“Into Foreign Territory”: The experiences of six students as they first encounter formal university learning structures

A thesis submitted in (partial) fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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September 2010
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# Acronyms

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACER</td>
<td>Australian Council for Educational Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEST</td>
<td>Department of Education, Science and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENTER</td>
<td>Equivalent National Tertiary Education Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCE</td>
<td>Victorian Certificate of Education</td>
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Abstract

Universities have as their modus operandi formal structures of lectures and tutorials set up to create a learning environment. This research study examines the voices of six first year university students as they encounter the formal structured learning environment of an Australian university.

The study is situated within a context of the changing landscape of tertiary education in Australia, particularly as it relates to student transition and what is commonly called “the first year experience” (FYE). The emergence over the last two decades of a number of theoretical perspectives on the FYE have informed this study, including student engagement and satisfaction with the university experience. Within these perspectives the negotiated engagement of the modern student is discussed. It is against these theoretical perspectives that the interviews of the students are explored as they journey through the formal learning structures of lectures and tutorials and through the processes and academic relationships that support these structures.

The aim of this study is to determine what engagement the traditional university learning structures of lectures and tutorials created for these six individual students. I also explored the academic relationships these students formed with their lecturers and tutors within these structures and their expectations about how they would learn and become knowledgeable in their discipline through these structures.

The research design was situated within a qualitative paradigm. The framework of interpretivism was selected as it provides opportunities for a view of the reality in terms of the constructions of the six participants. The ontology of interpretivism is based upon social reality – the human experience is a process of interpretation. In listening to the “voices” of the students I was able to grasp their meanings and then reconstruct the meanings into an interpretation. Within this framework of interpretivism I chose case studies using interviews as the key data collection method. I felt case studies were the best method to elicit the inner experiences and meanings of the first year students as they encountered the alien environment of university lectures. Through the articulation of their learning experiences over both semesters, I was able to gain an insight into the issues involved in the transition to formal university structures for each of the six students.

The interpretations of the students’ constructs allowed me to form a number of conclusions about their formal learning journey in their first encounter with university.
The students in this study were unclear about their role as learners in the formal university learning environment. In particular, university structures (such as lectures and tutorials) were alien to their previous encounters with formal education and they were unsure and confused about the nature and extent of their participation. All of the students were confronted and overwhelmed by the lack of direction provided by both the university structures and the staff. All of the participants quickly adjusted their expectations when confronted with the same formal structures in second semester. There was a clear mismatch between the curriculum and the pedagogy which led to the students’ disengagement with the discipline and the university.

The responses gained through this research cast these students as journey makers, engaging in rapid construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of the academic environment and the structures and processes within it. The data indicates a disappointment and frustration in the voices of the students as they grapple with the modus operandi of lectures and tutorials.

It could be argued that the insights of six individual students at one university are insignificant when considering contributions to educational practice. But, as the rawness and frustration of the student responses indicate, greater emphasis needs to be directed at the individual within the total cohort because it is after all individuals who together make up what is commonly called “the first year student experience”.

This is a study of their reconstructed experiences as they first encounter the teaching and learning structure of a university. By articulating and analysing the responses of these students, greater insight is gained about the needs of all first year students and the role of these formal university structures.

This study contributes to educational practice by raising questions about the type of learning structures and processes universities set up for first year students. It questions the quality of structures such as lectures and tutorials for all students. The study forces attention on the individual within such structures and questions the appropriateness of such structures in the modern tertiary landscape. Importantly, it challenges the role of academics in facilitating better “signposts” to aid perseverance in the learning journey and success in a “foreign place”.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction to the Research Study

1.1 Introduction

In Australia, as in many countries, an important educational milestone is the transition from schooling to tertiary education. For an increasing number of students this tertiary education takes place at university. The university milestone is the beginning of a journey that is punctuated with experiences, episodes and events that create understanding and knowledge. The transition from schooling to non-compulsory tertiary education is an important and significant step for many students. This transition milestone has been subject of much research and debate in the past two or three decades with the decision to undertake university studies and to pursue these studies beyond the first year examined from a number of perspectives discussed further in Chapter 2.

Changes in the tertiary education sector in Australia over the past three decades have meant that for an increasing number of Australians the admission to this sector of tertiary study – university – is an important event that is controlled by a number of factors – economic, cultural, social and physical considerations, as well as ability and aptitude (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). In addition, changes in the Australian tertiary sector have resulted in differences in course delivery and programme design that have created additional considerations for individuals pursuing university degrees. Within the formal education provided to university students, there are a number of distinct structures designed to facilitate learning and teaching. These structures of lectures, tutorials, academic relationships and formal assessment requirements to support these structures are, for most university entrants, a new experience. Henley and von Randow (2008) call it “cracking the code”, maintaining that incoming students do a crash course in adapting to their learning environment. It appears these new learning experiences require adaptation, maturity and self-awareness on the part of the student. It is not surprising therefore that the transition to university is seen as a new, important and complex milestone with the potential for failure high. As a lecturer in one university department I became interested, over many years, in what new students made of formal learning structures such as lectures and tutorials. (McLaughlin & Simpson, 2007; McLaughlin & Mills, 2010) This interest coincided with efforts by my university school to introduce a more general first year programme which was still heavily based upon a lecture/tutorial system of formal learning.
My research study examines the personal reflections of six first-time tertiary entrants to this Australian university as they navigated their educational journey through their first two semesters of formal lectures, tutorials and activities arising from these structures. In this chapter the parameters of the study are discussed with background material provided as a context upon which to examine the responses. Against this background the recent changes to the tertiary education landscape are briefly examined to allow for a wider lens through which to conceptualise this particular study.

The research rationale in this chapter examines the research aim, along with the specific objectives of the study. A brief introduction to the research study design provides the identified limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with an outline of the key research themes. My role as researcher within this study is integral to the design of the study. My aim was to grasp the constructed meanings of the individual students and reconstruct them. Through these constructed meanings a number of common themes emerged. These themes were “unpacked” with the interviewees so that explicit meanings could be further explored and assumptions developed and discussed. A brief discussion of the parameters of these themes is provided in this chapter to “set the scene” for a comprehensive understanding of the results that emerge in later chapters.

Finally, the chapter ends with an outline of the organisation of the research material in this document.

1.2 Background to the Study

The academic research landscape of the first experience of university education is broad, and by no means bounded by research parameters. Skene and Evamy (2009) call research examining the first year experience “contested ground”.

This “contested ground” spans areas as diverse as university orientations, student retention, discipline specific initiatives, learning styles, psychological studies, specific university research, and government policies amongst many others. The significance of causal factors has formed the basis of widespread research, along with research into the attitudes, psychological and academic motivations of the individuals as they first enter university. Studies, both internationally and within Australia, have attempted to address the importance of the first encounter with university.
Almost three decades ago Power, Robertson and Baker (1987) noted that the landscape of tertiary education had changed and that “much more attention needs to be devoted to systematically inducting students so that they clearly appreciate what is involved in studying at an advanced level.” (p.44) This comment, coinciding with changes to access to university in Australia, directed massive attention to what is now commonly called “the first year experience” or FYE. The complexity of the university or higher education terrain and the dramatic nature of change, including the student experience of this change, has continued to fuel the debate over the past three decades.

In spite of a wealth of research into the first year experience and general agreement across the sector that the first year experience of university impacts heavily upon student satisfaction, academic success and retention, there is still high attrition across the sector, poor participation and engagement of diverse student groups and low student satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning in the first year.

This focus on what happens in the first encounter by the student with higher education has been played out against a backdrop of increasing student numbers or massification of the university sector, increasing and targeted ratios of student cohort diversity, increasing tertiary sector competition, reduced academic morale, volatile and often declining staff numbers, renewed interest in flexibility of offerings and delivery, politically charged sector inquiries and overall economic uncertainty in the Australian tertiary sector. Although it is not the purpose or objective of this research study to examine the wider university sector in Australia, there is some value in briefly examining the sector-wide challenges and recent changes to gain a snapshot of the current environment of the students in the study and the climate within which this research study is contextualised.

1.2.1 The Australian Tertiary Education Sector

The Australian tertiary education sector is in a period of transition. Education, and in particular tertiary education of which universities are a key element, is commonly featured in social and political debate in Australia. Adams (1998) notes that changes to Australian universities over the past twenty years have been structural, economic, quantitative, demographic, bureaucratic and qualitative. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this research study to examine such debate in any depth, it is worthwhile to note a number of factors that impact upon the formal university environment in which the participants in this study were placed. McPhail, Fisher and McConachie (2009) have identified the changing tertiary landscape as a factor in the successful transition of first year students to
university and it is worthwhile to have an understanding of these factors to understand the relevance of this study. In 2008 the Australian Government commissioned a review of all higher education in Australia. The Bradley review, commonly named after its chairperson, correctly outlines a number of deficiencies in the Australian university sector. Most notably these deficiencies accentuated the need for greater student diversity, increased emphasis on lifelong learning, changing industry demands and markets, globalisation and new technologies. The review also highlighted the need for changes in funding and income. The uncertainty surrounding funding models combined with the political interest in university outcomes has created sector-wide tension and apprehension. Lovegrove (2003) also identified a number of tensions within the Australian university sector – student demands and expectations; enrolment patterns; curriculum and course offerings; knowledge generations and the cultural expectations of society. As identified by Lawrence (2004), the Australian university has shifted in the latter part of the twentieth century to mass education and cost management paradigms. The first shift increased participation of the student cohort, whilst the second shift increased funding responsibility on universities and students. Both of these shifts have influenced university policy and practice and the formal structures established, maintained and used within faculties, schools and departments. One consequence of these shifts has resulted in more diverse cohorts of students entering higher education with no corresponding increase in resources for coping with this diversity. In reality, Australian universities have had to rely upon existing resources to deliver to increasing numbers of students from more diverse cohorts (James, 2010). Consequently the FYE is now under greater scrutiny and examination as universities attempt to cater for larger numbers of increasingly disengaged students at the entry level. Competitive student driven funding for higher education places will commence in 2012 in Australia and the critical economic impact of a successful first year transition that results in higher retention rates should not be underestimated.

Forbes (2006) calls this shifting terrain the "massification" of tertiary education. Yet in spite of this shift in student cohort, student expectation and increasing economic focus in higher education, universities in Australia still adhere to the traditional ideal of “masters and scholars” (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1998) and remain very much modelled on traditional universities in London, Scotland and the United States (Scott, 1995). The idea of individualised scholarship occurring within a structured setting of lectures and tutorials is still the dominant method of teaching and learning for first year students. Forbes (2006) notes that many academics still subscribe to the ideals of a “community of scholars” even in the face of mass public education and deliberate government policies aimed at
increasing university enrolments. The acceptance of modus operandi (Kantanis, 2001) has remained and formal structures of lectures and tutorials are still regarded as integral to university learning.

In this study I am primarily concerned with the insights individual students have about this formal learning environment as they undertook their first year of university education in a large city-based university. The formal learning environment and the established structure such as lectures, tutorials and staffing ratios in which these participants found themselves were not immune from the shifts of a changing tertiary sector. Understanding the wider environment in which this study was placed helps to highlight the participants in the micro-setting of their university course.

1.3 The Research Study

This study was undertaken in a university school of Property and Construction at a large city campus. The school is the second largest in the faculty at the university. At the time of the study the school had in excess of 1,300 students, made up of almost 900 undergraduates. Undergraduate Bachelor Degrees (four years full time study) in Property, Construction, Valuation or Project Management are all offered. All undergraduate students undertake a common first year curriculum. Entry to the undergraduate degrees is primarily achieved through a Tertiary Admissions Ranking (TAR) gained at the completion of six years of secondary schooling. At the time of the study 85% of all entry students were admitted directly from secondary schooling. Some alternative entry schemes also operate, but with very small intakes. At the time of this research, 2006, the school delivered all undergraduate programmes via face to face internal mode. Although some support material is online, the school has a minimum online capacity presence and no distance or external teaching modes for undergraduate degrees. This is a policy decision, although it is subject to change. Further detail on the university school is discussed in Chapter 4.

1.3.1 The Research Aim

The overarching objective in this research is to examine the constructed meaning of the formal university learning environment as described by six students who were new to university. By examining the interview responses of these participants the study will contribute to scholarly research about the first year university experience and the importance of the formal learning environment in shaping that experience. The research also explores the links between student engagement and the formal learning environment.
1.3.2 The Primary Research Question

This study seeks to examine the self-constructed learning experiences of individual first year students in a common programme in the school of Construction, Property and Project Management at an Australian university. The primary research question posed by this study is:

‘What insights do individual students provide about the formal learning environment and its impact upon their learning experiences in their first year of university education?’

Within this primary question, I explored three themes underpinning the formal learning environment:

- The learning structures of lectures and tutorials
- The learning processes of assessment and assignments embedded in these structures
- The learning relationships with lecturers and tutors that arise out of these structures

The study is thus primarily concerned with investigating the learning experiences of participants as they engage over a 12 month period with the learning environment of a common first year programme in a university.

1.3.3 The Research Goals

The primary research question indicates two research goals:

- To ascertain if there is a link between the formal learning environment and the engagement of these students as learners in a university.
- To determine whether these insights can assist future students and university departments in Australian institutions.

1.3.4 Specific Objectives of the Research Study

In addressing the primary research question, a number of specific objectives are also addressed:
• The identification of selected demographic characteristics of the study participants through a questionnaire designed to elicit general background data about each individual.

• The comparison of this data across study participants to enable better understanding of prevalent background factors that may have influenced tertiary entrance to the selected programme.

• The analysis of information in the profile data which could be further explored in subsequent interviews.

• The development of interpretations about the participants’ responses as they engage with the university for the first time through three structured and unstructured interviews conducted in the participants’ first and second semester.

• The further development of interpretations based upon the participants’ reflections as they re-engage with the university for their second semester of study.

• The exploration of themes of structures, processes and relationships through the voices of the individual participants that allow for an understanding of the world of the participant and consequently through the study of the particular, an understanding of the larger picture.

• The determination of whether the experiences interpreted by the participants can form a basis to assist future students in their first year of university.

1.4 The Research Design and Methodology

The design of this research was deliberately framed to support the research objectives of discovering the insights of six first year university students in a university school of Property, Construction and Project Management. I will argue that qualitative research creates the best fit for these objectives. Within this qualitative research I have adopted a paradigm of naturalistic enquiry and interpretivism to interpret the insights of the six case study participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have argued strongly that an emergent naturalistic paradigm is useful and demonstrates greater power in the social/behavioural field. This argument has framed my adoption of this paradigm.

Interpretivism provides opportunities for a view of reality in terms of the constructions of multiple participants. Scott and Usher (1999) discuss this paradigm as a construction of meaning based upon ordinary life. As individual participants construct meanings and concepts based upon their experiences and insights, it is important to adopt a paradigm that allowed for my understanding, deconstruction and reconstruction of the meanings
that the participants made. Hammersley (1990) notes that this cannot be achieved without first-hand contact between the researcher (myself) and the participants.

The qualitative research design of interpretivism and the case study methodology to support this paradigm is further discussed in Chapter 3.

1.5 Research Themes

This research study is based upon a number of assumptions about the university learning environment and the processes and relationships associated with this environment. It is important to outline these assumptions in this introduction.

The ontology of interpretivism is based upon social reality – the human experience is a process of interpretation. The world or intimate setting is interpreted as an accomplishment of individuals, and these individuals construct meanings. In this study my role as researcher was to grasp these constructed meanings and interpret them. The constructed meaning of the learning environment of lectures and tutorials is explored with the participating students. Embedded in this learning environment are themes of learning processes and relationships. It is these themes that form the basis of the analysis in later chapters of this study. It is through the “unpacking” or deeper analysis of these themes that meanings can be made explicit and assumptions developed. This deeper analysis which leads to meaning has been informed by the work of Kalantzis and Pandian (2001).

Within this section I briefly examine the parameters of these research themes, to firstly determine the limits of the study and secondly the assumptions made about each of the themes by myself as researcher. The themes to be pursued with each of the participants were based upon an understanding of the formal university as provider of knowledge and learning as it existed at the time of the study in 2006/7. The interpretation of these themes given by each participant is unique and their meanings are analysed within a framework of interpretivism, which is further discussed in Chapter 3. The qualitative data explored with each participant was based upon the themes outlined below.

1.5.1 Learning Structures

Literature examining the first year experience of university contains a continuous thread of discussion about formal university structures. In this research study, the formal learning structures are defined by me as lectures and tutorials. This definition is supported by a number of researchers who have examined the formal environment and the processes
and relationships developed in this environment. The relevance of the university “task” environment and the structures that create this environment have been previously questioned (Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis, 2005). Johnson (1996), in a study examining the learning patterns of over 500 first year students, has argued that much of the university “learning task” is set in an environment which is unrelated to the students’ world or experience. The prohibitive factor, she notes, may be the task orientation of the university department and the assumption that the “learning” will best occur in a lecture and tutorial system of knowledge transfer. Her study noted the students’ disillusionment with the educational context in which they found themselves. Godfrey (2009) notes that the university culture has expectations that students will act in a certain manner in class, learn in a given structure and submit to rules, procedures and regulations. The learning structures of university, in particular discipline study, have been described as a culture of “academic tribes” (Becher, 1989). Levy and Murray (2002), although examining initiatives that enhanced learning for “at risk” first time university students, nonetheless commented upon the need for a review of the importance of strategies that encourage engagement with tertiary learning practices of lectures as they operate. Their conclusions indicate that the existing formal structures of lectures and tutorials do not match the needs of modern students. Coady (2000) has also questioned whether the complex nature of university structures has contributed to difficulties experienced by students.

These researchers all support the basic question of the relevance and suitability of the formal learning environment. My study is also concerned with this question and is explored through the journey of six individual students as they first encounter the formal university environment. The learning structure of lectures and tutorials is explored with each of the participants in this study. At the time of the research study, the university school used lectures/tutorials as the main method of teaching and learning delivery. Whilst I acknowledge that other delivery methods do exist and impact upon the learning journey, this study is confined to the main method of delivery in this particular school at the time of the study. The assumption upon which this theme is explored is that all of the individuals would be exposed to these learning structures and their voices and constructs of the experience will add value to existing research. In this way the outcomes of this study will contribute to policy and practice in all university environments.

1.5.2 Learning Processes

Within these structures there are processes and relationships intrinsic to the structure. The following section briefly defines the boundaries upon which these themes are premised.
Kantanis (2001) describes universities as having an educational “modus operandi”. This modus operandi consists in part of learning processes that support the formal environment of lectures and tutorials. One important process that operates across all universities is submitted work. In this study the individual participants were exposed as part of their first year experience to submitted work that supported the formal lectures and tutorials. Mackie (2001), in examining university “leavers” and “doubters”, determined that such organisational factors are an important force in determining the level of commitment to the university experience. The assumption upon which this theme was explored was that the analysis of the data would contribute to an understanding of how individual students see the processes used in lectures and tutorials to support the formal learning. Whilst the sample case studies of six participants will allow only a very limited analysis, I made the assumption that their personal constructs will nonetheless provide avenues for further research and discussion within the programme setting of the university school.

1.5.3 Learning Relationships

Students commencing at university also have expectations about university, their role and the relationships they will have with their mentors or lecturers in the structural environment. Prancer, Hunsberger, Pratt and Alisat (2000) note that these expectations can have a profound influence on the way students perceive their experiences. They offer the view that students who have developed more complex expectations are more likely to adjust to an outcome, as the outcome is most likely consistent with the complex range of expectations they had previously established. In this study my assumption, based on previous educational practices of the participants, was that all the students in the study expected to form learning relationships with their lecturers and tutors as part of the formal learning structure of the university.

Berdie (1966) and Rice (1992) have both explored the discrepancy between students’ pre-university feelings about the formal structures and the reality of university as perceived by the student. The greatest decline in students’ feelings about university appeared to occur in the first year, when this discrepancy was most apparent to the student. Shaw (1968) found a relationship between student attrition and learning expectations, noting that students whose expectations were more idealistic often were unable to reconstruct these expectations when confronted by the reality of the academic situation. Yorke (2002) and Waters (2004) have noted that problems with adjustment to university were based upon unclear expectations. Haggis (2004), Lawrence (2002) and van der Meer (2006), however, all emphasise that first-year students have positive expectations prior to coming
to university, but subsequent problems may have to do with course and lecturer expectations. The assumption I made that all of the participants initially had positive expectations of how their formal learning relationships within lectures and tutorials would occur was central to the analysis of their responses.

Thus the nexus between learning relationships and the constructed reality of the participants is pursued in this research. The importance of the participants’ constructed meaning is juxtaposed with what each individual participant expected from the formal learning relationships with lecturers and tutors. In reflecting upon their expectations and their constructed reality, the assumption was that I would be able to gain a picture of their individual relationships and propose improvements at the university school level to assist those students still to commence their studies.

1.6 Contribution of this Study

The study seeks to build upon existing research that examines formal structures and formal learning relationships as integral to academic success and student satisfaction at university. This research study aims to uncover how six students cope with these formalised learning structures and the ensuing formal relationships and how they attempt to use these to “succeed” in first year. Qualitative methods within an interview framework are employed to investigate and develop interpretations about their responses. As a result this study will consolidate research perspectives that identify the university formal learning environment as a barrier to successful university transition. The capacity to provide successful transition to university is intricately connected to the capacity to provide an enabling learning environment. Evidence from Kift (2008) and Johnson (1996) amongst others indicates the importance of the formal environment established by the university to facilitate this transition. This study contributes to research in this area by providing individual perspectives on this transition and the formal learning structures set up by one university school in 2006/7 during this transition. Evidence suggests that if students are supported and engaged in their first year of university education in Australia, then they will have a strong chance of completing their degree (DEEWR, 2009). In this way the conclusions arising from this research study have value and implications for educational research at a time when universities are being asked to increase enrolments and provide for more diverse learner cohorts.

There are, however, deliberate boundaries to this study. The study does not attempt to defend the academic environment or the structural elements designed to facilitate learning
within the university school. Neither is it within the scope of this work to analyse the university school or the decisions made in relation to those formal structures such as lecturing duties, orientation, learning support services etc. This study acknowledges that university teaching and learning can take many forms and structures, but this study is bounded by structures used within this university school at the time of this research: lectures and tutorials. Questions about staffing, university funding, transition, curriculum issues and retention at the first year level have contributed to significant literature and other research beyond the scope of this work. This study aims to contribute to emerging research through strict adherence to these boundaries.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This research study is presented in seven distinct sections or chapters. In the first chapter an outline of the research is provided as well as a brief discussion of the research aims and objectives. A snapshot of the tertiary sector climate in which the research is undertaken is also introduced to allow an understanding of the backdrop against which this particular research study will be placed. The second chapter examines prior research and selected published works in the area of the first year experience of university. The emphasis in this chapter is to define studies that address the key research objectives and themes of the first experience of formal university structures such as lectures and tutorials. The chapter is in no way a complete study of all the available literature in the area of the first experience of university. This would be exhaustive and beyond the scope and requirements of this research. Instead the literature examined is reviewed in attempt to extract salient information on the themes of learning structures relevant for this the particular study of six participants in a particular university.

The third chapter of this study provides information on the methodology to be used in examining the data collected from the participants and the methods of analysis. The methodology discussed in this chapter has been selected primarily to discover those voices of first year tertiary students and their innermost feelings about the academic learning environment. This chapter examines a research framework that supports such an objective and the specific sample identified to achieve it.

The fourth chapter presents general profile data about the six participants and examines some initial data based upon a questionnaire completed by all the participants as a background to their formal interviews. The chapter also briefly examines the university context in which the participants are placed. The context is critical to this study.
Universities and university faculties or departments are worlds or environments within a framework of higher education. Each “world” whilst operating under overarching policies and procedures is, in fact, a separate entity, unique unto itself, with procedures, policies and operating principles known and understood by its own inhabitants. It is appropriate to describe this school of the university as a world for these students.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the data arising from the individual interviews and group interviews. The data is analysed using a grounded theory approach to thick description. This approach best highlights the interviews as a means of unpacking meaning about the student experience. The relationship between the data and the previous reviewed literature is discussed in each of these chapters. In Chapter 6, the second semester experience of each of the participants is explored. The reasons are twofold – to analyse if there had been significant change in the personal constructs of each of the students over the two different semesters and to allow the students the opportunity to comment upon alternatives to the formal environment they had encountered. As students are individuals with a significant understanding of their own learning needs, I felt it was important that the research outcomes also showed deference to any ideas they may have about alternative learning structures.

Finally Chapter 7 summarises the research findings and the key themes to emerge, whilst making recommendations that have implications for wider application across Australian universities.

1.8 Conclusion

The background to this study and the primary aim and objectives of the research are the subject of this introductory chapter. In addition a brief statement on the research themes and assumptions have been provided to create the framework in which the study is situated. The next chapter examines the literature that is relevant to the study and explores themes emerging from previous research in this area.
Chapter 2 – The Literature and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Introduction

In this study I am concerned with the insights of six individual students as they commenced and then continued their formal first year university education in 2006 and early 2007. In particular, I am interested in their voices and constructs when exposed to the learning structures of the university (lectures and tutorials); the learning processes supporting these structures (assignments and tutorial worksheets); and the formal relationships these students established within these learning structures. As outlined in the first chapter, I have defined the formal learning structures provided by the university as lectures and tutorials. It is these structures that the university provides primarily as arenas of formal learning engagement for first year students. The learning processes that support these structures – assignments and worksheets – and the relationships students make with the academic staff within the lecture/tutorial structure were also explored as associate themes.

This chapter examines some of the literature surrounding the first encounter with university, commonly called the First Year Experience (FYE). As Skene and Evamy (2009) note, the literature surrounding the first experience is both broad and complex and beyond the parameters of this study to consider in its entirety. I have therefore selected literature that focuses upon the three related themes discussed above. In this way I hope to identify how such themes contribute to the environment of learning set up by universities and universally used by students in their transition to university. Evidence from Kift (2008) and Johnson (1996), amongst others, indicates the critical importance and relevance of the formal learning environment in contributing to successful transition and retention of first year students. By examining the literature within the three key themes of this research study, I will be able to compare the existing literature to the responses of the six students in this study and provide opportunities to make informed analysis of their experiences in later chapters.

2.2 The First Year University Landscape

Skene and Evamy (2009) call the landscape of literature examining the FYE of university a “contested site”. They point to the vast amount of literature and academic research highlighting first year student engagement from psychological, economic, social and education research viewpoints as indicators that the university experience for first year
students and new entrants is complex, problematic and not bounded by clear, discipline-based research parameters.

The work of McInnis and James (1995) in Australia underlined factors critical to successful retention in the FYE such as student engagement and expectations. This resulted in a body of research related to the FYE emerging in the Pacific Rim – the FYHE Conference (Kantanis, 2002; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; McInnis & James, 1995). As Krause (2003, p.1) notes, there is a “plethora of activities designed to support first year students, and the Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education conferences have provided a forum for these many initiatives”. The importance of student engagement in the first year is underlined by research that highlights engagement as critical to students achieving quality learning outcomes and central to achieving student retention (Tinto, 2009; Kift & Field, 2009). The ACER (2008) has deemed that student engagement is increasingly important for higher education quality and a practical lens for responding to existing constraints. The issue of engagement and attachment to university was central to these resultant research studies.

A longitudinal trend of disengagement was provided by follow-up studies by Krause, McInnis & Welle (2003) who, in examining patterns of change amongst first year students concluded that there was a trend of declining attachment to university life and study. In further work, Krause (2003) also examined the idea of student identity and engagement, concluding that students need to belong to a learning community. McInnis (2003), in discussing the responses of universities to the new realities of the student experience commented:

> The students appear not engaged with university life generally and with study in particular. Whilst some may characterise this as ‘disengagement’ it is more meaningful and useful to rethink the nature of the student experience as one of negotiated engagement (p.3).

This negotiated engagement has gained attention recently as a number of studies have given rise to specific measures of student engagement. For example, the Course Experience Questionnaire (McInnis, Griffin, James & Coates, 2001), measures student engagement in Australian universities, whilst the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides tests of engagement for U.S. Colleges (Kuh, 2003). Yet McInnis (2003), in commenting upon these instruments for measuring engagement, readily
acknowledges that universities need to start with the initial student experience and work from there:

The foundations for engagement are established in the first weeks of the first year. In Australia and the US, and now increasingly in Europe, much attention has been given to getting the first year experience right. There is no better institutional investment to be made (p.15).

Yet in spite of continued attention and some improvements in preparation for university (James, Krause & Jenning, 2010), there is still evidence that first year students remain in a disengaged or negotiated engaged state with the university. James et al (2010) note that:

only one half of all first year students felt like they belong on their university campus; and signals of lack of engagement such as skipping classes and being unprepared for classes are no different in 2004 or 2009 (p.3).

First year students spend less time on campus, make fewer friends through university, keep to themselves and are less involved in extra-curricular activities (James et al, 2010). This lack of engagement impacts upon individual learning. Behaviours such as preparing readings for class, posing questions in class or online, contributing to discussions all indicate a motivation to learn and engage (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Such behaviours cannot be undertaken by disengaged students. The evidence indicates that a lack of engagement persists and is growing amongst first year students (James et al, 2010; McInnis & Hartley, 2002).

The issue of student retention and engagement in their first year is not however confined to Australian universities. Tinto (1975) in the US over four decades ago drew attention to issues of student transition and retention into subsequent years. In later works, Tinto (1995) identifies how early experiences at university affect approaches to study in later years. Studies in the Netherlands (Werkgroep rendementen, 2005) have examined low student retention in the first year of university; the UK has also focused on engagement (Mann, 2001); studies in New Zealand have sought answers to first year engagement issues (Scott & Smart, 2005) and numerous US studies have examined the nexus between the engagement, expectations and retention of first year students (Miller, Kuh & Schuh, 2005; Conley, 2005; Tinto, 2002). It would be inconsistent to ignore changes that have occurred at the university level in the same period since Tinto (1975) proposed a model of
student and university integration and decisions about continuing at university. Whilst a number of authors have expressed concern about the specific assumptions about universities inherent in the Tinto (1993) model (Tanaka, 2002; Yorke, 1999) there is no doubt that the role of the institution is important in the overall student experience. What is even more pressing is the changing role universities have assumed since Tinto’s (1993) model was first proposed. Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003) point to the major changes in teaching and learning at universities as a contributing factor in the student experience. Students adopt different approaches to learning at university. Ramsden (1992) notes that a deep approach to learning is related to higher quality outcomes, whilst surface approaches to learning are related to extrinsic motivation, syllabus boundaries and negative approaches. Surface learning is triggered by an emphasis on rote learning and memorisation and produces a concentration on detail and facts without reflection. Alternatively, a deep approach to learning has an emphasis on meaning, relevance and relationships, along with long-term engagement with the learning tasks. Such deep approaches include reading for understanding and reflection, along with enthusiastic, committed and interested teaching. Deeper approaches to learning have been linked to student satisfaction and retention (Zimitat, 2003).

Students in the last decade are spending less time in structured contact sessions and on campus than at any other time (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). It is obvious that this decline in face to face experience will impact upon their education. Zimitat (2003) suggests that students evaluate their decision to remain in study and manage their own learning in an overall complex life. His findings indicate that the student of the first decade of this century wants to do well in their studies but relies upon sporadic study efforts and makes the minimum effort necessary to pass. Although based upon retention data, it is interesting to note that half of the first year cohort at an Australian university in the first decade of 2000 was seriously considering discontinuing their studies, citing low levels of personal satisfaction with studying (Zimitat, 2003).

McInnis (2001) supports these findings, noting that the modern student of the first decade of 2000 intends or anticipates getting lower marks, seriously considers deferring and questions the quality of the experience. He identifies the modern student as the product of “declining levels of application and motivation” (2001, p. 5).

The above literature indicates that students of the current decade have specific expectations of the university experience and that these expectations are often unmet. My research examines the responses and experiences of six individuals who were all entering
university in the first decade of this century. Their constructs are examined in a later chapter, but the literature reviewed here provides a picture against which to position their responses, as well as opportunities for comparison.

It is clear that the experiences of first year university students have over time become a major focus of concern in tertiary education both within Australia and overseas. The next section examines existing research that is pertinent to the key themes of this study.

2.3 Structural Arrangements for University Learners

Johnson (1996) was one of the first researchers to refocus the literature on the FYE in terms of the university “task” environment. She argued that much of the university environment in which the learning task is set is unrelated to the students’ world or their learning experience. Her study of over 500 students on one Australian campus indicates that students want an educational environment that is structured around collaborative learning. Her study reports a deterioration in the motivation of these students over the first semester and a slide from a deep approach to learning to a more superficial surface approach. Structures such as formal, impersonal lectures and tutorials appear to have little relevance for new entrants, who are looking for a more focused, integrated and collaborative approach that encourages deeper learning.

Historically, universities or “studia generalia” have been founded upon principles of masters and students where study relied upon a passive, memory based understanding of the classics (Ruegg, 2004). The establishment of the University of Halle in 1694 led to a major shift in the curriculum and the development of independent thought and debate through research and teaching. It embraced the concept of lectures and tutorials (Paulsen, 1976). In the modern university the structures provided for student learning remain relatively unchanged – lectures and tutorials. The extent to which these structures have been the subject of research into the first year experience of university is limited. Zepke and Leach (2005) identify two key discourses in the literature on university learning structures and first year students. The first discourse centres upon what universities can do to “fit” students into these structures. The second centres upon the challenge to adapt university learning culture to better fit the needs of increasingly diverse modern students.

The literature identifies a number of strategies to help first year students “fit” the structures. Chief amongst these strategies is the idea of a transition programme or period. Kantanis (2001) examines the credibility and legitimacy of transition programmes, whilst
McInnis and Krause (2002) emphasise points of intervention to successfully induct students to the structures. Mason-Rogers (2002) proposes a “template” for developing strategies to assist retention and Mackie (2001) hypothesised an interplay between four forces – social, organisational, external and individual. What is of interest in each of these studies is the underlying common threads that the first year students should be given assistance to adapt to the university task environment. The transition to university literature indicates an emphasis upon these interventions at the social and academic level of student engagement (Kift & Field, 2009). In other words, these researchers focus upon getting the student to fit into the structures of universities.

Levy and Murray (2002) examined a number of initiatives that enhance learning for “at risk” students in the first year environment and comment that whilst our “attention is focused on retention, we need to confirm the importance of strategies that encourage students’ engagement with tertiary learning practices” (p.1). The learning practices of lectures and tutorials is highlighted as critical to success in this study. The focus remains upon improving the student and thus his/her engagement, rather than on the structures provided.

An exhaustive range of studies has also examined initiatives at the faculty or department level (Hayden & Long, 2006; Zeegers & Martin, 2001; Johnston, 2001; Curlow, 2000 and Pitkethly, 1996 amongst others) to help students “fit” into university structures. These studies have all provided valuable micro “pictures” of the first year experience, although many of the cited studies are focused upon initiatives designed to keep students at university within the university task environment rather than creating a picture of the first year experience as constructed by the student. The underlying assumption of first year initiatives that focus upon curriculum or engagement strategies is that the task environment of the university is accepted in the modern day as suitable for student learning, in particular first year students.

However the emphasis on the institution and its structures as the arena of discontent and mismatch is not readily accepted as helpful by all researchers. There is evidence that the disjunctures and challenges of coping in new environments, orienting to new structures and being challenged by difficulty is a necessary element of being or becoming an adult learner in an adult learning situation. Similarly a number of researchers highlight the mismatch between first year students and the university task environment as an important next step in the student’s self-development. James (2002, p. 78) notes that the mismatch between the student and the formal environment can be vital as “being part of the
educative process of liberating the minds of students through exposing them to challenge and difference”. Jackson, Pancer, Pratt & Hunsberger (2000) have questioned whether modern students are really ready for university. They note that for many students, expectations about the university task environment are based upon a mythical understanding of the university. Again, the underlying assumption is one of making the student fit into the existing traditional structures. Wintre and Yaffe (2000) point to the underestimation of “difficulties that lie ahead” by all students, especially high-achieving students as though the failure of students to engage with the learning environment is to be expected as part of a natural growth and maturity. McPhail et al (2009) comment that students find it difficult to manage the level of autonomy and flexibility that comes as part of the higher education environment. They point to the supportive framework of secondary schools as a factor in students not adjusting well to the university environment. All of these studies focus upon the student as the “deficit” element in the transition to university.

A number of studies have questioned the need for any change, and whether universities should have to change to meet the needs of modern learners. These studies believe any change distorts the fundamental purpose of higher education. Haggis (2006) points to the diversity of expectations amongst first year students and concludes that the highly individualised nature of student expectations means the university is under enormous pressure to meet such demands and is unlikely to do so. McInnis (2001) highlights the uncertainty which is present in the modern university:

policies and practices to meet the demands of negotiated engagement at both system and institutional level are still in formation, and there is considerable uncertainty as to how to proceed (p.4).

This uncertainty has led to a number of models created from studies of the FYE and the new environment. Lawrence (2005) has highlighted the “deficits” model – where failure to adapt by students becomes a blame game – students are not prepared for university and this is a “deficit” in the student. This deficit approach extends to the relationships that academic staff form with students. McInnis (2000), in a study of academics in Australian universities, found that high numbers of academics “held negative views about the calibre of the students” (p. 24) and were reluctant to assist “under-prepared” students, seeing it as either the responsibility of the student themselves or support services. Lawrence (2005) notes this lack of responsibility as a mindset:
Such staff may accept that is the students’ responsibility if they fail – with such staff perceiving they have little role in it, and therefore little responsibility for students’ engagement and perseverance in high education (p. 245).

This mindset produces an environment of apathy which in turn fuels on-going student disengagement.

A second theme in the discourse on the first year student and the university task environment centres upon the need to adapt university culture to better fit the needs of commencing students. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2006) propose that universities need to recognise and accept the diverse goals and cultures of learners and develop and adapt practices to suit. Their argument calls for a student-centred approach to the task environment where

students experience a sense of influence, good teaching and where diverse learning preferences are catered for (p.598).

McPhail et al (2009) point to the need for institutions to resolve cultural issues that challenge students who make the transition to university, but they do not directly address the lecture/tutorial system as one of the cultural issues. Hillman (2005) does attempt to address the task environment of lectures and tutorials and queries whether the content and length of programmes are appropriate for commencing students. Hillman’s findings combined with studies by Wintre and Yaffe (2000) indicate a move towards an understanding of the university learning environment from the student’s perspective. Both studies question the university learning environments as immovable structures and focus attention on the existing structures set up by universities as learning environments. However, in the wider context of the first year experience, these studies have been isolated.

As I have identified it was almost two decades ago that Johnson (1996) argued that much of the university task environment was unrelated to the students’ world or experience. Howells (2003), in further work, has also questioned an examination of the first year from perspectives that do not focus upon the students as learners in a set environment. The conclusion reached by both of these studies was that successful transition to university is dependent upon the students’ self-conception of themselves as learners in an environment
that creates “obstacles” to study. Lawrence (2002) has also argued that the university
culture alienates the individual student and that there is within universities a promotion of
one type of structure or culture as superior or mainstream.

Over two decades of literature have produced a limited number of studies focusing upon
the university task environment and the structures supporting it, such as lectures and
tutorials. A limitation has been a direct focus on the commencing student as the element
of the study. As discussed above, numerous studies have sought to provide “solutions” to
the transition problem. The emphasis has been on the student adapting to the university
environment and structure, rather than an analysis of how the university structures
(lectures and tutorials) directly contribute to poor engagement and transition problems.

The next section examines recent studies that have addressed the learning processes of
first year students within these structures.

2.4 Learning Processes

In this research I have defined learning processes as those elements such as assignments
and work sheets that support the university structural environment of lectures and
tutorials. The ACER (2008) describes such processes as “student involvement with
activities and conditions [in the formal environment] that are likely to generate learning”
(p.3). Krause (2005) takes the definition further as “the time, energy, and resources
students devote to the activities designed to enhance learning at university” (p.3). These
processes are critical influencers in student engagement (Kift, 2008) and underpin the
structural environment of the first year experience.

In the previous section I examined literature specifically related to the “task” environment
of the university – in particular the structures of lectures and tutorials. The literature
identified the lack of engagement first year students feel with the structural environment
and the mismatch between their expectations and the university environment. There are,
however, a number of researchers who have proposed that it is the curriculum processes
underpinning such structures that impact upon first year engagement. Kantanis (2001) has
described universities as having an educational “modus operandi” and the requirement
that students understand these processes to achieve success is discussed. Beasley (1997)
also has argued that students must adjust to the university “norms” of assignments and
submitted work. The emphasis in both studies, whilst sympathetic to the first year
students and their adjustments to the university process, indicates a belief in the existing
processes as relevant and engaging and worthy of continuance. The student is peripheral to the discipline of study.

Howells (2006) raises the issue of the student experience as the research context and questions how students perceive the demands of their courses as centrally important to any study of the first year curriculum. Her argument centres upon the belief that first year students come to the learning situation at university with a greater need for their inner experiences to be validated. She notes that many students come to university from previous study where they have been involved in courses and methodologies which have required a sophisticated and reflective response. She emphasises that the students are sophisticated learners upon entry to university. The one-size fits all approach of university work (in particular assignments and tutorial work) may not reflect their approach to learning. Johnston (2001) supports this when noting in a research study that students’ approach to learning deteriorated from a deep approach at starting university to a surface approach after first semester.

Howells (2006) also raises the issue of “orientation programmes” for first year students, questioning why capable and confident learners need orientation to adapt to structures that appear out of sync with their previous learning experiences. Howells notes that one of the most “disorientating” experiences in the first year of university is that the self-awareness students bring about how they learn is silenced by the processes presented as the formal learning environment.

The idea of “silencing” the learning awareness that first year students bring to university is further endorsed by studies that seek to ameliorate the existing formal processes and introduce intentional and specific first year curriculum processes (Nicol, 2007; Healy, 2008). A wealth of literature has discussed good practice exemplars of course, subject, curriculum and assessment initiatives for engaging first year students (Nichol, 2007; Healy, 2008; Westcott; 2008, Nelson, 2008: Radbourne & LeRossignol, 2008; Kift, 2009).

These intentional processes indicate an attempt to move from traditional learning processes in lectures and tutorials to more specific processes. Kift and Field (2009) support this approach of engaging first year students through intentional curriculum processes. They comment:
engaging pedagogical approaches that take place in supportive, integrated and co-ordinated learning environments make deep learning outcomes for students possible, promote high quality student learning and discourage superficial approaches to set work (2009, p.4).

Yorke (2006) has also noted that students in such “first year specific” environments are more likely to connect with their discipline, go beyond the minimum assignments and prescribed work requirements and make connections with broader concepts.

This study is only confined to first year students, when it could be argued that the learning processes required at university are newly encountered, perhaps for the first time. But the arguments for intentional first year curriculum processes that question the value of the traditional lecture/tutorial model could equally be applied to all years at university, not just the first year. Kift and Field (2009) have argued for pedagogical approaches that take place in supportive, co-ordinated learning environments. These approaches should not only be applied to first years. All students, regardless of their stage of interaction with the university would benefit from integrated, co-ordinated learning environments which use processes based upon sound pedagogical approaches.

The literature relating to learning processes used to support the formal university environment of first year students identifies well researched initiatives and approaches. But the literature raises the fundamental question of the need to adopt such approaches. If the learning processes used in the formal environment have to be specifically adapted for first year students, then the suitability of the formal environment for these students needs to be further examined. This research will explore the formal environment and the learning processes used to support it and will attempt to reconstruct the environment from the students’ experiences to inform future practice.

The next section examines the literature pertaining to the learning relationships that occur in university formal environments.

2.5 Structural Relationships
As I have outlined in the first chapter, an important part of the university formal learning environment is the relationships first year students have with their tutors or lecturers. Prancer et al (2000) note that these expectations about relationships can have a profound
influence on the way students perceive their university experiences. If students experience positive, supportive tutors then the task environment will facilitate learning and engagement.

The importance of engagement with academic staff in formal learning relationships is a significant factor in the successful transition to the university environment. James et al (2010) support this:

> the importance of personal contact with first year students is a key to enhancing students’ engagement with learning and the university community as a whole (p.42).

Yet research indicates that the quality of the learning relationship for modern students is in decline. Research by James et al (2010) note that only 29% of first year students seek advice from academic staff and over a decade there has been a decline in the number of first year students who feel the academic staff know their name. Yet as Boud (2001) has argued, the academic relationship is pivotal to successful learning in the formal university environment.

The focus of the academic relationship has frequently been seen as the responsibility of the student but as Hay (2001) notes lecturers can facilitate students’ learning through their academic relationship, making transparent their often implicit expectations. In many cases, the lecture/tutorial model adopted by academics is representative of pedagogy that emerges from the idea that anything that is not mainstream academic culture and language is deficient. The New London Group (1996) have pointed out that such an approach in academia involves writing over differences and endorsing a dominant culture to the exclusion of others.

There is significant evidence that the encouragement of student participation and the engagement of students in the learning process is critical to students becoming independent learners. Lawrence (2002) points to the responsibility of academic staff in achieving this participation and engagement, and argues for a shift in current practice. She notes:

> academics have a vital role in the process whereby students learn to negotiate the multiple linguistic and cultural discourses of the university – a process which is pivotal to their abilities to
persevere and succeed in a new university culture. Academics can help this process by making their expectations clear and explicit, by assisting students to use socio-cultural competencies that are central to their negotiation of a successful transition to the new university culture, and by examining both their philosophies and policies in relation to diversity. University teachers can, in fact, make the difference: helping their students to develop the skills that “an expert” student demonstrates, attuned to and learning confidently and competently in the new university culture (2002, p.10).

The nature of the student/academic staff member relationship within the formal learning environment has also been addressed by Kantanis (2001) who identifies successful first year students as those who actively enculturate into the teaching style. These “successful” students are actively involved in the procedures and practices of the “new” culture of the university. Zepke et al (2006) also argue that adapting a more learner-centred approach would improve first year students’ retention. They note that in academic relationships where students feel a sense of influence, good teaching and acceptance of diverse learning styles, retention of first year students is improved. Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2008), in examining expectations and realities for first year students at one Australian university, noted that whilst the students felt they had a satisfying experience in some classes, they had very high expectations about wanting to learn but felt these expectations were not met where the academic staff member had a poor relationship with the students. Reid and Solomonides (2010), in interviewing 17 first year students to ascertain if their expectations about university were being met, noted the importance of emotional domains in satisfying the needs of first year students. Similarly, both work by Purnell (2002) and Bridges (2003) provide a paradigm of process from the student point of view. These studies indicate the need for first year students to establish themselves in supportive learning experiences as part of their transition to a new context.

As these studies demonstrate, the impact of the formal structured academic relationship upon first year students has received only limited discussion. Hillman (2005) has indicated the need for further research in this area, and McPhail et al (2009) have examined the collision between reality and expectations for first year students, pointing out the importance of extended research. In this research study I hope to contribute to further debate and discussion on this theme by reconstructing the experiences of the six students as they journey through their first year at university, encountering formal academic relationships in tutorials and lectures.
2.6 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter indicates a number of emerging themes within the research parameters of the first year at university and the formal university environment. The literature establishes the link between the first year university student and the importance of the formal learning environment in contributing to successful engagement with the university. This successful initial engagement has been shown to affect approaches to study in later years, be central to retention and to quality learning outcomes. As this chapter has shown, attention on the first year university student and patterns of engagement is not confined to Australia, with international studies focusing upon retention and satisfaction with university as well.

As I have demonstrated, a number of researchers (Ruegg, 2004; McPhail et al, 2009) have questioned the formal learning environment of universities as suitable for first year students. However, the focus of the literature has been on approaches within the curriculum processes or formal learning relationships that identify initiatives to ameliorate the “transition problems”. Much of the literature focuses upon elimination of these problems or assisting students in coping with the transition. These are deficit-focused models. By comparison, the formal environment and its underpinning learning processes and relationships as pivotal factors in successful engagement with university for first year students have been limited in research studies. The formal structural environment and its effect on student engagement have not been fully explored or reconstructed by the students themselves in any grounded manner. By listening to the voices of students in this research study I hope to draw attention to the relationship between the formal learning structures and student engagement.

This research then seeks to discover the unwritten or undocumented inner experiences of first year students when they find themselves in the formal environment of the university for the first time. In this way I hope to contribute to existing research in this important area.
Chapter 3 – The Research Design

3.1 Introduction

In selecting a research design, Green (2002) noted:

I rediscovered my strong inclination for an approach that highlighted the voice of the individual within the complexities of a dynamic context located in time and place (p.5).

In formalising the approach I have undertaken in this study I was aware of the context of the university as a complex, unfamiliar setting for the study participants. In addition, the “voice of the individual” so aptly framed by Green became an appealing call for me to discover the unwritten or the undocumented inner feelings of tertiary students especially when they first find themselves in the alien academic environment of a university. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest that the steps involved in defining a research design include:

- establishing the researcher’s theoretical paradigm
- selecting a research design that connects the paradigm to the strategies of inquiry and methods of data collection
- selecting the methods for data collection and analysis
- establishing the interpretive practice for presenting findings.

(p. 37)

The research design discussed in this chapter has been selected primarily to discover the voices of the six first year tertiary students and their innermost feelings about the academic learning environment of one university school. This chapter commences by discussing the participants and the context in which the study will occur to provide brief background information that scaffolds the selection of the research paradigm and the methodology. There is then an explanation of the data collection and analysis and the chapter concludes with a justification of the research paradigm and methodology as well as a review of the limitations of the research design.
3.1.1 The Research Context

The participants selected in this study are all first year students who are experiencing tertiary education for the first time in the school (department) of an Australian university. This context of the university school has a number of specific features:

- The participants were undertaking a common first year of study, compulsory for all students. They were the first cohort to experience this new, completed, common curriculum in first year, in 2006.
- First year lecturers and tutors received no additional training and were not selected specifically for this cohort.
- The school has very high figures of student attrition at the end of first year (higher than the university average) and low CES (student engagement and satisfaction) scores.
- The formal lecture/tutorial structure is seen as a key method for learning and teaching within the school at the time of the research.
- The school faces considerable pressure internally and externally to tailor its courses to meet short-term vocational demands – that is, to move more students through the existing learning structures of lectures and tutorials.

These features reflect a specific learning and teaching context, which I was keen to explore with the first year students. Whilst further information about the university school context is contained in the next chapter, it is briefly detailed here to support the selection of the research design and methodology.

3.1.2 The Participants

As with the outline of the research context, a brief description of the participants is given to facilitate understanding of the student sample and their selection. The sample of participants consisted of:

- Six students all full time, internal students enrolled in first year courses in the university school.
- All of the students volunteered or self-selected to be involved in the case study. The sample was drawn from the total first year cohort who were all offered the opportunity within the first week of the first semester. Although twelve students volunteered, only six were eligible as first time university entrants. All six students had one year previously been enrolled in the final year of high school in
Australia. This purposeful sampling was to ensure that students who had previously experienced university were excluded. The ethnographic focus, inherent in the case studies methodology, was to accumulate meaning from multiple experiences that only occurred for the first time at the same time to all students in the research project. All of the students completed ethics forms and plain language statements and signified they understood what they were undertaking and how it would be used.

- The very small number of participants was deliberately chosen to satisfy the research objectives which prioritised thick description and deep meaning through an interpretive framework. The six participants who volunteered were non-contrived or typical participants (Patton, 1990). Trustworthiness is established through member checking.

Further analysis and motivations of the participants is explored in the next chapter, particularly in reference to the setting and the dynamic context of time and place (Green, 2002).

3.2 The Research Paradigm.

A research paradigm is a set of core principles within which the researcher operates. Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as “a worldview – that defines the nature of the world, the individual’s place in it and the range of possible relationships in that world” (p.107). Crotty (1998) has suggested that the choice of research design and subsequent methodology and methods is determined by the researcher’s own view of the world and preferred method of working with the data. Crotty also provides a view of the different ways individuals understand knowledge, epistemology, and categorises them into three key types – objectivism (the existence of things as meaningful entities); subjectivism (the imposition of meaning onto an object by the subject); and constructionism (whereby meaning is constructed through engagement with the world). These epistemologies, or theories of ‘how we know’ or understand what we know influenced my theoretical perspective.

The social context in which the participants in this study were engaged and my role as a researcher located within this context meant that the paradigm I adopted had to reflect this context. I believe a qualitative approach best fits this type of study. My need to capture and interpret the individual perceptions and constructs of the participants could only be achieved, if, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) identified, “the observer is located in the world through a situated activity” (p.3).
This research paradigm implies a need for disciplined, consistent inquiry. By selecting a qualitative approach I was able to satisfy these needs. Selecting a qualitative approach meant I rejected approaches that emphasised measurement and quantification of data. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). In selecting a qualitative approach I was aware that a number of factors needed to be satisfied. Firstly the “voices” of the participants in their natural settings were crucial to satisfying the research objectives. I was interested in exploring their experiences as they navigated the formal learning environment of the university. Qualitative research approaches are more appropriate where there is a process of discovery and the researcher is attempting to learn the participants’ experience and understand the phenomenon more deeply (Morse & Richards, 2002) The “voices” of the participants could not be captured through quantitative approaches such as surveys and numerical responses. The participants would allow me to discover their experiences and make sense of their complex constructs in a more relaxed setting. Morse and Richards (2002) stress that qualitative research is more appropriate than quantitative research if you want to learn a participant’s experience and make sense of complex situations. Therefore I rejected quantitative research as inappropriate as a theoretical paradigm for this study. Cartledge (2002) notes there is always the dilemma of selecting a paradigm: the paradox of paradigm (p. 35). But it is, as he notes, of more importance to investigate and make an original public contribution to advance professional practice than to adopt the methodology religiously: “the method needs to come to the research, not the research to the method” (p. 45).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) acknowledge this contribution to professional practice by emphasising the public nature of the inquiry. Their premise is that to be a disciplined inquiry that can legitimately be called research, the report of the inquiry must inform the reader in ways that are publicly confirmable. They note that the reader must be aware of what the nature of the raw data is and the context in which it was collected. In this case it is the university environment that forms the context from which the participants and data are drawn. I elaborate on the context in Chapter 4. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have also stressed the need for transforming the data into information through interpretations, conclusions, extrapolations and recommendations in a publicly confirmable manner. Their definition of research – “a type of disciplined inquiry undertaken to resolve some problem in order to achieve understanding or to facilitate action” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985,
3.3 The Research Framework

Although I have identified the need for a qualitative approach to this research study, it was vital that the research framework I used and the subsequent methodology and methods selected support this approach. There are a number of qualitative frameworks – positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, critical enquiry, post-modernism that could have been selected (Crotty, 1998), but my selection was guided by the need to give meaning to the constructs of the participants. As Denzin and Lincoln (2003) observe “it is possible to understand the subjective meaning of action when the interpreter reconstructs those meanings” (p.193). I was keen to understand and reconstruct these experiences and assemble the meanings inherent in the experiences.

In selecting an interpretivist framework I was conscious of Neuman’s (2000) definition that it consisted of

the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds (p.71).

It is well substantiated that a naturalistic research paradigm such as interpretivism fulfils the conditions of disciplined inquiry; that is, problem focused and the achievement or facilitation of understanding or action (or both) (Patton, 1990; Guba and Lincoln, 1982; Caro, 1971). It is within this framework that the raw data of this research was publicly examinable and the conceptual problem ameliorated. In addition and perhaps the most persuasive reason for my adoption of this framework is the outcome or the facilitation of meaning and (potential) action that can be extracted from this research. This can best be achieved through a naturalist paradigm of interpretivism. In this case, my understanding will be elucidation of meaning or a deeper understanding of the voice of the participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that an emergent naturalistic framework is more useful and demonstrates greater inquiry power particularly in social/behavioural inquiry. They contest that naturalistic frameworks, such as interpretivism, allow a better fit between the inquiry assumptions and phenomena of interest (1985, p.561). Additionally, the argument
that a naturalistic framework facilitates theory development and rich or thick description is well supported (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Gephart, Ingle & Saretsky, 1973). It is through this thick description that other hypotheses can be tested and limits of transferability established. The central question of application – a particular situation at a particular time and place – is central to this research. This is true of the central question of this research – particular students at particular times in a particular place (university). Therefore, naturalistic research was best placed to determine contextual elements and responsive evaluation that I was seeking in this study.

It was appropriate for me to consider the individual students through a research framework that recognised the importance of their everyday experiences and insights and also allowed for a classification and ordering of their individual experiences through interpretative frames in a non-contrived setting. Using an interpretive framework allowed for such recognition and classification. As a framework, interpretivism provided me with opportunities for a view of the reality in terms of the constructions of the six participants.

It was the desire to hear from those who were most intimately involved in the experience that could be best exemplified through a theoretical framework of interpretivism. It is a framework that provides opportunities for a view of the reality in terms of the constructions of the multiple participants. Scott and Usher (1999) support this construction of meaning based upon ordinary life:

In interpretivism, research takes everyday experience and ordinary life as its subject matter and asks how meaning is constructed and social interaction negotiated in social practices. Human action is inseparable from meaning, and experiences classified and ordered through interpretative frames, through pre-understandings mediated by tradition (p.25).

Interpretivism rests upon the premise that the world is interpreted through the mind. The social world is best described through the language and symbols people use to understand their experience. Thus interpretivism rests upon the role of meanings in human actions. In this study the students would be describing their experiences using their own language and symbols – it was important to me to use a framework that facilitated meaning from these descriptions.
The ontology of interpretivism is based upon social reality – the human experience is a process of interpretation rather than sensory reception. The world is “interpreted” as a skilled accomplishment of individuals. In epistemological terms knowledge is derived from the everyday. The individual constructs meanings and concepts. My role is to grasp these socially constructed meanings and then reconstruct them in a social scientific language, as Green (2002) demonstrates – the reconstructions of the constructions that lead to tentative applications and the transfer of knowledge.

To hear the ‘voice’ this research needed to focus on the everyday experiences of the students as they first enter the world of university, to examine the complexities and emphasis they place upon formal structures and relationships as they commence their studies and to perceive their individual worlds. This approach is best based in an inquiry that allows understanding, deconstruction and reconstruction of the meanings that the participants and the researcher hold. Hammersley (1990) notes that such research can “only be achieved by first-hand contact with it, not by inferences from what people do in artificial settings like experiments” (p.7). There is a significant amount of research detailing how groups of tertiary students feel about university and significant amounts of research examining overall retention rates and first year enrolments, however there is only very limited material examining how particular tertiary students in a particular environment feel about and respond to the formal learning structures set up by the university. To examine this issue, a culturally-driven approach was needed. The given context of the tertiary environment was interpreted or deconstructed from the point of view of the participants – the first year students. This inquiry was carried out in non-contrived settings. This context was both complicated and complex but an excellent site for inquiry as the richness of the context provided a strong basis for my understanding of the individual participants.

A number of studies into the first year experience have examined both statistical results and patterns arising from them. Interpretivism argues that statistical correlations are not an insight on their own (Blaikie, 2000). By using an interpretivist framework this research study had the opportunity to explore what positivism and critical rationalism ignore – the meanings and interpretations, the motives and intentions that particular first year students use to direct their actions. This was a study from the ‘inside’. By using an interpretive framework, the imposition of ‘outsider’ views and meanings was eliminated. Interpretivists are concerned with how individuals produce and reproduce meaning through their continuing activities – this study deconstructed this process.
Using an interpretive framework also allowed me to form intersubjective meanings; that is, where members of a particular group, in this case first year tertiary students, shared common meanings and interpretations and maintained them through their ongoing interaction together. This framework allowed me to make more flexible interpretation and intersubjective meanings than could be found in positivism. Interpretivism allowed for both a construction of individual and multiple meanings within a context. In the analysis of this data there could thus be created multiple meanings and cross-meaning analysis, which contributed to me gaining a deeper, richer understanding.

3.4 The Research Methodology.

Green (2002) notes that “arguably in naturalistic inquiry…qualitative methods tend to be more appropriate” (p.7). Certainly to establish “ordinary life and everyday experiences” (Scott & Usher, 1999, p.25) as a site for constructing meaning through the eyes of individual first year students, there was a pressing need for me to use a methodology that answered the “what if” and “why” questions. Within an interpretive framework there is a desire to discover the “everyday” of people – to listen to and report on their accounts. Locke (2001) ascribes to this methodological approach of “a study of issues that are relevant to the situation being studied” (p.25). By using case studies, I was able, as researcher, to interact with the participants and the context. By limiting my assumptions to only the known published lecture/tutorial learning structure I was able to interpret the experiences that emerged from the data. Whilst Glaser (1998) has highlighted the dangers of the researcher adding individual experiences to the emergent data, I was aware that the case study approach offered the best opportunity to ameliorate these concerns. By conceptualising the data at various stages I was able to reduce the opportunity for pre-conceived assumptions. This formed a key element in my decision to treat each of the participants as separate case studies.

Case studies and the case format of case study methods best lend themselves to the “thick description” that is paramount in naturalistic and interpretive research. Within the framework of interpretivism my research methodology was based upon a case study format that would elicit the qualitative information I required to answer the research questions. As qualitative research, this study employed a case study methodology in order to capture and discern how students, and to a limited extent myself, perceived their learning journey in formal learning structures.
3.4.1 Case Study

Yin (1989) notes “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p.23). The aim of my research was to draw understanding and meaning from individual students as they experience formal academic structures. It was a real-life context in which multiple responses were available to draw meaning. Although individual students formed the case studies, it was through the study of each individual meaning that I gained a greater understanding. Simons (1996) advocates that it is through the study of the particular that research can come to understand the universal.

Lawrence and Holmel (1992) note that a case study is a comprehensive research strategy and not simply a data collection tactic. Defining a case study presents a number of conflicting considerations. Guba and Lincoln (1981) note that “many different forms of writing have been labelled ‘case studies’ – the range of information that has been included within a case study has varied from a few test scores for an individual to volumes of demographic, social, industrial and cultural information for an entire society” (p.371). In this study, my six participants were cases studies with qualitative information collected via interviewing.

The major criticism of case study research centres on the lack of rigour within their design. However Simister (1995) notes that this perceived lack of rigour has more to do with the balance between flexibility and selectivity – namely the flexibility that comes from meanings being explored during the data collection phase balanced against the selectivity that is exercised at the data analysis stage.

Yin (1989) notes that case studies have been used for exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research and depend heavily upon the research questions asked. Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis (1977) probably best summed up the concept of case study research as “an umbrella term for a family of research methods having in common the decision to focus on inquiry around an instance” (p.140).

Case studies were chosen for this research as they were best likely to elicit the inner experiences and meanings the individual first year students made of their environment. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) note, “case studies may be written at different analytic levels – a factual level, an interpretative level or an evaluative level and may, depending on
purpose and level, result in different products” (p.84). It is the interpretative level at which I located this research study.

Case studies were also seen as the best fit for my research as questions were being asked about a contemporary set of events over which I had little or no control – the experiences of six first year students.

My support for case studies as my methodology rested upon Yin (1994) who notes that three conditions must exist for a case study to be appropriate:

- The type of question must be explanatory: why? what for? how?
  In my research study the questions were centred on how first year students feel about the academic demands placed upon them and the learning experiences they were encountering.

- The extent of control the researcher has over actual behavioural events.
  In this study the behaviours were not manipulated as I used systematic interviewing, direct observation and documents to triangulate and construct meaning.

- The degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events.
  My study focused upon current feelings about academic structures and learning relationships.

By questioning how the participants felt about the academic events and demands, and attempting to place this in the context of their current total experiences through systematic interviewing in a non-manipulative environment, my research satisfied these conditions. Thus this method was seen as most appropriate for my research.

Stake (1994) proposed the use of intrinsic case studies as a way of creating research where “one wants a better understanding of the particular” (p.237). Case studies used in my research were intrinsic – six small in-depth samples, allowing for a detailed understanding within an interpretive framework. Transferability is the responsibility of the audience, the reader in this instance. Each of the key characteristics of case studies (Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994) was addressed throughout the methodology. These key characteristics and how they were addressed include:
• **Immersion:** over the course of one academic year, there is prolonged engagement through extensive interviews sustained over time, supported by key informant participants (the six students).

• **Bounded setting:** the parameters of this research were the first year at university, the university school and the formal experiences of individuals. Deliberate attempts to eliminate non-academic experiences are made and constantly reinforced.

• **Contextual knowledge:** the history, culture and experiences of the setting are examined, along with the participants’ interpretation of such contexts. Thus there are opportunities for contextual understandings across multiple cases.

• **Thick description:** in-depth analysis of the experiences and feelings of the six participants are traceable and replicable. The identity of each case was maintained through the interviews to allow contextual individuality.

• **Particular:** the purposeful sampling is typical and non-contrived (Patton, 1990), and uses Stake’s (1994) typology of a case-intrinsic case study based upon a small number of individual students. The flexibility retained allows pursuit of any interesting issues that arise during data collection.

• **Voice:** the key research question – what are their individual experiences – creates a voice of the participant which differentiates them from others.

Relating these characteristics to my data collection would allow intimate, detailed research of the particular. Consequently case study research method was seen as the best fit for the methodology.

### 3.5 The Research Methods.

In selecting a methodology, my methods needed to create a window of meaning on the experiences of the individual participants. It was important that the participants and I established first hand contact in non-contrived settings. Green (2002) supports this concept and notes the need for “the researcher to be responsive and adaptable enough to meet the demands of such research” (p.9). A model based upon interpretation and deeper understanding produced accounts of academic life drawing on meanings used by the individual students. It was necessary for me to articulate the everyday practices to understand the actions and response of the students. In an interpretivist model, I was able to gain an understanding of the world of the students through the structured interviewing. Scott and Usher (1999) note the need for procedures such as challenging questions and deliberations that encourage the participants, in this case the students, to reflect and
discover their own meanings. In this situation, the collection of the data would become an important part of building an understanding of the world of the students.

3.5.1 Data Collection

Data collection was done through extensive, 30 minute, regular taped interviews (5 per participant) over a sustained 11 month period commencing in March 2006 at the start of the academic year and concluding in 2007, just as the students commenced their second year of academic study.

A key characteristic of case study research is data collection through immersion (Yin, 1994). This immersion was created in my research through both individual and group interviews conducted on a regular basis and supported by key informant participants, the students, along with any documents they wished to use to keep notes between interviews. In addition, contextual knowledge of the setting was examined by me with opportunities for the participants’ interpretations of such contexts. Such interpretations were taped and used for member checking. Triangulation was provided by primary interviews and secondary observation. Green (2002) has noted that the representation of data in interpretivist inquiry is often via interviewing and journals or a combination of some or all, thus supporting my selection of data collection methods.

Data obtained from the participants is dynamic and placed in context with a heavy reliance on contemporary focus in interpretation. Thus the transferability of the data to other contexts that was created by the small number of participants rests with the audience (Blaikie, 2000), and does not rely on deduction based on pre-determined variables.

3.5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

My choice of a research data collection method was targeted at eliciting data that allowed me to capture the voice of the student. Whilst alternatives such as surveys, questionnaires and participant observation are all viable processes the use of semi-structured interviews afforded me the flexibility required for relevant, rich data collection and an understanding of the voice of the individual. Arskey and Knight (1999) note that exploring areas of interest to the participant and researcher provides rich data from which underlying themes and interpretations can be drawn. Any documentation kept by the participants (notes) is used as a means of corroborating the interview data.

My interviews were taped over a 30 minute period per interview. A list of open-ended questions or topics (Bresnenn, 1988) was used initially to draw out first impressions of the
learning structures at university. These open-ended questions and interview sessions are detailed in the appendix. As the interviews progressed over time, greater time was allowed by me for exploratory data collection and unstructured interviews are conducted. Documentation was used by participants to feed themes into the interviews. A total of five individual interviews were conducted per participant. In addition, over two semesters, three group interviews were conducted. They broadly covered the key themes of the research questions – structures, processes and relationships.

In summary the data collection was

**Semester 1**
3 Individual interviews (30 minutes per student)
2 Group interviews (30-45 minutes)

**Semester 2**
2 Individual interviews (30 minutes per student)
1 Group interview (40 minutes)

At each interview a number of key questions were used to introduce the conversation and allow the student to reflect on their experiences. The specific questions are detailed in the appendix, but the broad themes of each interview are:

**Semester 1**
Interview 1 (March, 2006) - Learning Structures/ Formal learning Situations
Interview 2 (April, 2006) - Formal Learning Processes.
Interview 3 (June 2006) - Formal Learning Relationships.
Group Interview 1 (March 2006)- Formal learning Structures
Group Interview 2 (June 2006) - Relationships and Processes

**Semester 2**
Interview 4 (August, 2006) - Formal learning Structures
Interview 5 (September, 2006) - Formal Learning Relationships/Processes
Group Interview 3 (March, 2007) - Review of Formal learning in First Year.

The group interviews were used as triangulation of the data and key issues arising from the individual interviews were discussed. The final group interview was used as an opportunity to review the key issues and allow the students to suggest changes or ideas for future formal learning structures within the first year in this school.
3.5.3 Data Analysis

Through extensive interviews and prolonged engagement over a sustained period of time, I collected key data. This data was bounded by the parameters of the first year at university and the formal academic experiences of the individual participants. The taped interviews were transcribed using a transcription service, but the analysis of the weighty transcripts was undertaken manually. I rejected qualitative software, as I was keen to read and re-read the transcripts myself, to recall the voice of the students and the emotion of the interviews and the group sessions. Although tedious, I undertook manual searches for similar words or themes in the transcripts and a thick description of the experiences and feelings of the six participants was elicited. The emerging trends and themes were analysed in light of the existing literature, highlighting the “voice” of the participants and combinations of their constructs. The analysis of the interview data was initially undertaken as a process of data re-organisation. Patton (1990) recommends “information be edited, redundancies sorted out, parts fitted together and the record organised for access” (p.313). The written record of the tapes which had allowed participants to talk freely produce significant data around each of the topics. With such a detailed and weighty amount of transcript material, it was important to sift the data and re-organise material into themes related to learning structures and relationships. This was undertaken. As with all transcripts, a certain amount of discussion was repetitious and social and not relevant to this study. By re-organising this transcript data manually and visually, using highlights I was able to develop links between the students comments. This was what I would call the first “layer” of analysis. Glaser (2001) notes this importance of raising the data beyond the merely descriptive level. By concentrating on the three key themes of the study – the formal university learning structures of lecture and tutorial; the process supporting such structures (worksheet requirements); and the relationships formed with academic staff in these formal settings and structures – I was able to re-organise the data into a better understanding of the students’ voices.

During this process, the transcripts of the tapes were still intact and could be relied upon if required. Strauss and Corbin (1990) emphasised layered techniques for analysis of data using this approach. I then looked for on-going issues within these themes. Essentially the second “layer of analysis” was within each of the themes of the research outlined in Chapter 1. The comparisons between each of the case studies – the participants and their responses – revealed commonality and clearer responses. Simons (1996) explains how the study of the single can lead to a renewed understanding of the whole. In this research, patterns emerged as I sifted through the second layer of responses to each of the key
themes. These patterns within each of the themes are discussed in greater depth in chapters 5 and 6.

The final layer of analysis I applied to the data was chronological. I presumed that as the year progressed the students would reveal greater insights into the formal learning structures. As a researcher, the concept of immersion in thick description was more obvious to me at this level. The idea of “layering” the data was the final level of analysis and led to a number of insights discussed in later chapters.

Thus the analysis was oriented towards emerging themes based around academic and cultural learning, rather than an analysis based solely on individual participants (cases). The ensuing discussion around each of these themes forms the basis of subsequent chapters.

3.5.4 Documentation

To support data triangulation the participants were invited to keep personal notes of their experiences. As a researcher, I did not make any demands about keeping any notes between interviews. Whilst specific guidelines for note-keeping were never given, the participants readily noted feelings and observations, especially during the first semester. As the participants became more confident in the interview situation, their reliance upon their written reflections decreased. The notes were useful for triangulation and member checking. As private documents participants were not required to share their written notes with each other or myself.

3.6 Interpretivism as a Research Framework

Interpretivism is not without criticism as a research framework. One criticism is the implication within interpretivism that individuals are competent beings who continuously engage in social activity that is meaningful, has reason and intention does not always hold. Individuals also engage in routine activities that have little meaning. Clearly there is much that a first year university student undertakes that is routine. In addition there is also much about this routine that is unmotivated. However, through the structuring of the case study interviews and flexible timetabling of such interviews, I hoped to appease this criticism. Careful selection of relevant data arising from the taped interviews was needed
on my part to ameliorate the danger of the “routine” data. Much data pertaining to routine activities was eliminated from my analysis.

Another criticism of interpretivism rests with the idea that there is more to interpretation than what is expressed in language. That is, language is only one aspect of interpretation. But in this research, for ethnomethodological study purposes it is only possible and necessary to understand the participants’ accounts and report upon subjective and personal experiences. At the heart of my study was the “student voice”. Ethnography facilitates a “thick description” and is able to capture the sense of what the individual students feel. This consequently permits interpretations and places events in a context, thus facilitating cultural meaning. Geertz (1973) acknowledges the importance of these interpretations.

It could be argued that an interpretivist framework fails to acknowledge divisions of interest and relations of power and that individuals are only partly aware of the circumstances and structures within which they act and find themselves. But the focus of this study was how students perceived their formal learning experiences in set structures, rather than why. It was based upon the importance of language and consciousness and reflexivity. I premised this interpretation on the understanding that social activity is created through talk. The actions and language of the participants were not covered by separate and discrete patterns. It was not simply cause and effect as in positivism, but interpretation of the world as the students saw it. It was the “search for social rules” (Neuman, 2000) that was important in an understanding of the participants’ experiences. It was their interpretation of the reality that provided the insight in this research.

If then the context was the experience contained within the first year of a university degree, the enormity of such individual experiences meant there was a need to draw some boundaries around these experiences. Huberman and Miles (1994) explore the concept of a bounded context and conclude that there is a need for “a focus or heart of the study and boundaries that define the edge of the case – what will not be studied” (p.25). Within this study the boundaries were contained to the formal academic structures and formal relationships within the university environment. Whilst recognising the importance of other first year experiences that may happen outside this environment, as Huberman and Miles (1994) note, there is a need to have a focus or a “heart” of the study from which the research could be built outward. Establishing what was not to be studied, such as the non-academic and informal experiences of the first year students helped establish the boundaries of the contextual site.
Hammersley (1990) notes that the human as instrument can best be achieved by “first hand contact, not by inferences” (p.7). It was important that the participants and I established first hand contact in non-contrived settings. Green (2002) supports this concept and notes “only the researcher-as-instrument is responsive and adaptable enough to meet the demands of such research” (p.9). A model based upon interpretation and deeper understanding produced accounts of academic life drawing on meanings used by the individual students. It was necessary for me to articulate the everyday practices to understand the actions and response of the students. Using an interpretivist model, I gained an understanding of the world through ethnographic fieldwork and interviewing. Scott and Usher (1999) note the need for procedures such as challenging questions and deliberations that encourage the participants, in this case the students, to reflect and discover their own meanings. It was this challenging interviewing that I hoped to achieve.

### 3.7 Triangulation

A key element of this research study was the aim to understand the meaning of the students’ experiences. Structured interviews were used to derive interpretations. Anderson and Arsenault (1998) note the issues related to interviewing include:

- Validity
- Efficiency
- Time (consuming)
- Analysis to elicit clear messages
- Bias through desire to please

Vigilance, briefing and debriefing with other researchers along with member checking were the key methods I used to ameliorate these weaknesses. Within the research framework, my preferred method was semi-structured and open interviews, triangulated by three methods:

- documentation (or notes) kept by the participants
- review of the interview data transcripts
- group discussions about transcripts

Whilst alternatives such as surveys, questionnaires and participant observation are all viable processes the use of semi-structured interviews afforded me the flexibility required
for relevant, rich data collection and an understanding of the voice of the individual. Any documentation kept by the participants (notes) was used as a means of corroborating the interview data.

Holloway (1997) advocates member checking of primary data blended with secondary data such as artefact analysis as a between-method form of triangulation. This was seen by me as the best fit for this research. The data was triangulated through on-going member checking, and inner constructs about the learning journey illuminated.

Winter (1989) also supports this triangulation, arguing that a number of different methods of data generation allows each method to transcend its own limitations by functioning as a point of comparison with another (p.22). Thus the primary and secondary data were used to triangulate the data. The purpose of the triangulation was to facilitate comprehensive understanding and explanation. Bailey (1987) calls this process “an inspection so that the data may be approved by others” (p.105). In this research the students did not have access to each other’s notes, nor did I, but the notes served as triangulation for each of the individuals to check and re-check their constructs.

3.8 Limitations of the research methodology and Methods.

Whilst the individual participants became case studies in themselves, strict adherence to a structured case study approach (Yin, 1994) was not possible due to the strong research framework of interpretivism. Whilst a more exploratory approach in the interviews allowed richer data to emerge, this focus avoided the more rigid approaches of semi-structured case studies advocated by Yin (1994). This relaxation of structure in the case studies may be seen as a limitation of the research. Silverman (2000) criticises any departure from the structure, even in creating flexibility of data. Eisenhardt (1989) calls this approach “controlled opportunism” – and this may be considered a relevant criticism of my research study. However, I was mindful of Cartledge’s (2002) comment that it was the unprepared that makes for rich naturalistic inquiry.

The number of final cases selected and studied (six) was determined by the interpretive driven theoretical approach. A limitation of this number is the small size of the sample – six cases. Hamel, Dufour and Fortin (1993), however, note that the number of cases required for a study is a function of the study’s actual objective. In this research one of my key aims was the reconstruction of the individual student’s response to being in a formal tertiary academic environment – their perceptions and understandings. In my research the small number of cases satisfied my needs and the research objectives. Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that an ideal number of cases is between four and ten is
suitable, as any more cases and the volume of data and complexity of data understanding is difficult. In this research, the “voice of the individual” is paramount – the danger in too many cases is that the individual is lost in favour of the majority. I was conscious of this when selecting my sample size.

The use of interviews or semi-structured, open and exploratory discussions is often regarded as a limitation in research. By commencing with semi-structured interviews and allowing the dialogue to take its own course over time, a balance between the structure of broad open-ended questions and unsolicited, flexible responses was achieved in my research. Simister (1995) raises the limitation of such questions masking the “hidden agenda” of the researcher and interviewer. This could clearly be a limitation, but familiarity over a prolonged period and a degree of confidence through member checking and constant triangulation has been shown to reduce this bias (Oppenheim, 1992), and I was determined to pursue this triangulation.

Gummesson (1991) notes that a key limitation of qualitative research is the lack of statistical validity, but uppermost in my research design was the building of both internal and construct validity. Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1994) recommend multiple sources of evidence to support construct validity. This was achieved through extensive literature reviews and both individual and then group interviews of participants. Additionally key participants were able to review draft case study interviews to assist with construct validity. In addition, internal validity was achieved with triangulation (Stoecker, 1991) and case comparisons (Silverman, 2000). All research studies have limitations – by constant vigilance and forewarned knowledge, the effect of these limitations can be reduced.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The issues of validity, reliability, confidentiality and trust were paramount in my decision to undertake this research study. Arksey and Knight (1999) explore the importance of these and other considerations in interview situations, especially where taping is involved. In this research the interviews with the students were all taped and I was conscious of the ethical considerations of taped material. Whilst I had obtained ethics approval to obtain taped interviews and although all of the participants were provided with clear, full knowledge of the research study through a plain language statement and permissions sought, I was still conscious that the insights were their experiences. I allowed them to control what would eventually be used as data and on a small number of occasions (3) the participants requested that their comments be deleted from the tapes.
As their comments were their constructs and their insights, I acknowledged the privilege they had afforded me and the trust they were showing me by giving them the opportunity to “edit” their transcripts. I was able to do this by allowing them to read and re-read the transcripts. This added support enhanced their trust in me as a researcher and not a lecturer and increased my credibility as a researcher. Over time, that trust was rewarded with the frankness and full disclosure evident in the rich transcripts and their decisions to leave all taped material as recorded. As the students had decided not to include some comments, I respected this decision and did not include any comments relating to these deletions in this thesis.

As the experiences of the participants related to individual colleagues and other university staff, I was circumspect in my discussions with others about this research and potential recommendations arising from the data. The university school whilst not enormous, comprises about 65 staff of whom only a very small percentage are engaged with students in first year. As the participants were not compelled to attend the interviews but selected their times based upon study timetables, it was impossible for staff to be aware of their involvement unless the student chose to discuss it (this did not occur to my knowledge). I was also conscious that the students may raise issues of poor or inappropriate teaching practice. As a researcher I resolved to accept the voices of the students as paramount and to accept their constructs, even if as a professional it meant accepting that some teaching would be interpreted as poor practice. I also resolved that I would discuss the dilemma posed by what I considered inappropriate methods with both my research supervisors. As there was no evidence during the interviews of examples of this, the dilemma didn’t arise. All participants were give pseudonyms to further protect their identity in the following chapters. I did not teach the participants in this study and had no role in their first year courses. In 2009, when these students were approaching the time that I would be interacting with them in a lecturing role, I was not employed by this particular school.

3.10 Conclusion

Cartledge (2002) calls naturalistic inquiry the “great adventure” (p. 46). It is the unprepared that the researcher encounters as they journey through the research experience. In this research I was keen to explore the link between student engagement and the formal learning environment universities set up for students.

The research question I posed centred upon the insights of six first year students at university have about their learning experiences within the formal framework provided by
the university. It was an adventure, a discovery of the unwritten or undocumented inner feelings of the six students when they confronted the university journey as undergraduate students with no previous tertiary experience. I felt it appropriate to consider the individual students through a research framework that recognised the importance of their everyday experiences and insights and allowed for a classification and ordering of these individual experiences through interpretative frames in a non-contrived setting. The use of an interpretivist framework allowed for such recognition and classification. As a framework, interpretivism provided opportunities for a view of the reality in terms of the constructions of multiple participants – it was ideal for this research.

The methodology I selected to support this interpretative framework was case study research. Whilst there are a number of conflicting definitions about case study research, this research was based upon case studies as defined by Yin (1994). This model requires three conditions – type of questions, control and focus. My methodology based upon Yin’s (1994) model specified each of these conditions, with purposeful sampling creating a best fit for the methodology.

Through this research design, the learning journey of six students was explored as they undertook their first year at university. Thus a much-needed picture of individual first year students’ feelings and experiences about formal structures and formal relationships was provided. Insight into learning experiences, the critical factors in adjustment and the decision to progress into second year have, I argue, valuable repercussions for the wider education audience.
Chapter 4 – The Case Study Participants, the Researcher and the Setting

4.1 Introduction

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Stake (1994) argues that the case study allows a focus on complexity, interactions, sequences, events and the wholeness of individuals in context. Stake has also suggested that a case study is idiosyncratic and requires explicit shaping to ensure that the research objectives can be met. My research study encompasses this focus of the sequence of events and the interactions occurring within these events to create a complex, interwoven picture of the experience of the individual. It reveals the uniqueness of each participant in the context of the first year university experience. This uniqueness allows a capturing of the understandings, experiences, interactions and learning journey as seen by each single participant. The appearance is of six separate, occasionally intercepting constructs, but it is through an interpretative framework that connections can be seen. The picture I create shows unique, dissimilar episodes over a period of time, but in understanding these individual interpretations, a further picture of the whole emerges. Simons (1996) explains how the study of the individual can, in fact, lead to a renewed understanding of the whole:

The tension between the study of the unique and the need to generalise is necessary to reveal both the unique and the universal of that understanding (p.2).

The “episodes” captured in data as students encounter the formal learning environment of lectures, tutorials and relationships may also reveal striking similarities in understandings – it is through these similarities that the ability to generalise is created. A key objective of this research is to reveal individual inner “voices” of students as they find themselves confronted for the first time with the structure of the university learning experience. The insights gained from the individual “voices” enable a range of general themes to emerge. It is from these themes that future chapters in this study are built. Through analysis of this rich data, strands of a whole emerge. Martin-McDonald (2000) supports this emergence as creating “vast opportunities of meaning which have the potential to yield far more than a singular instance” (p.62).
In this chapter I firstly examine the university context in which the participants are placed. The context is critical to this study. Universities and university faculties or departments are worlds within a framework of higher education. Each “world”, whilst operating under overarching policies and procedures is, in fact, a separate entity, unique unto itself, with procedures, policies and operating principles known and understood by its own inhabitants. It is appropriate to describe the department of the university as a world for these students. The students in this study commence their learning journey in this context. There is some evidence from the literature that students come to expand their world outside the university school over time, but my research is concerned with their journey within this context. The primary focus of this study is their interaction and experiences of the university through the formal learning structure within the school.

This chapter examines some initial data based upon a questionnaire completed by all the participants. Lawrence (2002) supports the use of an initial questionnaire to provide additional opportunities for analyses that are both compatible with case study research and enhance the research enquiry. The questionnaire allowed me, as researcher, the opportunity to develop a background picture of the participants which is essential to understanding them as individuals.

It is important to note that in this chapter I shift from describing the individuals as participants to describing them as students. This is deliberate. Prior to the study these individuals were participants in a research project. As the study progresses using the framework of interpretativism, it was obvious they are no longer participants – both as they see themselves or are viewed by me. They are actively involved in their stories – they are students who are an integral part of the data. They see themselves as “being” the data, no longer participants looking on to the emerging data. They are in fact, shaping the data, weaving their personal voices into or to intersect with the data. They are students who were listened to – an interesting study in itself. The distinction in this chapter between the individuals as participants and then as students is deliberate.

### 4.2 The University School

The university school is one of eight departments within a broader college (faculty) and is based at the university’s urban/city campus. The school has approximately 1000 undergraduate students, across four disciplinary areas of study. Each year the first year intake is approximately 250 students, with, at the time of the research, the majority entering university directly from secondary school (80% approx. per annum)
In 2005 the university school commenced work on a new curriculum format. All existing subject (course) offerings within the various degrees were reviewed, rationalised and updated following extensive industry, alumni and faculty consultation. As well as an update of existing degrees, a new degree in management was introduced to meet the growing industry demand for specialist managers. The review of existing curricula and the introduction of the new degree accentuated the need for subject (course) rationalisation and a greater emphasis on career pathways for students. One of the overriding issues to emerge from the review and subject (course) rationalisation was the need for students to gain a common grounding in all key core subject areas before specialisation in particular subject areas in later years. Within each separate degree a range of core competencies was developed and these core competencies were built into each subject area. The subject areas were then reviewed and a common first year curriculum was developed.

This common first year curriculum was introduced as compulsory for all undergraduate degrees in the university school in 2006. The common first year programme has a number of objectives:

- To enable students to experience aspects of each of the school’s disciplines.
- To create dialogue between the disciplines with an industry focus.
- To enable students to gain a comprehensive understanding of the entire industry.
- To deliver a programme that is recognised by Australian professional bodies.
- To create student opportunities for multi-disciplinary research, peer review, exhibitions, conference and publications.

These objectives are based upon a range of research studies into the first year university experience and the learning styles of modern students in the current university environment. This research seeks to capture the experiences of individual students in this common first year. The large first year cohort (250 students) is arranged into large teaching groups with a lecture and tutorial system. Tutorial groups contain up to 35 students and are randomly organised between the student cohort. There are no elective or choice courses in the first year.

Within the structure of the classes, the formal lectures are taught to the whole cohort of 250 students in one lecture theatre or large complex. The lecture material is determined by dividing the course themes into curriculum topics, which are then presented to
students. The topics cover areas of knowledge such as regulations for building, engineering concepts, property issues etc. Each topic is presented to the students via powerpoint slides or handouts. Most lecture material is copied online for students who miss the lecture or as an aid to support students who may have difficulties understanding the material. There are no online or external students in the undergraduate degrees in this school.

The tutorials, which are arranged randomly, are taught using co-ordinated topics based upon student worksheets and set tutorial material. Tutorial worksheets are provided to all tutors and co-ordinated by the course (subject) co-ordinator. Tutorial worksheets are organised around the topics covered in lectures and provide students with an opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge to particular property or construction problems. The set tutorial work is common across all tutorials in the particular subjects. This ensures quality control and eliminates some students not receiving the set instruction. The set tutorial work consists of a small problem or example and questions based upon either calculations relevant to the example, or the application of theoretical knowledge introduced in the lecture. It is presumed that students have understood the theoretical knowledge presented in lectures and will be able to apply it in practical examples introduced in the set tutorial worksheets. Tutorial worksheets may be marked and the course co-ordinator determines if the marked work will be considered for the total course grade at the conclusion of the semester.

Courses undertaken and course curriculum are pre-determined by the programme advisory committee which is comprised of senior university staff, administrators and industry representatives. For the student cohort in this study the courses undertaken are four core courses each semester of their first year, in the curriculum areas of

- Structures
- Technology
- Property
- Communications
- Project Management

Students undertake four courses each semester, some courses are two semesters in length. Each course is worth equal credit points towards their degree.

Although there are examinations and on-going assessments associated with these courses, this study was concerned with the relationships and learning environments within the
formally arranged classes for these students, and did not discuss the particular course examinations outside this framework.

4.3 The Participants

4.3.1 Selection of the Case Study Participants

The first year student cohort (250 students) was approached via email and a personal visit by me, the researcher. Beginning students with no tertiary education experience were invited by me to be involved in a 12 month study to discuss their experiences and feelings about their formal university learning structure through regular interviews. Twelve students responded, of whom an initial eight were selected to be involved in the study. The four non-selected applicants either did not fit the criteria of being a first-time user of tertiary education (two had previously commenced in other degrees); were unable to give a commitment for 12 months contact; or decided that they did not wish to be involved after meeting me and examining the data collection method (taped interviews).

Of the final eight participants only the data of six participants was collected. This was because two of the original eight participants did not attend after the first interview session and did not attend the group sessions, nor did they review their taped data for verification after the first interview. When I tracked and contacted these participants both of these participants said they did not wish to be involved in the research project, citing disinterest and lack of motivation as reasons. Both requested that their taped first interviews be destroyed and the material not used. Hence this data does not appear in this study. One student later left the university degree, after changing to another university. Whilst it may be very useful and informative to examine the reasons, expectations and motivations of these students, it is not part of the research objective of this particular study. It is also beyond the scope of the ethics of this study to use their first taped interview.

The size of the case studies therefore remained at six participants after the first interview and data collection. The six participants completed an initial questionnaire (Appendix 1). This number may be considered small for the purposes of statistical analyses but the initial data are collected to value add to the case material. Primarily, initial data about the participants was collected through a short questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was:
To establish a background data set profiling participants’ demographic characteristics in order to demonstrate differences in their perceptions and knowledge about university.

To establish a starting point for the research.

To illuminate the characteristics of the participants in the study in order to highlight them as individuals.

To allow comparisons between the individuals and other data about commencing student cohorts.

To thereby attest to the representativeness of the sample through these comparisons.

To augment the “richness” of the qualitative data analysed later in this study.

The initial questionnaire also helped to establish a starting point for discussion between the researcher (myself) and the participants, thus allowing more intimate and complex exchanges to emerge.

Denzin (2007) supports the use of a range of data collection methods to establish a richer understanding of the case study. Although the demographic data collected generated only an initial profile of the six participants, it did serve as a useful foundation to counter-balance limitations that may emerge in the qualitative analysis.

A range of demographic data that was readily available was not sought from the participants. This relates to ethnic/linguistic background, socio-economic status and academic record. In the selection of the data to be obtained in the initial profile questionnaire, preference was given to those areas that would be able to form a basis for discussion about programme selection and expectations about learning and the formal academic experience.

The value of information about a participant’s socio-economic status or background was not relevant to their learning journey in this study once they had entered university. Carpenter, Hayden and Long (1998) and Marks (2007) longitudinal studies reveal that there is little evidence that course attrition or learning problems are associated with socio-economic background. Of the students in both of these previous studies from a lower socio-economic status who did enter university programmes, there is no evidence that socio-economic background is a contributing factor to non-completion in any greater percentage that other socio-economic groups. As this study was concerned with the
students experiences in the formal learning environments, the link between socio-economic status and learning environments at university was seen as of only limited relevance.

Questions about the ethnic and linguistic background of the participants are also excluded. Relying on Urban, Jones, Smith, Evans, Maclachan and Karmel (1999), who showed only a small difference in course attrition between different ethnic and language backgrounds, and McMillan (2005), who found higher rates of completion by students whose language background was not English, the ethnic and language background of the participants is not considered significant. This exclusion also reflects the linguistically inclusive industry into which the participants will graduate and the non-exclusive entry opportunities for all ethnic backgrounds.

The chart below provides the results of the initial questionnaire. Any classification of a selected group of commencing students is bound to be arbitrary. Long, Ferrier and Heagney (2006) used student profiles that focus upon combinations of characteristics to build student “types”. They acknowledge the arbitrary nature of such characteristics, but highlight the advantages of group characteristics in establishing a basis for a general discussion of the individual “types”.

The categories used in this questionnaire were based upon the work of Denzin (1997) and Long et al (2006). These categories are age and sex; university entrance rank and previous schooling; reasons for university and discipline selection; and parental university experiences.
Table 1: Profile of research study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age at commencement of degree</th>
<th>Tertiary entrance rank</th>
<th>Previous schooling</th>
<th>Reason for selection of discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A – Alex</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Top 2 deciles</td>
<td>Metropolitan government high school, northern suburbs</td>
<td>Interested in Property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B – Ben</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Top 1 decile</td>
<td>Private co-ed high school, country area</td>
<td>Liked idea of construction, had worked for 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C – Craig</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Top 2 deciles</td>
<td>Metropolitan government high school, eastern suburbs</td>
<td>Unsure what to do – seemed interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D – Dennis</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Top 2 deciles</td>
<td>Metropolitan government high school, eastern suburbs</td>
<td>Construction – Had mates doing it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E – Elizabeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Top 1 deciles</td>
<td>Metropolitan private girls college, eastern suburbs</td>
<td>Project management – seemed exciting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F – Felicia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Top 3 decile</td>
<td>Metropolitan private girls college, eastern suburbs</td>
<td>Valuation – not sure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Lawrence (2002) discusses the collection of demographic data as “intersecting datasets” (p.206) where patterns stemming from an analysis of the characteristics of the participants are identified.
Within this initial demographic profile undertaken for this research project, a number of patterns have emerged. These observations contribute to these patterns:

- All of the participants or students are “new” to the university environment. This is essential to my research study.
- Four of the participants are male and two are female.
- All of the participants had completed 12 years of formal schooling in Australia.
- Only one of the participants had taken 12 months off “education” between secondary school and university.
- None of the students received credits or exemptions for any work or study prior to attending university.
- The major discipline areas of study prior to entry to university were varied, although four of the participants had undertaken more than one mathematics subject. Mathematics in the final year of schooling is not compulsory for entry to the courses within the university school.
- 3 of the students had attended government schools, whilst the other 3 had attended private schools.
- Only one of the students came from a rural area – the rest were from metropolitan areas.

4.3.2 Gender
The ratio of males to females in this study approximates the overall first year intake to the university school (approx 3:1). In general, the ratio is a reflection of the overall entry applications, community and parental attitudes to the industries and a mirror of the ratios of professionals actually working in these industries.

4.3.3 Direct Entry
All but one of the participants had entered university directly from secondary school. All of the participants had completed 13 years of schooling within Australia – completing Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in their final year. One student, Ben, had worked for 12 months, having deferred his initial offer of construction management. His work experience has been in the building industry – mostly labouring and general site work duties. He has been employed with a small residential builder. He, along with all the others, had received no recognition of any prior learning or experience.
4.3.4 Previous Schooling

Half of the students had attended Government high schools, only one in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The other two had been to public high schools in the predominantly more affluent eastern suburbs. The other half of the students had attended private schools, mixed between co-education and single sex. Both girls had been to single sex schools. All of the students in the previous year had completed the final year of schooling, thus achieving the Victorian Certificate of Education. The range of subjects studied prior to university was varied. Four of the students had studied mathematics at the highest level – even though mathematics at year 12 level was not a compulsory pre-requisite. Two of the students had studied at least one Visual Arts subject – graphics and visual communication. Only one of the students had studied a science subject: and only one had studied Music/Creative Arts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Major Secondary School Disciplines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A – Alex</td>
<td>Mathematics, sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B – Ben</td>
<td>Mathematics, humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C – Craig</td>
<td>Humanities, visual arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D – Dennis</td>
<td>Arts, humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E – Elizabeth</td>
<td>Music, arts/humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F – Felicia</td>
<td>Humanities, visual arts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Subjects previously studied by participants

Table 2 illustrates the range of subjects studied. The breakdown of subjects previously studied by these students weighs heavily towards precision studies such as mathematics and graphics. Students undertaking these subjects tend to have measurement and calculation skills along with technical efficiency skills. This preference may translate into their expectations about the courses they would undertake at university in their chosen degrees. The extent to which these secondary school subjects prepared them for university subjects was not a relevant question in this study. Significant previous studies have examined the link between secondary schooling and university (Lawrence, 2002) but this study was focussed upon the lecture/tutorial system that was presented to students once they arrived at university. It was acknowledged by all students that the structure was unfamiliar to them prior to entering university. A key issue for me is the expected learning role in the lectures and tutorials the students had selected – how it differed from
their previous experiences and how their expectations matched the reality of the learning structures at university. The diversity of the participants previous studies would allow for a wider discussion of this expectation as would the impact of previous study and learning habits. I intended to explore each of these themes later in individual discussions with the participants in this study.

### 4.3.5 Influences upon University Discipline Selection

Of the participants involved in this study only two had parents with some knowledge of the discipline area they were undertaking. Two of the students had parents who had no university experience whilst four of them had had at least one parent attend university. It is difficult to judge the full impact of these influences upon university expectations of the students. As illustrated in Table 3, a number of the participants had parents who attended university.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Parental University Experience</th>
<th>Parental Discipline Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A – Alex</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>None (medicine/nursing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B – Ben</td>
<td>One parent – mother</td>
<td>Father – work experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C – Craig</td>
<td>One parent – father</td>
<td>Father – degree in engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D – Dennis</td>
<td>Neither parent</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E – Elizabeth</td>
<td>One parent – father</td>
<td>None (management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F – Felicia</td>
<td>Neither parent</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Parental university experience and discipline relevance

Although some research has focused upon the relationship between tertiary educated parents and entry to university (Karmel, 2009), this research is concerned with the post-entry period, not the decision to attend in the first place. However, I was interested to find out if their parents’ knowledge of the university structures of lectures and tutorials had been discussed with the participants.

When questioned, most of the students saw little or no advantage in having parents who had an understanding of their discipline. In all cases it did not feature in their decisions to pursue university studies. As this research is based upon an interpretivist model of data analysis, I considered the relationship between parental experiences and participant experiences too broad to be captured within the boundaries of my research.
4.3.6 University Study and Expectations

An additional reason for undertaking the initial profile questionnaire was to obtain a snapshot picture of why these participants had selected university study in the first place and why a particular discipline in the university. This “snapshot” revealed a range of responses:

- Location of the university campus was mentioned by three of the participants.
- The role of parents and secondary schools was important in shaping initial university discipline decisions.
- Final results at VCE were significant in selecting disciplines.
- Employment options upon graduation were relevant to at least two of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Reason for University Selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A – Alex</td>
<td>Central location, potential for employment after graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B – Ben</td>
<td>Came to Open Day, careers teachers and parents urging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C – Craig</td>
<td>Final results in VCE, location, reputation of university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D – Dennis</td>
<td>Location, final results in VCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E – Elizabeth</td>
<td>Parents, careers teachers at school, central location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F – Felicia</td>
<td>Job prospects, results in VCE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Reason for university selection

As Table 4 illustrates, geography, parents and careers teachers, results and employment options are the key factors for all of these students in selecting this particular university. None of the students commented upon the quality of the course offered, nor the fact that the first year programme was common across a number of disciplines.

I used these responses as the starting point for discussions with the participants – how they came to be interested and most importantly their expectations about learning as they commenced. The boundaries of this study were limited to the voice of the student once at university and their experience of the formal learning environment.
4.3.7 Travel/Rural Students

Only one of the participants in this study was required to move to attend the university. Moving from the parental home has been associated with stress in first year university and may be a contributing factor in the decision to remain at university (Long et al, 2006). This idea was briefly explored with the student at the first interview stage, but as I am interested in the link between formal structures and student engagement I did not pursue this idea. The participant from a semi-rural background did not seem more stressed than the other participants when completing the questionnaire.

4.4 The Researcher’s Role

As outlined in the opening two chapters of this research study, the role of the researcher in qualitative studies is not removed. Denzin (1997) recognises the partnership that develops between a researcher and participants and advocates the expansion of this shared area as a site for rich description and analysis. In addition to the role of the researcher as an enabler of this shared space there is also an element of active influence in the research which must be addressed. This element is the extent to which the researcher becomes part of the final research product. Hertz (1997) outlines the role of interviewers as active research participants, advocating that they need to acknowledge their role and the extent to which the developed construct of the final research piece has been affected by their interpretations.

In this research study the role of the interviewer was undertaken solely by me. The original participants had no interaction with me as a university staff member other than the invitations to attend the interviews and discuss their experiences of the university courses they were undertaking. As I illustrated in Chapter 3, my involvement with the students which was to occur in their final year, did not occur as I had left the university school in that year.

However, just as the voices of the students became stronger and more explicit in their interpretation of the structured learning experience, so my relationship with each of them matured. The casual bystander attitude I had hoped to adopt became less able to be maintained as their constructs and interpretations required deeper understandings and more complex interviewing. Having access to close, personal knowledge shared by the students also established a bond or relationship that overshadowed my role as a university
staff member. For the students, it was an opportunity to build a relationship with a person who understood the complexities and experiences of the university school but who had no capacity to influence grades or enrolment. As this became better understood, the students were able to relate more personal detail and develop more trust in me as a researcher.

As a researcher and university staff member, I find it difficult to remain “pure” to the task of data collection and interpretation. My own assessments of the first year programme and courses have been formed over a number of years and are a major propellant for postgraduate study in the area of education. On one level, these assessments enable me to make sense of the students’ responses and their opinions. Interpretations of much of the data require an intimate knowledge of how the courses and learning experiences of lectures and tutorials are organised, as well as the expectations of students in their first year. On the other hand, there was an ever present danger in the interviews that the data could be interpreted by me according to pre-conceived ideas of the first year learning experiences. These pre-conceived opinions and notions were present, as I had been involved in the university school for a number of years, prior to the introduction of this common first year curriculum. I acknowledge this as a limitation of the study in chapter 1. But this limitation, once known and acknowledged, could be a distinct advantage as well. Lawrence (2002) noted that research of this nature has the capacity to recognise the role of the researcher on two levels. The first level is the role of the researcher in constructing the lens through which the research is undertaken and the second level is the role of social reconstruction of the research. Carspecken (1996) also alerts the researcher to this limitation of reconstruction:

> The researcher must be cognisant of the fact that the act of doing research and writing it up will carry references to self-intentions, qualities, capacities and identity (p.167).

In this study I am determined to remain vigilant and to use member checking and student group sessions to ameliorate this danger. The group sessions are deliberately structured to enable the identification and validation of the students’ experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight this identification as an important tool in the qualitative research process and encourage discussion of constructed interpretations as a routine.

I am also aware of the ethical dilemmas posed by discussing learning structures and relationships with students. I was confident however that examples of teaching and learning practice would be discussed professionally and the anonymity of both the student
and the lecturer/tutor preserved. In taped interviews, students were restricted to calling tutors by pseudonyms to assist them with this process.

Finally, as a postgraduate student myself, I am able to distinguish my role as a researcher as distinct from my role as a university staff member. Being a student allows me to develop the trust required for the collection of explicit and sensitive data required to meet the research objectives and allows empathy with other students as they negotiate the learning structures, process and relationships that are part of the university experience. Lawrence (2002) best describes this empathy of being a student and a researcher – “each journey informs the other, enriching and nourishing the other, and each is intrinsic to developing the interpretations and conclusions I reach” (p.26). My role was bifocal – I was a researcher and a student, but I was also a teacher who had been “inside” the setting. Thus I was fortunate and able to both research and learn throughout this study.

It is this perspective I hope to adopt when examining the data in the next two chapters.

4.5 Conclusion

The purpose of the quantitative data examined in this chapter is the generation of a profile of the participants and their characteristics in relation to each other. Whilst the scope of the study is the individual journey of each student through the formal environment of lectures and tutorials in the first year of university, the information obtained from the questionnaire creates a background that enriches the overall data and allows for more authoritative findings. It creates a picture for the research upon which to scaffold other constructs and derive meaning. It creates a picture of the participant behind the “voice,” and establishes the educational profile of each of the participants. By establishing an educational profile of each of the participants I was able to view them as established learners, capable of undertaking study at an advanced level and of ascertaining their own individual learning needs.

The next chapter focuses upon the interview data collected over the first semester and explores the students’ constructs of the formal university learning environment.
Chapter 5 – Interpretations of Beginning at University

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined the context in which this study is framed. By using a common questionnaire with all participants I was able to establish background information about their reasons for pursuing studies in their particular disciplines and gain a brief snapshot of their previous studies at school. Their responses also allowed me to reflect upon and contrast their prior schooling and learning environments with the formal university environment in which this research occurs. The questionnaire also allowed me as researcher, a chance to build a basic understanding around each participant, which I could explore in the one on one interviews.

In this chapter, I explore the data detailing the constructs of the individual students in more depth and interpret their experiences against the literature and themes reviewed in Chapter 2. Using the responses of the students and data gained in the interviews allowed me to develop a picture of the experience and explore with the student deeper meanings as they emerge. In this chapter, the students insights gained over the first semester are examined. In this way, I hope to establish their first impressions of the formal learning environment. In the next chapter, I revisit the data gathered throughout the second semester to determine if their experiences have changed, and if so, to what extent. By examining the data in the chronological blocks of each semester, I am able to gain a sense of the student as a journey-maker in the structured university learning environment. I am also able to make interpretations about the engagement of these students with their university over both semesters.

5.2 Learning Structures

In Chapter 1, I introduced the relevance of the university task environment and structures that create this environment of learning and engagement. As previously discussed, a number of authors have argued that much of the university learning task is set in an environment which is unrelated to the students’ world or experience (e.g. Howells, 2006; Johnson, 1996).

The formal environment of the university is heavily based upon a structured system of lectures and tutorials. The idea that individualised scholarship and learning will occur
within such a setting has continued to be strongly held by academics in spite of mass public education and evidence indicating student disengagement in lectures. As I indicated in Chapter 4, although the university setting in this study had moved towards a common first year, the formal teaching and learning system remained one of lectures and tutorials.

In this research, as I outlined in Chapter 1, the underlying assumption is that the lecture and tutorial system facilitates learning for first year university students. All first year classes are delivered in a lecture/tutorial format and course notes and PowerPoints are available on the intranet for students. The focus by the school on the availability of lecture notes and materials is strong and students are actively encouraged to make use of these materials.

McInnis (2003) maintains that universities need to commence with student engagement as a priority in the first few weeks of lectures. The reviewed literature informs that the foundation for student engagement and subsequent learning is established in the first weeks of the first year. In interviewing the individual students in this research, I explored this theme of engagement in their formal lectures and tutorials. The evidence from the data indicates that all of the students interviewed were, in the first weeks of the semester, confused and unsure of their role in the formal lecture and tutorial structure. Two of the students’ comments were typical of their lack of confidence in lectures and tutorials:

I know everyone is new, but I am too scared to say anything. I haven’t got any idea what to do – I am going because it is on the timetable. (Felicia, March’ 06)

I am confused by the tutorials – I keep trying to find out what to do, but no-one else seems to know. (Elizabeth, March’ 06)

It is natural to expect that in the first weeks these students feel unsure and confused, but already they are experiencing a lack of confidence – afraid to ask questions – in their ability as learners. The lack of confidence in their role as learners in the formal environment contributed to their feelings of isolation.

Well you really don’t talk about the work in lectures – it is too hard to talk to anyone anyway. The room is so large. (Elizabeth, March ’06)
The questionnaire discussed in Chapter 4 highlights the independence each of these students brings to the formal structured learning environment, yet this is not mirrored in their initial feelings about what happens in classes. Alex, who had approached university as a confident, capable student, felt deserted by the learning structures:

I am totally confused as to what to do or learn. Is this it – just lectures and talking all the time? (March ’06)

He later said:

There is no-one to tell you what to learn.

In the literature I highlighted the work of Trotter and Roberts (2006) who have discussed engaged learning as consisting of confident behaviours such as posing questions in class, contributing to discussions and preparing and researching relevant readings. None of the students interviewed in this research appeared to be engaging in these “confident” behaviours in the first few weeks. The interview data indicates confusion and a lack of confidence in their own learning style. It is difficult to ascertain if this confusion was due to the overall newness of university the students were encountering, or the actual lectures they were attending.

I explored with the students these feelings of confusion by asking them to comment upon the lectures and tutorials specifically, as opposed to the “newness” of the total environment. Their responses indicated a relationship between the lecture structure and their confusion. Some of their comments illustrate this:

I attend all the lectures and this is what is confusing me. There is no textbook and I have no idea which of the readings to do. Also, when I read the material I do not see how it relates to the lecture material. (Craig, March ‘06)

It is difficult being new, but the lectures are the real problem. I just do not know what we are expected to learn. (Dennis, March 06)

Both Alex and Dennis are unsure of the content of the classes. Even having access to the class structure didn’t really assist them.
I have the breakdown of topics, but I do not know who all the
different classes fit together. Are they supposed to make sense
together? (Alex, March ’06)

Dennis, too, commented upon the lack of cohesion between courses and differing
lectures:

It is like each lecture is working by itself – they do not form a
pattern. (March ’06)

It is understandable that these students are a little confused by the way classes are
organised and the lack of continuity in the content between different courses and different
classes – they are in a new environment and undertaking new work. Over the next week I
was keen to see if their “confident” learner behaviour had returned.

There was evidence that some of the students were beginning to make a link between the
lecture and the course requirements by the second interview. This was true at least in Ben
and Craig’s case, as these statements indicate:

Seems like you could make sense of all this when you put it all
together. (Ben, April ’06)

Well obviously the lectures are all going to add up at some stage –
like in an exam or something. I’m not sure when yet. (Craig, April
’06)

Within the first three weeks, Craig had begun to see a link between the formal lectures
and the requirements of the course. However, even as Craig and Ben began to make
effective links between lectures and tutorials, they had begun to evaluate their
participation as learners within these structures. Craig’s statements indicated he was
already beginning to think of the formal environment as negotiable. This endorses the
literature (McInnis, 2003). He is making an active decision to link into those lectures that
feed into course assessment. When this was further discussed later in the semester, both
Craig and Alex were indicating boredom with lectures and were negotiating lecture and
tutorials according to assessment requirements:

When I am tired or bored I just don’t go, unless the lecture
material is going to be on the exam. (Craig, April’06)
When asked about his expectations of the examination, it was clear he has sought specific information about importance and relevance from the lecturer involved:

I try to find out if the lecture is important. Sometimes I email the lecturer and ask about the lecture, like, is it on the exam? (Craig June ’06)

Both of these students had within a month of university commencement established a “negotiated” arrangement with lectures and tutorials. They attended when they saw the necessity to do so – the pursuit of knowledge was replaced for them by the pursuit of assessment material only. When I explored with them the possibility of attending lectures to further their disciplinary knowledge, Alex indicated a link between the lecture/tutorial format and such a possibility:

I would maybe go if it was a little more interesting. But, what’s the point – it is boring, same stuff, just slides anyway. Only a few people go to the lectures – no-one knows if you are there or not. Some people just go to the tutes. (Alex, April ’06)

At first everyone went, now lots of people don’t go. (Craig, April, ’06)

A key thread of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 was the wealth and depth of first year curriculum initiatives that have been designed to keep first year students engaged within the formal university learning (task) environment. The assumption was that the formal structure of lectures and tutorials is suitable as a learning environment for first year students but altering the content would improve engagement. Yet when exploring this assumption with the students in this study, it was obvious they felt alienated by the actual structure of the lecture and tutorial system.

It means just large classes of people – trying to keep us all together. (Craig April’06)

I don’t know what the difference between a tute and a lecture is – just the same thing, only less people. (Alex April’06)

I am just one of hundreds of people. (Felicia April’06)
When questioned about the actual purpose of lectures and tutorials, the students seemed unsure in the first semester. Most equated the difference with the size of the class.

I’m not sure if they are the same thing or not but all the stuff in them are the same. Like you don’t need to change the stuff that much. It probably hasn’t changed – that is the way it is here at uni. (Elizabeth April’06)

Smaller numbers I guess, so you can ask a question, but I don’t…ask questions. (Felicia April’06)

The repetition of material and class sizes is a common thread. The students indicated an overlap of curriculum between lectures and tutorials to such an extent that in their first semester of university the only discerning difference between lectures and tutorials was the number of students present.

The main idea of tutorials for me is to go over the work again in small groups. (Ben April’06)

I have no idea why we have lectures – tutorials are much better, they are smaller. (Alex April ’06)

Already Alex is questioning his engagement with the university, asking about the reasons behind lectures. Elizabeth indicated a gap between her expectations and the lectures:

I didn’t think it would be like this…it is not much better than school…but no-one really cares about the lectures…my teacher at school told me uni was up to me…and in the lectures no-one knows you anyway so I guess it is up to me.(April, ’06)

All of the students found the lecture and tutorial system bewildering. Several, like Ben and Elizabeth, found the lecture and the size of the lecture class (about 250 students) intimidating. Both Ben and Elizabeth had attended smaller secondary schools and were overcome by the sheer size of the lectures and the impersonal nature of the lecture environment. Ben, in particular, from a rural high school was finding the enormous numbers in lectures difficult to absorb in his construct of university. Within the first two weeks there were signs that Alex and Craig were becoming bored with lecture system and
were questioning the relevance of the system to their learning. Their attendance was dependent on gaining something that could not be acquired elsewhere and the tendency of tutors to go over the same material reinforced the idea that the information and structure of the “learning” was repetitious.

Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 highlighted the need for student involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate learning (ACER, 2008). For both Alex and Craig their level of involvement in lectures was very low and the conditions to generate learning within these structures had begun to disappear within the first weeks of the semester. Kift (2008) notes that the processes used to engage students are critical. For a number of students in this study, the process of repetition and review used in tutorials was not engaging. For Alex and Craig this was a primary reason for non-attendance at lectures and tutorials.

In the first half of semester 1, the students had begun to develop their own ways of coping with the modus operandi of lectures and tutorials at university. Alex, Craig, and to a lesser extent Ben had made firm decisions about their engagement and participation – it would depend on the relationship between the lecture and assessment.

At the structural level for all of the students the “one size fits all” lecture/tutorial system was initially bewildering and a complex maze of trial and error effort. Dennis chopped and changed between seeing the value of attendance at lectures and the value of the tutorials. Although initially unsure about the course and degrees he wished to pursue, as evidenced in the initial questionnaire highlighted in Chapter 4, his experiences in the first two week of classes endorsed his self-proclaimed “learning style” of seeking out minimum requirements and adjusting his performance appropriately.

The struggle to make sense of the structure of university teaching and learning was more difficult for others – especially Felicia, who was highly motivated to succeed and had no previous experience of learning structures such as lectures and tutorials, but was determined to “fit into” the structures. Her comments illustrate this:

I am confused by the tutes. I am unsure if I am in the right class. The material is very hard to understand and most of the other students seem to know what they are doing. I am quite at sea with the course notes. It is very hard to understand – I don’t fit in. (April ’06)
Felicia appears to be comparing her experience of school and its learning requirements against the new structures of learning required at university. Her reflections and interview comments indicate the stress she feels as she tackles the first two weeks. This is reflected in her reliance upon the course notes as having some answers to the problems she is facing. When asked to comment upon this over the first three weeks she was reluctant to admit her lack of engagement and learning, assuring herself and me at the interview that if she studied harder she would eventually gain control of the material and her learning:

My notes are pretty much all over the place – like when I didn’t understand what was going on in the lecture. It meant that I hadn’t prepared enough. If I had got some books out early and studied them, then I would have understood the material. I am behind already – I need to study more before classes. (April’06)

The structures and set-up of the university and the methods used to transmit information and knowledge are alien to Felicia. Her initial response is to attempt more work by herself, to become more familiar with the material to be studied as a way of coping with the structure. Howells (2006) notes that one of the most disorientating experiences in the first year of university is that the self-awareness students bring about how they learn is silenced by the process presented as the formal learning environment. This was true for Felicia.

Felicia’s previous results indicate she had entered university a confident learner, aware of her particular learning strategies. She sees a strong connection between class preparation and learning success – this is how she has studied in the past – yet she is unable to attain any connection in the formal learning environment in which she now finds herself. Her comments indicate a lack of confidence about her learning connections:

Even when I am prepared, the lectures still are so basically repetitive week after week that I don’t feel like I am learning. (April’06)

Ben, too, had begun to lose confidence as a learner when confronted by lecture and tutorial material that appeared unconnected and repetitious:

There does not seem to be any match between the lecture and the tutorial. I am in a tute that is held on Fridays – the lecture is on
Mondays. It is hard to see any connection by then. The material is pretty basic – you just sit there listening. (April '06)

The time difference between lectures and tutorials is a problem for him as well as the content. Howells (2006) notes that students make decisions about the demands of their study and first year students need reinforcement of their learning decisions. Her argument centres upon the belief that first year students come to the learning situation at university with a greater need for their inner experiences to be validated. She notes that many students come to university from previous study where they have been involved in courses and methodologies which a required a sophisticated and reflective response. The “one size fits all” of university structures does not reflect this approach to learning. In Ben’s case, the failure to receive any feedback or endorsement of his learning efforts combined with the passive learning style required in lectures contributed to his confusion and lack of engagement. It was clear that he had begun to drift away from an engaged learner to one who was just physically attending for the time being.

The tutorial system was viewed as particularly complex by the first year students in this study. In the first semester, students closely followed a lecture and tutorial system for all of their classes. Tutorials were organised for them and students found themselves separated from any friends. The traditional role of the tutorial has been replaced in this setting by a more teaching-centred emphasis. With up to 40 students in a tutorial, many tutors resort to re-explaining the lectures to assist students. Instead of leading, discussing and consolidating knowledge, the students in this study find themselves sitting through the practical explanations of assignment workbooks or the re-teaching in tutorials of material covered in the lecture.

The bewilderment of the students with the lecture and tutorial system was further explored by my questioning whether the students had been prepared for such a structural, formal system of learning and teaching. The role of expectation of university study and culture (Stern, 1966) has been discussed in Chapter 2, but it is significant to examine the students’ expectations in this study to the formal learning structures they had encountered in their first few weeks at university.

Elizabeth had parents who had attended university and was the most philosophical about what Stern (1966) calls the “freshman myth”. She noted:
It is nothing like I thought it would be, if you mean the lectures, they are pretty boring. I keep waiting for something to happen. (March, 06)

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Berdie (1996), Shaw (1968) and Prancer et al (2000) have all shown links between the freshman myth and negative university experiences. Their argument centres upon the fact that adjustment to university structures is related to the complexity of students’ expectations. Both Alex and Ben had high expectations of quickly adapting to the lecture/tutorial system and were keen to make it work for them. Their comments indicate these expectations:

Yes, I thought the lectures would be different, I don’t know, like lessons or even mini lessons. I didn’t think we would be all doing the same work – like just copying notes and things. I expected to do more in a lecture, like say more thing and go over homework or something. This is different and you don’t know if you are on the right track at all. (Alex, March ‘06)

Ben was a little more focused on his efforts to match expectations with reality:

I thought we would be in like a real classroom. I could see a mental picture of the lecturer up the front – like in the movies, but our lecture is in the (Hoyts) cinema. At school one teacher said the lecturer would be able to explain everything and “turn you on” to the subject – but some of the lecturers are so boring. I don’t think it matches my mental picture before I came and now I know what it is like I just try to cope with it as it is. (March’06)

As I discussed in the literature, the complexity of thinking about university and the structural organisation of university learning is in part a function of the amount of information that the student has prior to entry to university. Elizabeth had access to information about the way learning was organised into lectures and tutorials through her parents and siblings but was still disappointed with what she found:

Yes, it is different, sort of disappointing. Really different. I expected lectures to be work, but I was surprised how much time there is where you do nothing. The lectures are dull. The first few weeks are okay, but then they all get dull. (April, ’06)
Zepke and Leach (2005) have identified a major theme in the discourse on the first year student and the university task environment as the need to adapt university culture to better fit the needs of commencing students. As well, Zepke et al (2006) propose that universities need to recognise and accept the diverse goals and cultures of learners and develop and adapt practices to suit. Their argument calls for a student-centred approach to the formal environment where students experience a sense of influence, good teaching and where diverse learning preferences are accommodated.

There was no evidence from any of the students in this study that their learning preferences were being accommodated in the current lecture and tutorial structure. Comments from Dennis were typical of all the participants’ responses about engaging in tutorials:

It doesn’t matter what you might want to know, it is what is presented that is important. The tutor wants answers to the questions. He wants you to learn it his way. Most of the students find out what he wants and do it his way. (April, 06)

These students in this study were adapting their learning to suit the style of tutor, containing their responses to questions set by the tutor. There was a sense of boundary around the tutorial and this added to the confusion felt by the participants in this study, their role as independent learners is interpreted by the tutor as bounded by the direct content of the tutorial. Additional research and interest was not encouraged. This is demonstrated by Alex’s comments:

I did some research and looked up information on the codes, but the tutor said just stick to the questions on the tutorial sheet, otherwise I would not get the same information as everyone else. (April,’06)

Boundaries were drawn around what was required and students were encouraged to confine their learning and study to these boundaries. Elizabeth noted that this limiting approach was different to her expectations and ideas of a tutorial as a place to pursue additional knowledge. She noted:

Even when you know as much about the topic as the tutor, the discussion still centres on what is on the worksheets, nothing else. (April’06)
It is beyond the scope of this research study to examine why the first year tutors were “confining” the students into learning only content contained in the tutorial worksheets. However, from the students’ perspective this appears to be very demoralising. The content appears repetitious and dull, and attempts by the students to pursue more interesting and challenging content, to “value-add” to their learning, are not encouraged. The role of the tutorials has mostly become one of content transmission with limited opportunities for learning engagement.

In the reviewed literature in Chapter 2, I examined a number of studies that questioned the formal task environment of universities – in particular the structures of lectures and tutorials. These studies established the importance of enabling structures of formal lectures and tutorials that promote learning experiences. The interview data discussed in this section indicates that students in this study in the first semester of their university experience did not clearly understand the difference between lectures and tutorials. The students confused the two structures as interchangeable forums for course content and information. The lectures are seen as impersonal, large group sessions that not only inhibited interaction, but isolate them as learners. The tutorials are seen as information transfer sessions with limited opportunity for active engagement. In the next section I examine their constructs of the learning processes that were used to support the lecture/tutorial system.

5.3 Learning Processes that Support the Formal Structures

In the first chapter of this research study, I defined the learning processes as those formal activities designed to support learning within lectures and tutorials. These formal activities include visual presentations (PowerPoints), worksheets and tutorial assignments. In the literature reviewed for this research study, I particularly highlighted the ACER (2008) and Krause (2005) definitions of learning processes. These definitions focus upon the student as being involved with the academic processes devoting time, energy and resources to these processes to enhance learning. It was against these definitions that the student perceptions arising from the interviews are explored.

The relationship between the lecture material and the set tutorial work was discussed with the students during their first semester. Although aware that the lecture and tutorial work was related, the students grappled with making exact connections. Their comments reflect this perplexity:
The tutes have worksheets in (one) course – but I don’t really think the worksheets are related to the lecture. It is really different work. (Felicia, April’06)

As well as Felicia, Dennis could see no relationship between the tutorial material and the lecture material. He comments:

You would think if the lecture was important then the worksheets would be about what was in the lecture. Mostly it’s not! (June,’06)

Rather than enhancing learning and affording opportunities for effective engagement, the relationship between the lecture material and tutorials appears to be tenuous at best. As I explored the link between presented knowledge in the lecture and the tutorial work, it became obvious that the tutors and lecturers did not prepare material in any cohesive manner that was clear to the students. Elizabeth comments:

If you are in (X)’s tutorial, then he is the lecturer, so the material is the same. He just goes over the slides again and we all work through the worksheet on the board. That is if you are lucky enough to be in that group (June,’06).

It was clear the difference between understanding and engaging in tutorial work was often the particular tutor. Ben comments:

In (X) subject, my tutor is hopeless. He doesn’t seem to know what we are supposed to do. We asked him about the assignment and he didn’t know – he, said he would check with the lecturer. We’re still waiting for him to sort out the assignments from week 2! (June’06)

Ben was frustrated with the formal processes that were underpinning the tutorials and were unable to access important learning scaffolds. The interview data indicates this frustration permeating all of the students’ comments about what happens in tutorials. The use of intentional curriculum processes that support first year university students was highlighted in Chapter 2. Reviewing work by Kift and Field (2009) I highlighted their research that called for engaging pedagogical approaches in supportive, integrated and
co-ordinated learning environments. For the students in this study the ability to be involved in an integrated, co-ordinated learning environment was limited to the particular tutor. The “co-ordination” was not evident to the individual students. Both Ben and Craig comment upon this:

My advice to new students would be to try to get into (Y)’s tutorial – he knows what to do and gives you ideas on how to prepare for assignments. (Ben, Group Interview, June ’06)

I actually have stopped going to (M)’s tutorials. They are called workshops but if you are in (M)’s tutorials, he just goes over the same work all the time. It isn’t really interesting. (Craig April ’06)

Drawing on Krause’s (2005) understanding of engaged processes that enhance learning, I explored with the students the time and energy they devoted to tutorial work.

I don’t really go to many tutorials. You can do the work without going – no-one takes a roll. (Craig April’06)

It is just about getting the word limit or for the worksheets the correct calculations. Once you do that, there is no need to do anything extra. (Dennis Group Interview, June ’06)

I am still learning things, but not really from the tutes. I mostly get the answers from other students. (Ben ) Group Interview, June ’06)

These are all comments indicating declining connection with both the tutor and the material. The processes used in the tutorials should be critical to student engagement and underpin learning for these students. Instead, there was evidence from the interviews that the students in this research study are engaging in superficial learning – undertaking only tutorial work that is relevant to assessment. As discussed in Chapter 2, Johnston (2001) identified the deterioration of learning that occurs over the first semester as moving from a deep approach when starting university to a surface approach after the first semester. Felicia, who commenced as a very motivated, engaged student noted this decline:
…because in tutorials they mostly go over the questions for the workbooks – so if you wait you can get the answers from someone anyway.( Group Interview, June ’06)

Felicia has decided to use the system of tutorials to supply her with access to other students who “have the answers”. She has effectively stopped engaging with this particular tutor and now sees little reason to attend classes.

Even for those students who wanted to engage with the curriculum in greater depth, the actual material presented in lectures alienated their efforts:

When we have lectures the person just talks about notes and pictures – I can’t remember it all so now I don’t bother. (Craig Group Interview, June ’06)

I might get interested if the stuff [slides] was presented in a more interesting manner. (Dennis Group Interview, June ’06)

Both Craig and Dennis, like Felicia, have selected to opt out of the presented material. They have become disengaged learners.

In the literature I identified a number of studies that questioned whether the modern student was ready and prepared for university (McPhail et al, 2009; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000). All of these studies focus upon the student as the “deficit” element in transition to university. I was keen to determine if the lack of preparation for university had created this issue of non-engagement.

When exploring the idea of a “deficit” element or lack of preparation, the students in this study appeared more disappointed with the “bulk” treatment they received in lectures and tutorials than with being ill prepared. Their comments reflect this:

When I came here I thought the lectures would be exciting or different – but they are just large classes. It is still the same. (Ben June ’06)

Ben was disappointed that the classes were repetitious and was expecting more excitement. When questioned, he equated excitement to interesting presentation and delivery:
It is not the actual material, but that it is presented in a boring way. Like just pictures and slides which the lecturer just talks about. (June ’06)

I questioned him to determine if he felt prepared for university lectures. His response indicates that the actual structure of the lecture/tutorial system may contribute to this lack of preparedness.

Look, I know that I can do all this work – it is not hard. It is just the way they present it. Always the same – lectures that just go on and on. (Group Interview, June ’06)

Craig agreed:

It is too long – just sitting looking at examples all the time. Some kids just leave during the class. I can do it all anyway. We are going over things I learnt at school. (Group Interview, June ’06)

None of the students, including Felicia, appear to be struggling with the standard of the material. Their comments indicate that in a number of examples, the content was too easy and had been covered at secondary school. It was the manner of presentation and the breaking down of the material into formal lectures that was causing loss of interest. Repetition of material was a constant criticism from the students and there was a mismatch between what the tutors wanted to present and engage with, and how the students wanted to engage with the material.

Comments from these students indicate that the large number of students in both lectures and tutorials stifles active learning. They equated the lecture structure with a “factory production” – able to pass on the material to the greatest number in the least amount of time.

Well, the lecture is for just giving us material. Just no interaction at all. It doesn’t matter what you did at school – this is much more boring. (Craig March ’06)
You can’t ask questions in a lecture, but you can in a tutorial, so that is the difference. I would ask questions but there is mostly only talking by the tutor. (Dennis March ’06)

I don’t think you are meant to talk in a lecture – but some people do all sorts of stuff, like reading or ipod. I am interested, but mostly it is boring – just listening. (Felicia March ’06)

All of these students were aware that university structures would be different but were quickly alienated by the repetition of the curriculum and the impersonal nature of the large class sizes. The presentation of material in lecture and tutorials was also a frustration for these students.

They approached the lectures and tutorials willing to learn and prepared to engage with their learning and the classes, but this quickly deteriorated as the semester continued. By mid semester their comments about the formal learning structures indicate acceptance of their disappointment. As Dennis notes:

I was really keen as I specially picked this course, but what we do in the lectures is not really interesting. The material is not presented like you would get interested. (April’06)

Dennis was keen to become immersed in his discipline study but by mid-semester quickly became de-motivated and uninterested. Elizabeth also noted her frustration with the curriculum and connections between the various lectures:

I would have thought all the lectures would link up – but they don’t. All the subjects are separate and even the material doesn’t link together. It is extremely frustrating, because I cannot piece it together. I think most students are struggling with this. (April’06)

The relationship between different courses and lectures was also a frustration for Ben:

I have given up trying to make a connection between all of this – just do what you have to do is my advice. (June ’06)

The relationship between different courses was not clear to each of these students. As I have discussed in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2, the importance of making
connections between the presented material is critical to deeper understanding and learning. Students in this research study were unable to link the compulsory courses into a total, broader knowledge of their discipline area. Felicia actually stressed this desire in her comments about the learning environment:

It would be good if each of the lecturers showed us how all these courses fitted together. (June ’06)

I was also keen to explore the learning processes used in tutorials. The students indicate a heavy reliance by the tutors upon written materials:

In the tutes you get worksheets all the time. Our group just go over them. (Craig June ’06)

We only do the actual notes and workbooks. This makes it boring and repetitive all the time. (Felicia Group Interview, June ’06)

The students came to rely upon handouts and written materials as signposts of actual learning. Discussion and debate were limited by the size of the tutorial class and the emphasis upon written handouts and workbooks.

The reviewed literature in Chapter 2 establishes the link between the first year university student and the importance of the formal learning environment in contributing to successful engagement with the university. This successful initial engagement has been shown to affect approaches to study in later years, be central to retention and to quality learning outcomes. In this research study there is evidence that the approach to study has been compromised by the tedious nature of the learning processes, in particular the heavy reliance upon visual delivery and supporting handouts in lectures and tutorials. As newcomers to the university structures, the students in this study were bored by the format of the tutorials and began to equate university learning with the completion of tutorial worksheets.

In the next section I examine the constructs of the students in relation to the academic relationships within these formal structures.


5.4 Learning Relationships within the Formal Learning Structure

As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, an important part of the university formal learning environment is the relationship first year students have with their mentors or lecturers. Prancer et al (2000) note that these expectations about relationships can have a profound influence on the way students perceive their university experiences.

I was keen to explore these formal academic relationships and see if they influence the way students perceive their experiences. One of the key issues to arise from the constructs of the students was the impersonal nature of the lecturer/tutor and student relationship. Felicia notes:

I don’t think my tutors would really know me – I got to all the tutorials but they don’t talk to me unless I ask a question. They just want to get through the work. (Group Interview, June ’06)

Her impression is also mirrored in comments by Alex:

They (the tutor) wouldn’t have a clue. If I stay away they never ask or if I show up they act like they don’t know if I was there or not. (Group Interview, June ’06)

The impersonal nature of the tutorial or lecture was noted by all the students. Coming from strong pastoral care environments in secondary school, these first year students were quickly “turned off” by the lack of personal communication with both lecturers and tutors. Personal contact with academic staff was one area students in this study felt alienated. Ben comments upon his attempts to “chase” a lecturer:

I tried to get him before class, but you need an appointment and I made one, but he didn’t show up at the office – then he came after 20 minutes and said he had no time. That was in April, when I had missed a few classes. (Group Interview, June ’06)

These students expected to make connections with the academic staff. They all indicated in interviews that none of their tutors in first semester knew them individually and more disappointingly, had no real intention of getting to know them. Their attempts to connect with the academic staff in the formal environment were quickly rebuffed. Lecturers referred them to tutors for assistance and appeared too busy to provide individual help.
Elizabeth, as a result, decided to rely upon her peers rather than the lecturer:

The lecturer said that these questions would be answered in the tutorials, but when I asked the tutor said he didn’t know how to do those calculations, so I got the answers from my friends. (Group Interview, June ’06)

The importance of engagement with academic staff in formal learning relationships is a significant factor in the successful transition to the university environment. James et al (2010) notes:

The importance of personal contact with first year students is key to enhancing students’ engagement with learning and the university community as a whole (p. 42).

In parallel research, James et al (2010) also notes that only 29% of first year students seek advice from academic staff and, over a decade, there has been a decline in the number of first year students who feel the academic staff know their name. Data in this study confirms this literature with the students indicating that the lecturers and tutors did not know them individually and little interest was shown in making personal contact outside the classroom. In most cases in first semester the students felt uneasy about initiating contact and felt that the tutors dictated the tone for how they would engage with students very early on in the semester. In some cases this was made quite explicitly:

You are not really encouraged to contact the tutor – he said he is only part-time and not really available for us. (Ben Group Interview, June ’06)

In the lecture I prefer lecturers who try to learn your name, especially when they also take tutorials. Mostly they say there are too many students so it will be impossible for them to get to know us. (Craig Group Interview, June ’06)

As a result of this tone of engagement, the students in this study had clear preferences for certain lecturers over others:
(X) is my tutor – he does not want to see us out of class. (X) does not know what he is doing – I am confused and he doesn’t encourage questions. I am already changing out of his tutorial. (Ben June ‘06)

The encouragement of student participation and the engagement of students in the academic relationship are critical to students becoming independent learners. Lawrence, Burton and Hoey (2001) point to the responsibility of academic staff in achieving this participation and engagement, and argue for a shift in current practice. The academic relationship is critical to this participation and engagement, yet as the students in this study demonstrate this varied greatly and was very arbitrary.

A number of studies reviewed in the literature have also identified academics as failing to articulate expectations and as relying upon implicit instructions (Bond, 2001; Lawrence, Burton & Hoey, 2001). This was echoed by the students in this study who felt their learning was compromised by the quality of the academic relationship established within the formal learning environment. Elizabeth, who was keen to learn and gain good results, epitomises the students’ comments about tutorial work and the tutor:

He didn’t explain anything. He just said to hand it in, even if you couldn’t do the calculations and then he marked it down when I could have got someone to help me. Other tutors didn’t do it like that. Everything depends upon getting a tutor who does a good job and helps you learn. (June ‘06)

Alex was more direct about his relationship with a tutor:

I don’t go to those tutorials. I don’t have a relationship with that guy – he is not interested in us (June ‘06).

In Chapter 2 I examined the work of Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2008) who examined expectations and realities for first year students at one Australian university and noted that whilst the students felt they had a satisfying experience in classes, they had very high expectations about wanting to learn but felt these expectations were not met. This research outcome was mirrored in part by the data in this research. The expectations brought to the formal environment were based upon their understanding of previous formal learning experiences. This was not mirrored in what they found at university. In
many instances the students felt alienated by the learning situations. Tutors and lecturers did not encourage learning relationships and the students felt quite isolated.

I was conscious that these outcomes may be linked to the newness of the university formal environment and, in the next chapter, I explore how the student in the study construct their learning relationships after completing one semester in these structures of lectures and tutorials.

5.5 Conclusion

The relevant literature, reviewed in Chapter 2 and the qualitative data presented by the participants and discussed in this chapter have highlighted a number of conclusions in relation to the themes of the study. The primary research question of this study was “what insights do individual students have about the formal learning environment presented to them and their learning experiences in these structures in their first year of university education?” Within this primary question a number of themes of the formal learning environment were explored with the students during their first semester at university:

- The learning structures of lectures, tutorials
- The learning processes that were required to support those structures
- The learning relationships with lecturers and tutors established through those structures

A number of conclusions can be highlighted after the preceding examination and discussion of the data relating to these students’ constructs of their first semester at university.

Students in this study do not understand the difference between lectures and tutorials. Students confused the two structures as interchangeable forums for course content and information. Lectures were seen as opportunities for “large group” information, which was then re-explained, in varying degrees of understanding, within the tutorial structure. Where the time lag between the lecture and tutorial was significant, the students indicated that they had greater difficulty linking the two structures and the course material presented. For the students in this study, lectures were impersonal, passive sessions and tutorials had smaller numbers of students, but appeared to re-present the lecture material without much additional, new information. Tutorial rooms were not necessarily designed
for interaction and students in this study noted the heavy reliance upon visual presentations to present content.

The constructs of the individual students in this study endorse the existing literature on the first experience of university. In spite of continued attention to the transition to university and what happens in the first year, there is still evidence, supported by this data, that first year students are in a disengaged or negotiated state within the formal university learning structures. This lack of engagement impacts upon their individual learning. Behaviours such as preparing readings for class, posing questions in class or online, contributing to discussions all indicate a motivation to learn and engage. The evidence here indicates that a lack of engagement exists and is still prevalent amongst first year students, as they do not exhibit any of these behaviours in a consistent manner throughout the semester.

The students in this study did not understand their role in a lecture or tutorial. The students indicated that there was no information given for their role in either a lecture or tutorial. They were unprepared for the role which was presented to them. The students did not know what books or materials were required or whether they were expected to take notes or research new or existing material. All of the students felt the need for greater guidance in how to behave in lectures and tutorials and what role they were expected to play in each structure. They were unsure how to hand presented material and required greater direction from the lecturer about the importance of presented material and follow-up study or research. The students were often intimidated by class size, especially when seeking answers or posing questions. The students were confused about the sequence of the material presented and its priority in the course content. The lecturers and tutors often digressed from the official lecture material, causing confusion and adding to the students’ alienation and lack of engagement.

In particular the students in this study did not like large lecture classes and formal visual presentations. The students noted feelings of isolation in large classes and felt this contributed to their overall confusion about their role as tertiary learners. Pre-reading was not acknowledged and feedback within large lectures was problematic. The students relied upon lecture handouts and summary sheets for information. All of the students were unused to such large classes and in most cases tutorial class sizes were larger than their secondary school experiences.
The students were confused about the relationship between the lecture or tutorial material and the set work required as part of those structures. They saw only a weak relationship between material covered in lectures/tutorials and set assignments. The overriding construct was that assignments and formal work requirements could be undertaken without attendance at lectures or tutorials. The students noted that on a number of occasions the tutors were unaware of the course work and unable to answer specific questions about the material. The students saw no relationship between curriculum across different courses. Each course was seen as a separate entity.

The theme of overall disappointment in the university lecture and tutorial system was echoed in the comments of the students in this study. In spite of initial apprehension about the size of the lecture rooms and the number of students, the students in this study were able to review their expectations in light of the reality. When the individual students came together as a group after the first few weeks there was agreement about the intimidating size of lecture rooms and the enrolled student numbers. Their feelings of confusion about the differences between lectures and tutorials and the purposes of both were further endorsed and the group responses validated each of the individual comments about confusion and bewilderment as to the purpose of lectures. There was overall disappointment in the lecture/tutorial system as a way of enhancing their learning.

Within this chapter I have highlighted the parallels between the reviewed literature and the constructs of the students in this study. The literature identifies a number of studies that have proposed strategies to help first year students and their transition to university (Kantanis, 2001; McInnis and Krause, 2002; Mason-Rogers, 2002 amongst others). Data from this research study question whether these strategies would be applicable in the task environment of lectures and tutorials. The academic relationship formed between the lecturer or tutor and the students had an important impact upon their learning engagement. As demonstrated in the data, the students in this study had clear preferences for some lecturers and tutors over others. These preferences varied amongst the six individuals but in general the students preferred tutors who were also the course lecturers, feeling they better understood the course material. The students had clear preferences for lecturers whom they felt had a good understanding of the course content and the assessment requirements. They preferred lecturers who were able to link the course material to the experiences of the students and who kept them engaged with the course material. These students also preferred tutors who were familiar with the lecture content and who attempted to understand the learning problems of the students. Lecturers and tutors who learnt their names or made time for questions were preferred to those who did
The number of students in a lecture or tutorial inhibited the students in this study from forming learning relationships with staff within the lecture/tutorial structure.

The students did not see themselves as establishing any learning relationships with staff – lecturers and tutors were available for help with course material only and other learning issues were not addressed. The students felt that the lecturer and tutor dictated the tone for future engagement early on in the semester. Some lecturers referred students to tutors for assistance, others were unavailable or only attended university for set periods per week, making consultation difficult. The students indicated that the quality of the relationship formed with the lecturer or tutor depended upon the individual involved, but learning relationships were not seen as important by many lecturers and tutors.

As I have identified in the literature, it was almost two decades ago that Johnson (1996) argued that much of the university task environment was unrelated to the students’ world or experience. Howells (2003) in further work has also questioned examination of the first year from perspectives that do not focus upon the students as learners in a set environment. The conclusion reached by these studies was that successful transition to university is dependent upon the students’ conception of themselves as learners in an environment that creates obstacles to learning. Lawrence (2002) has also argued that the university culture alienates the individual student and that there is within universities a promotion of one type of structure or culture as dominant or mainstream. The conclusions I have reached in this chapter closely mirror this literature.

Students in this study did not feel comfortable about approaching lecturers for assistance out of class hours. This differed greatly from the students’ experience of high school, where relationships with teachers were formed in and out of class. Students preferred to confer with their peers rather than seek assistance from lecturers.

To them there were significant obstacles to learning, one of which was their academic relationships within the formal task environment.

The data discussed in this chapter are of students at risk of disengagement in their first semester of university. McInnis (2003) notes:

The foundations for engagement are established in the first weeks of the first year. In Australia and the US, and now increasingly Europe, much attention has been given to getting the first year
experience right. There is not better institutional investment to be made (p. 15).

As McInnis indicates, the first semester, specifically the first few weeks, is critical in establishing foundations for engagement. The data discussed in this chapter indicates the students were beginning to become disengaged from their formal learning environment. I was keen to see if this lack of engagement continued into their second semester.

In the next chapter I explore this disengagement or negotiated engagement with each of the students to see if the familiarity of a second semester altered their constructs. I was also eager to explore recommendations about formal learning structures with each of the students.
Chapter 6 – Interpretations of Remaining at University

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examines the data derived from interviews conducted with the six students over their first semester at university. As I discuss in the conclusion to that chapter, the overall picture is one of disappointment and confusion with six of the students unsure of their role as learners in the lecture/tutorial system and confused by the lack of clear directions about tutorial work. As I also indicate in the previous chapter, all of the students expected greater guidance in learning how to respond in lectures and more detailed explanations of the role they were expected to play as learners within university structures.

The conclusions in the previous chapter were drawn from my interpretations of their constructs measured against the reviewed literature. The voices of the students clearly indicate frustration and to varying extents loss of motivation about their formal university engagement. The students were disengaged within the formal lecture structures and they negotiated or selected what role they would adopt in tutorials. In some cases they elected non-engagement or non-attendance as their preferred role. The students also expected a more engaged, active relationship with the various tutors and lecturers. There was a disjuncture between their expectations of tutors as active partners in the learning process and the reality. Their expectations about tutorial work and formal learning processes were not met and the strong reliance upon passive learning within these structures meant that for some, like Felicia, their experiences were characterised by a series of adjustments and for others, like Elizabeth and Ben, a constant search for more engaging tutorials and tutors. For other students like Craig and Alex, the formal learning structures were quickly abandoned and opportunities for learning sought elsewhere.

I am conscious of the literature underpinning the first year experience and its emphasis on the first months as a critical transition time. As I discuss in Chapter 2, there is evidence that students can learn to adapt to new university structures (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt & Hunsberger, 2000; Beasley, 1997). In this chapter I examine the constructs of the students’ experiences in their second semester, to determine if the conclusions drawn in the previous chapter are still relevant to the students and the university context as they become more familiar with the university environment.
6.2 Learning Structures

In first semester, all of the students were confused about their role in the learning structures of lectures and tutorials. They began to use a variety of methods to cope with understanding their role as learners, such as selecting which lectures and tutorials to attend based upon the timing of the class, the perceived relevance of the lecture or tutorial to the formal assessment requirements, the attitude of the lecturer/tutor to the class and the attendance record of their peers. The students noted that success or a pass grade in their courses did not necessarily equate to attendance. One common method of selection was to check with peers who had attended classes as to “new” content covered, and then to make a decision to attend or withdraw.

By second semester and the second major group of interviews, all of the students had adapted to the university structure and were tailoring the structure to suit their own personal learning needs. They were more confident in their ability to make decisions about the formal lectures and tutorials. All of them had become pragmatic about their engagement with the formal structures. Alex, who originally saw no difference between a lecture and tutorial – just more people – decided to seek out tutorials that matched his learning expectations:

I’m not as confused anymore… but now some people have changed tutes and some of the guys have swapped into (V)’s tutorial. He is the best! I’m supposed to be in (Y)’s tute, but I got out into (V)’s. It is all much clearer now, plus he sets out the exam so that is better. The last guy – (Y) – he had no idea. I asked him and he showed me the tables and spans and stuff, but I still didn’t get it. Some kids don’t go to any lectures at all now, but I still go now that I have swapped. (August’06)

The students were negotiating or engaging the formal learning structures on their own terms – attending when they saw the need or altering their learning schedule to attend lectures they felt matched their needs. Background data and entry scores indicate these students presented as confident learners who were confused by their role in the university formal learning structures in the first semester and who engaged in a variety of methods to counter that confusion. By second semester they had regained their “learning confidence” enough to make active decisions about attendance, interaction and engagement. They quickly deciphered the course objective of each subject and tailored their learning efforts appropriately. James, Krause and Jenning (2010) indicated that first
year students quickly move to a more disengaged or negotiated engagement state and adopt learning patterns to suit their needs. They note this occurs in spite of continued attention and improvements in transition programmes and targeted curriculum innovations. The students in this study reflected this pattern. James et al (2010) note that signals of lack of engagement such as skipping classes and being unprepared for classes have not changed in a five year period. These students also skipped classes and quickly moved to this negotiated state of learning.

The students in this study identified the objectives and content of upcoming lectures and tutorials and then made decisions about attendance. This deciphering of the objective of lectures and tutorials was evident in how Ben handled the structure of lectures. His comments indicate an initial attempt to ascertain the overall objectives of the course but upon further exploration over the second semester interviews, he became quite pragmatic:

> At first (in first semester) I was just listening and copying stuff down, then we had to do this worksheet in the tutorial, so I got the answers from the web and that worked out much better. Otherwise I would have been spending hours learning stuff that wasn’t on the worksheet. So now I don’t copy anything down and don’t go if I can get the work elsewhere. (Sept’06)

When asked about this approach, Ben indicated that this approach was expected by staff:

> Well they tell you things in lectures, but they go over the stuff for the worksheets quite a bit, so you know that is the important stuff. So maybe they know you won’t attend. (Sept.’06)

Ben’s interviews in second semester contain fewer comments about how he was handling the structure of lectures and tutorials and more comments about feeling confident that he was learning. When questioned about this he noted:

> Well it is because I know what is going on now – you go to lecturers to get information for the tutorial worksheets. If there is no worksheet you don’t need to go or get the notes. (Sept’06)

Ben did not see himself as playing a university “game” of working towards the assessment – he felt this was what was expected. His comments reflected this feeling:
I feel like you should only pay attention to the things the lecturer says are on the exam. (Aug'06)

When questioned about such behaviour, both he and Felicia were confident that the sole purpose of lectures was to provide information that would assist in assessment tasks. Felicia was quite clear as to the purpose of tutorials by second semester – to complete set work. Her comments show this:

We have CDs to help you understand. I used the CD to find all the answers to the worksheets. If I couldn’t find any answers then I replayed the CD of the lecture. I fast-forwarded stuff not on the worksheets. (Sept’06)

In response to my questioning of this approach, Ben replied:

If it wasn’t the way to do things, then why is the worksheet exactly what is on the CD, which is exactly on the lecture? (Sept’06)

These students relied heavily upon lecture/tutorial “survival” methods to cope with the formal structure. The students use technology to feel secure about the lecture/tutorial structure, downloading lecture notes, emailing lecturers and tutors to check course content and required work.

By second semester, these students are undertaking practical computer workshops and model building workshops in some classes instead of tutorials. They are using the online lecture notes instead of attendance. Technology had replaced attendance in many tutorials. As Alex notes:

I’ve missed a few lectures – you can get it anyway from online…so what does it matter if you aren’t there? (Sept.06)

Felicia had originally attended all lectures and tutorials and although unsure of what role to undertake as a learner in these structures, had also adopted a pragmatic, negotiated approach:
I only go now to (X)’s lectures and tutes as she makes it clear what is required and I think I learn something there. Most other things I get from my friends. (Sept’06)

When questioned about this approach to learning, Felicia was quite specific:

Well I know I am learning something in all my classes because I can keep up with all the work and therefore do all the workshops easily. (Sept’06)

Craig was also negotiating his need to use the formal structures to satisfy learning needs. His learning needs have been narrowed down to simply understanding material that is likely to be assessed. Originally enthusiastic and prepared to adapt, by second semester he has begun to play a selective game of minimum work. When asked if he attempted study of material not likely to be assessed he is quite adamant:

No need really, I know where it is if I become a big project manager and need to find it. Anyway, it is best to stick to work that is going to be on the exam as the lecturer already knows what you need to know. (Group Interview, ’06)

By mid-semester both he and Dennis have also found a way of dealing with the university structure. Both had been unable to decipher the main objective of lectures and tutorials initially and rather than let it frustrate their learning efforts, both have quickly adopted a “less is more” attitude to the learning structure.

These students commenced at university keen to engage and learn in lectures and tutorials. This desire to learn within the lecture/tutorial structure depends heavily upon how the structure is organised. The students feel secure in courses where the lecturer is familiar with the content, uses a variety of teaching methods to present the material and has clear objectives for each session. Where the lecturer outlines the role of the student and the requirements of students at tutorials, the students in this study better understood the formal structure and the learning outcomes. By second semester, the students feel confident in approaching the lecturer for assistance if they are briefed on how to initiate content questions. Where the students are briefed by the tutor as to their role and academic requirements within the tutorial, they feel they achieve improved learning.
Where the university structure of lectures and tutorials does not suit their learning needs, they abandon the structures and seek alternative ways of learning such as online, peers and other tutors. Their negotiated engagement depends heavily upon the presented structure. Krause (2005) had identified ‘engagement’ as the “time, energy and resources” students devote to activities that enhance learning. By second semester the students in this study have begun to devote increasingly less time, energy and resources to their learning activities and view the formal learning environment of lectures and tutorials as peripheral to their learning.

There is, however, an important shift in the students’ interviews between first and second semester. That shift is reflected in the students’ constructs of what happened within lectures and tutorials. The data reveals their initial frustration at how to use lecture and tutorial structures to learn. This became weaker in second semester and for those formal lectures or tutorials they did attend there was greater emphasis on the content of the lectures/tutorials as meeting their needs for assessment tasks. In first semester the repetition of the lecture and tutorial format, the lack of encouraged interaction and the focus in tutorials upon set content to the exclusion of creative responses all combined to create a lack of interest or engagement in the students. By second semester this type of lecture and tutorial format was accepted as inevitable by the students in this study and they quickly moved to an assessment-focused attendance and engagement mode.

### 6.3 Learning Processes

As I discuss in previous chapters, the learning processes that are inherent in lectures and especially tutorials are critical influences in learning for first year students (Kift, 2008). The curriculum processes underpinning the formal structures of lectures and tutorials can also improve engagement and student learning (Kantinis, 2001). I also discussed the work of Howells (2006) who notes that how students perceive the demands of their courses such as assignments, tutorial worksheets and assessed work is central to their needs as learners. She argues that first year students come to the learning environment with the need to validate their inner experiences as learners. In the previous chapter I demonstrated how the students in this study had been unable to make learning connections with the lecture and tutorial processes and were constantly in need of validation of their own learning efforts. The students in the study found the curriculum content repetitious and the passive style of lectures boring and un-motivating.

In second semester, I was keen to examine their constructs of the processes used to promote learning in lectures and particularly tutorials. The interview data indicate that the
students had become far more demanding and selective when undertaking set work within tutorials. Their demand centred upon the content and quality of the work and the assessed material. Ben is typical of this changed attitude:

At first semester, I didn’t ask too many questions. Now I just want to know how much we have to write and if we will be marked on this tutorial work. If not, then I do not do it. (Aug’06)

When asked about why he had adopted this approach he was very clear:

Even if you do extra work, no-one notices. Sometimes (X) (tutor) does not even know what we did last week – or else he is away and we get someone else. So now I only do what is required… (Sept’06)

As I indicated in chapter 2, the literature has highlighted the decline in motivation and learning of first year students. Johnston (2001), for example, notes that students’ approach to learning in university deteriorated from a deep approach at starting university to a surface approach after first semester. This is true of Ben’s approach, who commenced as a confident learner, keen to pursue disciplinary studies in this area. His comments illustrate this decline into surface learning.

During second semester, some of the tutorials are converted to workshops and the students are required to submit a folder of selected workshop pieces as well as models. Elizabeth saw this as an obstacle race, and again converted it into an assessment-driven approach to learning:

You only have to complete five pieces, then you are finished. I have done three, two to go, then I will be finished and no need to go anymore. ( Sept’06)

Assessed work had become a “necessary evil” of being a student. Craig, who had struggled in first semester with the autonomy of attendance and the relevance of lectures, had resorted to minimum requirements to complete second semester:

I only do the minimum – you get a pass anyway. Employers don’t care. ( Sept’06)
The students all echoed this approach and had become quite pragmatic in their engagement with the formal classes. If, in their opinion, it was not of assessable or employment-related value, then it did not require effort or attendance. Yet, in spite of this pattern the students still rated the practical workshops as superior to the passive learning of tutorials. Alex comments:

I go to all the workshops this semester as the lecturer gives you better attention. It is more hands-on and I feel like I am learning something. We also get feedback on our workshop sheets. (Aug’06)

Workshops and practical assessments were seen by this group of students as more relevant to future employment. Feedback from practical work was understood better, particularly by students such as Felicia who saw themselves as struggling to cope with the course content. All of the students rated the practical workshops as superior to the tutorials. They felt the workshop sessions provided greater guidance and direct teaching in comparison to the tutorials. Students, who by their own admission did not attend tutorials, attended workshops. Although the staff/student ratios remained the same in lectures and tutorials, the smaller workshops gave the students the opportunity to discuss their learning with their peers as they worked through the curriculum. Craig, who had decided to attend only tutorials he felt were of value in first semester, was attending all workshops in second semester, but still remained selective about tutorials. He commented upon this difference:

Well, the workshops are good because you can learn something. We have to work together to get the models built and then we have to measure, check and write it up. In (Y)’s tutes you just really sit there and try and guess the correct answer that he wants. (Aug’06)

Dennis too was making active decisions about the learning processes he wanted to pursue:

I don’t go to many lectures now – no-one does. But I always go to the workshops – I am part of my group, they need me. I have to check the calculations and get the measurements. It’s the best way to learn for me – (X) (tutor) should learn from this. (Aug’06)
Kift and Field (2009) support this approach of engaging first year students through value-added curriculum processes. They comment:

Engaging pedagogical approaches that take place in supportive, integrated and co-ordinated learning environments make deep learning outcomes for students possible, promote high quality student learning and discourage superficial approaches to set work (p. 4).

The tutors and lecturers in the context of this study who had organised the first year workshops were attempting to address the lack of engagement that had become commonplace for first year students. The students in this study were appreciative of these efforts:

The workshops are a lot of work for the tutor – everyone wants to talk with him. But I am grateful because you can discuss how you are going and he can see where you have gone wrong. (Elizabeth Aug 06)

Yorke (2006) has also noted that students in such first year specific environments are more likely to connect with their discipline, go beyond the minimum assignments and prescribed work requirements and make connections with broader concepts.

This study is only confined to first year students, when it could be argued that the learning processes required at university are newly encountered, perhaps for the first time. But the students in this study entered the university keen to engage the curriculum in a learning environment. They were competent, capable learners who understood the need for independent learning, but were disappointed and frustrated with how new material was presented and the lack of encouragement to pursue further learning beyond the boundaries of the set content.

Alex summed up his feeling about the formal learning processes towards the end of the second semester:

Look – most of the lectures are just a waste of time. You can just get the notes and not attend. Tutorials are only worthwhile if you have to get help on assignments. The workshops are good. You just do what you have to. (Aug’06)
Felicia, who remained the most motivated of all the students in the study during first semester had abandoned learning and was keen to simply complete assessed work to the highest standard. She comments:

I don’t expect to learn much – my friends told me just to aim to get all the assignments done. Some of the tutors give me an answer to my emails, but most are not there to help. I think I should do it alone anyway as then I could learn. (Sept’06)

In Chapter 2, I examined the literature relating to learning processes used to support the formal university environment of first year students and identified well researched initiatives and approaches. However, I raised the fundamental question of the need to adopt such approaches. If the learning approaches used in the formal environment have to be specifically adapted for first year students, then the suitability of the formal environment for these students needs to be also examined. The data obtained from the interviews in this research indicates that the formal structures such as lectures and tutorials and the formal processes supporting these structures, such as worksheets and curriculum material were not able to engage the students in a meaningful manner. In first semester the students were confused and disenchanted by the learning processes. Assignments and worksheets that did not relate to lecture content were confusing and frustrating for them, but they continued to search for curriculum links such as continuity of content to scaffold their learning.

By second semester, they had abandoned this approach and were interested only in pursuing tutorials or workshops where they felt active learning for them occurred. The literature established a connection between successful first year engagement and quality learning outcomes as well as retention into later years of study. The academic perceptions of the students in this study indicate poor quality learning outcomes as the students struggle to maintain motivation. Although beyond the scope of this study, the retention of these students into later years of their degree appears, at this stage, to be at risk.

Zimmitat (2003) has suggested that significant numbers of students in the first decade of this century were seriously discontinuing their studies citing low levels of personal satisfaction with the material presented and required by the university processes. Whilst none of the students in this study raised issues about leaving the program, it was evident
that their low levels of satisfaction contributed to declining levels of application and effort. Over time this could lead to discontinuance of their studies.

Howells (2006) notes that first year students become “silenced” by the processes universities use to promote learning. Their self-awareness about how they learn is silenced by the processes presented to them. This is an accurate picture of the students in this study who felt alienated by how the university presented learning. Their awareness of their own learning needs was strong and they began to endorse this awareness by seeking out tutorials or workshops where they felt they could engage with either the tutor or the presented material.

In setting the boundaries of this study, one of the themes I focused upon was the formal processes used in the university school to support the learning environment. The conclusions drawn in this section indicate the students’ dissatisfaction with the learning processes utilised in the university school continued into second semester and the clearest conclusion is that these students were jumping through a formal hurdle provided by the courses with little expectation that they would learn from the material. As discussed in preceding chapters, however, where they felt the tutorial or lecture was relevant to the course material, their perception of tutorials as learning opportunities increased.

This ongoing evaluation of tutorials continued well into second semester with the students becoming more pragmatic about what they learnt and where they learnt. In general, the students became quite adept at satisfying the minimum curriculum requirements for non-assessed work, preferring to concentrate on assessed material. By second semester they had begun to manipulate the university learning structures to suit their engagement with the formal curriculum. This endorses the reviewed literature and questions the suitability of the lecture/tutorial structure as a learning environment for first year students.

In the next section I explore to what extent their academic relationships within the formal structures changed in second semester.

**6.4 Learning Relationships**

There is evidence from the data I collected in first semester that the students expected a close, deep academic relationship with their lecturers and tutors. This expectation was not met and I was interested in exploring if this situation continued into second semester.
Studies by Prancer et al (2000) and O’Shea and Lysaght (2010) have revealed that students’ narratives indicate a tangible gap between how they perceive university and what they actually encounter. In the first semester, as the last chapter indicates, this was true of the students in this study. The students all expected greater mentoring and guidance from their lecturers and tutors within the formal structures. There was a disjuncture between how they expected the tutors to respond to questions and tutorial activities and how they actually did respond. Felicia was left isolated and attempted to use the tutorial structure to gain confidence about the presented material, but was unable to make a meaningful connection with any of her tutors. Other students like Craig and Dennis were surprised by the lack of interest shown by their tutors and lecturers. All of the students indicated that personal contact with their tutors was missing. James et al (2010) note this personal contact is the key to student engagement with learning. For these students in this study it was not apparent.

By second semester the students in this study had no chance of establishing learning relationships with their tutors or lecturers – their lack of, or haphazard, attendance meant that active enculturation into the formal learning environment could be problematic.

However, where a learner-centred approach was used, such as the first year workshops, the students felt a sense of good teaching and acceptance of themselves as participants in a learning journey.

Craig comments upon this learning relationship in workshop classes:

    Well, (Z) has a good relationship with us – he makes it easy to learn and treats your questions seriously. (Sept’06)

Felicia, too, felt that the learner-centred practical workshops were the only places she had an academic relationship:

    The tutor takes time for me in the workshops – this is not what happens normally. (Sept’06)

I explored with the students this stark difference between workshops and more structured tutorials.
Well, in the workshops everyone is interested. There is something
to do that is worthwhile and we all get involved. Our tutor then
gets involved too. (Dennis Sept’06)

He is interested and encourages us be presenting new challenges
for us to learn each week. Other tutors don’t do that – the just do
the same thing each week, mostly boring worksheets. (Ben
Sept’06)

Lawrence et al (2001) have indicated that the academic staff have a pivotal role to play in
achieving student participation and engagement. They stress that university teachers can
make the difference in helping first year students develop skills to become independent
learners. In this study it was evident by the students’ comments that some of the tutors in
second semester were making the difference in engaging the students and encouraging
learning.

6.5 Remedies
As the pattern of limited engagement continued into second semester and the students in
this study adopted an attitude of resigned acceptance of the format and structure of
lectures and tutorials, I explored with them the possibility of alternative structures, or at
the very least, modifications to the existing university structures. The students also agreed
to meet in the first few weeks of their second year, as a group, to discuss their feelings,
review comments made in the previous semester and add chronological perspective to the
richness of their comments.

All of the students had opinions and suggestions about how to change lectures and
tutorial structures to enhance their learning. Initially their comments centred upon the size
of the lecture classes. All of the students agreed that smaller classes would enable more
active learning on their part.

Dennis comments:

If classes were smaller, then the lecturer would have more chance
of getting to know you…that would be good, because then he
would see if you don’t understand something and could go over it
for you. (March’07)
Some of the students wanted the formal structure to replicate school classes. Ben wanted to have the students ordered in a format:

> We need to be in the same small classes for everything, like at school. (Group Interview, March’07)

Alex agrees:

> If there were less people in a lecture, say about 25 – 30, then you would get through the work faster as you would know what everyone can or can’t do. . (Group Interview, March’07)

The desire for smaller lecture class sizes also centred upon the need for students to feel recognised and have their learning needs known by the lecturer. Ben explained this desire:

> I would want smaller classes so (X) would know who I am. Even if I go to class now, he does not know me. He doesn’t care as there are too many students. (Sept’06)

Elizabeth in commenting upon smaller sized lecture classes and tutorials compared her role as a learner in secondary school to her role in university:

> In school we had smaller classes – like 25 people – and it was easier to connect with the teacher. They could see you and get to know you and you could get to know what they expected – and then you could do it. Even if it wasn’t correct, you could easily find out what was required. . (Group Interview, March’07)

All of the students wanted smaller classes and wanted a closer relationship with the lecturer. They wanted to be known as learners and wanted learning interaction with the lecturer or tutor. Their experiences in university indicated that this was not likely to happen. Even in tutorials they wanted interaction in an environment where they felt the staff member knew them by name and was attempting to provide activities designed to engage them as learners. Dennis sums up his feeling on changes:
One thing I would change is the tutor. I have had four different tutors now and I reckon none of them would know me from a bar of soap. It’s true – they don’t really take any interest. It’s like just get on with the worksheet and then its over. (Sept’06)

Elizabeth agreed with his sentiments:

Even if they recognise you from the last tutorial, they still don’t bother to learn your name. It’s like they can’t wait to get to the end of semester. In my tutorial with (M), he just said to try to get on with it yourself, like don’t bother me. (M) even said there were too many in his class. (Sept’06)

The attitude and enthusiasm of the staff members within lectures and tutorials were important to the student. Although they were aware that the curriculum was varied among courses, the students were appreciative of staff who attempted to provide links between the various courses and those who were genuinely passionate about their subject area.

As Ben noted:

It would be good if each of the lecturers had to say how their course fitted in – like a plan of the year or something. You know like “this is a small part of engineering” or showing how major the course is. Otherwise you are just guessing why you are doing it. . (Group Interview, March’07)

When responding to my questions, Elizabeth stressed the importance of having staff who enjoy their subject area and have some real passion for it:

If the tutor enjoys what they are doing, then everyone learns. Like (Y) was able to keep everyone involved – even though the stuff and the worksheets were pretty boring. . (Group Interview, March’07)

Felicia, who was by her own admission a nervous learner and was constantly seeking reassurance from the tutor about the content and quality of her work, was very clear about the qualities and relationship she wanted with her tutors:
I want the tutor to be really well prepared and be able to answer questions that you ask and not to act like it is annoying to have you ask questions. Also if the tutor gets to know you, then they can tell if you can’t understand. (Group Interview, March’07)

As a learner, Felicia was very clear about how she could engage better with the course content. Her recommendations about the structure of the tutorial would also facilitate her learning. She, like Elizabeth and Ben wanted experienced, well prepared tutors who understood how individuals learn.

The students in the study also made recommendations about the timing and structure of the lectures, indicating that they would prefer a greater online component.

I want to see the lectures put online – like podcasts or something. Then you could replay it whenever you wanted. Also then there would be no need to sit through lectures that you already knew the work. (Ben. (Group Interview, March’07)

When asked about the lack of physical attendance and the effect upon opportunities for engagement with staff, both Dennis and Ben were unconcerned. Their comments indicate that they do not expect their own presence in classes to result in greater engagement. Ben explains:

Well even if you got to lectures, it doesn’t mean you are interacting with other students or the lecturer. You can be just sitting there. At least if you are watching it online you are concentrating. And you can talk to people online anyway. (Group Interview, March’07)

Dennis agrees:

I would prefer more online lectures. That way you can download them forever. Also we worked in groups online at school – we could do that for some subjects. (Group Interview, March’07)
Craig felt that the digital technology he used in secondary school supported his learning better than the technology provided by the university:

Even for those lectures that are available online, they are pretty static – there is not much interaction, just a discussion board. That’s not live. It is worse than being in class – just responding to questions. The IT services are pretty basic like that. I would prefer more live discussions. (Group Interview, March’07)

The students were all very clear in their recommendations for change. By second semester they had become confident enough to contrast what was happening within the formal learning environment of the university, with what they needed as individual learners. As learners they were not struggling with the content of the material, but were disengaged with its presentation and the packaged structure of lectures and tutorials. They saw digital technology as aiding their engagement and were disappointed at the quality and depth of material presented technologically. A number of the students felt that the senior secondary schools were better places to learn.

Alex summed up their responses:

Well, uni is good for socialising. The freedom is great – just do it if you want to. I have made heaps of friends. But school, like year 11 and 12, is better for learning. The teachers know their stuff and you have an aim to work for and the courses are laid out better. Everything works together at school. (Group Interview, March’07)

6.6 Conclusions

In this chapter I explore the changes that occurred between first and second semester in the students’ constructs of their formal learning environment. In the previous chapter I noted that the students in this study commenced university keen to engage and learn in lectures and tutorials. The continuance and nurturing of this desire to learn within the lecture/tutorial structure relied heavily, however, upon how the structure of classes was organised. By second semester, the students felt secure in courses where the tutor was
familiar with the content, used a variety of teaching methods to present the material and had clear objectives for each session. Where the tutor outlined the role of the student and the requirements of students at tutorials, the students in this study understood the requirements of the formal structure and the learning outcomes. By second semester some of the students felt confident in approaching the tutor for assistance if they were briefed on how to initiate content questions, especially in the learner-centred workshops.

The introduction of practical workshops in some tutorial sessions in semester 2 was seen as a positive experience by the students. These workshops and practical assessments were seen by this group of students as more relevant and feedback from practical work was understood better, particularly by students who saw themselves as struggling to cope with the course content. All of the students rated the practical workshops as superior to the tutorials. They felt the workshop sessions provided greater guidance and direct teaching in comparison to the tutorials. Students, who by their own admission did not attend tutorials, attended workshops. The students, by their own admissions, wanted feedback on their performance and interaction with staff in a learning situation.

Beyond the workshops, the learning relationships within the formal environment had not changed into the second semester. As in the first semester, the students did not see themselves as establishing learning relationships with staff – lecturers and tutors were available for help in classes with course material only and other learning needs were not addressed. Students were redirected to general university services outside classes. The students felt that the lecturer and tutor dictated the tone for future engagement early on in the semester. Some lecturers referred students to tutors for assistance, others were unavailable or only attended the university for set periods per week, making consultation difficult. The students indicated that the quality of the relationship formed with the lecturer or tutor depended upon the individual involved but learning relationships were not seen as important by many lecturers and tutors. The students indicated that they receive subtle messages of disinterest from staff.

Students in this study did not feel comfortable about approaching lecturers for assistance out of class hours. This differed greatly from the students’ experience of high school, where relationships with teachers were formed in and out of class. Students preferred to confer with their peers rather than seek assistance from lecturers and tutors.

Apart from the practical workshops that replaced tutorials in one component of the course, there was little change in the feelings of confusion, disappointment and alienation
experienced by the students in this study. Their constructs of the formal learning structures indicate a mismatch between their expectations of the university as a supportive, structured learning environment and the reality. All of the students were, to varying degrees, disengaged and unmotivated about their learning. They were, as Dennis noted, “journeying into foreign territory”. When further questioned as to why university formal structures were foreign territory, he commented:

You know, foreign, enemy territory. You only go there because you have to. (Group Interview, March’07)
Chapter 7 – Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This research study was concerned with capturing the voices of six first year students as they negotiated their learning journey within the formal structure of lectures and tutorials (and the processes and relationships within these learning structures) in their first two semesters of university. All of the participants were students in a university in Melbourne. The study combined a literature review of relevant research with the empirical data collected via interviews and personal notes.

Almost three decades ago, Power et al (1987) noted that the landscape of tertiary education had changed and that greater attention needed to be devoted to providing information to current and potential students about what is involved in university study. Numerous studies have subsequently resulted, yet in spite of continued research over this period leading to changed practices, the first year of tertiary study and university in particular still records high levels of student attrition, increased disengagement with university study by first year students and dissatisfaction with the course and university experience. My study has attempted to articulate some of the issues involved in the transition to university learning, and provide a constructive contribution to educational practice. This chapter briefly summarises the conclusions and recommendations rising from the study and also acknowledges the limitations of the study.

7.2 Limitations and Boundaries of this Research Study

All research has limitations and this study is not unique in having limitations and boundaries to what was researched and what interpretations and conclusions were drawn from the data. One obvious limitation of the study lies in the boundaries placed around the study’s themes.

By examining only the formal structural environment of university lectures and tutorials, the formal learning processes required of the participants within these structures and the relationships they had with their lecturers and tutors, only a very narrow slice of the total
university experience was examined. The first year university experience is far broader than the structures, processes and relationships set up formally by a university school. This is clearly a defined study to examine only particular aspects without identifying the contribution of social and informal environments to the total experience. However, the boundaries must be drawn at some point. The informal university experience was not examined. Even beyond the informal university environment there are, for example, socio-economic factors, geographical, ethnic and gender issues that all contribute to the total success of the first year experience. In addition there are institutional, economic and political nuances that affect the complex role the university can play in the experience. In deciding where to limit the study I chose those structural features – lectures and tutorials – that are common to all university courses and all students. In this way the opportunity to generalise is increased. In addition, by selecting only these features the possibility for change in first year university structures, processes and relationships is greater, as the university controls these structural features to a far greater extent than the student.

The research relating to the FYE is significant and ongoing. It is dynamic as the Australian university sector searches for improved performance in an industry competing for funding of undergraduate places. A further limitation of this research is the sheer quantity of research that can be included in the literature review. Whilst the literature highlighted is relevant and significant, it is beyond the scope of this research to include every possible study into the FYE that has been examined. As noted in Chapter 2, the selection of previous research has been confined to a small number of relevant themes and is in no way exhaustive or indicative of the total literature reviewed, or of all the themes relevant to the FYE.

The study also presents only data offered by students. There is no triangulation with academic or administrative staff. It is certain that academic and administrative staff may have had different perspectives on the learning journey. To elicit their constructs would enhance this study. But whilst this is a limitation, and perhaps an opportunity for ongoing research, the exclusion of their constructs contributes to the focus of this study’s data. The study was deliberately arranged to capture the voices of the students as they constructed their experiences. To add a dimension of staff responses would detract from the perspective of what I wanted to develop – a picture of the learning experiences as constructed by the students, not one also coloured by alternative viewpoints.

A significant strength of this study lies in the voice of the participants. Their voices and subsequent constructs of the learning structures, processes and relationships presented to
them in their first two semesters of study at university are unique. Their innermost feelings about the educational journey they have taken belong to them as representations of their experiences. Their voices and reflections mirror their grasp of the learning situations – at the point in time in which they sought to express them. Their insights allowed reconstruction and interpretation by me, analysed in a framework I had selected as best suited to convey the messages of the constructs. Interviews with the participants provide thick descriptions and triangulated their constructions of reality through group sessions and their own personal notes. Their contributions allowed for conclusions to be drawn in this chapter, conclusions which will contribute to the body of knowledge around the first year university experience. But this strength is also a limitation. The individual participants were exactly that – individuals, whose constructs of the learning structures, processes and relationships were their own.

The individuals validated their constructs against the group, and me as a researcher grounded in the practice of the university school. I was able to endorse the qualitative data that strengthened the individual constructs. However the number of individual participants remains small. If this data were measured as statistical data, the sample size is insignificant. This may be seen as a limitation of the study. However the richness of the data, the thick descriptions, the depth (or layers) of interpretation and the constant triangulation through group feedback, journals and reflections, to a large extent, ameliorate this limitation.

As I discussed in chapter 2, there is evidence that the disjunctures and challenges of coping in new environments, orienting to new structures and being challenged by difficulty is a necessary element of being or becoming an adult learner in an adult learning situation. There is also some disquiet amongst researchers into the FYE that research of this nature produces narratives of discontent, with participants focussing upon what has not happened for them in situations. It is inevitable that the participants will compare their expectations with reality and it is a stated aim of this research to explore that mismatch between the reality and the expectation to allow greater insight into how to address growing disengagement in the FYE. To ignore the reality is to ignore the problem.

This study has as one its objectives the aim of contributing to existing research on the experience of university as constructed by first time students. The limitations discussed here indicate that, whilst the conclusions drawn in this chapter are not generalisable to the
total first year student population, the conclusions allow for challenges to the environment in which first year university students are placed.

7.3 Conclusions

The relevant literature, reviewed in Chapter 2 and the qualitative data presented by the participants and analysed by me have highlighted a number of conclusions in relation to the themes of the study. The primary research question of this study was “what insights to individual students have about the formal learning environment and its impact upon their learning experiences in their first year of university?” Within this primary question a number of themes of the formal learning environment were explored:

- the learning structures of lectures, tutorials
- the learning processes of coursework that was required to support those structures and
- the learning relationships with lecturers and tutors that arise out of these structures.

Conclusions relating to each of the themes are highlighted below.

7.3.1 Learning Structures

Students in this study did not clearly understand the difference between lectures and tutorials. Students confused the two structures as interchangeable forums for course content and information. Lectures were seen as opportunities for “large group” information, which was then re-explained, in varying degrees of understanding, within the tutorial structure. Where the time lag between the lecture and the tutorial was significant, the students indicated that they had great difficulty linking the two structures and the course material presented. For the students in this study lectures were impersonal, passive learning sessions and tutorials had smaller numbers of students, but appeared to re-present the lecture material without much additional information. Tutorial rooms were not necessarily designed for interaction and students in this study noted the heavy reliance upon PowerPoint presentations to present content.

Students in this study did not understand their role in a lecture or a tutorial. The students indicated that there was no “training” given for their role in either a lecture or a tutorial. The students did not know what books or materials were required or whether they were
expected to take notes, or research new or existing material. All of the students felt the need for greater guidance in how to respond in lectures and tutorials and what role they were expected to play in each structure. They were unsure how to handle presented material and required greater direction from the lecturer about the importance of presented material and follow-up study or research. The students were often intimidated by class size, especially when seeking answers or posing questions. The students were confused about the sequence of the material presented and its priority in the course content. The lecturers and tutors often digressed from the “official” lecture outline, causing confusion and adding to the students’ alienation and lack of engagement.

Students in this study did not like large lecture classes and formal visual presentations. The students noted feelings of isolation in large classes and felt this contributed to their overall confusion about their role. Pre-reading was not acknowledged and feedback within large lectures was problematic. The students relied heavily upon lecture handouts and summary sheets for information. All of the students were unused to such large classes and, in most cases, tutorial class sizes were larger than their VCE class sizes.

Students in this study relied heavily upon lecture/tutorial “survival” methods to cope with the formal structure. The students used digital technology to feel “secure” about the lecture/tutorial structure, downloading lecture notes, emailing lecturers and tutors to check course content and required work. The students actively selected which lectures/tutorials to attend according to the timing of the class; the perceived relevance of the lecture or tutorial to the formal assessment requirements; the “attitude” of the lecturer/tutor to the class; and the attendance record of their peers. The students all noted that success or a pass grade in their courses did not necessarily equate to attendance. One common survival method was to check with peers who had attended as to “new” content covered in classes. The large number of tutors involved in some courses added to the confusion, especially when tutors “swapped” classes for various reasons.

Students in this study commenced at university keen to engage and “learn” in lectures and tutorials. The continuance of this desire to learn within the lecture/tutorial structure depended heavily upon how the structure was organised. The students felt secure in courses where the lecturer was familiar with the content; used a variety of teaching methods to present the material; and had clear objectives for each session. Where the lecturer outlined the role of the student and the requirements of students at tutorials, the students understood the formal structure and the learning outcomes. The students felt confident in approaching the lecturer for assistance if they were briefed on how to initiate
content questions. Where the students were briefed by the tutor as to their role and academic requirements within the tutorial, they felt they achieved better outcomes and enjoyed the tutorial experience. The students noted that the differences between various courses were enormous in terms of structural organisation.

The students in this study adopted their own particular methods of learning within the university environment. Where the students felt secure in courses and there were clear objectives for each session, they used note-taking successfully, relied upon their peers or discussed work outside formal classes. Where the role and the requirements of students was clear, they used techniques familiar to them from their previous schooling, such as texting, research, reading and internet usage to support their answers and provide creative solutions to class problems.

7.3.2 Learning Processes

The students in this study were confused about the relationship between the lecture or tutorial material and the set work required as part of those structures. The students saw only a weak relationship between material covered in lectures/tutorials and set assignments. The over-riding opinion was that set, formal work requirements could be undertaken without attendance at lectures or tutorials. The students noted that on a number of occasions the tutors were unaware of the set work and unable to answer specific questions about the material. The students saw no relationship between assessed work across different courses. Each course was seen as a separate entity with few interrelationships with other courses.

The students expected more direction on the content and quality of set work and assignment pieces. For the students in this study this was especially true in their first semester. Students noted that, unlike school, the content was not specifically outlined and their level of quality was guided by the word limit. Assessment pieces were seen as a “necessary evil” of being a student. The quality and marking system varied greatly across courses for these students, further adding to their confusion.

Workshops and practical assessments were seen by this group of students as more relevant and feedback from practical work was understood better, particularly by students who saw themselves as struggling to cope with the course content. All of the students rated the practical workshops as superior to the tutorials. They felt the workshop sessions
provided greater guidance and direct teaching in comparison to the tutorials. Students who, by their own admission did not attend tutorials, attended workshops.

In setting the boundaries of this study one of the areas of research focussed upon the formal processes used in the university school to support the learning environment. The conclusions drawn in this section indicate the students’ dissatisfaction with the processes utilised in the university school. The clearest observation is that these students were “jumping though the formal hurdle” provided by the courses with little expectation that they would learn from the material. As discussed in preceding chapters, however, where they felt the set work piece was relevant to the course material or practically oriented, students’ perception of the tutorial as a learning opportunity increased.

7.3.3 Learning Relationships

The students in this study had clear preferences for some lecturers and tutors over others. These preferences varied amongst the six individuals but in general the students preferred tutors who were also the course lecturers, feeling the tutor then better understood the course material. The students had clear preferences for lecturers whom they felt had a good understanding of the course content and the assessment requirements. They preferred lecturers who were able to link the course material to the experiences of the students and who kept them engaged with the course material. These students also preferred tutors who were familiar with the lecture content and who attempted to understand the learning problems of the students. Lecturers and tutors who made time for questions were preferred to those who did not. The number of students in a lecture or tutorial inhibited the students in this study from forming ongoing, meaningful learning relationships with the staff within the lecture/tutorial structure.

The students did not see themselves as establishing any meaningful learning relationships with staff. Lecturers and tutors were available for help with course material only and other learning needs were not addressed outside classes. Students were redirected to general university services. The students felt that the lecturer and tutor dictated the tone for engagement early on in the semester. Some lecturers referred students to tutors for assistance; others were unavailable or only attended the university for set periods per week, making consultation difficult. The students indicated that the quality of the relationship formed with the lecturer or tutor depended upon the individual involved but ongoing learning relationships, according to the participants, were not seen as important by many lecturers and tutors.
Students in this study did not feel comfortable about approaching lecturers for assistance out of class hours. This differed greatly from the students’ experience of high school, where relationships with teachers were formed in and out of class. Students preferred to confer with their peers rather than seek assistance from lecturers. Patterns of limited engagement were established very early in the semester.

7.4 Recommendations

The voices of the six individual students in this research study were examined against three themes relating to the formal learning environment provided by the university school at an urban university. Their responses and insights have been analysed using a qualitative research approach. This is naturalistic inquiry, within which interpretivism is embedded. This interpretative framework provided opportunities for a view of the constructed reality of the six participants. The case study method allowed me control over the type of questions and focus and this method also allowed deeper exploration of any themes as they arose in the interviews. The key theme of the learning structure of lectures and tutorials and the processes and relationships within these learning structures was explored with each individual participant. One of the objectives of the exploration of this embedded theme was to add value to existing research and thus contribute to policy development and best practice in first year university education. Another objective was the opportunity to add to existing research on the first year experience in Australian universities. These objectives have been achieved through the following recommendations.

7.4.1 Learning Structures, Processes and Relationships in the First Year of University: Recommendations

This study has concluded that in relation to the formal learning environment, students were confused about the purpose of the learning structures of lectures and tutorials at the university. The students in this study were unsure how to handle the material presented in lectures and were dissatisfied with their passive positioning as learners. As a result this anxiety over role confusion was channelled into additional cross-checking of lecture and tutorial requirements with lecturers, peers and tutors. This cross-checking took the form of emails, telephone, texts and face-to-face meetings.
In this study the students were, to varying degrees, disengaged from the lecture/tutorial structures. Several researchers have focussed upon this lack of engagement (James et al., 2010) and the conclusions drawn from this study support previous research. Stake (1994) however has argued that the case study allows a focus on complexity, interactions, sequences, events and the wholeness of individuals in context. This disengagement must be viewed in light of this wholeness.

However, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, much of the literature to date has focussed upon strengthening either the role of the student, the role of the lecturer or the role of the university in easing the transition to university and promoting greater student/university engagement. This research has examined the formal learning structures of university and concluded that the formal learning structures of lectures and tutorials that are in widespread use in universities may not be the most ideal structures for first year students. It is therefore recommended that:

- Universities review the lecture and tutorial system as a suitable learning structure for first year (new entrant) students across all university schools.
- If the university continues with this method/structure of teaching and learning then clear expectations of the role of students as learners within lectures and tutorials be provided to first year students.

and

- Lecture and tutorial class sizes be carefully considered for first year university students to allow for greater student engagement and more opportunities for individual ongoing engagement with lecturers and tutors.

In relation to the processes used to support the formal lectures I recommend that:

- Course coordinators, lecturers and tutors establish a clear link between the formal learning environment of lectures and tutorials and the material for assessment.
- Course co-ordinators, lecturers and tutors systematically include sessions in their timetable to allow clarification, discussion and feedback on set work for first year students, particularly in first semester.

It is difficult to develop recommendations about the role of lecturer/tutor relationships as the students in this study, whilst indicating clear preferences for particular lecturers or tutors, were unable to disengage the learning structure from the individual tutor or lecturer.
However, there is sufficiently conclusive data to recommend that:

- Universities review staffing arrangements for first year classes and positively appoint lecturers and tutors with track records as good communicators and a clear understanding of the learning needs of first time university students.

### 7.4.2. Contribution to Imperatives for Further Research

This study has implications for all universities involved in the provision of undergraduate courses to new entrants or first time users of universities. The conclusions indicate a need for greater research into the role of formal learning structures such as lectures and tutorials in the first year of university.

The results of this study question whether such structures are still viable for the modern university student and whether new entrants are suitably prepared to understand their role in this formal lecture/tutorial structure. The study also poses the question of the need for improved learning relationships between lecturers and students at the first year level within these structures. Further research may be able to clarify the value of such relationships on the academic performance of the students. Finally, as this study is limited to the voice of the student within these formal learning structures, the opportunity to consider the role of the educator in first year classes would make a valuable comparative study.

### 7.4.3. Contribution to Practice

At the commencement of this research study I proposed that this study would enable a contribution to educational practice, particularly in the area of the first year university experience. It could be argued that the insights and voices of the students in this study are insignificant when considered against the total first year student population at Australian universities. I agree, however, that by analysing the in-depth responses of the case studies greater depth would be added to our knowledge of the “first year experience.” The depth of the responses indeed indicate that the students have a good deal of articulate and critical insight into what is viewed as “normal” practice by most Australian universities.

This is particularly true in the formal structures universities set up for first year students – the lecture and the tutorial. Students in this study were not prepared for the lecture
experience and most took the majority of first semester to ascertain their role in a formal lecture. Even having some idea of their role, the students found that the lecture experience remained a passive learning activity for all of the students in the study. This is an important consideration for all Australian universities and thus an important contribution to educational practice. All universities engage in lecture/tutorial structures as economical approaches to learning – what preparation, feedback, training is given to new students about their role in these structures? An important contribution to practice from this study lies in the consideration of this question.

Another important contribution to practice is the need to provide first year students with clear explanations about the link between course work requirements and the formal learning structures of lectures and tutorials. Although the case study participants in this study represented only a very minute sample, it is reasonable to assume that their failure to see any or little relationship between the formal lectures and the assessed material is typical. The lack of engagement with the formal lecture was shared by all the participants. It is an important consideration arising from this study and highlights a need for a review of curriculum. This is a valuable contribution to educational practice.

Finally, there was evidence in this study that the first year students expected a significant, deep relationship with the lecturing and tutorial staff. Where the students enjoyed a positive, professional relationship supported by good teaching practice, the students felt engaged and well taught. They felt their expectations were met. One important contribution this study makes to practice is, at the very least, a dialogue within university schools about the need for staff lecturing to first year students to make available time for feedback, advice and student assistance. This dialogue will create opportunities for better informed practice.

The conclusions drawn from this study indicate significant distance between the students and their constructs of the formal learning structures and the objectives of the university school. The conclusions also indicate a collective disappointment and disengagement on the part of the individual students in the study.

Students in this study have provided a clear message – for them traditional university structures of large lecture rooms crammed with anonymous learners and fronted by lecturers who have little interaction with them as individuals is not conducive to their learning. Attendance rates, interest and engagement are the casualties of the imposed
formal structure of lectures and tutorials. Within these structures, poor relationships with tutors, lack of curriculum co-ordination and content based learning add to these problems.

For these students, digitally savvy learners who arrive at university capable and eager, the formal lecture/tutorial structure quickly disengages them. Their voices heard through the interviews are disenchanted and disappointed. For them, school had set up expectations of a better learning environment. The concept of “higher” education is not a reality, it is unknown territory, where the rules of engagement are pre-determined and foreign to their concepts of learning.

It is worth noting that this disappointment and frustration with the formal structures of lectures and tutorials and processes and relationships supporting these structures was confined to these areas. The study did not extend beyond these boundaries and it is incorrect to assume that the total university experience for these students was disappointing. Further study may indicate more in-depth results regarding their total experiences in the first year of university. Such study would be useful in adding to this research.

7.5 Final Comments

The six participants – first year students – in this study have been on a journey. It is worthwhile noting that they embarked on this journey and enrolled at the university school long before they agreed to be case studies in my research. They were motivated by curiosity, self-interest, altruistic behaviour and to lesser extent my interest in their joining the study in spite of finding themselves in foreign territory. They saw themselves as contributors to an improved future for students following them. The voices of the students in this study were strongest when asked about remedies or recommendations for future engagement at university. I hope their experiences and involvement in the study will create change or at the very least provide them with assurance that change is under discussion. They have now gone on to complete their journey.

As researcher I too, was on a journey. My understandings and interpretations have relied heavily upon the data and the literature, but my perspectives have been greatly enlarged by the enthusiasm and insights of the case study participants…these students. In this way I have become wary of quantitative research that groups “responses” of first year university students, as each participant in my study moved rapidly from being a “first year student” participant to an individual with valuable, unique information for educators.
Cartledge (2002) has said that undertaking a doctoral study within naturalistic inquiry is a rite of passage. For me on numerous occasions I was surprised, delighted, embarrassed and angry as I journeyed with the students. For the most part I also was in foreign territory. One thing is certain: the effect of this information and my unique encounters with these first year students who struggled in foreign territory will shape my role as an educator for a long time to come.
References


Appendix 1 – Initial Questionnaire

Name:
Age:
Tertiary Entrance Rank:
Previous school:
Subjects studied:

Why did you decide to come to this university?

Why did you decide to undertake this course?

Did any of your family members study courses like this?

Do any family members work in related professions or careers?
Appendix 2 – Interview Guide Questions

Interview 1  (Early March 2006)
Individual
Theme: Formal Learning structures.
What courses/subjects are you undertaking?
How are the classes organised in these subjects?
Can you explain how you feel about the classes so far, even though it is early?
What are the differences between these classes and high school classes?
What can you say about your own learning in each course so far?
Have the classes been learning opportunities for you?
Comments about the way we organise formal learning structures at this university school?

Interview 4  (March 2006)
Group
Theme: Formal structures
Each of you have raised a number of issues in relation to this school’s formal teaching and learning structures. Today I want you to comment on some of these issues.
Lectures to first year students?

Classes, sizes. Location, materials, IT, topics covered, lecture notes , learning.
Tutorials for first years?
Locations, timing, tutors experience, topics, set materials, worksheets, and learning. (these themes were added after review of the tapes for interviews one and two.)

Interview 2  (April 2006)
Individual
Theme: Processes
How best do you learn?
How do you know that this is the way you learn?
Do you feel that you are learning now at uni?
What processes best help you learn, eg: note-taking, etc.
Do we use these processes at uni?
Should we?
Do you think we understand how you learn within our formal university structures?


Interview 3 (June 2006)

Individual

Theme: Relationships

By now you have almost completed the semester, what relationships, if any, have you formed with each of your lecturers?

Is this different to what you expected?

Given the variances, do you feel the relationship with the lecturer is important?

Do you have any relationships with your tutors?

Again, how were these helpful or not in your learning?

Interview 5 (June 2006)

Theme: Relationships

Group questions

Each of you have spoken about relationships, and types of learning opportunities from these relationships.

Some of the things you have raised are going to be further discussed now. You can add or change things.

staff availability, worksheets and set work in classes, timing of lectures, tutes, friends in classes, online, obtaining missed work, interest of staff, motivation of staff and class, time to work in class, understanding of material by staff, establishing relationships, being invisible, trying to make contact in classes. (these themes were added after review of the tapes for interviews one and two.)

Interview 6 (August, 2006)

Individual

Theme: Semester 2, Structured classes.

Are there any changes in courses/subjects this semester?

How are you finding the new courses?

What about classes in these courses?

Have classes changes in the existing courses?

Are you learning more/less? Why?

Last semester you said that....... Is this still the case?

What do you feel about our formal classes now?
Interview 7  (September 2006)

Individual

Theme: Semester 2, relationships

Last semester you said.....about your relationships with the lecturers and the staff.

Is it the same this semester?

Is this an impact on the way you learn?

Could relationships be different?

Interview 8  (March, 2007)

Group

Theme: thank you and review of first year.

Last year you said ....about the ways you learn and how this was happening in first year.

What do you think now that you are no longer in first year?