centre. On average the students were in a centre either as a volunteer or employed for 12 and a half hours.

Seven student participants worked in paid employment as well as working or volunteering in a centre (Figure 8).
The amount of hours the seven students worked in paid employment ranged from 4-40 hours (Figure 9). The average hours that these seven students worked and volunteered in total (including working/volunteering in a centre) was 22 and a half hours. One student worked (and volunteered) a total of 48 hours.

![Figure 9 Hours worked outside of a centre](image)

**Caring for a dependent**
Six of the participants ticked ‘yes’ when asked if they were the main caregiver for a dependant (31.5%). 11 participants ticked ‘no’ (57.5%). Two people skipped this question.

**Disability or impairment**
One person ticked ‘yes’ (5%) for having a disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition that affected their studies. 18 ticked ‘no’ to this question (95%).

**Considered withdrawing from the programme**
Seven students said they had considered withdrawing from the programme (Figure 10). Students were also asked what made them consider withdrawing. The responses were:

- Lack of computer skills, family commitments, lack of finance;
• *Time constraints, unable to cope with job, children and assignment* (note this student was working 40 hours and volunteering in a centre for eight hours and had dependents he/she was responsible for);

• *Other career options, like moving overseas*;

• *Busy at work, not enough time for assignments*;

• *Thoughts going through my mind on whether or not I would be a good ECE teacher*;

• *Physically too tired working in the centre volunteer-position and caring for two children as a single parent*;

• *Failing to pass assignments*

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**Figure 10 considered withdrawing**

**Hours per week studying**

The participants were also asked how many hours a week they studied. Three students skipped this question. 16 students responded with hours ranging from 2-27.5 hours per week (Figure 11). The average time spent studying was 11 hours a week.
Summary of the background information
The findings from the first 12 questions in the questionnaire have provided a picture of who the students are; their background and the commitments they have. This initial section has shown clearly that the students in this research come from diverse backgrounds with varying commitments and personal circumstances. It also shows that some students have wrestled with the dilemma ‘should I stay or should I go?’

Questions on the students experience using a five point Likert Scale
This section of the questionnaire asked a series of questions that used a Likert Scale. Each question had a series of statements where students could choose from five options: Strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree and strongly disagree. Each question with a group of statements was related to specific experiences of their first year studies. These were: prior to starting the programme; transition engagement; peer engagement; institutional support; academic engagement; outside influences; and views on success. After each question a box was provided for the student participants to make any comments (Appendix A).

Prior to starting the programme
Student participants were asked if they felt confident that they would be successful before they started the programme. 18 responded to this question. 17 agreed or strongly agreed that they did feel confident that they could succeed. One participant
said that they strongly disagreed with this statement. This student did not feel confident and in the section where it asked whether they had ever considered withdrawing this student had said yes.

The students were also asked if they felt academically prepared before the start of the programme. 11 students said they either strongly agreed or agreed (57.5%), six said they neither agreed nor disagreed (32%) and two said they disagreed (10.5%) (Figure 12). The above student who had some self-doubt had answered this statement as neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

From this data it can be surmised that the majority of students felt confident coming into the programme and over half of the students felt they were academically prepared. Only two students felt they were not prepared academically coming into the programme.

![Bar chart](image)

**Figure 12 prior to starting the programme**

*Transition engagement*

This question had nine statements relating to the students transition period into the institution. Responses to these statements can be seen in Figure 13 and Figure 14.

All but one student agreed or strongly agreed that ‘students from diverse backgrounds were valued and respected’. This one student strongly disagreed with
Unfortunately this student did not provide any comment relating to this statement. Unfortunately this student did not provide any comment relating to this statement. This student also disagreed with the next statement ‘I felt safe and had a feeling of belonging’. 15 students strongly agreed or agreed with this statement (approx 80%), two students said they neither agreed nor disagreed and one student said they strongly disagreed with the statement (Figure 13). It is also worth noting here that the student who strongly disagreed with the statement ‘I felt safe and had a feeling of belonging’ did not know anyone prior to starting on the programme and did not develop friendships with some of his/her peers.

Another statement in this section on transition engagement was ‘I felt I could contribute to class discussions’. 16 students felt they could contribute to class discussions (approximately 85%), while three said they neither agreed nor disagreed with this. 16 students also agreed or strongly agreed that ‘The programme lived up to my expectations’ (approximately 85%). One student neither agreed nor disagreed and two students disagreed with the statement (Figure 13).

The majority of the students (17) agreed or strongly agreed that their first semester had been successful. One student did not answer and one student disagreed (Figure 14). 16 students agreed or strongly agreed that they were pleased with the results they had achieved. Two students neither agreed nor disagreed while one student
disagreed with this statement. The student who disagreed with this statement also disagreed with the next statement ‘I am very satisfied with my experience on this programme’. 15 students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I am very satisfied with my experience on this programme so far’. This is close to 80%. There were two students who neither agreed nor disagreed and two students (one mentioned above) who disagreed with this statement.

13 students strongly agreed or agreed that ‘orientation got me off to a good start’ (approx 70%). Five students neither agreed nor disagreed. It is not clear whether these students did not attend orientation so could not put agreed or disagreed or whether they were neutral about the statement (Figure 14).

The last statement in this section read ‘the first semester provided me with the academic skills I needed to be successful’. 17 strongly agreed or agreed with this statement and one neither agreed nor disagreed. One student disagreed with the statement.

This transition engagement section covered statements about settling into the programme. Overall it could be concluded that the overwhelming majority were happy with the transition period into the institution, however, there were a couple of
students whose transition into the institution did not run smoothly. This is discussed in the following chapter

*Peer engagement*

17 students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement ‘I developed friendships with some of my class colleagues’ (89.5%). One student neither agreed nor disagreed and one student disagreed with this statement (Figure 15).

In the next statement ‘class members were supportive of one another’, all 19 students agreed or agreed strongly with this statement. Seven students agreed or strongly agreed to the statement ‘I regularly studied with other students’ (37%). Six students neither agreed nor disagreed and six students either disagreed or strongly disagreed to this statement (Figure 15). Unfortunately none of the student participants provided comments that related to this.

The last statement related to peer engagement was ‘I have helped other students in their studies’. 17 either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement and two students disagreed.

![Figure 15 peer engagement](image-url)
From these results we can conclude that all students found class members supportive and the majority of the students developed friendships. Four students added comments to this section. They were:

- **not all classmates are supportive**
- **Our class is very supportive. I enjoy helping class mates, if they don't understand assessments**
- **We help each other out (other students who cross-credited)**
- **I have friendships with two girls that completed the same course as me last year. As mentioned on previous page, it was hard to bond with others due to cross-crediting arrangements.**

In this section of the questionnaire the students were asked about the institutional support. The first statement was ‘I knew where to go to get help’. No students strongly agreed with this statement, however, 11 students (58%) agreed with this statement. Six neither agreed nor disagreed and two disagreed (Figure 16).

For the second statement students were asked to respond to the following ‘I found myself struggling with the workload but did not ask for help’. Six students (31%) agreed that they struggled but did not ask for help (Figure 16).
Students were also asked to write down the support services they were aware of and which ones they had accessed. 13 students responded. The support services they listed were: ‘Head start’ programme; counselling service (noted by five students); nurse/health centre (noted by four students); learning support based at the library (three students noted this); Academic Support person [also referred to as the Academic Advisor] at the main campus (three students); Academic Support person [also referred to as the Academic Advisor] at the satellite campus (two students); library (four students); Lecturers/Teachers (two students); IT support. Also noted was academic help and academic support but this was not clarified as to where this support came from. One student had put Counselling and Nurses but then wrote that they were “not sure who they were or where to go.”

Four out of the 13 students said that they had accessed none of the support services they had listed. One of these students put “none so far. [Academic Support person/Academic Advisor on main campus] was busy one time that I wanted to see her. I could have come back but I didn’t.” Another student who put they did not know where to go for help said “Teachers were busy with other stuff when approached for assistance.”

Three students said they had accessed all the services they had listed. Other comments given when asked what services had they accessed were: Blackboard (online component); maths course; academic support from some lecturers; lecturers and extensions.

Students were given the opportunity to make further comments. Two of these comments relate to the difference in the services between the main campus and the satellite campus. This perception of there being more support at the main campus will be discussed in the next chapter.

*Academic engagement*

This question contains 13 statements on the Likert Scale that relate to academic engagement. The purpose of these statements was to understand the experiences of the students in the classroom, their engagement with academic studies and their relationship with the lecturers. The first statement in this question is related to the
students’ motivation. It states ‘I found it easy to get motivated’. 12 students agreed or strongly agreed with statement (63%). Five neither agreed nor disagreed and only one student disagreed with this statement (5%) (Figure 17). One student did not respond to this statement.

The second statement relates to workload. Eight students found it hard to keep up with the workload while seven did not (Figure 17). Out of the eight that found it hard to keep up with the workload four of them also considered withdrawing from their studies. The eight students who found it hard to keep up with the workload had a variety of work and family commitments and there did not appear to be any specific pattern between the workload and working and family commitments.

The third statement in the academic engagement section was ‘I had difficulty understanding the assessments’. Five students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while six students disagreed. Seven students neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 17).

![Figure 17 Academic engagement](image)

The next few statements in the academic engagement question relate to the support and engagement with the lecturers. Figure 18 below shows that the majority of
students (83%) felt the lecturers were: helpful with assignments and feedback; supportive; interested; and provided good quality teaching.

All bar one of the student participants strongly agreed or agreed that ‘The quality of teaching was generally good’ and the other student ticked neither agree nor disagree.

There were three students who ticked that they disagreed with the following statement, ‘Lecturers gave feedback that helped me to improve’ and two students who disagreed with the statement ‘Lecturers took an interest in my learning’. However, only one of these students did not find the lecturers supportive and did not think the lecturers had realistic expectations of students.

Students were also asked to show on the Likert Scale if they enjoyed going to class and the intellectual challenge of their studies. The results for both of these questions were the same. 16 students agreed or strongly agreed while three said they neither agreed nor disagreed with this (Figure 19). No students disagreed.
Another two statements related to students' engagement were ‘I regularly sought advice and help from lecturers’ and ‘I regularly asked questions in class’. Ten students said they regularly sought help from the lecturers while 12 said they had regularly asked questions in class. Five students ticked they neither agreed nor disagreed with the former while four neither agreed nor disagreed with the latter. Three disagreed they had regularly sought advice and help from lecturers while two had disagreed they had regularly asked questions in class (Figure 19).

What is evident from the four statements in Figure 19 is that the majority of students (84%) enjoyed going to class and enjoyed the intellectual challenge of their studies and over half of the student participants regularly asked questions in class and sought advice and help from lecturers.

**Outside influences**

In this section of the questionnaire students were asked to rate statements relating to family support, and concerns about family, money and health that affected their studies.

Figure 20 illustrates that 18 students agreed or strongly agreed that their family had supported them. One student had put they disagreed with this statement. Money and
family concerns made it difficult to study for over half of the students while five and six respectively did not find this. Health concerns made it difficult to study for four students (21%).

Students were given the opportunity to add comments regarding the outside influences. One student said she had been sick but had still managed to attend class while another student had said that coming to class and attending the centre was too much for them. One student said

*These factors have a large impact on students and it is important to support them*

Another student said their family was supportive and then said

*At times money is an issue – stress from work, study, finance, bus, car payments, socialising.*

**Views on success**
The last Likert Scale in the questionnaire asked students to consider their views on success. Three statements were provided. The first statement asked if they thought
success was a result of a lot of hard work. All students bar one agreed or strongly agreed that success is the result of a lot of hard work (Figure 21). The one student who did not agree did not put anything in the comment box provided.

All students agreed or strongly agreed that they were responsible for their own success (except one who did not answer this question). 13 students (68%) felt that lecturers played a huge role in them being successful. Two students disagreed that lecturers played a huge role in their success (Figure 21).

![Graph showing views on success](image)

**Figure 21 Views on success**

**Further questions using closed and opened ended answers**

In this section there were some questions that involved yes/no answers. If they answered yes to the first question they were then asked another question. These questions were then followed by two comment boxes that ask the student participants to share five factors that have enabled them to be successful in their studies and five factors that have hindered them in their studies.

The first yes/no question the student participants are asked is ‘Do you ever find yourself struggling with the work required of you for this programme?’ Two thirds of those that responded said yes and one third said no. They were then asked if they answered yes ‘What if anything did you do about this?’ The results for this varied but the common themes have been summarised and were:
Getting help from other class colleagues (This was mentioned by four students, 21%);
Asking for help and asking questions (two students, 10.5%);
Prioritising/organising time (four students, 21%);
Spend more time on study (three students, 15.75%); and
Apply for extensions.

Factors that have enabled students to be successful in their studies
Students were asked to list up to five factors that have enabled them to be successful in their studies. 16 students responded and three students skipped the question. Their responses have been collated and summarised below in two categories (using similar or the same words as the students), extrinsic (factors external from the student) and intrinsic (factors within the student themselves).

Extrinsic factors:
- Family support (six students, 31.5% noted this as having enabled them to be successful);
- Lecturers support/lecturers being approachable (eight students, 42%);
- Class colleagues support/friends (three students, 15.75%);
- Having other students who have cross-credited (one student, 5%);
- Support from centre (four students, 21%).

Intrinsic factors
- Working/studying hard (six students, 31.5%)
- Do my best/high expectations of self (three students, 15.75%)
- Persistence/determination (four students, 21%)
- Time management/prioritising (eight students, 42%)
- Attending class (three students, 15.75%)
- Focus on the future (five students, 26%)
- Time out for self/looking after self (three students, 15.75%)
- Reading/accessing library/having text books (four students, 21%)
- Faith in God/church (one student, 5%)
Other factors/key words mentioned were: being happy with what I am doing; having passion; commitment; support; encouragement; motivation; satisfaction; luck; and having a computer.

Factors that have hindered students in their studies

Students were asked to list up to five factors that have hindered them in their studies. 17 students responded and two students skipped the question. Their responses have been collated and summarised below (using similar or the same words as the students):

**Extrinsic**
- Family commitments/stress (eight people, 42% noted this as having hindered them in their studies)
- Workload/lack of time (eight students, 42%)
- Negative experience in early childhood centre (two students, 10.5%)
- Sickness (four students, 21%)
- Financial pressures (seven students, 37%)
- Negative comments from other people (two students, 10.5%)
- English (an additional language/grammar) (two students, 10.5%)
- Lecturer – unfairly treated and hard to understand respectively (two students, 10.5%)
- Lack of facilities/library (two students, 10.5%)
- “cross crediting and not being up to Uni standards, referencing and essay writing” (one student, 5%)
- Lack of computer skills (one student, 5%)
- Hours in an early childhood centre (two students, 10.5%)
- Travel (one student, 5%)
- Family members dying (one student 5%)

**Intrinsic**
- Poor time management (five students, 26%)
- Self doubt (three students, 15.75%)
- Not understanding what to do/assignments (four students, 21%)
- Shyness, afraid to ask for help (one student, 5%)

71
Tired (two students, 10.5%. One student said he/she was tired because of living along way from the institution).

Summary of the factors that enable and hinder students in their studies

It is interesting to note that many of the factors that students identified as enabling them to be successful in their studies were intrinsic in nature and yet the majority of things that students found hindered them in their studies were extrinsic. This is discussed in the next chapter.

Summary of the questionnaire

The findings from the questionnaire reveal that the students come from diverse backgrounds, with varying family and work commitments. 37% of the students had faced the dilemma of “should I stay or should I go?” despite the majority having a smooth transition into the institution. The questionnaire shows that most students enjoyed going to class where they felt diversity was respected and valued; they had a sense of belonging and were able to contribute in class. They all agreed that class members were supportive of each other and most had developed friendships with others. The majority of students felt the lecturers were: helpful with assignments and feedback; supportive; interested; and provided good quality teaching.

The students acknowledged their families, lecturers, class peers and their early childhood practice centres as having enabled them to be successful. However, mostly they shared intrinsic factors that enabled them to be successful, for example their persistence and hard work.

Most students had families that supported them however; they said that family concerns made it difficult for them to study as did money concerns. The factors that they acknowledged as barriers to their learning were almost all extrinsic and external to the institution. These included family, work and money issues. Other intrinsic factors that were barriers and mentioned the most were poor time management and not understanding the assignments/what to do.

While these findings show most students were very positive about their experiences there was a small number of students who for different reasons shared their
experiences that were not so positive. These findings will be discussed in the following chapter.

**Student focus group**

The second phase of the data collection was a focus group for students who had filled out the questionnaire, and who had shown an interest in being involved in the focus group. Those interested in participating in the focus group were asked to fill out a tear-away section of the questionnaire which contained their contact details. All students were asked to detach the tear-away section to ensure anonymity in the questionnaire. Those interested were then contacted and a time was organised for them to attend the focus group.

Seven students took part in the focus group. The reason for this focus group was to further explore the experiences of the student participants. What were their experiences? What were their views on success? What motivated them to keep going? What enabled them to be successful and what barriers did they face?

The seven student participants all filled out consent forms and were given pseudonyms instead of their real names. The pseudonyms given were Alice, Brenda, Claire, Daphne, Elizabeth, Fatima and Georgia. The discussion in the focus group came from five set questions relating to: their experiences in their first semester; what kept them motivated; what enabled them to be successful; what barriers did they face and what did success mean to them? (Appendix F). Another question was added at the end of the discussion on whether the students had asked for help if they found themselves struggling.

The focus group session was recorded and data was then transcribed electronically. The student participants were then given a copy of this electronic transcript for them to check and make changes if they so wished. None of the participants chose to do this. The transcript was then analysed using memoing and coding. The memoing and coding became part of the process of thematic analysis where the emerging and recurring themes were captured and have been used here as a framework. The major themes that came through the focus group were: support for first year students; a cohort system/learning community; student’s concept of success;
motivation; barriers; and a positive attitude. Out of these major themes came sub-themes.

**Support for first year students**

The subject of support came up throughout the focus group. There were a number of different types of support that the student participants said had helped them in their first semester. These types have been categorised into four groups: peer support; support from the Academic Advisor; external support; and other institution support. The student participants also raised some issues around support.

**Peer support**

There was a lot of discussion in the student focus group about the support they had experienced from their class peers. Brenda spoke about how she had “actually learnt off the other students” when she had trouble understanding the course booklets. Brenda also commented that she got “more help from the students” than she had from the library and the learning centre when she said “I’ve been to the library twice for help with my studies and the learning centre and I have found them to be no help.”

Alice also spoke of the pastoral support she had received from her class peers when people close to her had died. “I really need to talk with these people [referring to the other student participants in the focus group]. These are the ones who have supported me right through my whole time.”

Claire also commented on the support peers had given each other noting “especially with like our good supportive people like in my class. Like everyone just helps each other out.”

Elizabeth and Georgia discussed the importance of being in a class with peers who are on the same level and who may help provide the answers. This notion of belonging to a cohort came through strongly in the student focus group and is discussed further in the next section.
Support from the Academic Advisor

The Academic Advisor is a member of the academic staff on the Bachelor Degree programme. This person is employed to provide one on one support, workshops, and referrals to other services as needed (Programme Accreditation and Approval document 2006; Student Handbook). While not mentioned in the Accreditation and Approval document or the Student Handbook the Academic Advisor is also responsible for delivering an academic writing class and a numeracy class. Some students are required to attend one or both of these classes as part of their acceptance onto the programme. They are identified as needing this extra help through the diagnostic tests which are part of the entry criteria. However, these extra classes are open to all students.

There are two Academic Advisors for the Bachelor Degree programme, one on the main campus and one on the satellite campus. In this research when I refer to the Academic Advisor I am referring to the Academic Advisor on the satellite campus unless stated otherwise.

The Academic Advisor was mentioned the most when it came to discussing the support they had received. Brenda had found her peers to be of great help but also commented on the help she had received from the Academic Advisor when she found herself struggling. She had been to the Library and had found them to be no help and said “More [the Academic Advisor] was helpful, and helped put me on the right track.”

Georgia, Daphne, Fatima and Brenda all commented on the ways the Academic Advisor gave support in the academic writing and numeracy classes. This support included having resources ready, providing handouts, examples, and information on referencing and providing formative feedback.

The Academic Advisor is responsible for providing an academic writing class and a numeracy class. This was noted by the student participants as very helpful. Georgia said “she took us for our academic writing and stuff and yeah it was a great help.” This was confirmed by Daphne “That academic writing which she does with us, I mean she literally taught us how to begin, how to end, how the paragraphs should
be, I mean, who’s going to teach you all of those things?” Georgia also commented in the way these classes helped to clarify things saying it “just kind of put your mind at rest. You’re like that’s nowhere near as hard.”

All of the student participants except for Alice commented on the support they had received from the Academic Advisor. While Alice had agreed with the comments made by Daphne about the Academic Advisor giving them extra help in a number of different ways she later commented that she had not asked for help from the Academic Advisor because “I was always a bit afraid to ask for help.” Alice was reluctant to approach the Academic Advisor even though this person is employed to provide this support.

From the data collected from the student participants about their experiences with the Academic Advisor a conclusion could be reached that this person played a big part in supporting students in their first semester of studies. It appears that peers and the academic advisor were the main places the students went to for support. It is evident from the questionnaires that students knew of a variety of support services the institution offered but students tended to seek help from each other and from the Academic Advisor. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

External support

It wasn’t just the Academic Advisor and their peers that the student participants acknowledged as supporting them. The student participants were asked what had helped them to be successful. Elizabeth, Georgia and Brenda all spoke about the support they had from family. Georgia and Brenda also mentioned their partners and friends. However, Daphne said she had a little support from family but it was unclear what a ‘little’ meant. She also said that people in the community had been supportive by asking her how she had been going and saying “oh well done, good on you.” Three other students agreed with Daphne as she spoke.

Claire spoke of the support she had received from her church community and said “it’s encouraging to know that people actually care to ask how your studies are going.” Alice, Elizabeth and Brenda all spoke briefly about the support the early childhood centre had given them.
Other institutional support

Six out of the seven student participants in the focus group also mentioned a lecturer or lecturers that had been supportive. Claire found one specific lecturer had been very supportive and had a calming effect. Daphne also mentioned one specific lecturer who had given her a lift from her home to the satellite campus on her first day because she did not know where to go and the lecturer lived close. Alice and Fatima spoke of lecturers in general and how they had been supportive. Fatima also mentioned how nice it was to have small classes “because you really get to bond with the people, and the lecturers”. Brenda had spoken of the support from her class peers, the Academic Advisor and “the teachers, lecturers.”

Georgia gave an example of the support she had felt even before the classes started. She explained how she had been sick and was not able to attend orientation. She had telephoned the programme leader and “they kind of put my mind at ease.”

Issues regarding support services

There were a number of issues regarding support which were raised by the focus group participants. Many of these issues could be grouped together as one main issue which was the disparity between the resources available to the students on the satellite campus and the main campus.

Firstly Daphne spoke about living a long way from both campuses and how this was a challenge for her especially since she suffers from travel sickness. Daphne said that most of the resources were at the main campus and not available to those at the satellite campus unless you were prepared to go there.

Brenda, Elizabeth and Georgia all commented on the lack of access to the library. The Institute’s library is situated on the main campus. Students on the satellite campus can use this library but have to either travel to its location on the main campus or pre-order books which are then delivered to the satellite campus. Georgia explained what happened once you had received the books “you have got to organise to have them couriered back as well, like you’ve got to do that yourself.” Brenda explained that it wasn’t just about ordering books because
you have to know what you are looking for. You can’t sort of look through the books, and just go oh yeah this is what I need, this is information I need. You can’t, so it’s just easier to go to the library and get your information.

Daphne explained that you could access some books from the satellite campus but you could not take them home. Georgia suggested being able to borrow these books by paying a deposit “Even if you paid like a twenty dollar deposit, just to secure the books or if you signed something say that I accept responsibility for the book and if you lose it you have to pay for it.” The discussion then moved to the cost of text books and the issue of carrying them to the satellite campus. Alice noted that there was no parking available for students at the satellite campus whereas the main campus had plenty of free parking.

Elizabeth highlighted another area of difference between services available on both campuses. She spoke of a time when she was struggling with a family issue and wanting to access support but was put off because she would have to go to the main campus.

Summary of support for first year students
The student participants in the focus group discussed a variety of support they received in their first semester of study. This support came in the form of relationships with the Academic Advisor, their peers, lecturers, friends, family, and community. They also raised some issues regarding access of resources/support services that were only accessible on the main campus.

A cohort system
The Bachelor Degree programme at the satellite campus has class sizes of no more than 25 students. Students stay with the same class for the whole three years that they study for their degree. However, if a student fails a course they have to re-enrol in the course and join another cohort. Another exception to starting and staying with the same cohort is when a student comes into the programme via cross-crediting from another organisation and ends up joining an existing cohort or having to join more than one cohort (personal communication with the Academic Advisor). One
student participant in the focus group failed a course and falls into the former category, while two other student participants cross-credited into the programme and joined two cohorts at the same time as per the latter category. Their specific experiences relating to joining an existing cohort are shared later in this section.

It has previously been mentioned that the student participants identified their peers as a support and as being supportive. Not only did they discuss the reciprocal nature of this support but they also talked about the importance of attending class and being part of a class/cohort. Elizabeth shared with the focus group how she had been given the option of doing a distance course but had

preferred being in a class because there are so many people and they’re different views you get and you remember that, when you are doing your assignment you remember ‘oh yeah [Daphne] said this and [Alice] was talking about this.

This was supported by other student participants who nodded and said “yeah” and “oh absolutely.” Daphne also spoke about distance learning and said “I don’t know how people do it. For me I think when I come to class we all discuss whatever things we have. It’s, it’s really, really important to attend the class and know what is going on exactly.”

Georgia was explicit in her response saying “I think if I was at [names an institution] and having to go to those massive lecture theatres I just wouldn’t go.”

Brenda suggested that a smaller cohort would “be able to ask questions too and to get them answered.” This discussion on the culture of the classroom for getting questions answered and for building relationships with other students and the lecturers is part of what makes a learning community. This concept of the cohort being a learning community will be discussed further in the next chapter. Elizabeth and Daphne also discussed their experiences of the class cohort being a good place to get answers. Elizabeth stated “you’re expecting to go to class and meet those people, and sometimes you are sure that maybe the answer you don’t know, you
could get from those people out there” [referring to her class peers in the room next door].

Summary of a cohort system/Learning community
The student participants in the focus group spoke of the support they get from their class peers and of the significance of having a smaller class/cohort where they can build relationships with other students and get support with any queries they may have.

Student concept of success
This research investigated the experiences of first year students with the intention of exploring their experiences and identifying what enabled them to be successful and what barriers they faced. In this research ‘success’ is used to describe the accomplishment of passing assignments and exams, completing courses and ultimately being awarded a qualification.

One of the questions I asked the focus group participants was “what does success mean to you?” I wanted to find out if they saw success as passing assignments, completing their courses and graduating or if they saw success more broadly. Brenda spoke first identifying success as passing her foundation studies but then goes onto say “success for me is finishing what I started out to do.” Claire said “I think success is perseverance” explaining that she had wanted to quit but “what motivates me is my parents, and like I think that’s my success. It’s just thinking of my family and for myself and for my future.” Like Brenda, Alice said success for her was passing her foundation studies and her certificate in early childhood but then went on to say “when I came into the degree that was success for me because I failed high school epically [sic].”

Elizabeth explained that it was more than just passing your assignments “I think its accomplishing something to the best of your abilities.” Fatima said “going that extra mile.” Georgia said:

I failed at high school epically [sic] as well. I left at 15 and just hated school. I was just bored and it wasn't relevant to anything I was interested in and I was
just too social. That’s success for me after having that is passing with all A’s. That is success for me.

Summary of students’ concepts of success
While the student participants of the focus group saw success as passing and completion they also saw success as just being on the programme, persevering, giving it their best and achieving top marks.

Motivation
Another question the student participants in the focus group were asked was “what motivates you to keep going?” The purpose of this question was to find out what kept these students motivated and continuing on in their studies. All of the student participants responded and contributed to this discussion. Their motivation came from: family and self; proving to others and themselves; peers; and the benefits of being successful. The student participants also raised the point that their motivation was not about the monetary value.

Motivation from family and self
Claire said that success was about perseverance and that her ‘motivation’ was her parents and “It’s just thinking of my family and for myself and for my future.” Daphne also commented on her family and her own expectations as a motivation and said:

My family expects me to, you know, they have got expectations for me. So when they are supporting you they have expectations that you need to work for it, to get successfully done, to get your achievements so that you don’t let them down too. And we don’t let ourself down too [sic].

Motivation then can come from the expectations placed on the student by family members (extrinsic motivation) but can also include expectations the students place on themselves (intrinsic motivation).

Fatima noted the family as a motivation but talked more about the support the family had given as a motivation rather than an expectation (however, this support could also be an expectation but this is not clear in the data).
Everybody is influenced by their family and I think if you have...good family support or maybe friends, some one that you know you can go to at the end of the day and say, ‘oh man you know, I’ve had all these assignments’ or ‘you know I feel I’m doing well’ or just the support network there and I think that can motivate you.

Proving to yourself and others
Georgia gave an example of intrinsic motivation. She shared how she was motivated by her own success, proving to herself and others that she can do it.

I suppose to kind of prove to myself that I am not dumb, like the teachers made out and I can put my mind to it and like Fatima said handing an assignment in and yeah I fully nailed it.

Peer motivation
Alice talked about her peers as her reason for being motivated. She described how her first year was affected by the death of family members and how she had considered withdrawing but it was her peers that had helped her and “motivated” her.

Benefits to self and others as motivation
Brenda said she needed to do something for herself and that by being successful it was “benefiting the children and the grandchild... and my nephews and knowing and advocating for them.” This concept of benefiting others as a motivation was also commented on by others in the focus group. Fatima responded to Brenda’s comments by saying “And you can influence others lives especially children” and “you want to be a good example.”

Elizabeth spoke about her motivation “for me the motivation is the small kids you know” and then said her motivation was not about earning more money “I have already got a job which pays me twenty dollars but it’s nothing to do with the money... I am just doing it for my own self. And the love that I am getting from the kids there. It’s really different, I can’t really explain.”
Brenda also confirmed that it was not about the money. “I was a bit the same, I came to study from basically a job that was paying twenty dollars an hour, but yeah it’s not about the money, it’s about having something to do.”

Summary of students’ motivation
Not one of the student participants said that money was the motivation and some made it very clear that it was not about the money. Instead the student participants gave a range of reasons for their motivation which included the expectations and support from family and peers; their own desire to achieve; the benefits for children and being able to advocate for children as a result of being qualified and proving to themselves and others that they can do it. This notion of being motivated, proving to self and others and the desire to help others will be discussed further in the next chapter.

While the students commented on the extrinsic factors such as family and peers it was obvious that a lot of their motivation came from an intrinsic desire to prove to themselves they could succeed and to make a difference in the lives of children.

Barriers
The student participants in the focus group shared some of the barriers they faced. These barriers were: failing a course; personal circumstances; differences in cultural capital; finances; illness; joining an existing student cohort; and computer skills and internet access.

Failing
When students fail a course they can feel like giving up. This was Brenda’s experience “I failed [names the course] in the first semester in my first year and I was really gutted and I so much wanted to quit because I didn’t achieve as I would have liked to.” Brenda went on to say that she struggled to understand the course booklets.

Personal circumstances
Some of the student participants talked about the struggles they faced in their first year. Daphne and Brenda mentioned struggling numerous times throughout their
discussion with statements like “I really struggled with my first year” (Brenda); “I really, really struggled in the beginning” (Daphne).

Daphne and Elizabeth both discussed the challenge of studying, working and family commitments. Elizabeth said “During the first term of my course my husband lost his job... Since then it has been a bit tough, I have been working forty hours a week.” Elizabeth explained that these forty hours were on top of the hours she worked as a volunteer in a centre. Despite this work pressure Elizabeth remained very positive and said “but still the support is there and I enjoy doing what I am doing at the moment so I will keep going.” This positive attitude is discussed further in the next section and in the next chapter.

Daphne had a similar story to Elizabeth. She spoke of working weekends and the responsibility of being a mother, “Sometimes I feel too much going on, because there is no time for my assignments at all.” Daphne goes on to say:

I sit in the night time and being a mother you have so many things in the house also to do. It’s just not your work and just not your school. Its other housework also we have to do. So after I finish all those stuff I used to sit at ten o’clock, midnight, I have to spend with my assignments and I have done it. So it’s, it’s really a struggle for us you know, it’s really a struggle [sic].

Despite the pressure of balancing work, family and studies Daphne like Elizabeth remained positive and said “But after all when you get your marks it’s a big achievement, and the satisfaction, and the satisfaction.”

Brenda and Georgia also spoke of the pressure to complete assignments and talked about how this affected their family and social life. Brenda said:

I concentrate on my homework basically all weekend and just for the holidays it would be nice to actually have a break from it, instead of concentrating on, “What are you doing this weekend?” “Homework.” “What are you doing this weekend?” “Homework.”
Georgia suggested that she did not have time for socialising and made a joke of it “Do you want to catch up for a coffee?” “Erm [not] unless your name is Vygotsky or Piaget.”

*Differences in cultural capital*

Claire spoke of a different barrier. She alluded to a difference in cultural capital. Cultural capital represents what is considered of value to a culture and can be used in a similar way to financial capital where the currency (capital) can be spent in different contexts as long as the context accepts the same currency.

When the student focus group was asked ‘were there any times when you struggled but you didn’t ask for help?’ Claire responded with:

>I just didn’t ask because, I don’t know, growing up we were just taught to listen. And it was kind of like, even high school I would never ask questions. I would just sit at the back.

Claire noted the support of her peers “after a few semesters I kind of felt like it was okay to ask for help. And yeah, especially with like our good supportive people in my class. Like everyone just helps each other out.” As noted earlier Claire also spoke of the support she received from the Academic Advisor and another lecturer in her first semester, so despite not asking questions Claire still received some support and found this valuable.

Along similar lines to Claire, Alice mentioned how she felt she couldn’t ask for help. She said “I was always a bit afraid to ask [the Academic Advisor] for help.”

*Finances*

The first barrier that Georgia mentioned was “Money, plain and simple.” While Alice agreed with Georgia with “yeah”, money was not mentioned again. However, it was alluded to by Elizabeth and Daphne when they mentioned the long hours they had to work to support their families.
Illness

Another barrier raised by Georgia was getting sick. Both Georgia and Brenda said they had ‘shingles’ in their first semester.

I got shingles...and was just literally bedridden for four months, so I wasn’t sure that I was even going to be able to start and it was sooo disappointing... And I would just sleep all day and, so it was a barrier. It was a real, real, real struggle coming to the first day of class. (Georgia)

Brenda said “I also got shingles in my first year. It was just all the stressors of life.” It is not clear if her studying and struggling in the first semester was a contributing factor to her health issue as shingles can be brought on by stress (Ministry of Health, 2012) or if her health issues were a contributing factor in her failing a course. It is possible that her health impacted on her studies and her studies impacted on her health but this was not investigated. What Brenda did say was “I got sick, yeah and I don’t know, I was sick and I basically was floundering around and basically I failed.”

Joining an existing cohort

Fatima and Georgia both spoke of their experiences of coming into the programme through a cross-crediting process. This involved getting credits for a previous diploma they had completed at a different institution. This meant they did not have to complete all the courses instead they enrolled in a couple of year one courses and then went into year two the following semester. When they started on the programme they were across two different cohorts. Fatima shared the following about her experience

I think a barrier for me was being cross-credited and coming into the first year second semester, and having two classes to attend. Like with these guys [referring to her class colleagues] and then with first year doing academic writing and numeracy, so we were alternating between two classes and we didn’t really get to know everyone.

Brenda also spoke of having to join an established cohort after she failed one of the courses. “What happened was because I failed [names the course] I had to catch up.
It put me back, it put me back in my studies six months.” Brenda shared how she missed the cohort she started with and it took a while to adjust to a new cohort.

Computer skills/internet access
Also mentioned as a barrier in the student focus group was not having the necessary computer skills and referencing skills. Daphne said she had really struggled at the beginning of her studies because she did not have these skills. She shared how she received help from her son “I’ve got a son, a twelve year old son, he helps me with certain things, because they do [it] at the school.”

Brenda, Georgia and Alice all said that they either didn’t have access to the internet or that they couldn’t access the online information from home. Daphne said when she first started her studies she did not have a computer. A significant 57% of the student participants in the focus group did not or could not access the online information from home. These students shared the strategies that they used to enable them to get the necessary information they needed. These included: going to the library; being organised; arriving to class early to access classroom computers; downloading readings onto a usb stick; using text books and going to either of the campuses to access computers on days they were not in class.

Daphne acknowledged that not only did she struggle with her computer literacy but she also mentioned that she had found the referencing system challenging. “I really struggled in that, that particular one [computer skills] and the referencing too.” Referencing was not mentioned by anyone else as a barrier.

Summary of the barriers
A number of barriers were identified by the student participants in the student focus group. These barriers included factors that were external to the institution including: financial issues, family and work commitments; ill health; and internet access at home. While other barriers related to the experiences in the institution and they included: failing a course; differences in cultural capital; finding a childcare centre; joining an existing cohort and computer skills.
During the student participant focus group there was plenty of opportunity for the student participants to discuss the barriers and the pressures they felt, and they could have complained about the institution but surprisingly the students remained very positive about their experiences.

**A positive attitude and perseverance**

Despite the barriers the student participants faced they remained positive. When the student participants were discussing some of the barriers they had faced quite a few of them said that they just had to get on with it. Alice said “just got to do what you got to do”. Daphne, Georgia and Brenda all concurred saying “You just do it” (Daphne). “Because it’s something that has to be done so... you just do it” (Georgia). “I have to get through it, I’ve got to do the best I can the whole time” (Brenda).

This notion of perseverance came through strongly. Georgia said “you just need to just persevere because it really does get easier, and you know when you look back after the three years you’ll be like ‘I did it!’” Claire said “Yeah I think success is perseverance.” Elizabeth also touched on persevering but said she kept going because she enjoyed it.

Daphne linked her enjoyment to her success. She said “overall I think I enjoyed my first year, all the semesters so far and I have really done well for that.”

**Summary of the student participant focus group**

The student participants in the focus group shared how they had received support from the academic advisor, their peers, friends and family and their lecturers. Overall the student participants were very positive about their experiences in their first semester.

They shared their motivation for their studies despite sometimes considering withdrawing and much of their motivation was intrinsic. They were motivated by a desire to prove to themselves and others that they could succeed. They were also motivated by their desire to make a difference in children’s lives. Some of their motivation was also extrinsic and came from their families, friends and class colleagues.
While the student participants shared their successes and the support they had received they also revealed some of the issues and barriers to their learning. They spoke of the disparity between the resources available to the students on the satellite campus and the main campus, especially accessing the library and the bookshop.

They also spoke of the barriers they had experienced in their first semester. These barriers included a raft of personal circumstances that made it difficult to be successful including family commitments, financial and health concerns and internet access and computer issues. Other barriers the student participants shared were: coming into an existing cohort of students due to cross crediting or failing a course; being afraid to ask questions and finding it hard to find a centre.

The factors that these students have identified above as having enabled them to be successful and the barriers they faced are discussed in the next chapter.

**Academic staff focus group**

The third phase of the data collection was a focus group for the academic staff who had either taught the student participants or who saw them on a regular basis. The four academic staff participants all filled out consent forms and were given pseudonyms instead of their real names. The pseudonyms given were Helen, Imogen, Jo and Kim.

The focus group was organised with the intention of hearing the voices of the academic staff who had been involved with the student participants. Did they have similar views about success and motivation as the student participants? Did they identify the same factors that enabled students to be successful and did they identify the same barriers as the student participants? The academic participants were asked five questions that related to the students experiences (Appendix G).

The data was then transcribed and analysed using memoing and coding. Because the questions used for this focus group were similar to the questions asked in the student focus group the themes that emerged were almost identical. The major
themes that came through were: support for first semester year one students; a cohort system/learning community; the meaning of success; motivation; and barriers.

**Support for first semester year one students**

One theme that came through strongly was the support that students received in their first semester. This theme of support came through mostly when the academic staff focus group were asked what they thought had enabled students to be successful but was also evident in their response to what motivates students. Their responses have been categorised into four groups: academic support; pastoral support; peer support; and support from the early childhood centres where the students complete their practicum hours.

**Academic support**

Much of the discussion on what enabled students to be successful was about the academic and pastoral support the students received. Imogen started the discussion by saying that the students got a lot of support in the first semester and noted that students received more formative feedback in their first semester. Kim concurred, saying “having formative feedback available to them, it’s there in a very specific way to help them to be successful.” Kim also noted the importance of talking with students about managing their time and their assignments. She suggested “even a simple thing as a diary and a wall planner, but something, and check them, I mean I know it sort of seems basic doesn’t it to us, but it’s often not to them.”

Kim outlined some other ways the academic staff/lecturers supported the students, suggesting the information they gave to students helped them to be successful. She said

*To help them be successful...it’s the information we give them in terms of the structure. Like we give them a booklet with a timetable, with the dates, with when everything is due.*

The student participants in the student focus group discussed the support they received from the Academic Advisor and this was also mentioned by Imogen and Kim. Imogen named the Academic Advisors from both campuses and how they provide the academic writing and numeracy classes in the first semester. She also
said “lots of students have made good use of that” (referring to the Academic Advisors). Kim expanded on the academic writing and numeracy classes saying; “Those students are identified from the interview tests. Those that need extra literacy and numeracy. They have to attend those classes and in order to go into semester two they have to pass those classes.” Kim goes on to say that:

*Those students in the [academic writing classes] that are identified as needing the extra, you need to continue monitoring them for a couple, at least a couple more semesters. Because they will be the students that lecturers come up with, the names come up all the time that are having difficulty with something and will need extra work.*

Other academic support services that were mentioned in the academic staff focus group was the library and the student services. However, this was only briefly touched on with Imogen saying that she knew of lots of students who had made use of them. Imogen did not elaborate on this.

*Pastoral support*

Pastoral support was another area of student support discussed in the academic staff focus group. For this research pastoral support is referred to as building a relationship of trust and care for the student. Which means the academic staff are not only interested in the academic success of the student but in the student’s overall wellbeing? An example of pastoral care would be to follow up on a student when they are absent from class or when they have failed to hand in an assessment.

Jo spoke of the importance of being approachable and being there for them. She felt the students appreciated this. Imogen concurred with Jo saying “*as Jo said before that we are approachable, that’s quite motivating. If you’re someone that’s very standoffish, doesn’t invite participation then that can turn a lot of students off.*”

Jo spoke of getting to know the students on a personal level and sharing who you are with the students. “*We are all studying, we’re looking after our families, we’ve got busy lives too so we are all in this together.*” This was confirmed by both Imogen and Kim. Another way the academic staff said they support students was through
following up on absences with a personal phone call. Kim said “I just phoned this week, about five students that didn’t front up to class to see what was happening, so I think we are quite proactive in terms of...what’s going on.”

Imogen acknowledged that for some students their personal circumstances impact on their studies and while students may share this the academic staff may not have the skills to deal with this. She suggested that:

Even though some of our classes are small, it is still very hard to know that student really well and what makes them tick. Some of these students have some serious issues that really impact on their, just their ability. We can arrange counselling, that has happened for some students but there is only so far we can take it.

Imogen shared how she didn’t feel “experienced enough” and that there were some students “who require a whole lot more than others.” Kim follows on from Imogen’s comments saying it’s challenging and asking “how far do you go with pastoral care?”

Peer support
The academic staff who took part in the focus group said very little about the support students received from each other. The cohort system was briefly discussed which is explored further in the next section however, one of the participants Imogen, noted that as a result of having a cohort system students “form some study groups, [where they] work together outside, ask each other questions, you know, without having to rely on coming to the lecturer all the time, which is great because peer support makes a big difference”. Kim also noted the importance of “interact[ing] with their class mates.”

Practicum centre support
Imogen highlighted one of the benefits of a field-based degree was the support students gained from their practicum centres.

I remember this from when I was studying and this doesn’t work for everyone, but there will always be students who have either studied with [institutions
name] or who are currently studying at [institutions name] and you use them as your support systems in your own centre....That doesn’t work for everyone but....I think the students get a lot of support from others in their centre who have been [there].

Summary of the support for first year students
The academic staff in the focus group shared some of the support that was available for first year students. Much of the discussion focused on the academic and pastoral support the academic staff provided. This academic and pastoral support was also noted by the student participants in the student focus group and will be discussed in the next chapter.

A cohort system
It is evident from the feedback in the student focus group that the cohort system was significant in supporting students and played a big part in helping students to develop friendships and create a sense of belonging. This belief in having a cohort system to support students was shared by the academic participants albeit with less discussion.

Jo first mentioned the cohort system and said “they can form those bonds in relationships over three years” referring to the duration of the programme and the length of time the students spent together in the same cohort. Imogen agreed saying “They end up relying on those” referring to the relationships mentioned by Jo. Imogen went further to say:

“they sort of tend to form some study groups, [where they] work together outside, ask each other questions, you know, without having to rely on coming to the lecturer all the time, which is great because peer support makes a big difference.”

Summary of a cohort system
While the academic staff participants did not discuss in any detail the cohort system they did recognise the important role this system played in supporting students to be successful. They did mention this again later but this was in reference to the
challenges faced across campuses and cohorts. This will be noted in the barriers section below.

**Student success**

As noted in the findings from the student focus group ‘success’ can mean different things to different people. The academic staff participants were asked what success for students meant to them. They raised a number of different aspects to the meaning of success which were: Academic achievement; class attendance; having confidence; managing themselves; having a sense of achievement; and motivation.

Kim shared how the obvious meaning of success was achieving and passing their assignments. Helen added to this and suggested “if a student can meet the learning outcome of the course, I would say it’s kind of successful.” Kim also noted that from a learning support perspective she saw success as “seeing them able to produce an academic essay that’s well referenced etcetera. And that’s a narrow look at success but it’s one of the aspects that helps them be successful.”

Imogen talked about the importance of being in class and the impact that had on academic success. She said “I think also if they’re in class consistently, to me that’s successful. They are wanting to be there. That also has an impact on how well they do in their assessments.”

Jo also commented on this by noting the cohort system and the importance of this for students to get peer/collegial support. Kim added to this when she said ‘success’ was “interact[ing] with their class mates.”

Kim also said she thought ‘success’ was when she saw them “building confidence” and “watching their confidence grow.” Kim linked this to students “management of their study, their time, their planning, the system.” She felt that students sometimes came from school with bad habits and ‘success’ involved changing these habits.

Imogen highlighted success as being pleased with yourself, having a sense of achievement.
Quite often they would come to class after having the visit and realising that “actually I didn’t know that I was doing well before.” And it just takes someone to say “I really like the way you did this, this and this.” And you know, there’s a sense of elation. I think sometimes after they have had their first [visit] and they are like actually “I am okay, I am doing okay.” That’s ‘success’ for them too.

Summary of student success
The academic staff participants viewed ‘success’ as more than academic achievement. They also saw ‘success’ as students being confident, managing their studies, attending class and being motivated. This broader notion of success was very similar to the views of the student participants in the student focus group who saw ‘success’ as being on the programme, persevering, and giving it their best.

Motivation
The academic staff participants were asked what motivates a student to keep going in their studies. The majority of the discussion was on the extrinsic factors that had an impact on student motivation. These included students receiving positive feedback and achieving, but also included failing assessments. The academic staff participants also spoke of the academic staff’s role in supporting students and setting a good example as ways to motivate students. There was only one participant, Imogen who spoke of the students’ intrinsic motivation.

Imogen had this to say about students’ intrinsic motivation:

I think ultimately [motivation] actually it’s intrinsic. They have to want to do this. I think, as much support as we can give them, as much input and positive stuff we can give them, they have to want to be here and they have to want to work with children. They have to be passionate. I see that as a big thing that comes from within.

The extrinsic motivation that the academic staff discussed included providing positive feedback. Jo raised the idea that positive feedback motivated students. Kim added to this by saying “being told they do something really well, that keeps them [motivated].”
Imogen also commented on the importance of positive feedback and achieving, especially for first semester students “when they actually can do really good work, like they get good marks, they get good feedback; they get positive feedback about their own practice, that is a huge motivator.”

Kim suggested that “success breeds success. So if you can get them on that path of achieving and being successful I really think that’s motivating as well”. Conversely Imogen suggested that failing had a similar effect. She noted that:

> If they don’t pass something, that’s a real kick in the pants for some of them. When they realise that fail or that D grade doesn’t actually mean that they fail the entire course, it means they need to pick up their socks for the rest of the [semester], you know, and I think that can be a great motivator as well.

Another extrinsic motivator discussed was the academic staff’s role in motivating them by leading by example. Jo spoke of this when she said “I think role-modelling, I think seeing our practice, seeing what we do so we are practicing what we are preaching basically so...” Imogen concurred “I think part of that comes from how we are with the students and how we do in class. What we teach, what we talk about, making it exciting, making it relevant to their own teaching. That’s motivating.”

**Summary of what motivates students**

Much of the responses from the academic staff about what motivates students were extrinsic in nature, however, it could be argued that these extrinsic motivators could lead to intrinsic motivation. In comparison the student participants in their focus group were focused much more on their intrinsic motivation.

**Barriers**

The academic staff in the focus group were asked what they thought were the barriers students faced in their first semester. Their responses were coded and the following major themes emerged: belief about themselves; cultural capital; personal circumstances; computer skills; and the library and textbooks.
Belief about themselves

According to the academic staff one of the barriers that students faced in their first semester was self doubt and a lack of confidence. Kim noted this was particularly if they had not completed the certificate in early childhood education the institution offered prior to starting. Kim noted that students had “their own perceived lack of skills, lack of academic skills, being able to write, being able to reference and all that side of things, which impinges on the assessment.” She suggested that students thought they would not be able to cope with tertiary study and it was not until they had some success that their attitudes changed.

Imogen agreed with Kim and said:

> I know that I had a lot of students really worried about, you know, they see the assignment, let’s say for example that they have got to do [a] brochure. “Uh how do you do that?” Actually they can do that but it’s just getting over that initial hurdle of “oh my goodness, this is something I haven’t had to do before”

Helen also commented on the concerns students had about their assessments “most of [the] new students, they are very worried about assessments at the beginning of the course. They want to know what kind of assignments they will get and how can they pass the assignments.”

Imogen also noted that students had concerns about working with children because “some of them have never had experience with children before, or very limited experience…[this] adds another dimension of challenge.”

Cultural capital

When a student comes into a tertiary institution for the first time there may be a number of things they are not familiar with. This can be challenging for students. Kim noted this and suggested that students were “very watchful” and that “it’s just very nervous coming into tertiary study.” Imogen mentioned that it was also challenging to meet new people.
Kim raised another challenge when students first arrive and implied they needed to learn what was expected of them. She said:

_ I think it’s also the structure of tertiary education too. You don’t just go to your lecturer for everything. If it’s an administration thing then you know to go to reception. You have to be able to manage [the online component] so it’s the structure of that, being able to understand and get into that and confident._

Helen spoke about the challenges for some students whose first language is not English or who are from other cultures. She suggested that:

_ They will probably have a cultural shock when they start their first year, here in New Zealand. I would say the way we run the class, we facilitate the class is very different from like Chinese school, institution in China or in Asian culture [sic]._

**Personal circumstances**

The academic staff spoke of a number of personal issues that could impact negatively on students’ success. Money was mentioned along with the cost of transport. Students commute mostly by train or by bus to the satellite campus. Imogen shared how she knew of a couple of students who lived approximately 50-60 km away from the satellite campus. She noted that it was not only expensive but it was also time consuming. It would take these students an hour each way on the train to get to the campus.

Kim also mentioned that money was an issue for some students when it came to buying textbooks. Students are required to purchase the textbooks for each course. She suggested that some students were “choosing not to spend money, perhaps they haven’t got it, on text books.”

Imogen highlighted how for some students their personal issues could be “serious” and could impact on the student’s abilities. She explained how the academic staff could arrange counselling but also shared how she had felt unprepared “because I didn’t realise quite how much that would require of me. And that’s fine but, I didn’t
feel experienced enough to do that.” She did not explain what she meant by serious but these personal issues were serious enough to require referral.

Kim also noted personal issues that students faced but questioned how much support could they offer and said “It’s a challenge because how far do you go with pastoral care?”

How often can a student not turn up to class and group work because of family stuff etcetera. Or not come on the noho marae [over night marae stay] because they have known it was going to happen and they have a littlie [child] and then at the last minute say ‘I’ve got nobody to mind her’. Where do we draw the line or whatever?

This was a challenge for the academic staff. Jo raised the point that you had to be fair to everyone else. However, Imogen said “It’s just not fair and right for everyone though is it? It’s so hard, there are so many students that are here that don’t have that family support.”

Imogen recognised that while some students struggled with personal circumstances “you get to that point where students take advantage of the fact...that’s the real problem, that’s the grey stuff.”

Computer skills
Another issue that the academic staff noted were that some students came in to the programme without the necessary computer skills. Jo said “[you] can’t take for granted they are all computer savvy.” Imogen thought that this was starting to change and noted the day before there were “at least ten people with laptops and tablets, ipads. I mean that’s huge, even from last semester it’s a huge increase and they were actually using them for class work.”

Imogen suggested that one of the reasons more students were using laptops, tablets and ipads was because the class composite was changing, and they were “getting a very young group of students who are technologically savvy.” Imogen also noted
that the students had access to a computer room where they didn’t have to book to use the computers there and they could go in whenever they liked.

**Library and access to books**

Kim stated that students at the satellite campus were in “many ways... they are better off here.” She went on to state:

*They have access to computers and staff....[The programme leader] has put in quite a large day loan set of books in here now, and if they borrow through the library from [the main campus] then we courier it in for them and back out there.*

While Kim said the students at the satellite campus were better off than at the main campus she did acknowledge that an issue for students was getting their textbooks. She said “*they really have to access [names the bookshop] out at [names the main campus]. Which is a, yeah, it’s not handy.*” Imogen suggested someone from the bookshop could bring textbooks to the satellite campus on a set day where students “*can purchase all the books that you require.*” Kim shared the process at the moment and said “*they have just got to ring [names the bookshop] or email them with everything, plus their credit card and then their books get couriered in here.*”

As previously mentioned in the personal circumstances section Kim said that some students were not buying the text books because of the cost. She said “*there are some set texts that are critical to the courses. And therefore that holds back their learning because they are obviously not doing any reading or research.*” Kim also noted that textbooks were heavy to bring into class each week (most students commute to the campus via train or bus). Helen agreed and Imogen suggested it was hard to bring everything in to class. Imogen also ruled out students using the lockers to keep their books in and said this “*defeats the purpose of them having the book, because they need to have it to study at home.*” Kim agreed with this.

The issue of accessing and purchasing books is something that also came up in the students’ focus group and will be discussed in the next chapter.
Summary of the barriers

Many of the barriers that the academic staff identified were external to the institution. They included the student’s personal circumstances such as family and work commitments, health concerns and financial issues. They also suggested that some students come in either not confident or over confident and that students often did not know the expectations of tertiary study. Other barriers the academic staff noted was the lack of computer skills and access students had to computers at home and the challenge of accessing the institutions library and textbooks.

These barriers are discussed further in the next chapter and compared with the barriers the students identified in the student focus group and questionnaires.

Summary of the academic staff focus group

The academic staff in the focus group shared what they thought enabled students to be successful in their first semester. They mostly focused on the academic and pastoral role they played in supporting students. They also mentioned the students’ class colleagues and the early childhood centre as providing support for students. What was not mentioned by the academic staff was the support students received from their families, friends and community.

The academic staff were asked what they felt motivated students to keep going. Much of the discussion was around extrinsic factors such as receiving positive feedback and passing assessments but also included being motivated as a result of failing an assessment. They felt that they had a part to play in being a good role model for students. Also raised by one participant was the notion that motivation was intrinsic and the student had to want to do the course and to work with children.

Also discussed in the academic staff focus group were the barriers that students faced. The academic participants shared a range of barriers. They included the student’s personal circumstances such as money and health issues, and family and work commitments. Also mentioned was the students’ belief in themselves coming into the programme. They suggested some came in lacking confidence in their own ability and in the knowledge of what the course entailed, while others came into the
programme over-confident. Other barriers were computer skills and access to the library and textbooks.

All of these factors that impact on the students’ success and completion will be discussed in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

This research set out to investigate and gain an insight into the experiences of first year students in one cohort undertaking a Bachelor Degree in early childhood education at a satellite campus of a New Zealand tertiary institution. A range of data collection tools were used. This was made up of a questionnaire; a focus group consisting of student participants; and a focus group consisting of academic staff participants.

From the findings there were five major themes that emerged. The first theme was the diversity of student backgrounds followed by defining success. A third theme that emerged was the factors that enable students to be successful which included the Academic Advisor, academic staff, a cohort system/peers and family. The fourth theme was motivation and finally the last theme was the barriers students faced which were the differences between campuses/accessing support, joining an existing cohort, personal issues; and the differences in cultural capital.

These themes relate specifically to the research questions and provide the framework for discussion in the next chapter. The themes are discussed in relation to the literature covered in chapter two.
CHAPTER FIVE - DISCUSSION

Introduction
The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of students in their first semester of tertiary study. It has focused on one cohort of students who were undertaking a Bachelor Degree (early childhood education). This research was designed to examine what had enabled these students to be successful, what barriers they had faced and what motivated them to keep going.

A review of the literature in chapter two revealed the need for individual tertiary institutions to find local solutions to the specific needs of their student community. In this research this was achieved by hearing the voices of the students in one specific cohort of students in one institution which had previously experienced significant attrition. The student voices were captured in a questionnaire and in a focus group. I also sought to hear the voices of the academic staff who were involved with this cohort of students in their first semester to add another perspective which contributed to triangulation and validity. This was achieved through a second focus group for these staff members.

This chapter discusses the three main themes that emerged from the data collected which were presented in the previous chapter and relate specifically to the research questions. These themes were: factors that enabled students to be successful; the barriers students faced; and motivation that kept students going. From these three main themes came sub-themes which were: the support students received from the Academic Advisor, the academic staff, their peers in a cohort system and their families/friends; the barriers they faced which included the limited access to resources, personal issues, joining existing cohorts, and having to adapt to the culture of the institute; and the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of students. These themes are discussed in relation to relevant literature and theories from chapter two.

Background information on the student participants
Before the main themes are discussed, an introduction to the students who took part in this research is provided. It is important to do this because as noted in the
literature review it is no longer the single, white, middle-class male who undertakes tertiary study. As Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) assert, students today are from diverse backgrounds and are from ‘minority’ groups despite making up the majority of the student body. This cohort of students is no different.

19 students took part in the questionnaire with seven volunteering to take part in a student focus group. The findings from the questionnaire showed that the majority of students were female (a reflection on the programme they are enrolled in) and while there were a good proportion of students under 25 years of age (42%) there were still over 30% of the student participants over the age of 40. These statistics are not necessarily representative of the Ministry of Education’s (2009) targeted group whose goal is to increase the number of students who enter tertiary study directly from school. The Ministry of Education maintain this is because students straight from school have fewer commitments and are more likely to study full-time. The Ministry argues that students who study full-time are more likely to complete their studies and receive qualifications (Ministry of Education, 2009). However, given the nature of early childhood education and some women being involved because of their child’s involvement, the age of the participants is not surprising. What is surprising is that there were two males in the cohort making up 10%. Farquhar (2012) states that less than 2% of the early childhood workforce in New Zealand are males. No conclusions can be made because this is a small sample but it is still worthy of note.

Two other Ministry of Education (2009) goals are to increase the completion and success rates for Maori and Pasifika students. The Ministry also say that the group most likely to participate in tertiary education are the 15 to 39 year age group and that this group is changing because of the increase in Māori, Pasifika and Asian peoples who are of this age. The Ministry says tertiary education providers must ensure they “meet the educational needs of the increasingly diverse population” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 27). This increasingly diverse population is represented in this research. The student participants who took part in the questionnaire were diverse in ethnicity with eight different ethnicities identified. 63% of the participants who took part in the questionnaire were either Māori, Pasifika or Asian. Unfortunately the ethnicity of the focus group participants was not sought.
Almost half of the students who participated in the questionnaire had English as a second language and almost half were the first in their family to enrol in a Bachelor’s Degree. The student participants were not asked about their socio-economic status, however, it is clear from the findings that many of these students struggled financially. Seven of the questionnaire participants said that finances were a factor that hindered them in their studies. Also mentioned were the hours the students worked while studying full-time. The average hours students worked were 12 hours a week (this was on top of their class time (one full day and one half day, and the eight hours required in a centre). Only three student participants did not work any extra hours above the requirement for the programme. So despite being on a full time programme most students (80%) were still working in paid employment outside of their studies and required practicum hours. One student worked 40 hours on top of her full-time study.

Also worth noting (to provide a clear picture of who the student participants were) is that six student participants (35% of those who answered the question) said they were the main caregiver for a dependent. This dependent could be a child or children, a sick relative, a person with a disability, or an elderly family member.

The average age of those with a dependent was 41. This ranged from 18 years of age to 52 years of age. Students were asked if they had any disabilities that affected their studies. One student ticked yes and noted she was dyslexic.

These statistics are important because they highlight that the students in this research come from a variety of backgrounds, and have diverse personal circumstances that can impact on their studies. Diversity in the student population is not limited to this programme or the tertiary institution where the research took place. Diverse student bodies are now common-place in tertiary institutions. Zepke et al. (2005a) discusses the increasing diverse nature of the student community suggesting they come with “varied learning needs and differing cultural capital” (p. 5). The Ministry of Education (2009) in its Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-15 also acknowledges this and shares its vision to meet the needs of the growing diverse student body by “provid[ing] New Zealanders of all backgrounds with opportunities to
gain world-class skills and knowledge” (p. 6). This diversity in the students involved in this research and the impact this has on their studies is discussed in this chapter.

Defining success

The Oxford University Press (2013) defines success as “the accomplishment of an aim or purpose” (para. 1). In tertiary education the term success is often not specifically defined but is most commonly used to refer to the gaining of a quantifiable achievement, for example passing an exam or graduating (Kuh et al., 2006a). This research, unless otherwise stated, uses a similar definition, referring to success as the accomplishment of passing assignments or exams, and completing courses and ultimately being awarded a qualification. This definition is purposefully used in this research because: firstly this definition fits with most of the literature on retention and success despite it being implicit; and secondly the focus of this research is looking at students’ experiences with the intention of improving the retention of first year students, for them to complete their courses and ultimately qualify and graduate. However, I acknowledge that ‘success’ can be defined as so much more as Kuh et al. (2006a) and Yorke and Longden (2004) highlight. Success can have multiple meanings that go beyond the traditional measures of success. One of the focus group questions for the student participants was “what does success mean for you?” I also asked the academic staff focus group participants “what does success for students mean to you?” I wanted to find out if they had a traditional view of what success was and if their view was similar to the discourse in the literature around first year experiences in tertiary education.

When students were asked how they viewed success, initially the general discussion was around the traditional definition of success. Students in their focus group acknowledged that for them success was about passing assessments and completing courses or qualifications, for example Brenda and Alice said success was passing their foundation studies. Brenda also commented that she had achieved what she had set out to do. This more traditional view of success was also confirmed by the academic staff in their focus group. However, both focus groups also shared less traditional views of success. Two participants, Alice and Georgia talked about being ‘successful’ after having failed at high school with Alice saying just being on the programme was success. Both of these women said they had thought they would
never be able to do this. Georgia also shared that success was proving to herself she could do it:

*I failed at high school epically as well. I left at 15 and just hated school. I was just bored and it wasn’t relevant to anything I was interested in and I was just too social. That’s success for me after having that is passing with all A’s. That is success for me. I suppose to kind of prove to myself that I am not dumb, like the teachers made out and that I can put my mind to it and like [Fatima] said, handing an assignment in and yeah I fully nailed it. And yeah to pass my degree which is something that I never ever thought I would do. You know to have those letters after my name and to be qualified and so that’s success for me.*

Having the kind of success that Georgia describes can be very powerful and has the ability to change a mindset about a student’s own ability and lead to persistence. Students construct their own theories about themselves and their own intelligence and this can impact on their level of success (Dweck, 1999). These theories about intelligence are on a continuum with fixed beliefs at one end and malleable beliefs at the other (York & Knight, 2004). Dweck (1999) argues that teachers can help young students to move from fixed beliefs to more malleable beliefs by providing new early learning experiences that the students are good at. This could also be applied to tertiary students, although it could be much more difficult to move along the continuum the longer the fixed theories have been constructed. For both Alice and Georgia they had achieved something they didn’t think they would ever do. As a result they have gained in confidence. Their self-belief theories have moved along the continuum toward more malleable beliefs, however, it is not known how far across the continuum they have moved and how they now view themselves in relation to their intelligence. This was not investigated in this research but is worthy of further investigation in the future.

This notion that success goes beyond passing assessments and exams was also raised by the academic staff in their focus group. Kim noted that success was having confidence and that this confidence came about as a result of learning skills that helped students to manage their time and complete their studies. Imogen added that
a sign of success was when students felt good about themselves as a result of being told how well they were doing. She also noted that success was attending class consistently and that this led to students achieving better results in assessments and more interactions between students. This was also commented on by Jo who emphasised the importance of students forming relationships with one another in cohorts that stayed together throughout their studies. These aspects of student success focus on the experiences students have and are more subjective in nature making them harder to measure. A student’s level of belonging, their desire to attend class, interact with other students and engage in the class, and their growing confidence in meeting the institution’s expectations are all aspects of success. Feelings of belonging and overall satisfaction of their experiences at the institution are seen as precursors to academic success (Kuh et al., 2006a) and cannot be underestimated. When institutions are considering ways to support students to be successful in the traditional sense it is also important that all of these other aspects of success are addressed.

Students also saw success as their responsibility and while they thought the lecturers played a big part in their success by providing help and content knowledge they needed to put in the effort. The majority (95%) believed that success was the result of a lot of hard work. One student summed it up by writing:

_I think the lecturers are there to help and give information, but it is our responsibility to take that knowledge and ideas and use them wisely._

**What has enabled students to be successful?**

Students talked a lot about the support they had received in their first year. The majority of that support came from: 1. the Academic Advisor; 2. the academic staff (i.e. lecturers); 3. the cohort system/peers; and to a lesser extent 4. family/friends. Worthy of note was that many of the students did not access the wider institute’s support network and this network was not clearly identified by students as enabling their success. Instead the support the students found to be the most helpful was specific to the programme.
**Academic Advisor**

A strong thread that ran throughout the data was the academic support the students received from the Academic Advisor. As noted in the previous chapter the Academic Advisor has a number of roles. Firstly they are responsible for delivering the academic writing and numeracy classes which are provided in the first semester of year one. Secondly they provide one-on-one or small group academic support sessions for any students in the programme at any time and thirdly they are available to take academic writing sessions in the different courses being offered in the programme (for example essay writing in a first semester class). There are two Academic Advisors for this Bachelor Degree programme, one on the main campus and one on the satellite campus. Most of the data collected relates to the Academic Advisor on the satellite campus and unless otherwise stated this is who I am referring to when using the term Academic Advisor.

The support the students received from the Academic Advisor was significant. Six out of the seven participants in the student focus group spoke of the support they had received from this person and when discussing support the topic of the Academic Advisor dominated the discussion. Some of the comments they said about the Academic Advisor were:

“*She’s been a great help from the very beginning*”;  
“*She is stable*”; *she’s a strong base*”;  
“She keeps you on check”;  
“She is available anytime, yes that’s the best part you can come in and she’s there, every time you come in”.

Claire credited the Academic Advisor and another lecturer with being one of the reasons she was successful:

*They were really just calm through-out the whole semester, like they kinda helped me get through it. So yeah it was kinda like a breeze for me for my first semester. I was happy with it and I guess that’s why I got to be here* [in year two].
What is significant about the Academic Advisor is that as well as being employed specifically for the Bachelor Degree programme she is also a lecturer on that degree. As mentioned, one of the roles she has is to provide both an academic writing and a numeracy class to students who have been identified as needing extra support. For some students these classes are compulsory, but any students on the programme are able to attend these classes. Unfortunately the number of student participants required to attend the extra classes was not clear. In hindsight it would have been beneficial to have asked this question in the questionnaire. What was clear was that the support the Academic Advisor gave was very helpful especially in the academic writing classes. Four participants in the focus group spoke specifically about the support from the Academic Advisor in the academic writing classes while another two spoke more generally about the support they had received. The academic staff participants in the second focus group also emphasised the important role the Academic Advisor has in supporting students. Imogen said “lots of students have made good use of that” (when discussing the Academic Advisors).

Tinto (2009) notes that many students come into the programme ill-prepared for the academic rigour and require additional support in their first year. Stickney (2008) recommends those needing academic support undertake a course prior to entering the programme, and increasing the entry level to stop attrition. While there are entry criteria for the Bachelor’s degree programme in this research (that meet New Zealand Teacher’s Council requirements) those that meet the criteria but do poorly in the literacy and/or numeracy tests are admitted onto the programme with the condition they attend the academic and/or numeracy classes. These courses are similar to other pre-entry foundation courses. However, on this programme the students attended these classes while enrolled in the programme. They were delivered by the Academic Advisor who was not only familiar with the programme but who also taught on it. In this way the student’s learning was situated in a meaningful and authentic context. The Academic Advisor was able to embed the discourse specific to the programme into the academic writing classes, providing authenticity and relevance.

Having these classes embedded into the programme by someone the students are familiar with can help to destigmatise the accessing of academic support. It is widely
recognised that students’ attendance in academic support classes are poor especially when these workshops have no relevance to the content of the course (Bamforth, 2010; Hooley et al., 2011). Hooley et al. (2011) shared the findings from a first year student experience survey at Deakin University which revealed that students avoided one-on-one sessions and workshops on academic skills. Attendance in these extra classes seemed to “entail downward self-labelling and stepping out and away from the developing (and aspiring) social networks” (p. 2). Moreover, when the students did access these institute-wide academic classes they were often too impersonal and ineffective (McChlery & Wilkie, 2009).

Hooley et al. (2011) suggested institutions should embed these generic academic skills within the specific courses allowing the students to maintain their social networks, and remove the stigma that can be associated with these classes. It appears that the academic support in this research does this. The academic writing classes were not only for students who struggled to pass but for all students. As Georgia an ‘A’ grade student attested to:

“She [the Academic Advisor] took us for our academic writing and stuff and yeah it was a great help.”

Conversely, another student’s experience of accessing an institution-wide service highlighted how ineffective and impersonal these institute-wide services can be and how important it is for academic support personnel to not only have the necessary discourse, but also to build an environment where the student feels comfortable and emotionally safe. Brenda from the student focus group said:

Yeah, I found them no help [referring to the institute-wide support services]...Cause they don’t know the content we are doing, they don’t know where we’re at. There’s no level of understanding. They don’t know where you’re at. Like I had one guy flinging his arms around, ‘no that’s not right’ and he sort of got all frustrated and I’m thinking “yeah well I’m as frustrated as you are, you know”.
Brenda also shared the positive experience she had when she sought help from the Academic Advisor (based at the main campus):

She helped me figure out a few basics like, the person, the subject, and...it was just things like that, that I wasn’t finishing sentences properly and my writing was, it, it would have waffles going on in it...Just her showing me a few techniques really made a huge difference. But they don’t teach you that at the learning centre.

The student participants from the questionnaire also confirmed the academic support they received from within the programme when 17 of the 19 participants (90%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “The first semester provided me with the academic skills I needed to be successful”. It appears that the students were well supported academically and they felt positive and confident about the academic skills they had acquired.

As previously mentioned the Academic Advisor also provides additional sessions for all students. These sessions are built into the specific courses and cover generic academic skills. These sessions not only help students to gain these important skills in a meaningful context but they also provide the Academic Advisor with the opportunity to build relationships with the students. These relationships enable students to feel comfortable to approach the Academic Advisor for additional one on one or small group sessions. This could also include supporting the students pastorally since pastoral care and academic support are often inseparable.

Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey (2002) suggest historically academic support was seen as a last resort for those with problems and was reactive in nature. Recently however they note prominence has been given to a more proactive approach involving “a port of first call” which provides support for all students (p. 17). This appears to be what is happening in this programme where my research has taken place. It is not clear from this research if this is across the institution but it is obvious that the students in this research were very fortunate with the level of ‘in-house’ support they received. The students in this cohort preferred to access support from within the faculty rather than seeking wider institutional support. Thomas et al. (2002)
found that many participants in their research saw the way forward for support services was an “integration into teaching and learning and the embedding of inclusive practice into academic departments” (p. 18). Their participants recommended student services staff focus more on supporting other staff in managing student issues and less on remedial work with problem students (Thomas et al., 2002). This is something that could support the findings of this research. Since students do not seem to access the wider support services, resources could be better used by specialist staff supporting the academic staff. This could be achieved by helping the staff to embed the generic academic skills into the programme in an integrated and authentic way for all students.

While students spoke of the support they received from the Academic Advisor it was obvious that this support was more than just academic. Relationships were formed and this led to students sharing information about their personal lives. This could be a result of having a very competent person in this role but it was not just the Academic Advisor that formed these relationships and provided support to the students. The academic staff in this research were also very involved in getting to know the students and supporting them, indicating the culture and ethos of the programme and staff. Benson, Hewitt, Devos, Crosling and Heagney (2009) advocate for a team approach suggesting that staff who are already working with students are in a better position to provide support.

**Academic staff**

The responsibility for academic and pastoral support should not just fall on the shoulders of the Academic Advisor but should also be part of the role of academic staff. Critical to increasing retention rates and success for students is the involvement of academic staff and not just specialist academic advisors (Tinto, 2009). As noted above, in this research the academic staff also played a big role in supporting students to be successful. Both students and academic staff mentioned how approachable the academic staff were in the programme and how they developed relationships with the students. Having small classes certainly goes a long way in providing the right environment for these relationships to form but perhaps the biggest factor is the openness of the academic staff to engage in a reciprocal relationship. Kim from the academic staff focus group said:
Lecturers genuinely making an effort and really getting to know the students as people. It's not just a class of students that you're delivering to but really getting to know them and making those connections and things.

This was supported by the other academic staff in the focus group, with Imogen saying:

*We do share that we have children and that you know, dilemmas that we have in our own practice, when we are working with children. I think that makes us more real. That we actually have been there before.*

This authenticity with students is validated by the responses in the questionnaire. As previously stated in the findings chapter, the students were asked to rate a series of statements on a Likert Scale related to their academic engagement. These questions all related to their relationship and engagement with the academic staff (lecturers). The overwhelming evidence was that overall the majority of the students felt the lecturers were supportive, interested, helpful and provided quality teaching. This is in contrast to research conducted by Krause et al. (2005) who noted that less than one third of students questioned felt that teaching staff took an interest in their progress and only half felt staff were available to discuss their work. It can be concluded that despite the barriers the students faced they were well supported by the academic staff.

It is important to acknowledge not everyone agreed with the overall consensus that the lecturers were helpful, supportive, interested and provided quality teaching. As noted in the previous chapter two students disagreed with the statement ‘Lecturers took an interest in my learning’. However, only one of these students did not find the lecturers supportive and did not think the lecturers had realistic expectations of students. This student who did not feel supported put the following in the comments box:

*When approached a couple of times the lecturer was busy which discouraged further interaction.*
It is worth noting that this student did not feel that the programme lived up to her expectations, she was not pleased with her results and did not feel satisfied with her experience on the programme. This student had considered withdrawing and had found it hard to keep up with the workload. She worked 40 hours in paid employment and volunteered for eight hours in an early childhood centre and cared for dependents. This student’s questionnaire also highlighted that her family did not support her in her studies.

When considering withdrawing this student noted “time constrain [sic]; unable to cope with job; children; and assignments” as factors. It is not surprising that this student considered withdrawing given her circumstances. Nevertheless it is concerning that she did not feel she was being supported by the lecturers. Despite this she enjoyed attending class and she agreed with the statements on peer engagement revealing she had built relationships with other students and received support from them. Other aspects of her experience were also positive, for example she agreed that students from diverse backgrounds were valued and respected, she felt safe and a sense of belonging and she felt she could contribute in class. She also noted that the quality of teaching was good and she had been successful in her first semester. This student had three personal factors that she felt hindered her success. At the top of her list of factors that hindered her studies she put family life, followed by financial trouble and then thirdly lack of time. These three factors were all external to the institution. Personal circumstances that affect a student’s ability to succeed are covered later in this chapter.

This student also noted two other factors that had hindered her studies. One was library support and the other were the practicum hours she was required as part of the fulfilment of the programme. It is perplexing that she put the practicum hours since she had chosen a field-based programme nonetheless, this must have been another added pressure that impacted on her studies. While this student had mentioned the library’s support (or lack of it?) as a hindrance she did not mention the lack of support from lecturers as a hindrance. Because this was a questionnaire it was not possible to follow up on the responses for clarification, but this student was just one of 19 students who completed the questionnaire. Overall the response was that academic staff were very supportive.
In the programme where this research was conducted a lot of the support was given in the first semester especially from the academic Advisor. Moreover the academic staff noted other ways the students were supported. This included: giving students formative feedback on their assignments; stair-casing assignments; talking through time management; and supplying them with a diary and wall planner. Daphne shared the support she felt they had received in their first year saying:

[I] think the first year we had quite a lot of support regarding the assignments when they were due, about the formative feedbacks and all sorts of things.

Kim explained that support was reduced after the first year but suggested some students needed ongoing support:

It's quite tricky because there are some that are going to need the support longer than others, that's all I am saying. You can't necessary say well you have already done two years and I can't support you now because you're in year three. I don't think it works like that.

The intention is for the students to be “independent, self directed learners by the end of the programme” (Programme accreditation approval document). While the goal is about students becoming autonomous and independent learners the reality is that some reach this quicker than others.

Some students may need to be approached to access support. As Kim points out not everyone that needs support asks for it. For example Brenda, a student from the focus group, said she would only seek feedback if it was a requirement despite knowing the value of it and needing extra support:

The feedback we were getting in the first year, [was] a huge thing...I think its the feedback that really makes a massive difference...I found it was easy in the first year to hand it in for formative because it was expected. But this year it's not expected so...I sort of prefer to keep it to myself, now that it's not expected of me.
In Kinnear et al.’s (2009) research of students from Edith Cowan University it appeared that it was the student’s responsibility to seek out help when they needed it. What happened if they did not seek out this help? Did the University identify and support students that needed extra support? It is not clear in their report however, whose responsibility is it to make sure the right support is given to the right student. Universities have the added problem of large cohorts of students. In small cohorts of students it is much easier to talk with students who are struggling and to embed some activities within the class to support these students.

This raises the questions: “Should academic staff continue to expect students to hand in work for formative feedback? If so, how much more pressure does this put on the academic staff? How much support is enough, and can students have too much support that they do not become autonomous learners? Academic staff are already under increased pressure to perform more effectively and efficiently within a tight fiscal environment. What is clear is that academic staff are not just responsible for providing subject knowledge, they must also embed academic skills. This kind of support involves considerable demands on academic staff (Bamforth, 2010).

Academic staff have a responsibility to support students in a number of ways, including sharing the knowledge discourse related to the course, embedding academic skills and ensuring the environment is conducive to learning. Academic staff hold a considerable amount of power and as such it is their responsibility to initiate a relationship with students that supports them to be successful right from the start. This involves the academic staff being approachable and willing to engage.

Engagement is far more than an academic activity. It involves creating an environment where students feel a sense of belonging (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; Schuetz, 2008). Student participants in the research were asked to rate two statements in the questionnaire relating to their sense of belonging. The first was “students from diverse backgrounds were valued and respected” and the second was “I felt safe and had a feeling of belonging.” 18 of the 19 participants in the questionnaire (approx 95%) agreed or strongly agreed with the former statement while 15 (approx 80%) agreed or strongly agreed with the latter statement. The one student who did
not agree with both statements and disagreed strongly with the former gave no comments to help understand her strong disagreement. Nevertheless the rest of her response in the question suggests she was dissatisfied with the programme and did not feel like she belonged. Conversely she noted that some lecturers were supportive and they enabled her to be successful.

She had considered withdrawing, writing that she was:

*Physically too tired working in the centre volunteer-position and caring two children as a single parent (sic).*

Additionally this student listed English as a second language; having no family support; financial stress; long hours of practicum and racism in her centre as the five factors that had hindered her studies.

There was one other student who disagreed with the statement about feeling a sense of belonging. This student agreed strongly that students from diverse backgrounds were valued and respected and yet obviously did not apply this to themselves. This student did not know anyone prior to the programme starting and did not develop friends with her peers. This student also responded to the last question which asked for up to ‘five factors that have hindered you in your studies’ with:

*Unfairly treated by lecturer’s preconception.*

Unfortunately this student gave no indication why she wrote this and the rest of the questionnaire gave no clues. This is a limitation with questionnaires. It is not possible to go back and clarify comments students have made.

The results from the rest of this student’s questionnaire highlighted that she felt confident and prepared coming into the programme, she felt she had been successful and that the programme had lived up to her expectations. She agreed with statements that lecturers were helpful, took an interest in her learning and the quality of teaching was good. It is also worth noting that this student never
considered withdrawing and when asked to name up to five factors that had enabled her to be successful had put:

*Hard work; Lecturer's help, and Can do attitude.*

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about the two students noted here because there is not enough evidence about their experiences. Nevertheless their experiences are different to many others and are worthy of note. What is evident is that for the majority of the students they felt they belonged and that diversity was valued and respected. Still questions need to be asked about the minority, students who for one reason or another did not feel they were supported or that they belonged.

**Cohort system/Peers**

Transitioning into a tertiary community is a new experience for most students and many of them feel unprepared (Krause, 2005; Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Moreover the first few weeks are when students are at their most vulnerable (Pittaway & Moss, 2006). It is imperative that this initial induction period enables students to develop friendships and gain a sense of belonging. This is the institution's responsibility and requires the institution to create an environment that is welcoming of students and where diversity is not just respected, but celebrated. While the relationship between the academic staff and the students is crucial for this to happen it is also just as essential for students to build relationships with one another.

One way to create an environment where students can feel they belong and where they can develop friendships is to establish small cohorts of students who stay together throughout their studies. Burnett (2006) suggest that large classes can make the transition process into the institution difficult. In order for students to build relationships with one another they need somewhere for this to happen. Tinto (2009) argues that the best place for relationships to form between students is in the classroom. Today's students are diverse and many juggle family and work commitments with their study. For a lot of students the only place they will access social and emotional support from each other is in the classroom (Tinto, 2012).
In this research the students were fortunate to be in a small class who stay together throughout the entire degree programme. They do not take separate classes and only go into another cohort if they have failed a course, if they postpone their studies or if they come in from another programme or institution via a cross-crediting process. This has enabled them to form friendships and support one another. As Fatima attests:

> It’s nice having this environment to come into, not big lecture theatres, you know, where there aren’t hundreds of people and the whole atmosphere is overwhelming. It’s nice to have small classes because you really get to bond with the people, and the lecturers. So it’s a really good experience to have and to learn from.

Elizabeth also commented on this and said she had chosen to undertake this degree programme because it was face-to-face:

> [The] personal touch that we get when we interact with each other, and the different experiences. If you are sitting doing it on your own online, I don’t think you are going to get that experience.

Being in a small cohort gave the students the opportunity to develop friendships and to support one another. The overwhelming evidence from the questionnaire was that students had developed friendships with one another (90% agreed with this). Moreover, all of the student participants agreed that students were supportive of one another. This was confirmed by the student focus group who spoke highly of their class peers. Daphne said:

> What I like about my class here is we always try to understand each other and try to support each other, instead of going directly to the lecturers we discuss and find out the ways we can get our things done.

However, the support from one another was not only academic but social and emotional as well, with Daphne saying “it is a strong bond which is built between us” and Elizabeth suggested that their “very close group makes a lot of difference”. Alice
spoke very highly of her peers and found them to be an emotional support when she lost family members:

*I had a few people die in my first year so like lots of my family have died and I, I was really upset and was thinking of dropping out and like, no, I really need to talk with these people. These are the ones who have supported me right through my whole time. I need to talk with them, so that’s what motivates me.*

The academic staff also commented on the cohort system and how it enabled students to support each other instead of asking the lecturers. However, it is worth noting here the difference between the students’ response and the academic staff’s response. The students placed a lot more emphasis on the support they received from each other. The academic staff hardly mentioned this peer/collegial support. This may be because they were focused on the support the institution and they themselves provided and may have been a flaw in the design of the questions.

What was also significant was that 16 of the student participants (84%) said they enjoyed going to class, while no students disagreed. Obviously something was working well in the classroom that enables students to feel they belong and that they want to be there. Is this down to the small cohort? It is possible that it could be that having a small cohort of students that stay together but that alone is unlikely to lead students to have a sense of belonging and a strong commitment to each other. It is more likely to be a combination of the small cohorts who stay together and a supportive environment that the academic staff provides. Kinnear et al. (2009) suggest academic staff can create the right environment by showing a passion for the subject, providing support throughout the course, showing empathy and understanding of the complex lives students live and a willingness to respond in a flexible way when crises occur.

Tinto’s original theory of student departure discussed in the literature review was based on the notion that the student needs to integrate into the institution (Prebble et al., 2004). However, recently Tinto has written about the necessity of institutions adapting to meet the needs of the diverse students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2009; 2012). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) argue that the failure of students to do well
does not just lie with the student but with the institution and the environment the institution creates. They argue that faculty and staff need to change the way they do things and for some staff to change the way they think. Furthermore they state that “Institutions have to believe that all students, not just some, have the ability to succeed under the right set of conditions – and that it is their responsibility to construct those conditions” (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p. 11). This discussion on the ‘fit’ between the student and the institution is discussed further in the section on cultural capital.

**Family/friends**

The students also acknowledged support from their family, partners, and friends and while the discussion in the focus groups about this was limited, the questionnaire highlighted that the majority felt supported by their family.

**Motivation**

One of the questions that the participants were asked in the focus group was about student motivation. What motivated students to keep going? Something that stood out strongly was the positive attitude the students had towards their studies. I was surprised by their positivity. Despite all the challenges they faced (discussed below under the heading barriers) the students remained positive about their experiences. This was also noted by Castles (2004) who said that tutors were constantly surprised that despite all the misfortunes students suffered they continued in their studies with such determination (as cited in Bowden, 2008). Ballantyne, Madden and Todd (2009) suggest that the first year experience can have a significant impact on the attitudes the students have towards their studies. Based on this proposition and the positive attitude of the students in this research I would suggest their experiences in the first year have had a positive influence on their attitude toward their studies.

What came through really strongly was that students said they kept going because they enjoyed what they were doing. This was evident in their discussion about attending class:

> *I wake up every morning and like ‘yes!’* (Georgia);
Not like wake up in the morning and like ‘I’m sick’ [laughter] ‘I’m sick and I can’t come in this morning’ (Claire);
No, because it’s interesting (Brenda);
I enjoy coming to class (Georgia);
Especially the discussions (Daphne).

Also noteworthy was that 16 students (84%) said they enjoyed going to class and enjoyed the intellectual challenge of studying. Three of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed regarding these statements. However, one of these students wrote in the comment box; “when ticking the ‘neither’ column it means ‘sometimes’.”

The overwhelming consensus regarding their enjoyment of class and the intellectual challenge is a testament to the culture created in the classroom by the academic staff. From this discussion and from other evidence already discussed about the students’ experience in their cohort, it is clear that the students in this research felt they belonged in their classroom. According to Schuetz (2008) having a sense of belonging is one of three intrinsic needs that are essential for motivation and engagement. The other two intrinsic needs are competence and autonomy. As noted in the literature review this concept of intrinsic needs being met in order for students to be motivated and engaged is known as the self-determination theory. Deci and Ryan (2000) postulated that when tertiary institutions support students to have these three intrinsic needs met then engagement should naturally occur, even for students who have previously experienced adversity. In contrast if the three intrinsic needs are not met then there is a much greater chance of disengagement and attrition (as cited in Schuetz, 2008).

The notion of disengagement when basic needs of belonging, competence and autonomy were not met is supported by Gavala and Flett (2005) who found in their research with Māori students that “individuals reporting high stress, more feelings of discomfort at university, and a lower sense of academic control, were significantly more likely to be experiencing a lowered sense of well-being, and reduced feelings of academic enjoyment and motivation” (p. 56). The tertiary institution then, has a responsibility to create a place where students feel they belong and that they ‘fit’.
This notion of students enjoying their studies and attending class is an example of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation can be described as students engaging for their own personal reasons, for example: for the challenge, being curious, wanting to master something, gaining the satisfaction of learning or just doing it because they enjoy it. When a student is intrinsically motivated they are more likely to display autonomy and show initiative (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Pisarik, 2009). This is usually process-driven, where the focus is on the process not on the end result. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand is when students are engaged because of what they receive from it. This is usually product-driven, where the focus is on external rewards such as gaining approval or gaining a degree (Bye, et al., 2007).

A clear example of intrinsic motivation can be seen in Elizabeth when she said:

*I could take, just take the one year course, you know, the graduate diploma. But for me I just wanted to accept the challenge of doing it, the whole, from the very basics, doing it step by step.*

Elizabeth was motivated by the desire to learn and not just for the extrinsic reward of gaining a degree. This was also true for Georgia who said:

*I like just using my brain.*

The student participants in the focus group gave examples of both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The intrinsic motivations were: they enjoyed what they were doing and wanted to continue doing it; they wanted to prove to themselves and to others they could be successful; they were determined to do succeed; they wanted to do something with their lives and contribute to the lives of others.

Previously in this chapter I have discussed the students’ views on success and how they had felt successful just being on the programme. Students said they wanted to prove to themselves and others that they could be successful. Georgia was quite animated and laughed when she spoke of proving to others who had doubted her:
and turn around to all those teachers and say ‘in your face!’

This notion of being motivated by a desire to prove to yourself and others was picked up by Claire who said:

Also people that look down on you keep me motivated. Like people from church because sometimes you do have people, like negative people who...don't want to see you succeed... But to be able to look at them and be like ‘yeah I passed’. And to see them... just give you that look like ‘yeah whatever’. It, it kind of motivates me to keep going and to just, to get that paper, that graduation paper.

Sometimes a negative experience such as Claire’s can motivate students. Brenda had failed a course in her first semester and this seemed to motivate her more. She said:

I have to get through it, I’ve got to do the best I can the whole time. Just one more week and I don’t count points because it’s not how it’s done to do the absolute best you can. Even if it’s a C- you get it’s still, “do, do the best.”

Brenda was committed not just to passing but to give her very best. It continues to surprise me to see how determined these students are even when others don’t believe in them, they fail or they have other stressors. The students in this research were very focused on achieving their goals and this was a theme confirmed in Kinnear et al. (2009):

It is the students’ own commitment to, and clear clarification of personal goals and career futures that overwhelmingly influences them to persist, and this factor remains remarkably consistent across the student cohorts. (p. 37)

Another finding from the student focus group was the notion that they wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. This altruistic motivation came through strongly. Fatima said:
It's about contributing to the world and the wider community, and it's like you are giving something back

This was endorsed by the others in the group where they agreed it was about making a difference and about influencing others. They also said their motivation was not about money. Two of the students said they had good paying jobs but they were not doing it for money. Georgia also said it wasn't about money:

You don't become a teacher for the money do you?

Elizabeth said:

Because sometimes people just think that you are just doing it for the money that you are going to get. Because I had a business and then ah, I have another job and so like I was asked “so why, why are you studying?”... I want to study because I want to learn more about it. That’s what I told them and then they said “ah but, but you’re doing voluntary hours” like they were looking down at me, saying that “when you have that much money why do you do this?”... I told them that I am interested in doing it and I will be looking forward to do this course for quite a while, and I have got the opportunity and that’s the reason I am doing it now.

In their research into student engagement, Comer and Brogt (2011) compared each field of study and noted that education students were much more likely than other students to be involved in volunteer work or community service. Perhaps students who chose to become teachers have some altruistic motive that draws them to education while at the same time their studies could help them to develop these altruistic tendencies. As noted in the literature review “research even suggests that graduates are more inclined to be actively involved in community and voluntary groups, tend to have more egalitarian and anti-racist attitudes, and to have greater faith in the political process” (Institute of Education, 2001, as cited in York & Thomas, 2003, p. 64). Comer and Brogt (2011) also say that education students are more likely to interact with students with diverse backgrounds. They go on to say that education students are the most likely to say their experience in tertiary education
has “helped them understand people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds” (p. 17). Unfortunately this was not investigated in the research but because the students in this research were in a small cohort of students with a wide range of ethnicities and ages and who supported one another (90% said they helped other students and 100% said class members were supportive) it would be fair to assume that their findings applied to this cohort of students.

The academic staff in this research commented more on the extrinsic motivation such as students receiving positive feedback and passing assignments but they also commented that failure can also be motivating. Perhaps their response was an attempt to explain how they could motivate students rather than discussing motivation from a student perspective. Nevertheless this extrinsic motivation is also recognised as being important. Extrinsic motivation can influence intrinsic motivation. When students have success in their first semester this can impact on their beliefs about their own ability, helping them to re-evaluate their own theories about themselves and can result in persistence and lead to an increased intrinsic motivation. For example Imogen spoke of giving praise and being authentic as motivating:

Sometimes it’s a stroke on the back and saying “actually you’re doing a good job.” I think it comes from how we are with the students and how we do in class. What we teach, what we talk about, making it exciting, making it relevant to their own teaching, that’s motivating.

Celikoz (2010) highlights that when “teachers teach enthusiastically, take students’ learning difficulties into account, constantly rearrange their teaching strategies according to the needs, use different teaching methods for effective learning, then they can increase their students’ success, motivation and attitudes in a positive way” (p. 124). This type of extrinsic motivation can influence the student to feel better about themselves and to engage more, which can in turn lead to an increase in intrinsic motivation.
Barriers

So far in this discussion chapter I have discussed what ‘success’ is for students, what had enabled the students to be successful and what motivated them to keep going. This last section discusses the barriers the students and the academic staff said they faced which are: Access to support at the satellite campus; joining an existing cohort; personal issues and differences in cultural capital.

Access to support at the satellite campus

The questionnaire asked the students to list the support services they were aware of and if they had accessed any of the services. Only seven students said they had accessed the institution’s support services. The services they listed included the Academic Advisor (on both campuses) and the services they provided i.e. academic writing and numeracy classes; the services provided in class time i.e. database access and End-note (a reference programme); and the online component of the course (Blackboard which has specific content for the courses/programme). One student wrote in the questionnaire that she had been to the Learning Centre but the experience was a negative one, where “they [got] frustrated with me at the Learning Centre.”

The students did not appear to use the institution-wide support services instead they chose to use the support services within the programme. They had a lot of support within their own programme and this may be one reason why they did not access this additional support. Nevertheless some students commented that some of the services they wanted were not available on their campus.

The main concerns as noted in the findings chapter related to accessing the library, the free computer courses and the health and counselling services. While students still had access to these services they were not close to or on the satellite campus. The institution had some strategies in place to address some of these issues such as students being able to order library books online and delivering them to the satellite campus, but these strategies may need to be revised. The students in the focus group made the suggestion of being able to take books home on short term loan from the small library available on the satellite. This should be investigated further by the institution.
Another issue that arose out of the findings chapter was the large proportion of the focus group students who did not have internet access at home (57%). The institution supported these students by providing access to computers on both campuses. The students were proactive and made use of this service.

**Joining an existing cohort**

In this research the majority of students began their studies together in one cohort and have stayed together throughout the programme so far, having all their classes together. The exception to this is a small group of students who for different reasons joined the cohort after the first semester. From the data I was able to ascertain that four students in this cohort of 21 students joined this cohort after the first semester. One student Brenda had started with a different cohort but because she had failed a pre-requisite course she had to repeat the course and became a member of the cohort involved in this research. Three other students came into the programme through a cross-crediting process (two of whom were participants in the student focus group). They had previously studied at another institution and had gained credits for some of the courses across year one. They were required to do two courses in their first semester (one in semester one and one in semester two of year one) and then begin the second year of the programme in their second semester. This meant they were with two cohorts of students for the semester before the research took place. One of these cohorts was the class they would stay with for the rest of the programme. All of these students shared how challenging it was to go into an existing cohort.

Brenda shared how she had failed and said:

*I found I really missed my first year group that I started with, and it took me a little while to settle in, so yeah basically I failed.*

As previously discussed in this research, the first semester is a significant time for students. Ensuring students are successful in transitioning into tertiary study can increase the chances of the students staying and completing their studies (Burnett, 2006; Pittaway & Moss, 2006). The findings from this research have shown that the students formed strong bonds with the other members in their cohort and they felt a
sense of belonging. It appears that this happened for Brenda too, who had established friendships in her first year. Brenda found it hard to be left behind by her initial cohort. At the very beginning of the focus group Brenda began the discussion by saying she had failed. She shared the following:

*I failed ‘.......’ (names the course) in the first semester in my first year and I was really gutted and I so much wanted to quit because I didn't achieve as I would have liked too, but my studies, although I had done foundation studies, weren't up to standard, I needed still a lot of help.*

Firstly Brenda had to contend with failure which made her consider withdrawing. Not only had she failed a course but she also had to leave her class, where she had established friendships, and join another class/cohort. It is likely that the cohort she joined knew she had failed a course. This can lead to embarrassment and in some cases a feeling of shame and humiliation. While Brenda persisted and did not withdraw it begs the question as to how many students in a similar situation decide to leave? The Clash (1986) song “Should I stay or should I go? If I go there will be trouble, if I stay it will be double” illustrates a student’s dilemma when they fail. This dilemma is increased when the students have to join another cohort.

How then can the institution best support these students? Yorke and Thomas (2003) shared how one institution in their research was dealing with failing students by developing “revision summer schools” which “facilitated progression without the need for students to ‘trail fails’ during the succeeding semester” (p. 70). While the system may be a little different in the research institution (for example the small cohort system and pre-requisite courses), the concept of students catching up during summer school is one that could be investigated as a possible option. This would enable students to stay with the same cohort while repeating the failed course during the summer semester break. Another solution could be to look at strategies that could be adopted to help students make the transition into a new cohort.

Conversely, from my own anecdotal evidence I have witnessed a student who joined another cohort after failing and who said it was a good thing that had happened because she felt a sense of belonging with the new cohort. She shared how she had
never felt comfortable in her first cohort. However, I would suggest that this anecdote is the exception rather than the rule. What is important is that students who fail should have options. I am of the opinion that when students fail a course this is an opportunity to learn for all concerned.

The experiences of Fatima and Georgia were similar to Brenda’s in that they too joined the cohort in the research. However, they did not fail a course, instead they cross-credited into the programme. As previously stated in the findings chapter, Fatima and Georgia found it challenging to go into an existing cohort where the class already knew each other and had established friendships. Furthermore, they found that there was a lot of new information and organisational culture that they were unfamiliar with. Fatima said:

[Georgia] and I came into it second semester first year. So we didn’t have the initial, you know, beginning type part of the course and it was slightly overwhelming, I think, to just kind of be thrown into it.

Coming into an existing group of students can be very challenging. While these students have had some experience in a tertiary institution, each institution has its own culture and expectations of students. Moreover each cohort is a learning community that is constructed by its members, albeit within the confines of the institutional culture. This construction is “governed by social, linguistic and discoursal norms” (Mann, 2005, p. 49). These ‘norms’ are implicit and control; what is talked about; what the roles of the members are; what is valued; what are the ways to teach and to learn; and what a good student does (Mann, 2005). When students are not involved in the formation of this learning community they can miss out on knowing what these norms are. It is not just those who come in late that can have trouble deciphering what the norms are since these norms are often unspoken and implicit. Still, coming in late can be challenging. This was the experience for Fatima and Georgia. Fatima said:

I think even though the lecturers were very supportive, it would have been nice to maybe have kind of a separate session or a class that was just for
integrated students because...the lecturers kind of had the perception that everybody knows what to do and...it wasn’t quite that way.

One participant in the questionnaire gave a similar story saying:

Because of my course I completed last year, I was cross-credited. I found it hard to settle into a routine and bond with class mates, as I was going to first year, first semester class and a first year second semester class.

It should not matter when students come into an institution; there should always be an orientation and induction period. I would strongly recommend a review of the process of inducting new students who come in through the cross-crediting process. As Fatima has suggested it would be beneficial to have a few extra sessions for the new students to be introduced to the processes and procedures in the institution.

I would also suggest time should be invested in the classroom to support the inclusion of new students. A buddy or mentor system could also be introduced. In Georgia, Fatima and Brenda’s case they did settle in and eventually feel a sense of belonging. Georgia and Fatima were also fortunate to have each other for support. Fatima shared:

And the group of people who we are with now are awesome. It makes a big difference.

**Personal issues**

The most significant of all the barriers the students identified were personal issues. In the questionnaire students were asked to list up to five factors that had hindered them in their studies. At the top were family commitments along with workload/lack of time, followed by financial concerns and then sickness. Other personal issues were also noted but only by one or two students. Zepke et al. (2006) claim that the main reasons for student withdrawal are non-institutional factors: employment; health and family commitments. While the students in this research have not withdrawn, the factors that have hindered the students’ studies are the same.
Zepke et al. (2005a) said that in their research that the phrase “there was too much going on in my life” turned out to be the most important factor for students in thinking about withdrawing and actually doing so” (p. 7). They noted that looking back they could have been more specific about what made life so complicated that students considered withdrawing. In this research the students were asked whether they had considered withdrawing and if they had, the reasons why. Seven students said they had considered withdrawing (37%) and four of them gave personal reasons why (for example: unable to cope; family commitments; financial problems; work commitments). While I have attempted to discuss the main personal factors the students spoke about, it is important to note that it is often not just one factor that can be a barrier to their studies but a combination of factors. As Long, Ferrier and Heagney (2006) found in their research the reasons for dropping out were often a combination of factors. Students could possibly cope with one or two problems but when there was a combination of factors this caused the students to withdraw.

**Family commitments**

Family commitments were mentioned the most in the questionnaire when students were asked to list the factors that hindered their studies. Students were also asked to rate four statements about their family, money and health in relation to their studies. The first statement asked if their family supported them during their studies. 18 of the 19 participants agreed or strongly agreed (95%). This was quite surprising to hear that their families were so supportive of them since Thomas (2002) noted that previous studies had found that “families or communities with little or no experience of HE [higher education] may be less supportive of members’ participation” (p. 428). This research also found that almost half of the students were the first in their family to study for a degree (47%). Family support cannot be underestimated. It can be very challenging for students if their families do not support them. In my experience as a first year coordinator I have witnessed students withdraw because their families had withdrawn their support. Imogen spoke of the struggle some students faced when she said:

*It’s just not fair and right for everyone though is it? It’s so hard, there are so many students that are here that don’t have that family support. For example, if you do have little ones and you have got no family support, and your*
husband ends up having to work, it’s the women, it’s us as mums who have to pick up the slack...And I feel that sometimes we, we are almost too black and white in that respect, that we expect this and this and this by this time, but it’s not always that easy.

While students acknowledged that their families were supportive, over half of the participants (53% - 10 students) also agreed with the statement “Family concerns made it difficult to study”. Daphne shared her story and her dilemma of meeting the needs of her family but also being committed to her studies:

Cause it’s very important, you have to get your cleaning done every week. You have to get your groceries sorted. You have to look after the children’s study and also they are doing their jobs too. It’s just not one role; you need to take up so many roles at a time. But that’s a part of your life isn’t it?

Daphne also shared how her studies impacted on her family:

Yesterday my daughter had a dance show and she was awarded dancer of the year. I was not able to attend because I had my assignments to do and I worked yesterday the whole day. After coming from that I promptly did my assignments. I felt so bad about it but sometimes you just can’t. If I had gone there I wouldn’t be able to complete this [assignment]. So it’s a lot of commitment actually.

Thomas (2002) shared previous research which had stressed the importance of non-institutional factors, especially family commitments on retention and that family responsibilities, especially for women, can have a negative effect. Long et al. (2006) and Kinnear et al. (2009) had similar results suggesting that students with children are more likely to withdraw due to the conflict of balancing study and family commitments. Long et al. (2006) also said those working full-time were another group at risk of withdrawal at a higher rate because of having to balance work and study. For one student in this research, Elizabeth, she had to balance family, full-time work and study:
During the first term of my course my husband lost his job... Since then it has been a bit tough, I have been working forty hours a week.

**Finances/Workload**

Other factors that hindered students in their studies were finances and related to this were the student workload and assessments. van de Meer (2011) found that in both New Zealand and international studies keeping up with the workload was a challenge for first year students. As noted before in this research, with the massification of tertiary study (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003), the student body is now very diverse and students come in juggling many commitments. The students were asked in the questionnaire to provide the hours they worked and the hours they studied. The average hours the students worked or volunteered (both in a centre and outside of a centre) was 13 and a half hours per week. Three students did the minimum eight volunteer hours in a centre and did not work anywhere else while one student worked 48 hours per week. The three students who did the minimum required hours had no dependents or a disability and had never considered withdrawing from the programme. Nine students (47%) worked and/or volunteered for 20 hours or more a week. Three of these had dependents they were responsible for. Five of these students had considered withdrawing (55%) compared with two students (20%) of those who worked and/or volunteered less than 20 hours a week. It can be concluded that the more hours a student works the more likely they are to consider withdrawing. Also worth noting is that seven of the nine students (78%) who worked for more than 20 hours said English was their second language.

The students were also asked how many hours per week they studied. Unfortunately, three students who worked for more than 20 hours did not answer this question or they put a question mark beside it. In hindsight I have realised that this question could refer to the hours they attend class. It could have been clearer and asked how many hours they studied on top of the classes they attended. However, the six students who answered the question and who worked for 20 hours or more a week, studied on average for 15 hours a week. This compares with students who worked for less than 20 hours who study on average for eight and a half hours a week. Therefore students who were working more were also studying more. This
may have something to do with the fact that for the majority of students working longer hours English was their second language.

In response to the statements about their family, money and health in relation to their studies 11 students (58%) said that money concerns made it difficult to study. This finding is consistent with the findings of Kinnear et al. (2009) who found that financial issues were the most common reasons students gave when considering withdrawing.

Another issue related to finances was the cost of text-books. This was raised in the student focus group. They said that the cost of the text-books was approximately $1000 in the first year and then you had to purchase more in year two. Georgia said:

*And some of the books you might only use a chapter out of it or like some books are better than others for certain papers*

One solution the students shared was the use of eBooks where the institution held the license and the students could download the textbook onto their ipad or computer. However, some students liked having the hard copy in front of them. With the increase of libraries investing in eBooks it may be an option to make more of the textbooks available in this format along with having more hard copies of textbooks and make them available for short term loan at the satellite campus.

The other barrier that the students identified was their health. Four students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that health concerns made it difficult to study and four students mentioned illness when they listed factors that had hindered they studies. Two students in the student focus group also commented on their health, sharing how they had shingles.

**Pastoral care**

These personal issues made up the majority of factors that hindered the students in their studies that were external to the institution. This was similar to the findings of Kinnear et al. (2009) where the most frequent themes regarding why students considered withdrawing were “extrinsic to the university itself” (p. 29). This does not
mean the institution should absolve themselves of responsibility. On the contrary, the
Ministry of Education (2009) calls for institutions to “be more responsive to the
demands of both students and industry and to make better use of scarce resources”
(p. 13). The Ministry of Education in its Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-15 states that:

We expect to see better course and qualification completion and progression
rates for students as a result of higher-quality teaching and learning, and
more effective and culturally responsive pastoral care. (p. 13)

But what does “culturally responsive pastoral care” mean? And who delivers this
care? Are academic staff equipped to meet this requirement? The Ministry of
Education does not define culturally responsive pastoral care or explain how this
could or should be implemented. With no guidance as to what this looks like in
practice it is up to the individual institutions to interpret this. It would be helpful for the
Ministry to give some guidelines regarding this while at the same time limit being
prescriptive. Oxford University Press (2013) defines pastoral care in an educational
context as “relating to or denoting a teacher’s responsibility for the general well-being
of pupils or students.” The New Zealand Teachers Council (n.d.) in their resource for
teachers define ‘cultural responsiveness’ as

interacting... to truly understand their reality; it means understanding the
socio-political history and how it impacts on classroom life; it means
challenging personal beliefs and actions; and, it means changing practices to
engage all students in their learning and make the classroom a positive
learning place for all students (p. 3).

My interpretation of culturally responsive pastoral care focuses on building
relationships with the students, getting to know them and connecting with them in
ways that validates and respects who they are, being open to hearing their stories
and their lived realities. I see this notion of connecting and sharing as an exchange
of cultural capital.
Pastoral care in practical terms can mean checking in with the student asking how they are going; ringing them when they are absent; providing a listening ear; and when necessary referring them to support services (for example health and counselling, financial assistance services, chaplain). McChlery and Wilkie (2009) refer to studies by Christie et al. (2004) and Cooke et al. (2006) who say that the more vulnerable students do not seek help from counselling services. They argue that referring such students to counselling services absolves academic staff of responsibility and is often impersonal. This suggests that academic staff should take a more active role in supporting students pastorally. This is something that Benson et al. (2009) identified in their research. They found that students were more likely to contact academic staff than the institution’s support services. My research has also identified students preferring to talk with the academic staff. Benson et al. (2009) suggest that “students from diverse backgrounds will respond to a diverse range of styles and approaches” (p. 548) and to support this they recommend academic staff include in their responsibilities “support and advocacy, offering practical and emotional support and guiding students towards learning skills support and other university support services” (p. 548). This is a strategy I highly recommend. However, I suggest it should go further with the most pastorally minded and culturally responsive staff being responsible for the teaching of first year students. The first year of tertiary study is the most crucial time for students and if we want to reduce attrition and non-completion then we need to be employing the best academic staff we can for them.

In this research the findings showed that the academic staff provided support to students and on the whole they were approachable and created an environment where the students felt they belonged. Nevertheless the responsibility of academic staff to provide pastoral care is problematic. As noted above in the Ministry of Education’s (2009) Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-15 Academic staff are expected to do more with less. They want more effective and culturally responsive pastoral care but at the same time they want efficiency. I would suggest this is an oxymoron. Being effective and providing culturally responsive care cannot take place without building relationships with students and this takes time.
Imogen in the academic staff focus group shared how she was aware that some students faced some serious personal issues and that she felt unprepared to deal with some of them:

*You know, some of these students have some serious issues that really impact on their, just their ability... I didn't realise how much, quite how much that would require of me. And that's fine but, I didn't feel experienced enough to do that and I wonder if maybe that, if that's just me or if that's other people as well, because there are some students who require a whole lot more than others.*

In the student focus group Alice spoke of family members dying and Elizabeth spoke of emotional and personal matters. However, conducting focus groups can limit the amount of personal detail a person is willing to share. Bryman (2012) suggests that participants of focus groups may feel uncomfortable when intimate details of their private lives are expected to be shared. I did not want the students to feel uncomfortable or feel unsafe so did not ask for more detail when students shared briefly their personal issues. It may have been helpful to have interviewed students separately in conjunction with the focus groups to provide a fuller picture of the extent of the issues students face but this was outside of the realm of this research. I would like to add here that in my role as year one coordinator and lecturer, students in the programme in which I teach have shared some of their personal issues with me. I, like Imogen, have felt unprepared for some of the more serious issues.

Van Laar and Easton (1994) investigated the pastoral care that lecturers undertook. They found that 94% of lecturers had met with one or more distressed students in one year, with an average of three per term. They go on to state that this increases when taking into account mature students. Van Laar and Easton said the lecturers commented on the resourcing that “much more could, and probably should, be done by themselves and by the counselling services, but that sufficient time, money and resources were not always available to do the job properly” (p. 86). Despite this being written near on 20 years ago it is still relevant today. Van Laar and Easton recommended more resources and lecturer training. This was something that Imogen from the academic staff focus group reiterated:
I think maybe sometimes we almost need, I mean that’s one thing that I found as a beginning lecturer, I would like more PD, [professional development]…on actually how to be an effective pastoral carer.

Kim raised another question in relation to this asking:

It’s a challenge because how far do you go with pastoral care?

Wilcox et al. (2005) found that some teachers felt it was not their role to provide pastoral care or to be involved in the retention of students. They highlighted that this view was made worse by the time constraints and the conflicts they faced between their teaching and research roles. This conflict between teaching and researching was not investigated in this research but what has been raised is that lecturers are unsure how much pastoral support to give, and feel inexperienced in providing this support. Having support for the academic staff in the form of professional development to explore the level of support, when to refer students on, and the ethics involved is recommended.

**Cultural capital**

As noted in the beginning of this chapter the students in this research are diverse in ethnicity and personal circumstances. In addition to this almost half have English as an additional language (44%) and are the first in their family to enrol in a Bachelor Degree (47%). Many of these students are likely to have a different cultural capital to ‘traditional students’, which can disadvantage them and make their transition into the institution more challenging. Especially since the dominant discourse in academic culture still reflects the student as “white, middle-class and male” (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003 p. 262). It is important to note that students from diverse backgrounds are not disadvantaged because of their lack of ability or their commitment but as a result of differing cultural capital. Previously in this chapter I shared evidence which clearly showed that the majority of students who had English as an additional language worked longer hours and studied more, showing determination and persistence.
Students who are the first in their family to enrol in a Bachelor Degree (first generation students) may not have been exposed to the same discourse and knowledge about tertiary study as those who are ‘traditional students’. Lundberg (2007) uses the analogy of a game of baseball to describe cultural capital. She suggests that children who play baseball with no previous family history of baseball are at a disadvantage because they do not have all the information that is handed down from one generation to the next. The child may have ability but may not know all the rules or what the best equipment is to buy. It is the same for students in tertiary study. If students do not know the rules and the discourse expected in tertiary study this can disadvantage them and put them off their game. They can feel like they don’t belong. This is also true for other students from diverse backgrounds and not just first generation students.

Cultural capital is formed from the moment a child is born. It is the reproduction of what is valued to ensure its continuance (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). A child learns how to operate within their society based on the practices of those closest to them and the context and conditions in which they live. This in turn is influenced by the position the family has in society and economic class (Zipin & Brennan, 2006). This becomes the child’s inner working model, and is drawn upon when relating to others. Bourdieu (1977) called this deeply embedded model the “primary habitus” (as cited in Zipin & Brennan, 2006, p. 334). It shapes the child’s identity, defining who they are and their position in society. This primary habitus embodies codes that help identify familiarity. As children attend school and other contexts outside of their immediate world they identify with others who have a similar primary habitus to their own.

If they are from less powerful positions in society and class they may sense in their subconscious habitus that they don’t belong and that “this place is not for me” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, as cited in Zipin & Brennan, 2006, p. 335). Moreover children from more powerful positions in society find their primary habitus fits well with the new experiences and that they can invest their ‘cultural capital’. Children from these powerful positions are seen as more intelligent and hard-working when the reality is that the odds are stacked in their favour. Children from less powerful positions and class maybe viewed in a deficit model where they are seen as lacking and that the odds are stacked against them. Zipin and Brennan (2006) say the blame
is wrongly put on these children rather than the inequitable structures in society and institutions.

Zipin and Brennan (2006) suggest that deficit theorising also exists in tertiary institutions, and they strongly advocate for students rights, arguing they have the right to “have their cultural identities recognised and included through education that uses the knowledge and literacies of their familiar lifeworlds” (p. 343). Zipin and Brennan (2006) also call for institutions to redistribute cultural capital by helping students develop competency in the dominant literacies and knowledge. This involves starting with cultural familiarity, giving significant place to the cultural capital the students come with, while also supporting the students to recognise and use the cultural capital of the institution and academia.

This notion of institutions adapting their practices instead of always expecting the students to assimilate has gained momentum in the last few years with many researchers advocating this (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Leach & Zepke, 2003; Prebble et al., 2004; Skene et al., 2006; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 2009; 2012). This is also evident in government documents with the Ministry of Education’s (2009) Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-15 calling for institutions to “adopt teaching practices that are culturally responsive to Māori students” (p. 12) and as previously noted, to provide “culturally responsive pastoral care” (p. 13). This does not absolve the student of responsibility; nor does it lower the standards expected. Rather it levels the ‘playing field’, allowing the students to participate in a meaningful and authentic way. This should include the two-way exchange of cultural capital which acknowledges that students as well as the institution have something of value to contribute.

This research has found that on the whole the programme where the research was conducted has practices that support students from diverse backgrounds and different cultural capital. As already mentioned, the majority of the students felt the lecturers were supportive, creating a safe environment where they felt a sense of belonging and where students of diverse backgrounds were valued and respected. The students were encouraged to form supportive relationships with each other through small cohorts who stayed together to form learning communities.
Nevertheless, one student shared how she had struggled to understand the course booklets.

Lundberg (2007) suggests institutions can support students by sharing their capital with students. One way to do this is to explicitly explain the rules to them (Zipin & Brennan, 2006). In the findings from this research, Kim, a member of the academic staff focus group, said:

> Often you find that they're having trouble with time management or being organised. And if you can talk through about how they can manage their time and their assignments etc. Even a simple thing as a diary and a wall planner, but something, and check them, I mean I know it sort of seems basic doesn't it to us, but it's often not to them.

It is often these small things that are taken for granted by those who have the dominant cultural capital. For some students they may have no or little understanding of these ‘small things’. Kim acknowledged this. She also shared how the booklets had the information the students needed:

> To help them be successful...it's the information we give them in terms of the structure. Like we give them a booklet with a timetable, with the dates, with when everything is due. It's on the power-point, they can access power-points...Making sure they all know what to do and when it’s due. And what the systems are if you’re going to be late or if you can't turn up, that you actually communicate.

Unfortunately not all of the students found these booklets helpful. Brenda from the student focus group had real trouble deciphering the course booklets. She was the first person to speak in the student focus group and started by saying she had failed and that she had trouble with the booklets. This was obviously of significance for Brenda because it was the first thing she said:

> I failed ‘.......’ (names the course) in the first semester in my first year and I was really gutted and I so much wanted to quit because I didn't achieve as I
would have liked too. But my studies, although I had done foundation studies, weren’t up to standard. I needed still a lot of help. I didn’t know how to read the course booklet. I didn’t know where people were getting their information from. All I was doing was going through things and just reading things randomly. Yep, so I really struggled with my first year.

Brenda considered withdrawing; she had failed a course because she had struggled to understand the discourse. Later Brenda said:

It was all the course booklets. I didn’t know how to get the information out and what I was doing wrong. So I found that one of the biggest struggles out of my whole learning, because I basically had to teach myself, how to use it. All the content was there and it was all explained in class and everything you know, and with all the information in the class was how I got through.

Brenda had shared in the focus group how she had been to the institution’s support services for help with the booklets but said they had been no help and instead she found help from the Academic Advisor and her peers:

Things have improved, I actually learnt off other students, how to work out the course booklet.

Georgia also commented on the course booklet saying:

I totally understand what you mean about reading the course booklets, cause when we first got here it was like, ‘what’s this?’ and ‘what’s all this stuff?’ Yeah it was a little bit daunting that you know, there was a whole book.

This research did not examine the discourse in the course booklets however, this is something I recommend the institution should do along with investigating further strategies to help students understand this discourse.

The other issue raised in regard to cultural capital was the reluctance by some to ask for help and ask questions. In the questionnaire six students agreed that they found
themselves struggling with the workload but did not ask for help. Also worthy of note is that five students neither agreed nor disagreed and two students did not answer this question. The same number disagreed as agreed. Unfortunately only one student gave a reason in the comment box. As previously mentioned this is a limitation of using questionnaires. It is not possible to go back and ask these students for comments. The one person who did respond said:

I felt not very confident in seeking support and that I wasn’t good enough for people to help.

There was also a fault with the wording of the statement because it was a double-barrelled statement. Bell (2007); Cohen et al. (2007); and Hinds (2000) recommend avoiding double-barrelled questions/statements, where the student may agree with the first part of the question/statement but disagree with the second part or vice versa. The first part of the statement should have said ‘I found myself struggling with the workload’ and then if they had agreed with this statement they should have been asked ‘did you ask for help?’ with a comment box directly underneath. However, what was clear from this question/statement was that some students (35%) did not ask for help when they were struggling. Why were they not accessing this help? And how can the institution support these students? Further research needs to be conducted to provide a clear understanding.

While one student did not feel she was worth helping it is not known why the other students did not ask for help. Conversely, in the student focus group they were asked if they had struggled but didn’t ask for help, and Claire said:

I just didn’t ask because, I don’t know, growing up we were just taught to listen. And it was kind of like, even high school I would never ask questions. I would just sit at the back. If I didn’t know anything I just didn’t ask. And then it kind of grew on me when I came here, if I was lost like I was, I was kind of afraid of asking, because I was afraid of people thinking “that’s a dumb question” and that’s what kind of stops me from asking and that’s what stopped me from asking for help as well.
But I don’t know after a few semesters I kind of felt like it was okay to ask for help. And yeah, especially with like our good supportive people like in my class. Like everyone just helps each other out.

Initially Claire’s primary habitus did not fit comfortably with the institutional habitus. Claire felt uncomfortable asking for help and asking questions. However, with the help of her peers and the Academic Advisor and other academic staff (this support was noted earlier in the chapter) she was able to overlay her primary habitus with a secondary habitus (Zipin & Brennan, 2006). This does not diminish the primary habitus but enables Claire to trade in the cultural capital of the institution. This secondary habitus may never feel ‘second nature’ but it allows Claire to participate on a ‘level playing field’ without losing her identity. As Zipin and Brennan (2006) believe

Educators thus have ‘two-way’ ethical responsibility to design curriculum work and pedagogic interactions that are both inclusive and redistributive, enabling students to thrive in both home communities and mainstream institutions through teaching that both valorises lifeworld codes and enables effective learning of elite codes. (p. 346)

While Claire has now established it is okay to ask for help it has taken quite some time for her to arrive at this point. Previously in this chapter I also mentioned Brenda being reluctant to hand in work for formative if it was not required. She may hold a similar primary habitus as Claire, and she may see it as a sign of weakness if you ask for or need help. These may also be the views of others who did not access help when they were struggling. Conversely some students will advocate strongly for extra support and will access any additional support they can. A way to be both inclusive and redistributive would be to embed support into the programme and specific courses (as advocated previously in this chapter). Instead of highlighting individual students’ failure to understand the cultural codes (such as singling out students to attend additional classes), the codes should be made explicit to all students in a way that preserves individuals’ ‘mana’ (Maori word for a person’s authority or identity/being). As previously stated institutions need to find ways to support students to integrate into the institution but also adopt practices that are not
only inclusive but that help redistribute power so that all students have the opportunity to learn on a ‘level playing field’. The institution has already many practices that support this model but I suggest they consider going even further by adopting the recommendations in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

This research was designed to explore the specific experiences of one cohort of students who were undertaking a Bachelor Degree (early childhood education). What had enabled the students to be successful, what barriers they had faced and what motivated them to keep going? These questions provided a framework for the discussion and analysis of the findings from chapter four. This research has highlighted the diversity in the cohort of students and the barriers they faced. The majority of these barriers were external to the institution and included personal issues such as: financial problems; family commitments; work commitments and sickness. However, there were also a number of barriers for students that were directly related to the practices of the institution. These institutional barriers were: the differences between the campuses regarding access to support; joining an existing cohort; and the differences in the cultural capital the students bring and the cultural capital the institution trades in. Despite these barriers this chapter also discovered the high level of support the students received from the Academic Advisor, the academic staff, their peers and their families. The value of the cohort system for these students was also identified.

Another significant finding discussed in this chapter was the positivity of the students and their motivation to persevere despite all the barriers and the thoughts of withdrawing. Most students were pleased with their progress and were very satisfied with their experiences on the programme in their first semester.

The aim of this research has been to investigate the experiences of students in one cohort with the intention of finding practical solutions to the barriers they face. It is also about identifying the good practices that already exist with the intention of ensuring they continue. The next chapter addresses these aspects of this research by providing recommendations for the institution where the research took place and by suggesting options for further research.
CHAPTER SIX - CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction
This chapter summarises the main findings from this case study carried out in a single programme in one institution. It draws together the perspectives of first year students from one cohort who undertook a Bachelor Degree in early childhood education and the academic staff who were directly involved. Recommendations for the programme and the institution are provided along with suggestions for further research. These recommendations are followed by the limitations I experienced. The summary provided is based on the responses of students and academic staff to the following research questions:

What do the experiences of first semester students from a Bachelor Degree programme (early childhood education) reveal concerning success and completion?

What factors do students identify as having enabled them to successfully complete their first semester?

What factors do students identify as barriers they face in their first semester?

What factors do the staff on the Bachelor Degree programme identify as enabling students to successfully complete their first semester and what barriers do the students face?

What motivates students to be successful in their studies?

Summary of main findings
The aim of this research has been to explore the experiences of students in their first semester of tertiary study to find out what is needed for success and completion especially since the first year is well known as a crucial time for retention and success (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin & Bracken, 2000; Jansen & van der Meer, 2007; McInnis, 2001; Pittaway & Moss, 2006). To achieve this aim, students and the academic staff who taught them in their first semester were asked to share their
understanding of what had enabled the students to be successful, what barriers they had faced and what motivated the students to keep going. This was achieved by using the methods of a questionnaire for students, and two focus groups, one with students and one with academic staff.

The significant findings covered the following topics:

- diversity of the students;
- barriers to students success;
- support that enabled students to be successful; and
- student motivation.

**Diversity of the students**

The first finding of significance was the diverse make up of the students in the cohort that was involved in this research. While most of the students were female, they were diverse in age; ethnicity; employment; educational background; and family commitments. This diversity in students' backgrounds is a reflection of the broader tertiary community and presents challenges for both the institution and the individual students. The students identified some of these challenges in their personal circumstances as barriers to their success.

**Barriers to student’s success**

The students in this research faced a number of challenges/barriers as a result of the following:

1. personal circumstances - These included: financial problems; family commitments; work commitments; and sickness.
2. access to support at the satellite campus;
3. joining an existing cohort; and
4. differences in the cultural capital the students bring and the cultural capital the institution trades in.
**Personal circumstances**

Kuh et al. (2006) highlight that 45 percent of students withdraw from tertiary study and less than one quarter of them do so as a result of poor academic performance. They suggest that many students are affected by family circumstances that can have a debilitating effect on their studies and their social transition. Financial problems, family commitments and workload (related to the hours they were employed) were all listed as the biggest barriers by students in the questionnaire. This research found that while students said their families were supportive over half said they had family concerns that impacted on their studies. The overall impression from the research was that while their families were supportive the students had many responsibilities and this meant that there was less time for study. This was coupled with some students also working part-time or full-time.

Almost half of the students surveyed said they worked for more than 20 hours a week. Those that worked for 20 hours or more on average studied twice as much as those who worked less than 20 hours. The majority of those working more hours had English as a second language and over half had considered withdrawing from the programme. This highlights the significant influence personal circumstances have on students’ study and the dilemma of “should I stay or should I go?” that some students face.

The personal issues faced by some students were acknowledged by the academic staff who viewed their role as both academic and pastoral and sought to establish supportive relationships with students. However, they also raised concerns about their own ability to deal with some of the more serious personal issues, saying they felt unprepared, and suggested professional development to know how to respond.

Another barrier the students identified regarding personal circumstances was the struggle to pay for text-books and accessing the library resources. Computer and internet access were also an issue for over half of the students in the focus group. However, the institution provided access on both campuses and the students were proactive in taking advantage of this service. Is this a barrier external to the institution or a barrier the institution has created? This is debatable. On the one hand you have the institution’s expectations while on the other hand you have the financial problems
that are external to the institution. What is clear is that institutions can still have a role in supporting students who have these personal factors that impact on their studies, for example by making textbooks more readily available.

While the majority of the barriers the students faced were external to the institution there were some issues that were directly related to the practices of the institution.

Access to support at the satellite campus
This research uncovered a perceived disparity between the satellite campus and the main campus. The institution had some strategies in place to help with access but a small number of students felt they were disadvantaged. It was evident that the students had such extensive support within the programme in the way of academic and pastoral support that the students did not need the majority of the institution-wide services. However, access to the library was the main concern raised by students.

Joining an existing cohort
The cohort system is a major strategy employed by the programme to support students' retention and success. This research discovered that while this system was very effective at establishing a place for students to belong, there was also a flip side to this. Three students in the student focus group came into the cohort as a result of either cross-crediting or failing a course. They experienced difficulties fitting into the cohort and adjusting to the institution’s culture especially when the rest of the cohort was already familiar with this culture.

Differences in cultural capitals
It was noted in this research that some of the students came into the programme with different cultural capital than that which was valued in the institution. This research has discovered that overall, the programme where the research was conducted has practices that support students from diverse backgrounds and different cultural capital. However, there were some examples shared where students struggled to understand the expectations of the institution. This can present a real barrier to students, not because they are unintelligent or unmotivated but because they are not familiar with the discourse or the "hidden curricula" (Zipin & Brennan, 2006, p. 344). To support students from diverse backgrounds, institutions need to ensure they
provide an environment that is familiar to students and which gives significant place to the cultural capital the students come with, while also supporting the students to recognise and use the cultural capital of the institution and academia.

**Support enabling success**

The most noteworthy finding from this research was the level of support the students received from:

1. the Academic Advisor;
2. the academic staff;
3. the student’s peers and the cohort system;
4. and the student’s families.

Students did not access the wider institutional support services and this may have been because this support was not on-site but it is more likely a consequence of the extensive support the students received from within the programme.

**Academic Advisor and academic staff**

Academic support typically involves generic academic skills provided by institution-wide services (Hooley et al., 2011). In contrast the students in this research had access to an Academic Advisor who was employed to specifically support students on the programme. She was also employed as a lecturer. This gave her inside knowledge of the programme, the discourse and the curricula. As a result students formed a relationship with the Academic Advisor and received both academic and pastoral support from her. Students spoke very highly of the Academic Advisor and the support she gave them. It appears that having the Academic support embedded into the programme takes away some of the stigma associated with accessing this support. It was not only the students who were struggling that attended the academic writing classes but it was also attended by students who received ‘A’ grades.

Overall the students found the Academic Advisor and the academic staff to be very supportive, interested in their learning, helpful and provided good teaching. The students said the academic staff provided an environment where they felt valued and respected and where they had a sense of belonging. This level of support is an
example of good practice and a credit to the institution. It has enabled these students to continue on in their studies despite the barriers some of them have faced.

The caring attitude of the academic staff and their commitment to the students is obvious and worthy of further investigation. Is this level of support across other programmes in the institute and what are the conditions the academic staff work in that enables them to provide this support?

*Peers/Cohort system*

Another reason the students in this research have persisted and been successful is a result of being part of a cohort system. This cohort system enabled the small group of students to form a learning community where they supported one another, depended on each other and shared responsibility for each other. The students had a strong commitment to each other; they felt valued and respected; experienced a sense of belonging; and enjoyed attending class. Small cohorts enable students to: establish friendships; gain understanding of other people’s culture and way of being; access information related to their course and assessments from each other; and support each other both academically and pastorally. Strong supportive cohorts/learning communities are not automatically created just because you have a small group of students together, rather they are constructed with the guidance and support of academic staff.

All of the students agreed that their peers in the cohort were supportive and almost all of them had helped other students. Most students in the research said they enjoyed attending class and developed friendships as a result of being part of the cohort.

*Family*

Another factor that enabled students to be successful was the support they received from their families. While family commitments were seen as a barrier all but one of the students said their families supported them in their studies. Unfortunately this research did not investigate the ways in which families supported students but this could be something to consider for future research.
**Student motivation**

Intrinsic motivation comes about as a result of students feeling they belong, that they are competent and they have autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000 as cited in Schuetz, 2008). The evidence from this research showed that despite the barriers the students faced the majority said they enjoyed going to class; they felt valued; they had a sense of belonging; they felt they could contribute; they were happy with their results and the academic staff were supportive and caring. The majority said they found it easy to get motivated and I believe this is a result of the environment the academic staff and the students created together.

Students who were part of the focus group gave examples of what motivated them and most of these were intrinsic. What came through strongly was their enjoyment of what they were doing. They also wanted to prove to themselves as well as others that they could be successful and do something of their lives and contribute to the lives of others. They made it clear that their motivation was not about financial gains.

**Recommendations**

This research has identified the key factors that have enabled the students in this research to be successful, along with the barriers the students faced and the factors that motivated the students to keep going. The following recommendations have been developed in response to these findings and are specific to the institution the research was conducted in. These recommendations along with the main findings of the research will be disseminated through a presentation to the institution, faculty, programme leader and academic staff and a copy of the thesis will be presented to the faculty.

**Recommendation 1**

This research has found that the academic staff have provided a supportive environment for students from diverse backgrounds where the students felt they belonged and were valued and where they had build friendships and supportive networks as a result of the cohort system. This environment has enabled the students to be motivated and engaged. As a result of this support the recommendation is to
• Continue providing this level of support and consider using this programme as a model of good practice for other programmes in the institution (this level of support may already be in place in other programmes but if not then I recommend this)

**Recommendation 2**
This research found that students did not access the institution-wide academic services. This was possibly due to the high level of support they received within the programme, however, previous research shows that avoiding institution-wide academic support is a common problem in tertiary study (Bamforth, 2010; Hooley et al., 2011). Having academic staff who are able to provide additional academic support within the programme are in a better position than ‘specialists’ because they know the students well and have build relationships with them. I suggest:

• A feasibility study to investigate the cost of providing an Academic Advisor as part of each programme against the cost of a centralised academic support service and the cost of attrition.

**Recommendation 3**
One of the barriers the students faced was financial concerns. Out of this came the cost of textbooks and accessing books, especially the textbooks from the library since this is based on the main campus. I recommend:

• Extending the small library set up at the satellite campus to include more textbooks and make them available to students to borrow on a short term loan.
• Increasing the number of e-books at the library to include textbooks that the students can borrow online.

**Recommendation 4**
Another barrier the students raised was the challenge of joining an existing cohort due to either failing a course or coming into the programme later as a result of cross crediting. I recommend
- For students cross crediting into the programme, the provision of a specific orientation and induction process that will enable them to learn the discourse and the rules and expectations of the institution;
- For students cross crediting that they meet at regular intervals in the first semester with a designated academic staff member who can support them in their transition;
- For students who have failed a course consider the possibility of a summer school where the student can catch up any failed papers thereby enabling them to continue on with the same cohort (this may not be possible but could be investigated);
- For all students joining an existing cohort more support could be provided through the provision of additional strategies that support students to get to know other students in the cohort.

**Recommendation 5**

The biggest barrier the students faced were external to the institution, the student’s personal issues. Work load, family commitments, work commitments and financial concerns were all high on students’ lists. While institutions may not be able to address these issues they can provide pastoral care. This research has found that while the academic staff provided pastoral care to the students they needed support with this. I would like to recommend that

- Staff receive Professional Development around supporting students with personal issues, to explore the level of support, when to refer students on, and the ethics involved
- Staff have close networks with counselling services for referrals and support

**Recommendation 6**

This research has found that the programme where the research was conducted has practices that support students from diverse backgrounds and different cultural capital. However, understanding the course booklets was raised as a barrier to their learning. I recommend
• Examining the discourse used in the course booklets along with investigating further strategies to help students understand this discourse.

**Recommendation 7**

Some of the students in this research had acknowledged that they had struggled but did not ask for help. This research did not investigate why they did not ask for help but, one student shared it was because she had been brought up not to ask questions or to ask for help. This student did eventually start asking questions and asking for help and this was a result of the supportive environment she was in. Given that the first year of tertiary study is the most crucial time for students I recommend institutions

• Utilise their most pastorally minded, culturally responsive staff to be responsible for teaching and supporting the first year students.

**Further research**

This research has made seven recommendations that are specifically related to the findings in one cohort of students in one institution. However, this research has raised some questions that could be addressed through further research.

The main barriers that the students shared in this research were external to the institution and were a combination of factors including financial concerns, family concerns and commitments, work commitments and workload. The reality is that for many students tertiary study is only one part of their already complex lives and once they enrol they can face the dilemma of ‘should I stay or should I go?’ For some students these barriers can lead them to needing both academic and pastoral support from the academic staff. This has raised some questions regarding the level of support the academic staff can realistically give students. Academic staff are under increasing pressure to provide both academic and pastoral support while also undertaking research. At the same time the Ministry of Education (2009) is calling for institutions to “provide higher-quality teaching and learning, and more effective and culturally responsive pastoral care” (p. 13) while also expecting them to work in a tighter fiscal environment. Are academic staff comfortable offering this support?
What affect is this extra expectation having on the academic staff? How much support are academic staff providing and how much is enough/too much? These questions are worthy of further investigation.

Also worth exploring is why some students do not ask for help or access help when they are struggling. Is this a difference in cultural capital? Do students feel academic staff are not approachable? Do some students feel they are not entitled to support? What are their self belief theories about their own abilities and do these theories about themselves change during their first year? All of these questions have been raised as a consequence of this research.

This research investigated the experiences of students in one cohort only. The results cannot be generalised, however it would be beneficial to undertake further research to examine student cultural capital in a range of institutions nationwide and compare them.

While this research investigated the experiences of students in one cohort in one institution, asking what has helped them to be successful, what barriers did they face and what motivated them to keep going, it did not investigate why students withdrew. This was due to limitations listed in the next section. This cohort of students had a 30% attrition rate in the first semester. Why did some students leave, especially when the remaining students attested to a supportive environment? Were the reasons similar to the students who had considered withdrawing but had stayed? Are there any clear differences between the students who stay and the students who leave? While this was not investigated it would be useful to firstly investigate why students leave and secondly to compare the results to those who consider withdrawing but stay.

Lastly, I have made the recommendation that the cost of having an Academic Advisor for each programme be investigated and weighed up against the cost of a centralised academic support service and the cost of attrition. I would also suggest it would be valuable to undertake a comparative study to compare students who have access to an Academic Advisor who is employed specifically within a programme with students who only have access to an institute-wide academic support service.
The recommendations from this research and the recommendations for further research will be shared with the institution, the faculty, programme leader and the academic staff through a presentation once the report is submitted and by providing a copy of the final report once it has been approved.

**Limitations**

Whenever any research is undertaken limitations are inevitable (Merriam, 1998). While conducting this research I faced a number of limitations that are common in qualitative research along with some that were more personal.

One of the limitations of qualitative case studies is that it is not possible to generalise the findings (Cohen et al., 2007). This research was a very small case study that was personal and unique to those involved. The recommendations are primarily for the specific programme and institution where the research took place. It is likely however, that other students and other institutions can identify with the findings and may find the recommendations helpful. I intend to share the findings with others through a presentation at the International First Year in Higher Education Conference and by submitting articles to Journals committed to the first year in tertiary study.

I used focus groups as a data collection method and while this provided me with a lot of rich descriptive data, in hindsight I realise that I could have also followed up with individual interviews. In a focus group situation participants are less likely to share more personal details. The implications for this research were that the possible true extent of the personal issues students faced was unknown.

One of the most significant limitations was the timing of my research. The research proposal took much longer than I had expected, especially narrowing my focus to a realistic aim and research question. I also experienced delays with my ethics application and this resulted in the data collection starting much later than anticipated. I had envisaged I would conduct the questionnaire and focus groups while the students were in their second semester of their first year. The idea was that when they shared their experience it would be about their first semester. Unfortunately I was not able to start my data collection until the students were in their
second year. This meant that some of the information the students shared could have been clouded by their recent experiences in year two. Ideally it would have been better to conduct the questionnaires and focus groups soon after they had finished their first semester.

I had intended to pilot my questionnaire but this did not happen because of my late start. I also had a sporting injury while trying to get my proposal written resulted in surgery and time off work. This also set me back.

Another limitation of this research was the small sample size. This research only investigated one small cohort of students with only 19 student participants and four academic staff taking part. Because this research was part of the requirements for a Masters degree I needed to keep it manageable and realistic. As it was it I ended up with a lot of rich descriptive data that took time to code and write up in a logical and cohesive manner.

There were also limitations with the questionnaire. In hindsight I have realised that the questionnaire was probably too long because some of the students did not answer all the questions. I have also realised that a couple of the questions I asked were double barreled, where I asked two questions at the same time and if I had been able to pilot the questionnaire I might have picked up on this and divided them to gain a better picture. There were also some questions where the wording could have been clearer and where it would have been useful to ask students for clarification on their responses but because they were anonymous this was not possible. I have also realised in hindsight that it would have been useful to have asked students whether they were required to attend the academic writing class.

There were also limitations due to ethical considerations. I wanted to ensure that the participants and the institution remained anonymous. To minimise the risk I had to refrain from collecting some information. For example it would have been beneficial to have identified the ethnicity and age of the participants in the focus groups but this may have led to their identities being revealed.
There were some students who had joined the institution after the first semester due to cross crediting. While they were commenting on their first semester they did not start with the rest of the students and their experiences were different to the majority. While this could be seen as a limitation and a skewing of the results it did highlight a real barrier for these students and added a richness to the data.

Another limitation was the discourse used. While researching the literature I found authors using multiple words to mean the same thing and single words that have multiple meaning. While vocabulary may appear standard certainly the meanings are not.

**Final comments**

Transitioning into tertiary study for most students is a new and challenging experience with the first year commonly recognised as being a critical time and where students may ask themselves “should I stay or should I go?” Students come into tertiary study from diverse backgrounds and with differing cultural capital. It is not enough for tertiary institutions to expect students to integrate into the tertiary environment; instead they must also adapt their practices to enable the students to trade in their own cultural capital. Institutions need to ensure cultural familiarity, give significant place to the cultural capital the students come with, while also supporting the students to recognise and use the cultural capital of the institution and academia.

My research has found that the programme where the research was conducted is successful at supporting students’ integration while also creating an environment that values an exchange of cultural capitals, allowing the students to participate in a meaningful and authentic way. There were some barriers the students faced which were mostly external to the institution however, there were some things the institution could do differently to minimise these barriers. I have suggested the institution: extend access to textbooks; provide additional support to those who join an existing cohort; support academic staff to provide pastoral support; examine the discourse used in the course booklets and ensure the institutions best teachers teach the first year students. These recommendations will be presented to the institution and its members through a presentation and a copy of the report.
On a personal note, as a result of this research I have come to realise that I have found my own educational journey a challenge. I have come from a working class background and I was the first in my immediate family to enrol in tertiary study (though my father did do an apprenticeship and became highly qualified over time). Growing up we did not have lots of books in the house or have conversations about going on to further study. One the other hand we were encouraged to give things a go and not to give up just because something was challenging. These values are part of my primary habitus. I have often said to others I am not an academic because it has never come easy to me and I do not feel comfortable with this label. During the first couple of years as a lecturer I often felt a fraud. Like the students in this research I persisted despite my own barriers of self doubt.

The students in this research have also persisted in their studies despite the many barriers they face, and while some of them considered withdrawing they have weighed up their options and as The Clash (1982) song goes “should I stay or should I go?” these students have decided to stay.
References


Celikoz, N. (2010). Basic factors that affect general academic motivation levels of candidate preschool teachers *Education 131* (1), 113-127.


understanding (2nd ed.). (pp. 154-175). Auckland, New Zealand: Pearson Education.


Appendix A

Appendix A - Questionnaire

Should I stay or should I go? First Semester Experiences in a Tertiary Institution.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire on the first year experiences in a tertiary institution. The researcher for this project is Janet Malcolm (janet.malcolm@manukau.ac.nz). It is being conducted for the completion of a Masters of Education Programme from Unitec. Janet Malcolm’s supervisor for this project is Melanie Miller (mmiller2@unitec.ac.nz).

The aim of this research is to improve the learning experiences and success for students at one Tertiary institution by investigating and gaining an insight into the learning experiences of students and to understand what is needed for success and completion.

This questionnaire is completely anonymous. Any answers you give will be combined with other students and individuals will not be identified.

Please answer all questions (write N/A – not applicable – as necessary) and add comments where requested. Please use a black/blue ballpoint pen. If you would like to provide additional comments please feel free to use the back of the sheets and put the number of the question the comments relate to.

SECTION ONE:

1. Age

2. Gender (Tick one)
   - Female
   - Male

3. ETHNIC ORIGIN - Tick only ONE box (ie the ethnic group you most identify with)
   - NZ European/Pakeha
   - Australian
   - New Zealand Maori
   - Other European
   - Samoan
   - Filipino
   - Cook Island Maori
   - Cambodian
   - Tongan
   - Vietnamese
   - Niue
   - Other South-East Asian
   - Tokelauan
   - Chinese
   - Fijian
   - Indian
   - Other Pacific Peoples
   - Sri Lankan
   - British/Irish
   - Japanese
   - Dutch
   - Korean
   - Greek
   - Other Asian
   - Polish
   - Middle Eastern
   - South Slav
   - Latin American
   - Italian
   - African
   - German
   - Other

Please specify if “Other Pacific people”, “Other European”, “Other South-East Asian”, “Other Asian” or “Other”
4. Is English your first language?  
   Yes  No

5. What is your highest school qualification prior to enrolling in this Bachelor Degree (early childhood education) (Tick only one box)
   - No formal secondary education
   - NCEA Level 2 or 6th Form Certificate
   - NCEA Level 3 or Bursary or Scholarship
   - Certificate in Foundation Education – Level 3
   - Overseas Qualification (please specify)
   - Other (Please specify)
   - NCEA Level 1 or School Certificate
   - University Entrance
   - Certificate in Early Childhood Education Level 4
   - Certificate in Learning Support (Inclusive Education) Level 4

6. Are you the first in your immediate family to enrol in a Bachelor Degree?  
   Yes  No

7. How many hours a week do you work in an Early Childhood Centre?  
   Paid  Volunteer

8. Are you in any paid employment? (besides working in an ECE centre)  
   Yes  No
   If yes, how many hours a week do you work? (not including the hours you do in an ECE centre)

9. Are you the main caregiver for someone who is dependent on you? (i.e. children, a sick relative, a person with a disability, an elderly family member)  
   Yes  No

10. Do you have a disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition that may affect your study?  
    Yes  No

11. Have you ever considered withdrawing from the programme?  
    Yes  No
    If yes, what made you consider withdrawing?

175
12. How many hours per week did you study last semester (on average)

**SECTION TWO:**
The following questions relate to your experiences *last semester* (please tick where appropriate). After each set of questions a comment box is available for you to add more information if you would like to.

13. Prior to starting the programme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt confident that I could be successful</td>
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<tr>
<td>I felt academically prepared before I started the programme</td>
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<td>I knew other people that were enrolling for the same programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>My enrolment ran smoothly</td>
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Comments

14. Transition engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students from diverse backgrounds were valued and respected</td>
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<td>I felt safe and had a feeling of belonging</td>
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<td>I felt I could contribute to class discussions</td>
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<td>The programme lived up to my expectations</td>
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<td>Orientation helped me get off to a good start</td>
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<td>My first semester was successful</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am pleased with the results I have achieved</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am very satisfied with my experience on this programme so far</td>
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<tr>
<td>The first semester provided me with the academic skills I needed to be successful</td>
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### 15. Peer engagement

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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I developed friendships with some of my class colleagues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class members were supportive of one another</td>
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<td>I regularly studied with other students</td>
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<td>I have helped other students in their studies (ie explaining assessments/answering questions)</td>
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Comments

### 16. Institutional support

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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I knew where to go to get help</td>
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<tr>
<td>I found myself struggling with the workload but didn’t ask for help</td>
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<td>I had problems accessing the online resources</td>
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What support services are you aware of?

What support services have you accessed?

Further comments
### 17. Academic engagement

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>I found it easy to get motivated</td>
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<td>I found it hard to keep up with the workload</td>
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<td>I had difficulty understanding the assessments</td>
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<td>Lecturers gave feedback that helped me to improve</td>
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<td>Lecturers took an interest in my learning</td>
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<td>The quality of teaching was generally good</td>
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<td>The lecturers were very supportive</td>
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<td>The lecturers took time to explain the assessments</td>
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<td>I enjoyed the intellectual challenge of my study</td>
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<td>I enjoyed going to class</td>
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<td>I regularly went to class having completed the required readings</td>
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<td>I regularly sought advice and help from the lecturers</td>
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<td>I regularly asked questions in class</td>
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<td>Lecturers had realistic expectations of students</td>
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<td>Comments</td>
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### 18. Outside influences

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My family supported me in my studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money concerns made it difficult to study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family concerns made it difficult to study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health concerns made it difficult to study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 19. Views on success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success is the result of a lot of hard work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am responsible for my own success</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturers play a huge role in whether I am successful or not</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SECTION THREE:

20. Do you ever find yourself struggling with the work required of you for this programme?  
   Yes [ ]  No [ ]

If Yes what if anything did you do about this?

Comments
21. Have you ever missed two or more classes in a row

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

If Yes did anyone contact you about this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

22. Please list up to 5 factors that have enabled you to be successful in your studies

23. Please list up to 5 factors that have hindered you in your studies

Cut/tear here

SECTION FOUR:

24. Would you be interested in attending a focus group to discuss further some of the issues raised in the questionnaire?

I am looking for volunteers to be involved in a focus group in approximately a month’s time to discuss in a small group some of the experiences you have had in your first semester. This would take place after class/or during the lunch break depending on what suited participants. It would be under an hour in length and lunch or afternoon tea would be provided.

If you would like to be involved please write your name below and indicate what time you would prefer

I am interested in taking part in a focus group.

Name: ____________________________________________

Tick which box best suits you
Thank you so much for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>After class</th>
<th>Don’t mind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Appendix B - Information sheet

Title of Thesis:

Should I stay or should I go? – First semester experiences in a tertiary institution

An Invitation to students

Kia Ora, My name is Janet Malcolm and I am an early childhood teacher educator and year one coordinator at a tertiary institution. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Education degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology and seek your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate and gain an insight into the learning experiences of first year students and to understand what is needed for success and completion. I am interested in exploring the factors that students have recognised as having helped them or hindered them to be successful.

My research consists of the following data collection methods:

- Questionnaire
  - This questionnaire will ask participants about their experiences in their first semester. The questionnaire is an initial inquiry into a range of student experiences including orientation, settling in, institutional and peer support.

- Student focus groups
  - After completing a questionnaire participants will be asked if they would like to participate in a focus group. The focus group/s will consist of 4-6 people and will explore the experiences in more depth.

- Staff focus groups
  - Staff that have been involved with supporting students will be invited to participate in a separate focus group of 4-6 people. They will be asked to share their experiences of what has enabled students to be successful and what has hindered students to be successful.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project by completing a questionnaire, which will take approximately ten minutes to complete. If you agree to the questionnaire you will be invited to participate in a focus group. The focus group will be up to one hour in length and will take place approximately one month after the questionnaire, during the lunch break or after class, whichever is more suitable to the participants.

You have been invited to participate in this research project because you are part of a cohort of students who attend class at a new satellite campus where some
students in the cohort did not complete their first semester. I am interested in your experiences and what has enabled you to be successful and what barriers you may have faced. The intention is to improve the experiences for first year students and consequently improve success and completion.

Neither you nor the organisation will be identified in the Thesis. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw any information that you have contributed from the research at any time before the data is collected. Any decision to participate in this research project will not impact on your performance in any way. If you agree to attend a focus group I will record your contribution and will provide a transcript for you to check before data analysis is undertaken. All data collected will be kept securely under lock and key for a period of five years. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Melanie Miller and may be contacted by email or phone. Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext 8176. Email: mmiller2@unitec.ac.nz

Yours sincerely

Janet Malcolm
Ph: (09) 9688765 ext. 7384
Email: janet.malcolm@manukau.ac.nz

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1180
This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 23.6.2011 to 23.6.2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix C

Appendix C - Participant consent form - Questionnaire

Should I stay or should I go? – First semester experiences in a tertiary institution

I have had the research project explained to me and I have read and understand the information sheet given to me. I understand that my choice to participate in this research will not impact on my performance in any way.

I understand that my participation in the questionnaire is voluntary and that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project before the data is collected.

I understand that everything I say is confidential and none of the information I give will identify me or the name of the organisation and that the only persons who will know what I have said will be the researcher and her supervisor/s. I understand that all the information that I give will be stored securely for a period of 5 years.

I understand that I can read the finished research document, and that it will be available at Unitec Library.

I have had time to consider the above and I give my consent to be a part of this project.

I agree to take part in this questionnaire as part of the research project.

Signed: ______________________________

Name: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1180
This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 23.6.2011 to 23.6.2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix D

Appendix D - Participant consent form – Focus group

Should I stay or should I go? – First semester experiences in a tertiary institution

I have had the research project explained to me and I have read and understand the information sheet given to me. I understand that my choice to participate in this focus group will not impact on my performance in any way.

I understand that my participation in the focus group is voluntary, that I will be provided with a transcript for checking before data analysis is started and that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project before data is collected.

I understand that everything I say is confidential and none of the information I give will identify me or the name of the organisation and that the only persons who will know what I have said will be the focus group participants, the researcher and her supervisor/s. However I realise that while the researcher will discuss with the participants in the focus group their responsibility to keep the information discussed confidential the researcher cannot guarantee their confidentiality. I also understand that all the information that I give will be stored securely for a period of 5 years.

I understand that I can read the finished research document, and that it will be available at Unitec Library.

I have had time to consider the above and I give my consent to be a part of this project.

I agree to take part in a focus group as part of this research project.

Signed: ________________________________

Name: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1180

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 23.6.2011 to 23.6.2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix E - Information sheet

Title of Thesis:

Should I stay or should I go? – First semester experiences in a tertiary institution

An Invitation to Lecturers and support staff

Kia Ora, My name is Janet Malcolm and I am an early childhood teacher educator and year one coordinator at a tertiary institution. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Education degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology and seek your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate and gain an insight into the learning experiences of first year students and to understand what is needed for success and completion. I am interested in exploring the factors that students and lecturers/other staff have recognised as having helped or hindered students to be successful.

My research consists of the following data collection methods:

- **Questionnaire**
  - This questionnaire will ask student participants about their experiences in their first semester. The questionnaire is an initial inquiry into a range of student experiences including orientation, settling in, institutional and peer support.

- **Student focus groups**
  - After completing a questionnaire student participants will be asked if they would like to participate in a focus group. The focus group/s will consist of 4-6 people and will explore their experiences in more depth.

- **Staff focus groups**
  - Staff that have been involved with supporting students will be invited to participate in a separate focus group of 4-6 people. They will be asked to share their experiences of what may have enabled students to be successful and what may have hindered students to be successful.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project by being part of a focus group. The focus group will be up to one hour in length and will take place in July. The time, date and place to be negotiated.

You have been invited to participate in this research project because you have in some way been a part of supporting a cohort of students who attend class at a new satellite campus where some students in the cohort did not complete their first semester. I am interested in your experiences and what you feel has enabled
students to be successful and what barriers you feel some students may have faced. The intention is to improve the experiences for first year students and consequently improve success and completion.

Any participation in this research project will not impact on your performance and neither you nor the organisation will be identified in the Thesis. However while I will discuss with the participants in the focus group their responsibility to keep the information discussed confidential I cannot guarantee their confidentiality. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw any information that you have contributed from the research at any time before the data is collected. If you agree to attend the focus group I will record your contribution and will provide a transcript for you to check before data analysis is undertaken. All data collected will be kept securely under lock and key for a period of five years. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Melanie Miller and may be contacted by email or phone. Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext 8176. Email: mmiller2@unitec.ac.nz

Yours sincerely

Janet Malcolm
Ph: (09) 9688765 ext. 7384
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Appendix F - Student focus group questions

Should I stay or should I go? First Semester Experiences in a Tertiary Institution.

1. Was the first semester what you expected? Why/why not?

2. What does success mean to you?

3. What motivates you to keep going?

4. What has enabled you to be successful in your first semester?

5. What barriers have you faced in your first semester?

**NOTE:** These key questions are tentative and broad based and may be influenced by the results of the questionnaire.
Appendix G - Staff focus group questions

Should I stay or should I go? First Semester Experiences in a Tertiary Institution.

1. What are the issues that you are aware of that students face in their first semester?

2. What does success for students mean to you?

3. What do you think motivates a student to keep going?

4. What do you think has enabled students to be successful in their first semester?

5. What barriers do you think students face in their first semester?

NOTE: These key questions are tentative and broad based and may be influenced by the results of the questionnaire and student focus groups.